# THE DOGS / THE GHOSTS

By

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Abstract

The Dogs / The Ghosts is an auto-fictional novel derived from personal memories and interviews with the author's family members. The text does not attempt to portray a real family history; it takes many liberties with material derived from family lore and much of the content is entirely invented. It is therefore presented as a work of fiction. The novel serves as a character study of Dean Rideout, a self-employed man from Portland, Oregon. The narrative is conveyed via four first-person perspectives, that of Dean's wife Moira, and those of his children, Joanne, Beth and Morgan. The main events of the novel begin in 1989 with Joanne's early childhood memories of Dean, and conclude in 1999 when Morgan witnesses Dean's death. Additionally, flashbacks of Moira's childhood serve as a contextual backdrop for Dean's and Moira's negotiation of parenting style. A deviation of the novel's form is represented with *(parenthetical italics)*, in which Morgan, as curator of the stories, comments and speculates from a future vantage point.

Table of Contents

# August, 1999

*When you sit on the aisle, an airplane is a slow teleporter. You get primed, readied, metal-detected, then ushered, sealed and buckled in. And most of the time no one even looks out the window to remember they're in the freaking sky. The sun-shields clack closed up and down the rows and shut out the clouds until it's just the little g-forces and you. Just you, in a dark tube with your grubby laminated safety cards and the in-flight magazines and packs of pretzels that fit in your pocket—just you until the plane noses down towards an airport still too far away to see and makes you feel lighter in your seat, just you until the roar of the tires on the runway and the wind on the airbrakes, the lurch of your body still flying as this thing you're strapped inside of clenches itself to a stop. Then they unseal the door and welcome you someplace. An airplane is a slow teleporter.*

*This time, as I found my seat on the flight back home—another aisle—a nice man asked me if I'd flown much.*

*"Just to get here," I told him.*

*“Did you get a window seat?”*

*I shook my head. “That’s okay, though—”*

*He got up right away instead of answering, waddled out to the aisle and ushered me in. It seemed impossibly generous, but he chuckled when I asked him if he was sure, and though I was fifteen years old, I thought to myself that the best way to seem grown up in that moment was to own that I wanted that window seat and let myself be treated like a kid. We taxied away from the gate and the cabin darkened as most everyone closed their sunshields, so the few left open beamed the red morning light like cathedral windows across the cabin and projected the shadows of passengers onto the overhead compartments.*

*I watched San Francisco shrink down into a plastic model of a city and waved bye to Aunt Linda, who I guessed was down there in one of the hundreds of cars driving back to Walnut Creek on the expressway. I watched the clouds start to look like a low ceiling, then a fog, and finally like a sea under brilliant daylight. For a long time they were like a quiet sea, torn in places, but the tears were too small and the land too far below to see anything. The nice man had fallen asleep with his head back and his mouth hanging open, looking like he was about to snore. I watched the clouds for awhile and then surprised myself by getting bored of the view, and digging a book out of my bag to read. That boredom, with something so beautiful, made me feel grown up.*

*We’d run into Cousin Melissa at the gate. She’s a flight attendant, but it seemed strange. She’d given me a big hug and called me baby, and Aunt Linda had asked her what she was doing there, but she had on her airline uniform and of course she was at work. I guess that’s just what you say. She was wide-eyed and too excited, and hugged me too tight. She stayed talking with us*

*—I hoped I could keep a conversation going like she could someday—until we all said goodbye and Linda hugged me, and told me how good it was to have gotten to spend time together. "I hope we see each other soon," she said.*

*Teleporters hum, and you sit waiting while they deconstruct you one atom at a time and put you together again on the other side. The you that gets there is not the same as the you that left. That's what the pop-science magazines say. Teleporters hum and pick you apart and put you together again, and it feels like boredom.*

*At the end of the flight, the plane came down until the wing was slicing through the wispy bits of cloud. Then, like sinking beneath the water in a swimming pool, they rose up over the window and the daylight was replaced by gray fog. Rain streaked the glass. The engines rumbled a little louder than they had before, and the cabin trembled.*

*We dropped through into a gloomy wet day, with the green forested hills vivid in the rain below us, and downtown Portland's little clutch of towers in front of the river on the other side of them. We must have been flying right over Beaverton, over our house, where those hills make up the horizon, and the city beyond them had always felt like another place entirely. From the window of a plane it's all one thing—the maps are right. I'd never think about it the same. The crest of hills lined up under us as we banked and turned—a perfect dividing line of woods between the hard steel edges of downtown rising above its trees, and the black-shingled suburbs nestled under theirs.*

*I tried to spot a street I knew, or a building, or a school as the westside suburbs swung away from us. Now the river stretched straight out under bridge after bridge to where the city looked perched in the mist between the hills and the riverbank. There was a cargo ship sidled up*

*under the cranes on Swan Island, with its acres of brand new cars waiting to be sold and driven, and its muddy yard where the end of a train track unraveled like a piece of string into a dozen ends. We swept low over the tip of Sauvie's Island, right over the little red arches of the bridge we'd crossed to go pick raspberries with Dad last summer and seen a deer. Over Northeast, the plane got so low the houses zoomed by, and I could see the color of their trim. The brake lights of an old truck like Dad's glowed red when it rolled up to a stop sign. It could even have been him, on his way—a little late. These were the neighborhoods Joanne liked to run off to, the places he'd forbade her from and chased her down in, but they were his stomping grounds, too.*

*I saw the control tower up ahead, and the mess of signal lights on the tarmac that must have meant something to somebody. Let's hope. I couldn't believe the rain. We always say that summer starts the day after your barbecue gets rained out on the fourth of July and ends when it's time to trick-or-treat on Halloween night when it dumps on you again—but here it was raining in August. It was weird—somehow—in the same way that running into Cousin Melissa at the airport in San Francisco had been weird.*

*Runway stripes, the lurch and roar. Teleporters hum.*

(They wanted to tell Beth on home turf, to tell her only after we got the front door of our house closed behind us—to somehow contain it within ourselves for the thirty minutes that it took to return from the airport. Mom sat crying on her bed as the arrival time closed in, saying "I don't know how to do this." Grandma and Aunt Denise had their arms around her. Joanne was pacing the hall, teary-eyed. She stopped outside her bedroom and fit her shoe into the crater in the sheetrock she'd made during an argument with Dad that winter.)

*Just like when the plane had landed in San Francisco, everyone stood up and waited, craning their necks around the bulge of the overhead compartments. Some made toothless smiles with the folks whose eyes they accidentally met. The nice man who'd given me the window got my rolly-suitcase down and set it on his seat. He was talkative with a boy in the next row up who was handsome and mellow and said neither too little nor too much. He was older, maybe nineteen or twenty. I looked up the length of the cabin; the people at the front were standing still. The nice man took a breath, then everyone was quiet for a beat. The doors stayed closed. A little girl whined and her mother shushed her. I pictured my family waiting: Mom, Dad, maybe Joanne and maybe Morgan.*

*Up ahead, they started moving, filing apart, the spaces between each person stretching. I edged into the aisle and thumbed the plastic button on the handle of my bag to telescope it open. We de-boarded like sand going backwards through a funnel: the narrow aisle, the widening bridge, the open terminal. The handsome boy walked away, too mature to have anyone meeting him right at the gate. He had a backpack, not a rolly-suitcase and, pulling mine along behind me, I suddenly felt like a kid.*

*I spotted my little brother with a new buzzcut, spacing out at the end of a fused row of metal chairs. And next to him, Joanne all in black with her bleached hair—but not in full regalia —and Mom and Grandma, all seeing me at the same time and standing up. All looking stiff and heavy. Mom looked sad like the clouds had come right inside the airport and rained on her.*

*"What the heck's wrong?" I said. "Aren't you happy to see me?"*

*Grandma smiled. "We're so glad to see you, Sweetheart!" She gave me a hug. "How was your trip?"*

*I told them it was good as I switched and hugged Mom and tussled against the grain of Morgan's hair, which I don't think I'd ever done before. Told them that we'd had a lot of fun.*

*"Hi." Joanne said, gentle, like she was maybe ready to get off of my shit-list.*

*"Hi." I stood back and took them in. "Dad couldn't make it?" I was taking it in stride: a broken promise, something come up. They all looked numb.*

*"Something came up," Grandma said. "Are you ready? Let's get you home." She and I set off in front. "You're so grown up, taking a trip like that all by yourself," she said, which made me feel anything but grown-up. Be cool, Grandma, I joked in my head. She asked what all we'd done.*

*"We went shopping," I said. "At all those little stores in Haight Ashbury. I had the best nachos of my life, and we went to the beach—oh, and the trolley. We rode the trolley a few times. And the art museum!"*

*She was walking a little too fast. "What was the best part, Sweetie?"*

*The wheel of my suitcase skipped on the carpet behind me and I looked back to check it was alright. Mom, Joanne and Morgan were walking side-by-side, each either angry or totally spaced. I couldn't place it.*

*"What's going on?"*

(It was like tumbling out the back of my head, out towards the ceiling, like when you're playing video games and have eaten nothing but sugar and you don't notice any hunger, just that you feel upside down inside yourself, and then behind yourself, and then above yourself. It's not unpleasant. The revolving doors at the airport entrance were swallowing people up on the right, changing their clothes, spitting them out on the left…)

*Mom dismissed the question, shook her head and rolled her eyes like it was too long and unimportant a story to tell just then. But she hadn't said more than a word to me. I wasn't sure if I'd heard the sound of her voice since I got off the plane.*

*Grandma walked on. "Hurry, Beth."*

*"No, wait." I stopped. "Mom, what's going on?"*

*"Let's talk in the car," she said.*

*Morgan tripped on nothing and went down skidding his knees on the green airport carpet. He said he was fine. He'd once gotten his head stuck in the doors as they swept around. I can't imagine how it happened—he was in the gap up to his ears all of a sudden, hollering for help. The door was squeaking and skipping on his head as if he were a rubber doorstop. Joanne and I had died laughing before Dad pulled him out. Another time, he'd run the wrong way down some hallway to meet our mom as she de-boarded and set off a siren and a rush of security. Now it was a running joke anytime we brought him to the airport:* What would Morgan do this time?

*"Watch the doors," Grandma said. "Let's hurry along,"*

*"Hold onto Morgan," I said, but no one laughed that customary laugh. "What's going on?" I asked again. "Where's Dad?"*

*Grandma: "Let's get outside."*

*I stopped cold. "I'm not taking another step until someone tells me what's happening here."*

*Mom's lip was trembling. I caught her round, glistening eyes in a moment of such focus that the gaze seemed to pick me up and hold me.*

*Grandma took my shoulders. "I'm sorry, Sweetheart. We aren't trying to keep a secret from you, but we do need to get to the car. We'll tell you everything in the car."*

*So he left, I thought. Mom and Dad finally split. I shook my head at Joanne, standing there sad, like it wasn't all her fault. "I want to talk to him," I said. "Call him right now I want to talk to him."*

*Mom stroked my hair.*

*"I want to talk to him right now. Where's a phone?"*

*"Let's just get to the car," she said.*

*"Phone."*

*Grandma pointed. "We're parked right there."*

*I pressed my lips thin, set off through the doors without them, along the sidewalk of the passenger pick-up and over the crosswalk.*

(Her suitcase wheels hummed like something electric about to blow a fuse.)

*I turned around in the parking garage. "Which way?" My voice echoed off the concrete and car doors. Grandma pointed down the line.*

*It was her white Buick Le Sabre, with its blue corduroy seats. They sat me down in the back, between Mom and Morgan on those seats so soft and clean they smelled like sugar. Doors closed and Grandma backed out of the parking spot.*

*"What, he left? Are you getting a divorce?"*

*"No, honey," Mom said. She started to cry. So did Joanne. "I want you to put your head on my lap."*

*No. "Why?" I won't do that. I was lowering my head before I'd even decided to do it—won't do that… won't do that—rearranging my legs so I didn't kick Morgan. Something clenched up inside me, closed, rose up and became a voice telling me to shut my eyes tight and cover my ears and be back on the plane, to see the city out the window and simply try again. Mom's jeans were soft against my cheek. Teleporters hum.*

*"Is he still mad at me?" I asked.*

*"No, sweetheart."*

*"It's bad?"*

*"Yes," she said. "It's bad."*

(The confusion in Beth's voice changed to not believing, her words like play-acting; her body understanding the truth already. "What hospital is he at?" The same question I had asked between 'Dad's gone' and: 'Dad's died.')

*"He's not at the hospital, Sweetie," she said. "Dad is not here anymore."*

*I split in two, I think: into a mind that wasn't making any sense of the words and a body that understood them perfectly.*

(The same flash of anger—)

*"When?"*

*Now Mom really broke down, bad news tears pushed out by tears of fear and betrayal and failure. The ones you cry before you say something you think someone might not forgive you for. "I couldn't tell you over the phone."*

*"When?" I asked.*

*She took a breath. "The day before yesterday." And somehow, the pain got worse. "I couldn't have you finding out over the phone. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."*

(She buried herself in Mom's arms, Mom who could only say I know, I know. Joanne reached back from the front seat and kept a hand on her knee until Beth shooed it off. Then Joanne recoiled, as if it were suddenly too much to have any one part of her extended and away from the rest. She had to cover her face and tuck her elbows in and lean forward against the pull of her seatbelt and cry.)

*"Does Linda know?" I asked them.*

*"Yes," Mom said. "Melissa told her as soon as you were on the plane. She's on her way here. I'm sorry, Beth." She squeezed me tighter.*

*Joanne looked back from the front seat and put her hand on my leg again. I shooed it away. "I don't want you to touch me right now." She pulled her arm back and faced forward. Grandma reached across the arm rest between their seats and held her hand.*

(Out my window, the people in the other cars were the same as always, eyes forward, some moving their lips in speech and lifting their fingers from the wheel to gesture. A woman whizzing by in the passing lane looked over at me and then away, eyes not lingering long enough to see that everything was different now.)

*"I'm the last to know?" I asked.*

*Mom shook her head. "There are so many people who need to know. So many."*

*"That's not what I meant," I said, but then I didn't know what I meant, or why it mattered. Mom waited for me to say more, then she sniffled and stroked me hair.*

*I'd had it backwards. The airplane was not, in fact, a slow teleporter. I hadn't been deconstructed atom by atom, and I was not a different me than the one that took off from California. The airplane had been like a force field; it was everything outside the plane that had fallen apart atom by atom while we were in the air—and put back together all wrong. I was me. I was hopelessly, helplessly, down-to-the-atom me, myself—but Mom wasn't Mom, Joanne not Joanne and Morgan not Morgan. Grandma just kept driving, kept her eyes on the road, used her turn signal like any other day. The* here *I got to was not the* here *I'd left for.*

# Chapter 1: Summer, 1989

**Joanne**

*I'm bundled up in blankets in the backseat. In the night. Ready? Yes. Dad helps Mom into the car. She's hurting bad. Breathing. Dad's red car. It's too loud. The sound of it shakes me; I cry. Hurry. This is the night my sister is born. It is my first memory…*

***

It's too cold to drive with the top down that early in the morning, that's what he told me, but a *please* was all it took. Now my hair was whipping in the wind. I wore my favorite blue and green sundress, paisley like a big handkerchief. Dad was dressed in a navy blue suit, and his dark curls were blowing backwards off his forehead. He said we'd take the long way, the scenic route, the shortcut—said these things everywhere we went, and so often that I started to think of the direct route as something almost mythical or sinister. Our way wound down through forests and over streams. There was Fish Creek and Thieves' Brooke. They flashed by in glimpses of water

glistening in the gash of light where the tree shadows didn't touch, bubbling busily over green, shining stones below the road. Fanno Creek, the Tualatin River: white text on green signs, which I copied in shaky letters on my sketch pad, racing the jumbling and fading of the picture in my mind so I could sound out the words at my leisure. Dad was so excited by my strategy that he slapped the steering wheel and squeezed my shoulder and yelled out, "Kids!" once, twice—three times. "You're just closer to the source, aren't you?" I didn't understand. "Don't you get it, Jo?" he hollered. "You're a genius." But—I explained—a genius would just be able to read the signs in the first place.

"Genius isn't about not having problems," he said as we drove along narrow patches of farmland, carved precariously from the woods, then came out through wide open farms, sunny and sprawling in the morning light. "It's about finding ways to solve the ones you will inevitably have." He scrunched his face to think. "It's about solving them as fast or faster than they can pop up on you—or," he interrupted himself. "Yeah, yeah! Solving problems so fast you see 'em coming. Solve 'em before they even have a chance to get at you: Anticipate. Mitigate." He bobbed his head and weaved like dodging punches.

"What does inevitably mean?" I asked, and he smiled: "Think it through."

The right thought didn't really come though, and so the edict left a strange silence in my head as the world passed by on that country road outside. And that gave me my change of subject; I'd be the one asking questions, I'd be the one in charge. I grilled him on value: from the backhoe parked alongside some old garage to a silver watch on the wrist of another driver we were passing.

"What's that worth?"

And he never missed a beat: “Maybe ten thousand.”

“What’s that worth?”

“Five hundred and some change”

“What’s *that* worth?”

“Three thousand dollars.”

I had to up the ante. I asked him about our own oh-so-coveted car, the famous red corvette that had sparked so many conversations in the parking lots of burger joints and been the pretense for so many first chats with neighbors or plain old strangers we now counted as friends. I gave my father a menacing look, leaned forward and placed my hands on the dash. “What’s this worth?”

He checked the rear view and ran his hand through his hair.

“You know, Jo, something’s only worth what someone will give you for it.”

I frowned. He’d told me the numbers for everything we passed—everything we’d packed with us, everything we were wearing. Everything had a number and so, above all, something as precious as the car should have one, too.

He stood his ground. “Nothing’s worth any more than someone is willing to pay for it.”

“That’s not right,” I argued.

He shrugged. “It’s true. I was just giving estimates for the other things.”

I’d stump him, then—stump him with something so unimaginably valuable that he’d have to admit he was wrong, and recite some number bigger than any I’d ever heard. “And what about a house?” I asked.

He lifted a finger. “Especially a house. A house changes more than anything. Today it’s worth one hundred thousand, and tomorrow it’s worth seventy thousand, and the day after that it’s worth one hundred fifty. When you buy a car, it depreciates as soon as you leave the lot. But houses are investments. You buy a house and hold onto it; the market goes up and down, but the value mostly goes up, you know?” I didn’t know, and sat quiet, batted by the wind. I looked hard at the siding and the shingles and the windows of the homes we passed, slouching in the shade beyond the road.

At the county fairgrounds, our red Corvette rolled slow and patient atop the gravel and, smiling, Dad stopped and waved at the people walking up the margins from their cars, always letting them pass in front of us. We went right on through the gravel lots, took a left down a lane marked by isosceles flags on flimsy plastic poles set in traffic cones. Then the Corvette teetered charmingly as we pulled off the gravel and onto the lumpy grass of the vendor parking area.

We gathered our things and headed in, threading between parked cars. I carried two small plastic cases, and Dad walked stiffly with the weight of a propane tank in one hand and pulling a little collapsable wagon stacked with cookware box sets with the other. We crossed the threshold of the fairground, into the stall lined path we’d walked together so many times. Other vendors were already preparing, and even though only a few places were ready—one with artisan honeys and loose-leaf tea, another with hand-built birdhouses, there were already fairgoers beginning to mosey through, the day coming alive. Someone had a litter of Dalmatian puppies romping clumsily in a little pen at the corner stall at the end of our row.

"Here's trouble," Dad said as I ran to see them. I remember telling the seller how cute they were, and him telling me I could pick one up. Dad set down the propane tank and knelt beside me to pick one up, too He brought it up into his neck and puckered his lips while it licked frantically at his chin. I held mine at my heart and it bit softly at my fingers, little legs kicking. The man told us they were ten weeks old and adoption included shots, flea and worm medicine. The world stretched with possibility. I looked at Dad and he laughed. "Not today, Jo. They're very cute, though." He placed the puppy he was holding back down in the pen with the others, which scrambled towards his hand. Reluctantly, I did the same, and we said thank you.

At our booth, Dad pulled a thick, royal blue linen from one of his suitcases. It cast a spell when he spread it out over the fold-up plastic table. Then, while I clicked open my cases and arranged beaded necklaces and bracelets on my end, he made his pyramid of pots and pans on his, with the big stainless steel soup pot on a polished wooden block for a center piece in front. Then, to the front of our display table, Dad clipped a clear plastic box, slotted on the top like a piggy bank, and half-full already with last month's tickets (*to make it look popular*, he once explained). The drawing would earn our potential customers a free dinner party, and as he drew people in with his charm and his questions about their cooking, he would mention it off-hand and encourage them to '*throw their hat in the ring.'* We shared conspiratorial looks as the tickets stacked up inside, because, at home, later that week, we'd unlock that box with a funny plastic key, dump the tickets on the dining room table and call up each and every number. This was a raffle that everybody won.

Within an hour, the path running between the vendor stalls was choked with people. “Hey, how you doing?” He smiled at the passers-by, offering an upturned palm. “Are you cooking with aluminum, may I ask?”

If they slowed down, he had ‘em.

“Yeah, been putting food on the table with my aluminum set for going on a decade.”

“Well, step up here if you’ve got a minute. I’m going to let you in on a few secrets. They’re going to improve the taste of your food; they’re going to make your family healthier”—he smiled wide enough to show a silver filling in the way back—and confided, “if I’m lucky I might even sell something.”

Later, he’d fall out of character and talk so long and so engaged with some stranger about some other thing (all the while potential customers passing by unbothered, or getting nothing more than a nod for an invitation if they eyed his display), that invariably at some point his conversation partner would clap their hands and say not, “Well, I’m keeping you from your customers,” but: “I better take a look at your wares. What are you pushin’?”

“Never mind that,” he’d say and point a thumb at me sitting in the folding chair behind my beads. “She’s just letting me tag along.”

“This your kid?”

“My daughter, *Joanne*.”

Before I knew it, I’d have a sale: an anklet for their daughter, or a charm bracelet, or a shark-tooth necklace for their son. (“Sell enough and we can start buying these wholesale,” I remember Dad saying one day as he held a tooth up to the light.)

Twice during the day, I saw one of the baby Dalmatians, one passed between a man and a woman that were walking together, smiling, but not half as happy as I would have been in their place. The other was held all wrong by a little boy about my sister's age, carrying it off as if he'd just kidnapped it from some den in the woods.

"Any non-stick aficionados out there?" Dad asked the passers-by. "Do you cook non-stick? What if I told you that stainless steel is not only the healthier option, but that it is just as easy *to clean*?"

And a woman who, as she passed in front of our booth, had studiously ignored him up to that point, suddenly turned her head and cried, "Baloney!" Before she took another step, Dad spun the valve on his burner and crackled sparks over the stream of gas to light it, dropped a pad of butter on his skillet—and was frying eggs.

"The original non-stick, of course, was temperature control, and for that you need cookware that heats evenly. Our cookware is five-ply across the bottom and up the sides; it cooks from the bottom up, the sides in and the top down." He tipped his skillet and, to all their amazement, two sunny-side-up eggs slid across the steel over bubbling butter. A few more people joined the first, wondering what spectacle they'd been drawn in by. "See, that aluminum you were cooking on all through the seventies heated so uneven and unpredictable that you thought you were a bad cook, so you chucked that and started cooking with non-stick. Well, the vicious cycle can end today: stainless steel is back to basics with a high tech twist, and your old nonstick, as it wears and scratches, is putting you at risk."

It was waterless cooking—with pots and pans that stacked and worked together in more combinations than any cook could memorize. He'd sell five, six sets a day, and usually talk so

long with someone who wasn't buying that they'd go out to dinner with us in the evening, or exchange phone numbers and become one of the characters who, weeks later, showed up in the passenger seat of his pickup, the truck bed sagging under wood posts, rolls of chainlink, or bags of unmixed concrete for some grand home improvement project or a new business venture.

In the late afternoon, the bustling thinned to individual voices. You could start to hear the sound of vendors folding up their tables and packing up supplies, and, if it was very early or late in the season, maybe even have a chill sneak up on you as the sun dipped behind the trees at the edge of the fairground.

"That's all she wrote," Dad said. "Should we pack it up?"

"Do you think they sold all the puppies?" I asked him.

He smiled. "You want to go check? One last puppy fix before we get this show on the road?"

I gave him a last look to confirm it was alright before I left.

"Go ahead. It's right here close," he said. "I'll start packing."

I closed the lids of my bead cases, snapped the plastic latches and went out into the path. Next door to us they were selling music memorabilia and concert tickets. The next had wool blankets, coats and hats with geometric patterns, but half the displays were down already. There were five booths or so before the end of the row, but I couldn't see if the puppies were still there until I reached the end and came out onto the wider walkway that ran between parking and other parts of the fairground. The corner stall was desolate, nothing left but bare ground and the folded pen leaning against the inside wall. I sighed. This was as far as I'd ever ventured from my

father's cookware stand without him. I looked back that way, down the path dotted with stragglers walking slow. The bathrooms were only a little further, I thought, just across the way, and he wouldn't mind. Far down on the left, cars sat in the parking lot behind a yellow haze. The foot traffic had all come from that direction in the morning, and there had been a golden sheen to the air then, too. We'd seen it in front of the fir trees that grew in groves at the boundaries of the fairground as we entered. During the heart of the day, the path had filled with people walking in both directions, but now it had reversed. I felt the quieting, like the coolness on your skin as water falls down the drain of a bathtub. I went across and pulled open the plastic porta-potty door, the neck of my shirt hoisted up over my nose. When I came out into the light again, a big hand fell across my shoulder. Another wrapped firmly around my arm. My heart dropped and my eyes went up, afraid of what stranger they might land on—my dad.

"Jo."

"What?" I asked him, mad now because he'd scared me.

He pointed towards the parking lot, the people, where one man in blue jeans and a grey pullover sweatshirt was walking alone just a bit faster than the others. "That man was following you," he said.

"Why?" I asked.

"Don't know."

Dad's eyes were on him still. I looked back and forth between the two. "Let's do our diligence," he said. "Hop up on my shoulders." He picked me up and started walking after the man. I got afraid and told him not to.

"Nothing's going to happen. We're just going to our car."

“But our things,” I argued.

“Our stuff will be fine.”

There were two groups between us and him—people the man had gone around or cut through. “He’s going to get away,” I said.

“Shhh,” Dad whispered, and it was like the whole world obeyed, and I was floating a head above the remnants of the crowd, level with the yellow sky. No one said a word, and footsteps didn’t make a sound. Ahead of us, the man got to the exit and turned right. A moment later, we reached the same point and went straight for another few yards, then turned and went between the cars. My heart pounded. The man was gaining on us, getting further away, seemed he would walk right through the parking lot and out onto the country roads, and then what? I remember worrying about my beads—imaging that the little boy who’d walked by our booth with a puppy dangling terribly from his arms in the afternoon might come back and muss up all my displays and steal the shark teeth. Then the man turned down a row, unlocked a clean, silver car and got in. Dad turned left and away, walking between bumpers towards the exit. A few cars from the end, he stopped and put me down The man’s silver car was coming up the lane. Dad pulled a little scratchpad and a pencil from his pocket, the same one he used after a nice chat with someone at our display to write down what they did for work, or the names of a family member they’d mentioned. He set the pad down on the roof of the nearest car, and as that man turned and drove out the fairground, Dad read out the plate number and wrote it down.

“I’ll be able to sleep now, Jo,” he said. He brushed some hair from my face and half-smiled.

Nothing ever came of it, as far as I know. We packed up and Dad notified a couple of staff, who said there hadn't been any other complaints, then dutifully took the stranger's description, the make and model of the car, and the license number. At home, I ran inside hollering, "Mom, Mom, I was followed today!" She looked at me and then at Dad, coming in the door behind me, like we were crazy.

"What happened?"

Dad shook his head and heal-toed the shoes off his feet. Beth ran in from the living room with her arms raised. "Baby B!" Dad said and lifted her into the air. "I missed you more than life itself." She hugged him tight.

"When Dad wasn't watching, a man tried to follow me."

"You only thought I wasn't watching," Dad said.

"We think he wanted to kidnap me—"

"Ah," Dad cut me off. "We don't think anything. But we're gonna remember to be aware of our surroundings from now on. Right?"

I nodded, kicking off my shoes. Then Dad explained the whole thing, no speculation, just the facts—how he had walked out into the path and watched me turn the corner and how a man, alone, had seemed to see me and change his mind about the direction he was going—and Beth, whose cheek was resting on Dad's chest, kept her eyes on me from beginning to end, understanding who-knows-what about the things that Dad was saying.

As even-keel as his version was, he still slipped off to their bedroom before dinner, and through the closed door I listened to him make a police report. I wondered if they would go to the man's house, check him out—wondered if they might find a basement full of little kids or

something gruesome, or if they'd all be saved thanks to this fairground sleuth, hero in a salesman's suit—my very own father.

**Moira**

I was sitting in a lawn chair in the shade of some arbor vitae lining the Potters' driveway. Toby was manning the grill and Dean was towering fixings on a ballpark frank balanced on a paper plate. Beth ran and clung to me because the older boys were throwing pop-its at each other's feet and she was scared they'd get her, too. The Potters' boy, Will, appeared after her, almost hollering, "No, look, it doesn't even hurt!" Trying and failing to get one to spark between his fingers, which were smudged with soot from an earlier success. He groaned with embarrassment and tried a new tact, cupping the mangled little packet in his palm and slapping his forehead, but to no avail. Beth looked on horrified over her shoulder and clambered onto my lap. Joanne was in the street with a couple neighbor girls, writing in the air with sparkler smoke. My eyes fell on our house in the distance behind them, the wood stain looking hot in the sun, ringed by a drying lawn. Dean had hosed down the roof earlier, but hopefully this year Norm had just skipped the trip up to Vancouver to load up on mortars and cherry bombs altogether.

Our next door neighbors were at the grill now, waiting for their patties, and Wayne was recounting a harrowing rescue operation: the time their van had broken down on highway 30 outside Astoria and Dean and Toby set out at 8pm to find and tow them home with a doubled up length of mountaineering rope, which Wayne had instructed Dean where to find in their garage.

"You remember this one, Moira." Magdalene said from the chair next to mine.

"Oh, I remember."

"Life savers, these two," Wayne's wife, Carol, said.

"Neighbors of the year, no doubt about that," Wayne continued. "However…"

They all started to chuckle. At the back of the driveway behind the grill, an old Porsche rested under a tarp. Toby had brought it home one day as a hobby project. He had beamed with nervous pride—nervous I think, because he'd been out with Dean and he probably wouldn't have gone through with it otherwise. Since then, Dean had dragged home a sun-bleached old Camaro to match and parked it along the dead end curb at our place: all these cars that wouldn't start, shown off to the neighbors like trophies, talked over like games already won—the make, the model, the LLC Dean had created in order to write the hunk of junk off on his taxes. He was suddenly in the classic-car refurbishment business. Toby, at least, had stopped short of that.

"However," Wayne went on, coming to his favorite part of the story, in which he's holding the steering wheel of his dead van with white knuckles, fighting the weight of it at the end of a taught, checkered rope, nothing but the dull red glow of Dean's taillights showing the stretch of road between them— "'Cause our battery was out. I'm talking all the way out… no parking lights, no cabin lights, nothing. And I'm asking myself (because we're going around some serious curves, and even on the straightaways Dean's swerving) *Has he been drinking? Is he trying to take us for a ride, or what's going on?*"

Before the cars, there'd been the 'Sidewalk Doctor,' grinding down the uneven concrete over tree roots for pittance—our garage filling up with expensive equipment. *Don't you have to have business profits for a business expense write-off to mean anything for us?*

Dean had once dreamed up a telephone company with his brother Miles, started installing booths all around Portland and Oregon City. They'd had twelve or so before someone started bashing in the coin boxes, and they damn near got shot during an all-night stakeout one night to try and catch the perpetrators in the act. And a few years before that, around the time Joanne was

born, Dean and Miles had lost, bought, and lost again the land where the new Riverside Mall, in Milwaukie, now stands, and trashed both their credit in the process. Whoever built the mall, I'm sure, was laughing all the way to the bank for that steal-of-a-deal at tax auction. Most accountants these days took one look at Dean's dossier and turned him away.

"But then I get it," Wayne said. Everyone was cracking up. "Because I've got their outlines in that back window and I see Dean's arm waving and it clicks: they're up there spinning yarns! Telling stories! He's clean forgot about us."

"I was checking on you in the rearview," Dean insisted through everyone's laughter. "Regularly!" And something about the way he said it made them laugh all the more.

That morning, over the preparation of a fruit salad to be served in a hollowed-out watermelon, Dean had gone on and on about his next big idea, listing median real estate prices up and down the west coast… *You know how much a comparable home costs in good old Portland, Oregon?* It had been a rhetorical question.

"You doing alright over there, Moira?" Magdalene asked me.

"Me? Oh, yeah. I'm great." And I shook my head and smiled at the story.

*If you ask me: this whole town. Buyer's Market.*

I'd countered: *That's not what Al was saying…*

*Al's looking at it from his own perspective.*

A spinning firework began to whir and skip across the pavement and one of the neighbors scolded her boy for having lit the wick in his hand. Beth jumped off my lap to go see Joanne.

*Not real estate again, Dean. It's burned you before. I don't want to get involved. I don't…* But we would. I knew we would.

A puff of grill smoke wafted over us. Magdalene got up and came back with two beers as the story wound down. "Let's go see what these kiddos are up to," she said as she handed me a can.

"Just playing with explosives," Carol said.

Toby laughed and wiped his face with a napkin. "Right! Nothing to worry about."

"All good over here!" Magdalene summarized and we walked to the edge of the street. She asked again if I was alright, if something was bothering me.

"I'm doing great," I assured her. "Thank you. Just bracing myself for the big ones."

Magdalene rolled her eyes and touched my arm. "I know, gosh. I mean, have your fun, but do you have to shell the neighborhood?" She was short with bright ginger hair, and her laugh was infectious.

"Last year I found some of those big illegal ones still smoldering in the garden the next day," I said.

"I remember that! I remember."

"Dean hosed down the roof earlier, at least. So that made me feel better."

"Smart. That is smart. I should have had Toby do the same, but we do have some extinguishers on hand and the hose is all ready—just in case. You sure you're alright Moira? I hate to see you stressed."

"I'm fine," I told her and we patted each other's backs. Then Magdalene complimented the girls' sparklers and we went out into the street to join them and that was that. If only I didn't have to show everything on my face all the time, I thought, things would be easier for me.

*It's past time to start building something up, he told me. Money-in, money-out; money-in money-out—with no change whatsoever. He wanted out of the race and into bleachers.*

The kids provided a nervous energy as the sun went down. "Is it dark enough now?" "How about now?" Then people started in with the fountain fireworks, and we all carted our chairs from the driveway to the edge of the sidewalk to watch. Around 10:30, Norm snuck out into the street with one of the big ones under his arm, and after lighting the wick, ran back with just a bit more urgency than the kids had with theirs. The mortar launched with a thud, and erupted into a sphere of magenta trails just over the trees. The neighbors cheered and there was the smell of phosphorus. Good old Norman.

The party lasted into the pitch dark of 11, 12 pm before the fireworks ran out. There were grumblings from the kids who'd used up their supply too fast, and envious, excited gasps when the Peverett boy revealed a shrink-wrapped mega pack right when the others had thought he was out of ammo. They'd all seen them at the stands in the red and blue boxes, fonts like bottle rocket tails, and he was lucky, they said, that his parents had let him get it.

*I won't be able to get the girls through college on cookware alone, Dean had said. And you don't make it in this world without jumping at any opportunity that comes along.*

*What opportunity? I'd said.*

*Without manufacturing your own opportunities!*

*Then get a nine-to-five, I'd wanted to say so badly, but I knew better. He'd tried twice before, when Joanne was about one year old, and again after Beth was born, but he clashed with the bosses so bad they'd be at each other's throats in a month. He always knew better than them about how to get the job done, and I'm sure he did, but that's not what it's about. Sometimes you just have to put your head down and do what they say, even if they're sending you in circles. That's what I told him the second time, and he tried, I know he tried… and that look of frustration on his face at the end of everyday… and how honestly sometimes it was just easier for him to be turned loose and working his odd hours, his weekends and his night owl streaks and taking care of the girls while I put in my forty and occasional overtime. Some months were fat, and some months were lean. Lately, lean. But Dean couldn't work for anybody but himself. Something to do with the war, maybe, or his feral childhood.*

We were among the last to leave. We called the girls back from the Peverett's yard, back from their running and laughing in the dark and reassured them that the fireworks were done, that the party was done, that the whimpering end had really been the end. There was no grand finale. The street was covered over in the cardboard husks of *fountains* and *Piccolo Petes*, slashed with silver and rust-red burns, the winding, looping trails of *martians* (as the kids called them), and strewn with powder. The house felt still and anti-climactic. Beth put herself to bed on the couch before Joanne had even finished brushing her teeth.

**Joanne**

Before dawn, my room blue with shadows: Mom lay my little sister down in the other bed, whispering kind, quiet things. She had fallen asleep in my parents' room the night before. Mom was about to leave for work. I closed my eyes again, warm and fearless with sleep.

On summer days like this, she worked from dawn until late afternoon, when the sun was nestling into the tops of the trees across the street. In winter, she came home after dark. Beth was about four years old; I was eight. At home with Dad, these were days of multi-tasking, days that hummed like the air around an electrical substation.

After breakfast, Dad unlocked the box of raffle tickets from the cookware stand and I dumped them on the table. The old ones, marked with a slash in ballpoint, were separated out. Dad made his calls with the phone squeezed between his ear and shoulder. "…Dean from the county fair, you remember?" ...called with my little sister balanced on his lap, helping her color Disney princesses with one hand and taking notes with the other. "That's right," he said, suddenly smiling wide as if the person was right in the room with us. And his mouth worked here and there while they yammered, sometimes even getting out a whole word like this: "Music…" but he'd trail off and then come back with a polite "Mm-hmm…" the smile never leaving his face.

He'd do the talking while I waited, pencil in hand, intent on writing down a date and time as soon as they settled on one. "…Music to my ears." And when I grew bored of helping, I got out my beads and worked on what Dad had dubbed *product development:* designing pendants with red, blue and yellow—also rationing out small piles of beads to Beth so she wouldn't try to pour them on her own and spill everywhere.

"Listen here," he said into the receiver at lunchtime as he lifted the corner of a grilled cheese sandwich from the skillet to check its progress. He summoned a voice part street performer and part game show host: "I'm calling because you're one of our lucky raffle winners, and you've earned yourself a free dinner party…"

Later, he called in between bouts of chasing my little sister and me around the yard as an ogre, a wolf, a lion—Beth squealing, running for her life on legs so short Dad didn't have to do more than speed-walk to keep pace with her. ("…Now it's dinner for six to eight, so you should invite two or three other couples. Dinner's on me. I'll cook and clean.")

He called while he washed and bandaged scraped knees from a slip on the driveway or a stumble over a loose shoelace on the back patio, one finger to his lips imploring us to let the tears fall without crying out, flexing his arms to say *be tough!* ("Dean, from the fairgrounds: stainless steel cookware." "Dean, with Temptone Waterless Cook Systems.")

The reward: a drive in his pickup to the ice cream parlor on Skyline, then down the hill to Pittock Mansion, where we enjoyed our oversized cones on the grass overlooking the city and Dad told us how Mt. Hood, in the distance, would one day erupt and lose its pointy top. He told us how, when Mt. St. Helens blew, he and Mom had only known for a month or so that she was pregnant with me, and how, because of the ash that fell, all the plants in our garden grew twice as tall that summer, the squash twice as big, and the tomatoes sweeter than anything. "Come to think of it," he said. "That could be the reason you turned out so smart." And when Beth asked for the reason *she* turned out so smart, Dad told her that for her incredible genius there was no explanation in heaven or on Earth.

When we got back, Dad put Beth down on the carpet with a couple pillows and some blankets and fed *The Little Mermaid's* black plastic cartridge into the VCR so the two of us could get back to work. Dad called and called. He called until my hand was cramped from squeezing the pencil and my eyes were heavy. At a certain point, I slipped off my chair and wandered towards the cartoon sounds.

"You clockin' out?" he asked.

"Yeah, clocking out," I answered.

He waved me back and wrapped a big bear arm around my head. "Good work. You can get outta here."

On the screen, Flounder darted in a streak of yellow from Sebastian to Ariel, voicing his concerns. Soon, I heard the front door open and the crinkle of groceries in Mom's arms. Nestled in her bedding on the floor below me, Beth's eyes looked like they might close at any moment.

"Girls," Dad's voice came from the entry. "Girls, your mom's home from work. Come say hi." He asked again. I ambled to the kitchen, where Mom had placed three white plastic grocery sacks on the counter. She called me sweetheart and asked how my day had been. Her hands were rough and dry and smelled like hospital soap.

"Good."

The screen door opened and fell closed again. Dad came in with three or four more bags.

"That everything?" Mom asked.

"Yeah," he said.

I headed back to the couch, where my spot was still warm and Sebastian and Ariel were singing.

Dad's voice softly: "Oh yeah, they're tuckered. Beth especially."

*"…under the sea…"*

My sister's eyes were really closed now, and the sunlight fell red and sharp edged across the wall. Plastic sacks sighed in the kitchen, and the fridge fan whispered. I heard the little creak of cupboard hinges and the doors falling closed as my parents put away the groceries. Then nothing but Ariel and Sebastian, and Ursula's voices were left, quiet and further and further away, with whooshing and the sounds of bubbles and *Danger! Darkness! Ocean!*

***

It was almost Fall: the grass just about giving up on being green, and the light softening, coming through the windows into the house at different angles, painting new shadows on the walls that I hadn't seen before—of a chair or wicker magazine rack, stark on a wall that had always stood blank. The sun had browned the yards and burned away the clouds for the season, tired itself out, and got lazy. Still, even by accident, it was making beautiful things.

Dad and I did the dinner parties on Friday and Saturday nights. Beth was jealous, and Mom would cross her arms over Beth's chest like a harness as Dad and I packed our supplies into the car and got ready to leave.

"We'll have a girls' night," Mom told her. "Just you and me." But she pouted anyways. "I know," Mom commiserated. "Life's hard."

Dad was in the doorway with the last of the grocery bags.

"*We'll be alright,*" Mom mouthed. "Out of sight, out of mind."

Dad came back in and knelt in front of Beth. "Not long now and you'll be big enough," he said. "A few more years and you and I are going to make a great team. Keep training on the

vegetables. Right now you don't know how lucky you are: you get to have Mom all to yourself." He asked her for a hug, then we were out the door and off.

We drove across old Beaverton under orange sherbet skies, past square yards with chainlink fence short enough that the dogs could stretch up and get their heads pet over the top by passers-by—or just bark like crazy.

"Pop quiz," Dad said, and I looked over. "What are the clients' names?"

Easy. "Mr. and Mrs. Thielson," I said.

"What do we know about them?" He asked.

I thought back to that phone call where Dad could hardly get a word in to tell the woman what she'd won. "They're as talkative as you are," I said.

He laughed, then started explaining how sometimes there's a lot of empty air to fill, and you have to lead the way. Other times—imagine, lets say—selling cookware to his brother or one of his sisters, all you'd have to do is rev them up and watch them go. He said there were people out there so excited to have someone to talk to that they'd walk away thinking what a great person they just met, not realizing you hardly said a word.

"You got the address, there?" He asked.

I said yes and read it off the torn sheet of notebook paper he'd given me. "It says to take Cedar Hills Boulevard to Cornell," I told him.

He nodded. "Alright: what are the five ingredients of our patented Five Ingredient Apple Crisp?"

I squinted and focused. A week ago I'd known them all. But now? "Apples," I started.

"Yeah."

“Apples, cinnamon, brown sugar—” I paused and thought. “Oats and butter.”

Dad looked at me sideways. Cedar Hills had taken us under the freeway and was pointing us uphill under old mossy trees.

“Rolled oats and salted butter!”

“That’s my girl. We’re gonna knock ‘em dead!”

We pulled up outside of a two story house with red brick around the windows, and grass that was greener and plusher than ours had been in April. Dad handed me the grocery bag with the vanilla ice cream, its label just visible underneath a layer of frost on the lid.

He liked me to address our hosts by Mr. or Mrs. and ask them where I could *‘take a load off,’* and it was always the bag with the ice cream he gave me to carry. Sometimes they would comment on it, saying something like ”uh-oh, we got a little girl with sweets here,” or something like that. But no matter how it started, Dad always walked in like he’d been their guest before; he smoothed over their mistakes. “When they can see we’re comfortable, *they’ll* be comfortable,” he once told me.

A woman opened the door and my first impression of her from the fairground came rushing back—she’d been laughing and carrying on with her husband and their friends and had dropped her name in the raffle saying she’d bother figuring out what it was for on the off-chance she won. She’d cracked a few jokes and was off again like a whirlwind—these people were having fun, and wouldn’t be needing any help from us.

Whereas occasionally we walked in on a group of adults all standing around unsure where to look or where to put their hands, here we were invited in like old friends. Three guys with beers were leaning forward at a football game on TV, and a fourth hollered, “Hey, how’s it

going?" as he dried his hands by the kitchen sink. "Welcome!" There were three women drinking wine at a round table in the kitchen. The ceilings were high and the light was warm and bright. Dad said to the man in the kitchen: "You better not be undercutting me with any appetizers, now. I didn't sign up for competition." The two of them laughed and shook hands.

"Chips and salsa's all. Welcome in. What do ya need from me?"

Dad dropped his bags on the counter and looked around. There were barstools at the kitchen island, which he loved. He once told me he'd never struck out in a kitchen that had barstools.

"I'm more-or-less a kitchen on wheels," he said. "But if there's anything comes up I'll be sure to let you know." And then he went around and traded names with all of them. *Dean. Izzy. Dean. June. Dean. Marge. Dean Dean Dean.* He got to me and pointed: "*Dad* to you."

The host and the three other women laughed and wanted to know who I was and what grade I was in and what I liked to do—everything. It was so much more of a reception than we'd ever got that I was blushing and felt like I could say just about anything I wanted to. Anything that came to mind, these ladies would want to hear it and make it right.

"This is my daughter, Joanne," Dad said. "She'll be helping me out tonight."

They oohed and awed. Dad headed out to the car for his cookware and the hostess put the ice cream in the freezer. "Where it's safe," she said.

Dad typically liked to start, in those houses where the people didn't seem to know what was going on, by saying something like: "Now I might have a product to sell." He'd look around at them, letting the room breathe, "But that doesn't mean that's all we're here for. Whether you want to invest in a set or not, we are here to enjoy ourselves. Friends, family and good food:

that's what it's all about." He liked to say it in any case, but there were certain situations where the room just felt frozen until he did. "You have to meet people where they're at," he liked to tell me.

In this case, he had the opposite problem. Where usually he would already have the whole party gathered around him and involved, and be the center of attention, most of this crowd was still more aware of the ball game, and of each other, than of us. I thought Dad might be about to ask the ladies at the table to come over and have a front row seat—thought that's what he should do, but instead he was palling around with the hosts, who were standing at the counter with their drinks, asking them who did the cooking. The woman leveled her pointer finger at her husband and squint-smiled.

"Must be nice!" One of the ladies at the table said loud, so her husband could hear.

"Someone talking about me?" One of the guys on the couch hollered back.

"What's your signature?" Dad asked Mr. Thielson.

"Beef Wellington," he said.

"Dad looked surprised. That right?" Those always fluid motions of his got hesitant for a second.

Mrs. Thielson was beaming. "Once," she said. "One time."

Dad looked relieved. I guessed Beef Wellington wasn't one of the things you could make with the pots and pans that we were selling. Still, there was the other problem: you can't sell anything when nobody's paying attention. But, now that I thought about it, I guessed you couldn't just come right out and ask people to pay attention, either.

The men on the couch erupted in short, quick cheers with voices like ripping paper. "*Yes!*" "*Woohoo!*" "*That's the way! That. is. the. way.*"

The television went to commercial and one of them stood up, clapped his hands together and headed to the kitchen for another bottle of beer. He was tall and seemed to stoop so as to be a little closer to the rest of us. Dad now had a Temp-tone medium sauce pan down on the stove and dropped a big crown of broccoli into it and put the lid on. "Mrs. Thielson," he said. "There is one thing you can do for me."

She stood at attention.

"May I see what kind of sauce pans you're using, and what kind of skillet."

She tucked her chin down in mock offense.

"Uh oh, Sharon," said the stooping giant at the fridge. "Looks like you're about to get schooled."

She was already at her cabinet. "I'll play along!"

When she gave it to Dad, he filled it under the tap and then cranked one burner up on high and set it on top. He threw in another crown of broccoli, quartered a purple cabbage and threw that in, and topped it off with a handful of baby carrots.

"He's doing just what I do, but he makes it look like some kind of speed run," one of the ladies said from the table.

"You would, too, if you were as hungry as I am!" Dad said, and they laughed. On the burners closer to him, he set down Mrs. Thielson's skillet and his own and trickled a thin layer of flour over the cooking surfaces.

"Now that's a trick I don't know," the same lady commented.

I hopped over and asked their favorite food to see if I could lure them in a bit further; maybe one would decide she wanted to sit with me at the counter, and the rest would follow.

“Wine,” one of them said quick, before taking it back and saying, “I’m joking, I’m joking!” even quicker. “I love,” she said while the other two were still calming down, “a good, old fashioned—”

“An old fashioned!” Mrs. Thielson exclaimed, and then they really laughed. The giant chuckled on his way back to the couch. Now the woman was blushing. “A good—*old fashioned* —rice casserole!”

“I’m a breakfast gal,” another said. “There is nothing better than a perfect Eggs Benedict.”

“Can’t beat fish tacos,” said the third. “What’s yours?”

I told them *ice cream*, playing my character just like my dad played his.

Dad laughed. “She’s not lyin’.” We caught eyes right over those empty barstools and I tried to send him a psychic message. The lid of Mrs. Thielson’s pot began to jump and rattle with steam. The two other men from the couch walked through to the fridge, talking about the game. One of them retrieved a cold bottle and was glancing around for an opener. Dad was chopping more vegetables. “I’ve got you, here” he said, took the bottle, and popped the cap off with the safe edge of his knife. I hopped to the furthest bar stool, took a seat, and plastered a fascinated look on my face at everything he was doing.

“Daddy’s girl,” said the woman whose favorite food was wine—no—casserole.

The guy who Dad had opened the beer for lingered, looking perplexed into the two skillets of flour.

Cutting chicken now and still holding his knife, Dad pointed into Mrs. Thielson's pan with his pinky finger. "You see the difference?" He asked.

"'Deed I do."

"Uh oh, Sharon," said the giant.

"What difference?" The woman who loved fish tacos perked up. And then, like magic, the whole lot of them were up and standing around the electric range. In Dad's pan, the flour had turned golden brown, as even as beach sand all the way across; in Mrs. Thielson's, it was white around the edge, and turning black as coffee grounds in the middle and starting to stink. Dad started up in a quieter version of the voice he used at the fairground, explaining the importance of even heat distribution. He dumped the perfectly browned flour out into the trash and asked what they thought the odds were that he could brown a potato—no oil, no butter—without it sticking. They all seemed to agree they couldn't stop a potato from sticking to their pans in the best of times. Dad halved a russet and stuck it cut-side down squeaking and squealing right on the hot steel. Right about then, his saucepan with the broccoli crown and other veggies started whistling. He closed the valve and reduced the heat. "Medium to low is all you need to know," he told them. "Once I hear that whistle, I'm gonna turn down and steam these veggies below the boiling point to retain their flavor and nutrients." He pointed at the rim of the lid. "See that water seal forming? That keeps the heat in, so they're gonna cook quick, too. Did you all grow up eating boiled vegetables?" There was general agreement. "I know I did—and I. Just. Dreaded them." He took Mrs. Thielson's saucepan by the handle and the lid and drained out a steaming yellow-brown tea into a glass measuring cup, then held it out for them to see. "That, right there,

is all your flavor. And all your nutrients." Mrs. Thielson's jaw dropped. Her husband had his poker face on, but his hand was on his hip and he was leaning in.

That russet potato looked like a miniature Haystack Rock in Dad's skillet. He snatched it up and showed us the cut-side, as golden and crisp as Wonder Bread on a perfect grilled cheese, then he dumped the drumsticks and thighs from his cutting board down in its place. "Even with chicken, I don't need a drop of oil. As soon as it's browned, it's going to release from the bottom of the pan—every time."

Dad had started taking me along originally out of necessity, when he had parties to throw the same nights that Mom had babies to deliver. Now, I went with him because we made a team "How you doing, Jo?" he asked.

I shrugged and smiled, and he pulled the lid off his saucepan and served me a bowl of veggies, as if to keep me occupied while he entertained and started mixing up the batter for a pineapple upside-down cake that would would cook right in the same pans while we ate—and when somebody *oohed* and *awed* about such a young kid eating her vegetables like that, Dad told them it was because vegetables tasted so much better cooked with a stainless steel, waterless, greaseless, cook system.

At the end of the night, stuffed and happy, our hosts and two of the three other couples had each bought a set.

The long adult chats that the grown-ups settled into at dinner and over our pineapple upside-down cake had taken all my energy and, in the car, high beams boring through the dark in front of us, my eyelids were getting heavy. A little heat was coming out the vents, fluttering the

curly hair on Dad's wrist as he guided the wheel, and in our headlights trees materialized out of the dark as if there were an endless conveyor belt on each side of the road. He was looking ahead at the edge of the darkness. The little glow on the wavering needles of the dash put me to sleep like nightlights.

*(My sister has maybe pulled her hood up and rests her head on the window to sleep. Dad's maybe thinking about this voice he's found to talk to crowds that still feels like him, or maybe he's always had that voice and so it doesn't cross his mind. Maybe he's thinking about the road at night, the lines blinking by like morse: all dashes, but reads like, 'GO GO GO—keep going, you're on the right track.' Maybe he's thanking God. He skips their exit that night. Joanne's out cold. He has half a tank, and they closed three sales. He wants her to see it. Has she ever seen it? Maybe when she was little, little. That's no good, he thinks. He nudges the blinker off again and straightens out. There's no one in the rear view close enough to bat an eye. He takes Barnes to Burnside; Skyline to Germantown, and drives slow through the hairpins so as not to wake Joanne. He wants her to open her eyes expecting home.)*

The slowing of the car half-woke me, and there was the sound of the blinker, then a wash of cool air. I opened my eyes and was alone. Not a blinker, but both blinkers—the hazards! The driver side door was open, and Dad's seat was empty. The road was a smooth low hump in front of us, lit pale, straight out under grey-green cathedral spires. The metal made huge gates over the road and cables big as tree trunks swooped down from the heights—all those lines together making it feel like it'd be wrong not to go across, like you had no choice but to get drawn along, as if by a slow, steady but all-encompassing intake of breath from the mouth of a city-sized

beast. Lazy red lights faded off and on at the tips of the spires, high up in the night-dark like the eyes of a dragon.

The convertible cover clicked and released, and there was my Dad, pulling back by hand what once slid back on its own with a slow electric hum. "Told you I'd show you a real bridge, Jo."

It looked more likely there would be some kind of dreamscape on the other side than a neighborhood: a city of spires with black emerald streets.

"Bundle up good," he said. I got tucked up like a little egg on the seat and he draped his suit jacket around me. He sat back down, closed his door, and unclicked the red exclamation point which was holding the hazards in their hypnotic pattern. We drove slow under the arches, slow enough to see the shadows in the threading of the green-painted nuts and bolts, big as truck wheels.

(*Those big old hex nuts caught Jo's attention, he thinks, and he says to her: "Can you imagine the wrench?" She laughs and makes a face like gold. At the crest of the St. John's Bridge, he points west downriver to the city lights.* Drive a loop and go back over? *he asks himself.* Nah, we'll make a loop of it and take Willamette Boulevard.*)*

We came off the bridge into a little town built around a star-shaped intersection with about ten different ways to turn. Dad took us past bars and a tiny old theater. A few people were walking around. We turned onto a neighborhood street and drove slow, looking close at the houses we passed. Suddenly he stopped, shifted, and reversed halfway back down the block.

"One sec, Jo," and he threw open his door and jogged past the front of the car and onto the sidewalk to take a house flyer from one of those white-painted posts with a realtor sign

hanging from little links of chain. Behind him, stretched out above everything: balanced at the top of legs thin as those of Dali's dream elephants, with the road floating on and on until it was caught again by the arches on the other side, was the St. John's Bridge. He got back in the car, studied the flyer and pursed his lips. Then he folded it, ran his thumbnail sharply across the crease and reached across me. He popped the glove box open and stashed it on top of a dozen more, just like it.

We got onto a long road curved like a crescent moon above the darkness of the river below. Mansion-after-mansion were lined up on Dad's side as if for military inspection. For sure, one of those would be ours. On the other side of the river, the gloomy darkness solidified into a black wall topped by the saw-teeth of treetops against the sky, stretching all the way back to the downtown lights. I fell asleep again.

**Moira**

Dean added more cities and towns to his circuit in the lead-up to his big return to real estate, for a total of twelve weeks on the road every year—twelve weeks which he concentrated in the Spring and Fall, trying to line them up as close as possible with wedding season without either leaving me and the kids high and dry while they were out of school for summer and the weather was good, or totally missing the high volume seasons for his industry. In the dead of winter, he took on a bit of fine china dealing as well, the kinds of sets that our parents' generation would keep on display in glass fronted cabinets.

In the spring months, working up to wedding season, Dean's pitches catered to the parents of engaged couples who might be looking to send their children off to do their own homemaking with a complete set of state-of-the-art cookware. In the fall, the newlyweds themselves were in his sights, perhaps freshly moved into a house of their own and suddenly realizing that a hodgepodge of hand-me-down pots and pans was holding them back from their culinary dreams.

Twelve weeks a year, to increase his income half again what he'd been raking in since Beth was born: just far enough apart that every time the day came for Dean to leave, for Joanne and Beth it felt like the first time: the sequel to a bad dream they'd almost, almost, forgotten. Joanne didn't understand why she couldn't go with him—why she couldn't be pulled out of elementary school to travel a sales route with her fast-talking father. Couldn't understand how it was different than the county fair or the dinner parties..

Beth tended to act up more in the lead up to Dean leaving, somehow picking up on a looming departure intuitively. Dean's leaving had a similar effect on our children as the full

moon did on the maternity ward. Babies not due for another three weeks would suddenly be ready to go; Beth would throw tantrums and refuse get in the car when we had someplace to be; refuse to leave it when we arrived home. She wouldn't eat her favorite foods, would dump a bowl on the table and cross her arms and pout, asking for something that only her father could cook the 'right way'. God help me, if the two things coincided, and I had to live in the chaos at work and at home. I would end the day in tears, and rue that Dean had to be the way he was. Then guilt myself that if Dean had been a different kind of man, the girls I loved would be different kinds of girls. And what did thoughts like that say about me?

Soon, Joanne began to find that there were different rules when her Dad was away. She was allowed to do more, and go more places, so long as other kids' parents could handle the transportation. Beth still loved spending days on end with grandma, but Joanne needed her friends, and there'd be multi-night sleepovers, and after school hangs, and whole weekends without having to check in or answer to anyone. When Dean returned, there were cries of happiness, and a dog pile of hugs and kisses at the door when he came through it. Then, within a week, disappointment at the inconvenience of having a parent always available to suss out new activities and new friends, to either give her a ride himself or deny permission, not trusting a friend's parent's choice of automobile.

Here she was in tears again, coming to me after Dean had told her no about some get-together with her friends. I'd made the mistake of telling her it was alright with me if it was alright with her father. She moped back out to the other room and I could hear her telling her dad: "Mom says it's *okay* and that it's up to you, Dad. Why? *Why why why?*"

Dean tried to explain how he felt sending her over to stranger's houses.

“But it’s the most normal thing in the world for everyone else,” she said. “Everyone’s going to each other’s house. Everyone’s just going with the flow!”

I didn’t know what normal was. The neighbors’ kids played outside all day, running in a pack, cycling through every sport I knew, and some I didn’t. But of course Joanne was making her own friends at school… kids she was choosing and not just the kids who happened to live on our street, and that’s important. But what was normal? My sister and I had grown up without a neighbor for miles, completely different math— (“*Why?*” Joanne shouted in the other room. Dean continued on without raising his voice. He never got emotional with her; I think it was one of the things that was driving her crazy.) — Nope, Denise and I hadn’t had a neighbor’s house in sight, and our father had driven us crazy too.

Dean’s property search alternated between absolute tear-downs that he was in denial of being tear-downs. (“I can do a roof, I can do a floor.” “You can’t do a foundation, though.”), tear downs which would obviously bankrupt us if he purchased them, and pie-in-the-sky properties we would have had to mortgage my house to afford.

Beth was lying on the couch in the gap between us, her head in Dean’s lap, taking in every word and every twitch of his face. He stroked her hair with one hand, emphasized his points in the air with the other.

“I have the money,” he said, of a dreamy little row house in John’s Landing, across the street from Willamette Park, blocks from a cafe and a bookstore.

“You have the money—” I wobbled my head *“*—sort of.”

“I have it, it’s just my credit that’s cooked.”

“And it’s that you haven’t done your taxes since before we got married. What’s that, eight —nine thousand dollars?”

He shook his head. “That was a situation and a half.”

I puffed the air. “Six years ain’t no situation, Dean.”

He looked at me hurt, or a bit sad. “If they haven’t come for it by now…”

“They always come,” I answered.

“You heard Al, though. Those people are overworked. Filing together will have thrown them off the track.”

I just looked at him. “I hope Al’s right.”

“Who’s Al?” Beth asked. “Throw who off the track?”

“Nothin’, Sweetheart. Al is Dad’s friend. We’re just talking bills and boring stuff.”

“They’ve got bigger fish to fry,” Dean said.

He was gonna do what he was gonna do. I knew that going in. Start filing jointly and don’t look back, that’s what Al told us to do, and so far, so good.

Beth listened to us, trying to put all the pieces together.

“I’ll lend you my good credit,” I said. “But the accounts stay separate. We both agree on that. At least one of us needs a clean bill of health. He thanked me and hugged and kissed me and told me I wouldn’t regret it.

*Remember when you met Denise’s kids you maniac? You were good with them, and it wasn’t an act either. They got excited. You got excited. I saw you. When Mom met you she said you were a little wild, but she liked you. “Yeah, but he knows he is,” I’d told her. “So-and-so is*

*down-to-earth. If Dean says that about someone you know he likes them. It's the highest compliment he knows."*

"Are you down-to-earth, Dean?" I asked him in the early days. He just laughed—smiled and laughed and put his arm around me.

*Now you've walked over and swooped up Beth like a babe in arms and she can't stop laughing.* "Bigger fish to fry! Ain't that right Bee?" *She's yelping with the biggest smile that your whiskers are too scratchy. She loves you to the moon and back.*

We put in an offer on something by the end of the month, and when we were outbid, I didn't know if I was relieved that he might next go for something cheaper or dreading that he might go for some shabbier fixer-upper's dream that he couldn't see was out of his league. He started taking the long way through town everywhere he went, driving slow with his head on a swivel for forgotten, gave-up on properties across the Portland metro area. We were driving across Beaverton to pick up Joanne at a friend's once and I saw him lock on to a little house with its windows boarded up, and the front stoop caving in. He stopped and reached for his address book in the glove box in front of me—"Wrong," I said—and the little library pencil he kept with it.

"Three blocks from city center!" he said.

"Dean, absolutely not." Where the sediment had collected in the crooks of the roof, a whole grassland was taking root.

"Even if it's a teardown…" He balanced the booklet on his steering wheel and started jotting down the address."

"It is, of course, a teardown!"

"When the revitalization comes, and you know it will, this area, right here, is where the city is going to be absolutely pouring cash."

*And what was that in the gutter? Could I believe my eyes? A goddamned, fully-fledged—*

"Dean, that is a cattail." I pointed: rooted right out of a clogged-up downspout that ended in rusty amputation a few feet off the ground: a marsh plant.

He paused writing, laughed and shrugged, and we drove on. But when I opened the book to check, the whole address was there. Right down to the zip code, labeled: *'Swamp House'*

***

Dean didn't come home one night. When, by the next morning, he still hadn't shown up, I was betting that he had just caught a wild hare, pulled an all-nighter on some project, somewhere. Maybe, he and his brother Miles had gotten carried away cooking up another business. Hell, Dean had a pilot's license—got it when his G.I. Bill education benefits were set to expire and, man, if I thought he was hard to keep track of before… it was possible that Dean had been offered cash to deliver some little, single-engine Cessna a few states over. Delivery complete, he could now be hitchhiking his way back across wide and lonely counties with an eye out for some little station where he could call and fill me in. Or, maybe, he'd been waylaid for that meager wad of bills they'd paid him and was now lying in a ditch somewhere—no, impossible: Dean was indomitable. He once caught a pickpocket by the neck on our honeymoon in Greece. The trolley doors closed and the man went limp like a puppy, handing back Dean's wallet with sheepish eyes. Another time, when we were first dating, one of my girlfriends had brought along some yahoo that, after a few drinks, started waving a loaded pistol around. In a

single motion, Dean had snatched the gun and sent it scattering onto the floor of the bar in harmless little pieces. In any case, it had been a couple of years since Dean flew.

I made some calls, pacing the kitchen while our girls played in the other room, but no one had heard from my husband. While some of Dean's friends chuckled at his eccentricity, Manny couldn't hide his envy over my apparent nonchalance. "You can't cage a lion," he marveled, barely stopping short of asking me to put in a good word with his wife for this kind of behavior. "You know it, and you know better than to waste your time trying."

But it wasn't like Dean and I had been attached at the hip and then he'd fallen off the map sometime after we got married: I never used to know what day Dean would blow in, and rarely knew when he'd blow back out again. The disappearances had been the rule and become the exception. Anyways, Manny was no lion. "I don't know about all that," I told him.

"He'll turn up before too long, I'm sure, Moira. Probably with a chest of pirates' gold and one helluva good story."

Our neighbor, Toby, hadn't heard from him, Wayne neither. *Saint Moira*, Al called me. *Not mad or nothin*'.

I hung up and walked into the living room. Joanne sat under the picture window, which filled the room with light even as it let out all the heat. She was directing Beth through some episode in the lives of their dolls: a moment of harmony that I hoped their ages would begin to permit more often. Beth babbled in different voices, every bit the performer that Dean was, happy to have all eyes on her. Though Jo was quieter, like me, I saw Dean in her dark hair, and in her brown, curious eyes.

Not long after Dean first moved in, I gifted him a fake, plastic carphone to stick on his dash. He and Toby, who was fresh back from a tech convention in Las Vegas, had had an hour long conversation through the window of Toby's idling car after he'd stopped to say hello on his way out of the neighborhood, and they'd gotten so worked up over the DynaTac Cellular Telephone that I had to have a little fun. Dean and I would get a kick out of rolling up on friends in mid charade, smiling our best apologies or holding up a finger—*just one sec!*—capping it all off by name dropping some senator or billionaire, making like he was just too much of a chatterbox to break away. Wherever Dean was, that toy carphone was still right there on his dash. Shame, I thought as Beth held a doll up to the window to look outside, that it wasn't the real thing.

My first husband had been as much a traveling salesman as Dean. He kept a small apartment in Spokane where he stayed one week per month while the company he contracted with mustered the troops for inventory or hosted sales meetings and ra-ras. Likewise, my sister's ex-husband had kept a place in Eugene and Lewiston both, and was quick when his bosses fired him to replace one vagrant, traveling job for another–too accustomed, I'm sure, to that roving double (or triple) life to be deterred over having to look for a new job that fit the specs. And Dean, too, kept his apartment in Salem for the first years that we dated, no matter how many nights a week he spent with me in Portland.

My first marriage should have ended when it came to light that my ex paid no great portion of the rent on that apartment in Spokane where he spent his one week a month—it was, in fact, mostly financed by, and home to, my predecessor and their two small children. He begged me to understand: the past was past and he loved me so much that he had been scared

he'd lose me if he told the truth. That one week per month had always been for the benefit of the children and was *strictly* platonic between him and his ex. In a penance for what he'd done, Larry stopped going to see them. When the shock wore off, our romantic life was reduced to my imploring him, and then finally loaning him the money, to pay his child support, trying to explain that depriving two children of a father was not the way to get back in my good graces. The marriage should have ended then, but it languished another year until I guess it all became too much for Larry and he bumped me from the final ring in his chain of ongoing relationships to one of the middle links. He and my sister's ex, both, had had a girlfriend in every town on their respective routes. We commiserated–the big difference being that my sister was pregnant, and I was not.

What would the DynaTac Cellular Telephone mean to men like them? How did they feel when they heard news of a future in which we all might be reachable anywhere in the world we happened to be, simply by dialing a number? No more crocodile tears about the distance, and missing you, and the difficulty of staying in touch, or how lonely it is, life on the road. Dean was almost certainly on the same program at the time we met. I liked just about everything about him except that, but I didn't need him either. My parents helped me buy the house after my divorce. It was all mine, and nursing paid the mortgage, so if Dean had someone he liked better, then congratulations. *Get going*. If he was going to stay, he could stay because he wanted to, not because I made him put the blinders on. Anyways, I saw the Salem apartment with my own eyes while he still had it: bastard child free, a little messy. The only secret I learned there, via a handsome old guitar leaning against the wall in his living room, was that Dean had a hidden

talent. He made himself blush strumming out a bashful version of *I Want to Make it With You,* and what a pleasure it was to see him that way.

When the phone rang that afternoon, I picked it up, hoping for Dean's voice to put an end to all the mystery, but it was work. Two of the night nurses had called in sick and a sixteen year old girl was going into labor.

My mom arrived in less than thirty minutes, happy to help, the girls overjoyed to see her: no problem, really.

"It's a shame he can't find a job with regular hours," she said as I got my things together.

"You know Dean," I answered.

Now, with my hand on the door, the girls wanted to know where he was, along with important details like which one of us might get home first. I winced, *out of town on business* just not sounding the same as it had moments ago, said to my mother. "He'll be back soon," I assured them, hoping.

"Soon like minutes?" Jo pressed. "Or soon like hours?"

The truth was that I didn't know–that this disappearance had none of the romance of the old days, back when his smiling returns had prompted something between love and pleasant surprise, back when it was just the two of us, and I had my bills handled whether or not he ever came back, whether or not whatever new dream he was chasing ever panned out.

I stroked Jo's hair–better to temper expectations and be wrong: "Soon like days."

*St. Moira*, I thought as I drove off. Thought of the ramshackle toasts at our haphazard wedding. All his glowing sisters. His brother in a cheap suit, wiping sweat from his forehead and popping Tylenol— 200 milligram tablets, and far too many of them.

*We're just relieved,* was the general gist. "Thank god he found someone that can put up with him, because I've known him an awful long time—thirty-two years—and I know one thing. There's no changing him."

We all laughed. I kissed Dean on the cheek. He drank from both our champagne flutes that night, and so slyly that no one caught on. No one asked.

*St. Moira.* I knew what I was getting into.

"How do you know when you've found the one?" A younger nurse had asked me when she found out I was getting married. I'd joked that I didn't know any such thing, then said the true part: "I can't imagine not doing it. I can't imagine doing it with anyone else."

I wiped away a few frustrated tears in the parking garage before I went in. Our young patient had not quite gone into labor after all, and was looking quite relaxed, sipping on an iced tea and flipping through the channels on the tv in her room. Her parents, sitting by a window that looked down on the white roof of a lower part of the building, were doing her worrying for her.

Dean would be back before me, I told myself. By the time this shift was over, he will have showed up, hugged and flattered my mom and sent her on her way. The girls would be in bed. All would be right. So, there would probably be a phone call at some point. I'd get a page from the nurses' station and arrive there to find a line on hold and his voice waiting when I picked up the phone. But when the sky outside the hospital windows turned dark and no call had come, that hope drifted off and left behind a leaden certainty that there would be no such luck. I

ate a silent dinner in the break room, except for another brief installment of one of those even, shift-spanning conversations with a coworker as she microwaved some pasta and left again to catch part of a television show in one of the empty delivery suites.

I kept tabs on three patients, one of whom had arrived after me, but of course it was her who gave birth that night. *Last in, first out.* To my original patient, I said, "looks like the little guy is in no hurry."

"I guess," said the girl's mom, shaking her head.

"I guess," said the girl, with one eye on the television. She winced and half sat up, but I could tell that it was nothing.

I wished them luck before I left for the night. They were disappointed it wouldn't be me the next day, wouldn't be me taking care of them unless the baby waited two days—and no one wanted that. I assured them they'd love the nurse who was taking over and said goodbye, drove home through the night under the cold orange glow of lichen-stained streetlights on Highway 26.

I gripped the steering wheel and thought. *I'm not mad, I'm just… I'm just…* A car came up fast in my rearview and its signal only blinked once when it was already halfway over into the passing lane. It hummed by and shrank away. *Not my favorite,* I thought. *It's not my favorite.*

Morning: the windows clear and bright again. The ten o'clock news was on TV and mixing with the girls' voices as they played. It was Beth that spotted his Corvette coming down the hill. "Dad!" She cried out. Joanne twisted and looked at me to see if it was really true, her expression coming alive. I leaned forward on the couch and saw him rounding the corner. I told Jo with a glance that it *was* true and she was up and looking out the window, then they both took

off for the front door. I could hear little hands negotiating the locks, then the slamming of the storm door. Dean parked alongside the curb. Joanne and Beth ran down on bare feet to meet him, and they jumped into his arms. He hugged them close and was setting them down on the strip of grass between the street and the sidewalk when I left the window.

Dean came in, sunburnt and smiling. The girls were glued to his sides, looking up. He had a box of doughnuts for them and a grocery store bouquet for me, which he handed to Beth to give to me, and she ran those two or three steps between Dean and I with all the happiness and pride in the world, and raised the flowers as high over her head as she could until I took them and thanked her.

"I've got news," Dean said.

"You better."

"I found a place. A good one." He smiled. "I think we've got a winner on our hands."

I put my hands on my hips, found myself biting the inside of my cheek.

"Small little place off Lombard, all shady, the whole street is lined with oak trees. Five/ten minutes from downtown St. John's and, Moira, you aren't gonna believe this. I met this guy. He's gonna sell it to me for a thousand dollars."

I felt caught between the bright light of his excitement and a ball of dark, too-good-to-be-true foreboding in my chest—and the knowing that if he'd made up his mind there wasn't much I was going to be able to do about it. "What's the catch?"

"No catch," he said. "I mean, it's just a little old house. No frills, that's for sure."

"And who's this person who's going to sell you a house for a thousand dollars? Is he in some kind of trouble?"

"It's a thousand dollars *plus what he owes*. He's not in trouble, but he is at his wit's end with the bank and with his taxes and all that…"

Dean went on to tell me how he'd come across this old timer trying to devise a way to maneuver a washing machine into this place without a dolly or a partner—how he'd been walking it on its corners and plumb-given-up when he got to the overgrown lawn, and how he'd pulled over to give the guy a hand. How, after that, they'd got to talking over a drink at the Ranger Tavern across the way, then kept talking over dinner at the Korean spot around the corner, how they were just seeing eye-to-eye on just about everything and worked through the night on wiring and sheetrock in the little house as they went on talking. How the next day, the guy—Jaxon with an x—admitted that what he wanted more than anything was to give up on this place because he was behind on the payments and had other projects and other ideas and how he was damn close to just throwing in the towel and letting the bank take it back like the sharks they were. And that's when Dean offered to buy it from him.

"He was treating me like some kind of young buck," Dean laughed. "Who still had it in him to take on these kinds of things. The lack of sleep was catching up with him, So I drove us over the bridge back to Vancouver, where he's from, and he took a cat nap while his wife made me breakfast (Alice, real sweet lady). We talked the whole thing over after Jaxon woke up."

"And last night? Don't tell me you spent last night with this old guy, too."

"No, last night I had to get Miles out of a jam over in Milwaukie. Long story." He paused and looked me over, trying to read my face. "I found a house," he concluded.

"And how much does Jaxon still owe?"

“About twenty-nine,” Dean said. “Twenty-nine thousand, give or take, with seven and a half outstanding.”

There was a breath of silence. The girls looked back and forth between us, caught in-between with their confused excitement, smiling when they looked at Dean, hesitant when their eyes fell on me.

Dean saw it, took the three of us in with one sweeping glance and cried, “I found us a house!” And Joanne and Beth’s faces lit up for good. “It’s time to celebrate! We’ve got a winner on our hands!” The excitement won out on our daughters’ faces and the heaviness, the dread in my gut made room for a twinge of excitement in my chest. We would do what we planned. We’d set it in motion and we’d see it through. “It’s time to celebrate,” he said again. The girls cheered and Dean took me in his arms. “It’s time to celebrate!”

Dean had a little extra pep in his step the next morning as he shaved and got dressed for church. He tied an immaculate half-windsor and wrangled the girls into their Sunday best while I straightened my hair and did my makeup. He pushed his Mamas and the Papas tape into the tape deck in my car, drummed on the steering wheel, revved his engine on the straightaways and did a whole lip-synch routine in the rearview mirror for the girls in the backseat. For my part, I smiled a little and sang along to a line or two I knew, until I found that it didn’t feel good to sing.

In our pew, with the girls in Sunday school downstairs, I shook hands with the folks around us in near silence, while Dean was effervescent, glowing in his church clothes, making acquaintances feel like old friends. When we sat back down, the rest of the pastor’s words were

lost to me. I was mad at Dean. I told him so after, in the hushed polite chatter and milling of slacks and ties in the lobby. He nodded and gestured to the door.

"I'm not trying to hold you back," I told him outside under the shade of one of the newly planted trees. "I'm not trying to limit you. But you could have called, Dean. I never cared when it was just us. After all the shit I've been through, I never thought I deserved any better, but *they* do! Just like you did. And you may not be running off after women, or booze, but you still ran off. I had to lie for you, Dean. I had to lie to them."

"What did you tell them?" He asked.

"I told them you were away on business."

"Then you weren't lying!" He shifted his weight onto one leg. "I can't say why I didn't call. I just… it was like a flow-state. I wish I could tell you that it crossed my mind to do it and I decided not to, because if that was the case, I could promise to do things differently next time, but that's not what happened. I don't know how to change something like that, that goes deeper than thoughtfulness or decision-making. I'm sorry," he said. "I'm sorry. But you know me. I thought you putting up with me had something to do with strength and understanding, and not with weakness, not with believing you don't deserve better, Moira. I don't know what to say. You deserve the world. I'd be lost without you, and I know the reverse isn't true. You'd make out just fine. I'm sorry, Moira. I'm sorry."

I looked up at him from under my eyebrows, my forehead crinkled tight.

"I'm trying to build our future."

“You should see the looks on these girls’ faces when they see your car coming down the hill,” I said. God, they love you. They’d trade their piggy banks, they’d trade their toys, hell they’d probably trade their mom—“

“Moira—”

“They love you. They don’t need you to be a business magnate, or have a real estate empire—”

“I’m not asking to build an empire, just a little something,” he said. “You give me enough slack and I’m gonna put something in motion for us. Give me a few years and I’m gonna have us on rails.”

It was amazing the way he was talking, with his voice low and round and resonant. He sounded both serious and as though he were speaking through a reassuring smile. He looked up at the sky and breathed deep. “Beautiful out,” he said.

“Come on,” I said. He took my hand and we went back inside to pick up the girls.

The following week, on Tuesday, I took a long lunch and met Dean at the credit union in Northwest to cosign his loan application. A week after that, we met Jaxon and and Alice for lunch at the Ranger Tavern, before taking a tour of Dean’s new acquisition. The house was old. It smelled like cats had lived there in some distant past. The carpet had given up slack and lay in ripples. The doors were thin, and you had to lift them to get them to latch. The kitchen floor was marred with scuffs and black-stained scratches. But there were no leaks, and the plate glass windows were whole, though they shook with the traffic going by on Lombard. The toilets flushed.

Dean showed me each room like he was Leonardo Da Vinci showing off a choice block of marble.

"I thought you said there was a view of the bridge?"

"Only from the roof."

Alice and I laughed. "Lot of good that does us," I said.

"When this one's shipshape, we'll trade it in for something with a view. These are my humble beginnings," Dean said.

"I'm just glad it's going to be in good hands," Jaxon said. "Capable hands. Anyone can see you're passionate about this stuff." And he set the quitclaim deed down on the kitchen counter next to four water-spotted champaign flutes they'd brought along. Dean brandished his checkbook. They shook hands and smiled.

"All sales final, huh?" Jaxon said.

Dean ended his signature with an audible slash of the little pen. "Better believe it."

I watched Alice untwist the wire from around the top of the bottle she'd brought. We both flinched when she popped the cork, and laughed about it while Jaxon poured our glasses.

# Chapter 2: Braxton Hicks

**Beth**

Mom took Barnes to the hospital each morning, up through the hills past the cemeteries and past the bases of those red and white towers which, by night from anywhere in town, were a stack of floating, blinking red lights on the horizon. Passing them in the gray light before dawn, they were lattices of painted steel.

Barnes turns to Burnside and heads downhill into Northwest, past the stadium, almost no one out. An early morning bus passes an empty stop. Mom turns off onto one of the side streets and soon we're threading through red brick hospital buildings. The parking garage is the next novelty, then the security doors, where we use a call box to let someone at the nurses' station know we're there. Everyone knows Mom. Everyone stops to say hi. They say *nice to meet you* like they've been waiting their whole lives to meet their coworker's daughter. Like my reputation preceded me.

We changed into scrubs in a locker room, and fit blue shoe covers over our sneakers. The nurse's station was a rectangle of desks in an open area at the midpoint of two parallel halls, which were lined with heavy doors to the birthing suites.

"Look who it is!" Mom's coworker, Stephen, said and hopped up from his chair. "Beth, the future nurse extraordinaire. Or doctor in training?" he added, with an eyebrow raised.

Mom introduced me to the other nurse, a young woman who looked busy filling out paperwork. She said hello and asked if it was cool to see where Mom worked. I nodded, a bit shy.

"Have you seen the babies yet?" she asked, and gestured towards the big glass wall of the nursery. "That's the fun part—not this stuff." She tapped the top of her pen two times on a clipboard stacked with forms, rolled her eyes up and bit her tongue.

"Don't tell her about charting," Stephen said, "She'll never come back."

"You know, Moira," the younger nurse said. "They've got you on a cesarian this afternoon."

"Then she'll really never come back," Stephen said.

"I had a feeling that would be today. Mom looked at me: "Would you want to watch if I can get permission? It's when we deliver a baby surgically."

Stephen pointed at me. "Oh, my gosh. Priceless face she's making."

"Think about it," Mom said. "No pressure."

I pressed my face close to the glass to look into the little beds. The lights were low on the other side. Four swaddled, cotton-capped babies lay still in some of the first sleeps of their lives.

“You want to go in?” Mom asked me.

“We’re allowed?”

“Of course,” she said. I was worried we would wake them up. “We’ll just be really quiet. But if they wake up, it’s okay. They wake up all the time.” She led me off to a door on the right, through a room with two crystal clean steel sinks and dispensers for soap with a smell that made my eyes water. We washed up and dried with paper towels, then we passed through another door and we were there. Stephen and the other nurse were talking at reception and he made big gestures and slapped his knees in the light, laughing on the other side of sound proof glass.

Mom stroked one of the baby’s heads “I helped deliver this one,” she whispered. “His parents are sweethearts.” Then she cradled the bundle up into her arms and told me to sit down on a little couch that was against the wall. “Hold your arms like this.”

My stomach turned over with butterflies. I couldn’t imagine holding it.

“You’ll do great,” Mom said. She stepped close and leaned down. I felt she was handing me some priceless treasure. Then it was in my arms: eight pounds, six ounces.

“He’s beautiful!” I whispered, tears almost welling up in my eyes. He shifted in his blanket and opened his tiny mouth to yawn. There were bits of whitish crust near his eyes, and little bumps on the tip of his nose and on his forehead. I asked what they were.

“Milia,” Mom said. “Almost all babies have them when they’re born. They go away in a few weeks.” She picked up another, a baby girl with a pink cap instead of blue. “You can stroke his forehead like this,” she instructed me, running the side of her finger across the baby girl’s brow.

“Are her parents sweethearts, too?” I asked.

She smirked. “They’re alright.”

I smiled at the conspiracy, at my world creaking open.

“No, they’re nice,” she backtracked. “Don’t repeat that.”

She had me give her the baby boy, and she held one tiny bundle in each arm for a moment before hunching down and laying the baby girl in my arms. I looked into her face imagining myself so new and small, the times before words and before memories.

At the nurses’ station, we picked up a clipboard at reception and started down the list of new mothers who needed checking in on. Mom knocked at the first of those heavy doors and a voice inside said to come on in. When she opened the door there was a curtain on a half-circle track.

“Wait one sec,” she instructed me, and slipped through and said hello and how are you doing and, after a short exchange, told the woman it was Take-Your-Kid-To-Work Day. “How special!” I heard her say. Mom parted the curtain and beckoned me through.

The patient was in bed under a fold-up TV tray. “Hi!” she said to me, and started to clear away the remains of her breakfast. Mom stepped in for her and moved the tray to the counter across from the end of her bed. “Thank you, Moira,” she said. And to me: “So nice to meet you. Are you having a good time?”

“Yes,” I said.

“Your mother has been taking excellent care of me. I’m a lucky patient.”

The new dad was asleep on the bench by the window and still hadn’t noticed us.

“He’s tired,” Mom said.

“It’s nice he’s able to get some rest after all he’s been through,” the woman said, and she and my mom shared a laugh I didn’t quite understand.

“Just joking,” she clarified for my sake. “It’s a lot for everyone involved.”

Mom agreed. “A lot of emotions. A lot of stress. It’s intense.”

In the break room there was a fridge-full of hospital dinners prepped onto sectioned plates, and plastic containers of grape juice with tinfoil lids. Across from the fridge, a machine dispensed pellets of crushed ice into styrofoam cups, a combination like no other with the grape juice. That alone had me asking my mom if we could visit her work for years afterwards. I wanted to be a nurse.

We took our sack lunches from the employee fridge and ate in the conference room. Afterwards, Mom left downstairs to assist with the c-section. I wasn’t allowed to go with her in the end, and I felt a mix of relief and missing out—but mostly relief. The hospital felt so much bigger and more important than me, than my feelings, and if the doctors and the patient and, it seemed, the walls themselves thought I shouldn’t be there, then it must be the way things were supposed to be. They set me up to draw in the conference room with thin, off-white paper that had holes running down the sides on a strip which I carefully tore away from each page before I started.

Mom looked tired when she came back. She apologized for being gone so long, and sat down next to me with her charting so that we looked the same: me with my drawings, her with her forms.

After awhile, the door opened, and the nurse I'd met earlier came in smiling. "Are you ready, Moira?"

Mom gave me a conspiratorial look. "Just about."

The nurse led us to an empty birthing suite about halfway down the hall from the front desk.

"Do you know what we're doing?" Mom asked.

I shook my head *no* as she reclined on the bed and the nurse rolled a piece of equipment over to the side of the bed and handed her a white plastic bottle. Mom rolled her shirt up over her belly and squeezed out a blob of clear gel. "Have you figured it out yet?" She asked me again.

"I'm more confused than before," I said. "Are you okay?"

She laughed a little. "Yes."

A little television screen clicked on. The nurse began to inch and angle an ultrasound wand through the gel across her skin. "Let's see what we can see," she said, and, on the screen, white amoebas of signal expanded into rings against the gray-black. They resolved searchingly into shapes and layers.

"Do you see this here?" The nurse asked me, pointing with her pinky finger.

I nodded.

"That's the head. And this here: the arm."

Suddenly, I understood.

"You're going to be a big sister," Mom said.

"Looks—" the nurse said, "like Beth is going to have a little brother."

"Two girls and a boy," Mom said with watery eyes and a smile that turned her cheeks red.

"I knew it," the nurse said. "Stephen owes me five bucks."

"Two girls and a boy," Mom repeated.

"And a pretty good spread, too. His sisters are really gonna dote on him. He'll be the baby baby."

"We're the first to know," Mom told me, and I felt so special. I imagined Mom and I getting home, glowing with the secret, and the faces that Dad and Jo would make when we told them.

The nurse put a wipe on the bedside table for the gel and let Mom take hold of the ultrasound wand. "I'll give you two a moment." she said and walked out.

Mom adjusted the wand this way and that and the shapes on the screen changed in rapid movements. She tried again. Then, there in the signal noise, clear as anything: a baby's nose and lips and hand. We looked into the image and, ever so slightly, Mom angled the wand, like turning his head in her hands.

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Dad had known for a month that Mom was pregnant, and so that night, when we gathered at the kitchen table, he and Joanne were waiting for two different secrets. He wanted to know, of course, at the age of forty-five, if he was going to have a son, or if God's plan for him was to raise up three daughters. There were good odds of that, too, there being no boys on my mom's side, and only two boys out of eight children on his. He did a decent job acting patient as Mom disappeared down the hall. Joanne's face lit up with the mystery, and I added smug raised eyebrows to my smile as if to say: *be patient little one.* Then the excitement overtook me and I

started jumping up and down in place. Mom returned with three white print-outs pressed protectively against her chest.

"Do you know what the secret is, Jo?"

My sister shook her head. Mom placed each of the photos down purposefully, one by one: a triptych of grey smudges and swirls. Joanne looked intently at them and the recognition dawned. She looked up, beaming, her mouth open wide. "You're pregnant!"

Mom nodded and Dad put his hand down on Jo's shoulder, smiling.

"And?" he asked.

Mom looked at me. "Do you want to tell them?"

Yes, I did. I wanted to be the one! And the words came out faster than I could even think to remember the moment, or to watch their faces. "It's a boy!" I said. "It's a boy!"

Dad didn't say anything. He looked like he might be about to, but paused. His eyes glazed. Then, in a high, funny whisper I'd never heard, he said: "Really?"

"We're having a boy," Mom said.

In the weeks that followed, our Dad about ran circles around all of us. He set posts for a backyard fence which he would never finish. He organized half the garage and retrieved my old crib from the loft storage he'd built the previous year, but when he tried to bring it inside Mom reminded him we had months to wait and nowhere to put it until then. The crib stayed in the garage. He started working with an accountant to clarify some of the sketchier aspects of his finances, and posted ads in the Oregonian and the Willamette Week for his broke-down Camaro, but it never sold. One day, he stacked the furniture into the kitchen and shampooed the carpet

with a borrowed machine. His schedules became more predictable: he picked us up from school, cooked dinner every night, and it was clear that Mom and Dad were happy.

**Moira**

I'd met Dean thanks to a late night milkshake craving. I'd gotten off work and just had to have one—first and last time for that particular whim. The place was empty except for Dean, standing at the counter and ordering his food slowly and indecisively—making the cashier laugh. When he brought his wallet out of his pocket to pay about a dollar in change came with it and landed with muted plinks on the floor around his feet. He didn't seem to notice.

I bent down to collect it for him. "You dropped these," I said.

There was a sort of stunned look on his face when he turned around. He thanked me and soberly finished paying. Our orders came up quick, so we hadn't said anything else to each other, and we went out different doors. It was a summer night, and the warm air had me crossing the parking lot at an easy pace. The paper cup was cold in my hand. My vanilla milkshake: delicious.

I had just put my car into reverse when his red Corvette pulled into the spot beside me. I looked over and saw Dean smiling back, both our windows down. "You ever tried it with bourbon?" he asked, and held up a little bottle of Jack.

We met back up to dance at Earthquake Ethel's after I went home and changed. I found out Dean was a salesman, and had been high school quarterback in Oregon City. He'd been moving all over the country since he got back from Vietnam—even spent some time in Boise, had more than likely been one of the boys playing football on the lawn on West University Drive I used to walked past on my way to class. He and Larry had both gone out with the same girl who sang at Showdown. Small world. I didn't know whether to be creeped out or to wonder if it was really Dean that I was supposed to have met back then instead of Larry.

We got to know each other quick. He was the youngest in a big family right here in town. His mom was passed away and his dad presumed so, though no one knew for sure. I told Dean, in turn, that I'd grown up on an Idaho farm with my older sister. My dad was still working the land, and my mom was alive and well, working part time as a stenographer across the state line in Pullman, Washington. I'd followed my sister out to Oregon after nursing school and been here ever since.

"And you really don't have someone?" he asked a few dates later, in my apartment.

I shook my head. "Been married once."

"Told me that," he said. "You're really single?"

I laughed. "What do you think? I'm hanging out with you, aren't I?"

He flopped back on my bed.

"What is it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "I think I've died and gone to heaven."

The saddest thing Dean ever told me was in those early days when I asked him more about his parents. He talked lovingly of his mom, said she tried the best she could and all that, but I got the idea that they had been very, very poor. He gently avoided the subject of his dad at first, but finally told me this story: Dean had trained right here in Portland his first six months in the air force. He was then shipped out to a base in Hawaii and ultimately to the war. He spent his last day in town at his brother Miles's place. His Mom and some of his sisters who were still local came by to say their farewells. Dean didn't want to do it, but his brother was pretty sure he knew where to find their father, and when everyone else had left he convinced Dean to go and say goodbye. He was where Miles thought he'd be, casting off the bank of Beaver Creek at his

favorite fishing hole behind the grocery store. *Miles, look at the size of this thing,* he said when he saw them and pulled maybe a nine inch trout out of his catch bucket. Miles had said it was very nice and came a little closer. *Dean's leaving for Vietnam,* he told their father soberly. *I thought I'd bring him over to say goodbye to you.* Their father had stood there, still presenting the fish, his good-time-Charlie smile marred by this unexpected news. *Who's that you got with you, now?* he said finally, and Miles pinched the bridge of his nose, regret setting in. *Your son,* Miles said. *Your son is leaving for Vietnam.* Their old man looked at Dean like a stranger and then back to Miles. *You see the size of this thing?* Dean said they should go. *Real nice,* Miles told their father and said they were leaving. *See you Miles,* their dad said, and to Dean: *Bye Harry.* Then to the fish: *Tom, you're stayin' with me!* He dropped it back in the bucket and cast his line into the creek.

I told Dean I was sorry. *I couldn't imagine.* He just shrugged and said *it was what it was*. "Plenty of other things to talk about besides my old man." And so we found other things to talk about.

That spring, I got a call from my mom. She wanted to know how I liked it out there in Oregon, and how my sister was doing with the kids. I guessed Denise hadn't been as easy to get ahold of as they'd hoped since they helped her out with the house.

"She's good, as far as I can tell," I said.

"And you're liking it out there?"

"Yeah," I said, thinking of this strange, handsome man I'd fallen in love with. "The job's good. I like my coworkers. How are things with you?"

She said Dad was thinking about selling off a few acres. “As long as you’re staying out there—and it looks like you are—we think it’s only fair we help you get out of that apartment and into something more permanent, like we did your sister.”

They showed up in town a few weeks later, looking old fashioned and out of place in the big city. Dean caught up with us at one of the open houses. He and my dad shook hands and talked in numerical terms about their respective wars: the length of their tours, the names of the units. It was really kind, Dean told my parents, to be helping me out with my down payment the way they were.

“Got to,” my dad answered. “We made her.”

Dean laughed, not quite knowing how to take it.

“She had no say in it,” my dad concluded.

My house didn’t end up being one on the realtor’s list. Mom and I had found it driving around: a little three bedroom with a big garage in a neighborhood full of trees that was still being built.

“A nice starter place,” my dad called it when we woke him up from his nap at the motel and brought him over. We were standing in the yard. The trees in front were small then, and the cedar siding on a lot of the houses was stained instead of painted, like it is now.

I told him not to get his hopes up.

“For what?” he said.

“You know what.”

“Well, you’ll have an office and a spare room, anyways,” he said. “This the one?”

I told him I thought it was.

“Portland seems as good a place as any,” my mom said. “I’m just glad you landed someplace nice.”

“Now remember, there are some terms involved here,” my Dad said seriously. “We’re not helping you out just so that you can shack up with some boyfriend.”

“Dad,” I protested. I was not a little girl. Hell, I’d been married and divorced! This was not my first rodeo.

“I’m serious,” he said, standing there in the spring sun. “If you two want to get married, that’s another thing. And that’s between you two, but don’t have some boyfriend moving in here.”

I agreed and we put in an offer together.

Dad looked just as natural behind the wheel of the moving truck as he did in a combine—the subtle awkwardness of his city manners banished as soon as he had a job to do. He lifted the heaviest boxes like they were nothing. Didn’t talk much, just got the job done, and when I was all moved in, they packed into their town car and headed back seven hours to the farm.

Dean came by as often or more than he had when I was at the apartment, and before too long, well, you know how it is. A sweet girl from Texas lived across the street. “It’s hard to hide that bright red car, you know!” she hollered from her driveway one time and made me blush.

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Dean had to lower the rent before he found his first tenant for St. John’s, and after a couple months of making mortgage payments on it with nothing coming in, those checks felt like a slow climb back to baseline. Groceries, my mortgage, and all our family bills were up to me, and that had me grinning and bearing my first, queasy months of pregnancy at work. When the

morning sickness wore off in the second trimester, I felt like a sea captain who'd sailed through a storm and was thanking God for the sunbeams on the other side of it. I was pulling from some wellspring of power then, and when work was busy I felt like the best nurse I'd ever been. In quiet moments, I ducked, alone, into one of the empty suites and used the ultrasound to watch my baby boy.

"You stay put, now," I told him softly. "Mom's got a lot of work to do, but you just take it easy."

Joanne and Beth had been born pretty much right on their due dates. I actually went into labor with Jo during my shift. That's what we needed to happen again. I felt the changes happening in my body, hormones working to loosen the pubic joint in preparation for labor wreaked havoc on everything else, too. Rather than having sore feet at the end of an eight hour shift, I'd hobble home with sore feet, sore ankles, sore knees and sore hips.

Twice I'd seen other nurses run into trouble after week 32 or so, the physical strain of the work egging on cervical dilation. When that happened, there were no half measures. They were hospitalized and administered drugs continuously to prevent their babies from being born prematurely—and missed six weeks of work. We couldn't afford that. I didn't even have to crunch the numbers. We couldn't afford it.

Each day I drove to work breathing deep, slow breaths, hoping that might help me work in such a way as to bypass the circuits of strain and tension that could cause disaster. And I talked to him, touching my growing belly, telling him to take it easy, take his time. "I need you to work with me here."

*(How? I ask when she tells me what those times were like. How could you have been excited? With all those problems, how could you find the levity and the joy to drag out telling him I was a boy, or to sleep in the same bed? How could she live like that when I can't even feel those things in the best of times—no cares but the resentment that locks around me when I see that girl's loving face. How? Why? Everywhere I look, I just can't see the threads keeping anyone together.)*

The halls of the maternity ward seemed to double in length as I began my third trimester. The pain in my joints changed shape, morphed from a dull ache to a bite, like toothy muzzles clenched tight on the spaces between my bones. It wasn't even one of the bad days when the charge nurse looked up and saw my face as I arrived from one of the most far-flung suites.

"Goddamnit." She winced at her own language and looked over her shoulder to see if she'd been caught. "Why didn't you say something, Moira?"

"I'm okay," I said.

"No, you're not okay. I'm a dunce. We're keeping you right around here from now on."

"Going forward," I countered. "Don't muck everything up that we're already doing." But she insisted. My assignments for the week were shuffled around. I imagined the disruption rippling from room to room to room, and how some patients who'd already met and got used to their nurses would have to see the replacement hobbling in almost as pregnant as they were.

My first Braxton Hicks contraction came at 31 weeks, in a patient's room. I scrunched one eye a little and went on setting up the fluid drip, placing an IV. *Eight more weeks.* I needed eight more weeks—another couple months, four more checks. In a few hours I'd be on my weekend. I hydrated, took a break, and, when I got home, told Dean I needed to take it real easy.

In the morning, he had the girls serve me breakfast in bed like they'd done on Mother's Day. It's funny how much kids love stuff like that.

I didn't have any more contractions on Monday, but I'd had two or three by the end of the week, each in the final hours of my workday. I nipped it in the bud by taking a sick day for a long weekend. Same story—I could almost count on having a contraction in the second half of every shift. The next week, I used another sick day midweek, thinking maybe working fewer consecutive days would be a better solution than having more consecutive days off. Then, the week after that, the doctor sent me home for bedrest.

I told Dean to spare me the details of the rental, afraid that stress would be as bad as being on my feet. In the mornings, I got the kids ready for school and got back in bed as the house emptied out, feeling useless and frustrated in front of the television. I imagined bills and paychecks like waves on a beach, washing in and out and in and out—one step forward, two steps back. The outbound tide winning in the end, like it always does.

Leave the mail, Dean told me. He'd get it in the evenings and save me the trudge up and down the steep driveway. But come one o'clock in the afternoon, it was hard to think about much else besides what might be out there in the mailbox at the curb. There were decisions to made: to pay the Shell card or the Mervyn's, the Visa or the Mastercard? To miss a payment on the water or the electricity, or on the mortgage? Dean suggested we take a few months off garbage services. He could haul our trash out to the rental, which I knew probably meant sneaking around to the dumpsters of some apartment complex down the street, not to mention having the waste disposal company repossess our bins in front of the whole neighborhood.

I voyaged from the bedroom to the filing cabinets in the laundry room, bumping my belly on the doorframe, and gathered our contracts. I spread them in a heap over my lap in bed to compare interest rates and late fees. *What could wait?* By the numbers, the credit cards were vicious—so pay those. *What payment can we miss?* By the numbers, the mortgage. And the mortgage wasn't due for another two weeks, while the cards were due now. *So, maybe the answer is to pay the thing in front of you and figure out the other things as they come.* I had a contraction just looking at them and started to cry. I folded each contract back up, hiding all that fine print in on itself and laid them roughly in my bedside drawer. Dean had lost houses before, more than once. We wouldn't lose mine. Never. So the cards would sit unpaid and when the mortgage bill came at the end of the month—even if that was the only thing we paid—we'd pay that.

**Beth**

One week before Morgan was born we got a piano. I think I was probably bouncing off the walls and Mom sent me outside to check the sky after the weatherman announced some slight chance of snow. The cold rose up from the pavement through the soles of my shoes and a small breeze shredded the white puffs of my breath. I walked the long curve of the sidewalk at the top of the cul-de-sac, stopping, like I'd been taught, at each driveway to make sure the neighbors' cold, empty cars weren't about to back out. Mom waved from the living room window when I'd made it to the other side of the street. The overcast traveled along above the tops of the trees.

I heard Dad's truck coming down the hill before I saw it. He turned the corner, tailpipe rumbling out whole clouds and a blue tarp winched down tight over something big in the back. He looped around at the top of the cul-de-sac and waved, then reversed into the bottom of the driveway until his tires nestled against the incline.

"Hey Bee!" he said as I ran across to meet him. He closed the door and picked me up in one arm. The tailgate creaked as he opened it. He set me down on my feet in the truck bed. A few half frozen rain drops hit like needles out of the gray sky. "Looks like weather," he said. "We better get this inside."

I asked what it was. He bent down, untying the cord and pulling it through the eyelets of the tarp. "I found us a piano!"

Mom watched from the window, lifting one supportive hand from under her belly to wave. "Head on inside," Dad said. "I've gotta run over and get Toby." He hopped down from the truck. "I'll be right there!" he hollered over his shoulder and jogged off towards the Potters' on the rain-spotted street.

The humming of the garage opener a few minutes later sent Mom and I to the door. The tarp had been pulled back and lay in a heap at the top of the truck bed. Dad and Toby braced themselves on each side of the piano, each with one leg up on the tailgate. They heaved it down onto the drive between them, planning their next move in quiet voices.

"What's going on here?" Mom called out playfully.

"Caught red-handed," Toby called back.

"We're cooked!" Dad said. He turned back to Toby and nodded. They bent their knees, clenched their hands around a set of handles in the back of the piano, and half lifted, half rolled the wooden bulk up the driveway and onto the smooth, level safety of the garage floor. They were breathing hard and Toby rested his arms on his knees, red in the face.

"That wasn't so bad," Dad said.

Toby shook his head. "No."

Outside, the cold rain grew steady, muting the terra cotta paint of the house across the street Mom hit the switch and the garage door winched down, humming. Jo joined us in the doorway at the top of the garage stairs while Toby appraised Dad's find. He slid back the cover and tried a few hell-tuned notes, then raised the top and inspected the inside. He gave Dad an approving shrug.

They plugged in a space heater and spent the afternoon cleaning it, tinkering with the hammers and pedals, and around them on the floor a strange collection took shape: dusty colored pencils and tarnished coins, tiny plastic dinosaurs and a couple of business cards and beads. When they were ready, they took the piano back outside and heaved it up each of the porch's

three sets of double steps. They found a place for it in the living room against an interior wall, as Toby instructed. On the couch, Mom winced through one of her contractions.

"Every household should have a piano," Dad said.

Toby tried a couple notes again and Dad asked what a good tuning ran these days. Rather than give a straight answer, Toby went home and came back a few minutes later with a little black device, like a calculator with several grey rubber buttons. He pressed one and a mechanical sounding tone played out. He pressed it again and the tone stopped. He held it over the keys and played one, strong, sour note, reading its little screen. "The thing is," he sighed. "It'll take more than one tuning to get you up to pitch where you need to be. Where'd you find this thing?"

"Traded a set of cookware for it," Dad said. His eyes lit up when Toby told him how much it would cost… two or three sessions at fifty bucks a pop.

"I'm in the wrong business."

"It's timeless," Toby said. "Also not easy." He went on to explain how the tension of a piano's two hundred-some-odd strings added up to nearly twenty tons of force. "That's a few elephants," he said matter-of factly. Dad nodded along, looking gravely at the freshly dusted keys. The oily citrus scent of furniture polish hung fizzing in the air. Dad reasoned he could get a set of tools for the price of the first session, maybe less, and do the rough passes himself. Toby agreed they could take a crack at it, but cautioned: "let it settle awhile."

The next day we woke to jagged white webs of frost across the cars and Dad had to scrape the windshield of the Corvette before we left for church. And that night, it started to snow. We watched through the living room window as the street was dusted over under the orange glow of the streetlights. Mom sat bound to the couch, one arm behind her head and the other

hanging to the floor as if bored of tracing the curvature of her belly. She bit her lip. “We might be in for an adventure,” she said wearily.

Dad took Jo and I out to see it before bed. We walked the neighborhood and scooped meager snowballs from the hoods of cars. My jacket scratched on the street while I made a snow angel—trying to cross every thing off the list of activities before half an inch had even fallen. Tilting my chin up to catch snowflakes on my tongue, my eyes caught the quiet, dark infinity of the snow drifting down out of the night. For every flake there were three more above it, higher, smaller, falling.”Wow, look,” I said, and Dad and Jo looked up and were captured by by the sight. “Wow, he said. ”Wow,” said Jo. And I remembered Mom, and wished that she was seeing it, too.

School closures were announced in the morning. We played in the snow outside while Mom waited, wondering, focused, for the beginning of labor. The next day was warmer, and the snow glistened and began to melt, then froze solid overnight. The process repeated: it rained briefly, snowed again, began to melt and then turned to ice. the And then, early the morning of February 14, Morgan’s time came. Jo and I awoke to our dad in the doorway of the bedroom and dressed in seconds.

The main roads were sanded, he reported. He and Wayne had spread sand and cat litter themselves all the way up the hill out of the cul-de-sacs, and excavated a decorative boulder from another neighbor’s yard and heaved it up into the bed of Dad’s pickup to weigh down the rear axel. The neighbor had laughed that that was one thing he never thought anyone would ask to borrow.

Mom groaned. “We’ve got to go, Dean.”

He helped her down the hall. It was sunrise and the ice outside was hard. He’d shoveled and salted the steep driveway but the cold won out. Mom tried one step, holding tight to his arm and said it wasn’t going to work. She wouldn’t be able to get up into the truck on the icy slope. Dad looked around.

“We’re going down the bank then,” he said. He went ahead of us and tried to break the crust with the heel of his shoe but it was solid. He got the shovel leaning against the garage door and almost slipped on the driveway coming back. He punched it into the frozen ground, roughed it, turned up bits of the bark dust. “Beth, you go first,” he said. I hurried across the yard and then sidestepped down the path he’d made to the sidewalk. “Jo, go about halfway down.” Mom and Dad followed across the yard and started down the bank. She made slow and tiny steps, holding tight to Dad, then to both Dad and Jo. She eased down. Dad traded his hold on Mom for a hold on Jo. I put one small foot on the bank and Mom reached for my hand, taking it for real. I felt her strength, felt her needing that final anchor. She made it to the sidewalk, all our hands unclasped and Jo came down next. Then Dad shuffled across the icy driveway to the truck and pulled out onto the street. Jo and I scrambled into the cab and Dad helped Mom in behind us. The vents were blasting cold air. Dad hopped up behind the wheel, shifted to drive and we started up the hill and out of the neighborhood towards the hospital. My baby brother was born on Valentine’s Day.

***

Joanne and Dad got into their first real argument when she was in the sixth grade. Some of her friends had started taking TriMet to the mall at Washington Square on weekends or after

school and she caught Dad off guard when she asked him if she and her friends Isa and Rachel could go. We had just picked Joanne up from school.

"To the mall? On the bus?" He was incredulous. "I don't think so," he said. "You're too young to be wandering around a mall on your own, let alone taking public transit."

Joanne did a funny thing, saying that her friends were going either way and they would be safer if there were three instead of two. "Safety in numbers," she said.

Dad wasn't moved by her point. "Their parents shouldn't be letting them go either, Joanne. There's all kinds of creeps out there."

She pressed him further, saying that she was one of the only kids at school who wasn't doing it already.

"We'll see what your mother thinks," he said.

That night Joanne and I sat with Mom at the kitchen table while she nursed baby Morgan. Dad was cooking dinner.

"It's right down the road," Mom said. "If you're not comfortable with them taking the bus, just drive the them over yourself."

He bounced his palm off his forehead. "I'll go with you. It's no problem."

"You mean walk around in the mall with us like we're babies?" Joanne said.

Dad cocked his head. "What can I say? You're my baby."

Joanne looked at Mom with pleading eyes. "No, Morgan's your baby."

"They'll be alright, Dean."

Dad was quiet for a minute, stirring something under the stove vent. Then he asked Joanne for a compromise. He said he'd drive them over himself, but to call up Isa and Rachel to

make an *itinerary*. “I want to know what stores you’ll be going to, in what order, and how long you’ll be at each one.”

Frustration replaced Joanne’s victorious expression. “That’s crazy though! We can’t even walk around.”

“I need to know where to look for you if anything happens,” he said.

Joanne sighed. “Will you take us in the Corvette?”

Dad smiled. “Yeah, I’ll take you in the Corvette.”

A couple days later I went with Dad to pick up Joanne and her friends from school. They sat in back and Isa thanked Dad for driving them. Rachel said thank you, too, but then bragged about taking the city bus by herself all the time. She said she never had to make an *itin-a-whatever* when she went to the mall with her other friends. I looked over my shoulder at Joanne. She was tense and didn’t know what to say. The itinerary, with its fifteen minute increments lay crinkled under the backpack in her lap.

“It takes away the fun,” Rachel said. “Don’t you think?”

“I don’t care,” Isa said. “There’s only one store I want to go to. I’ll go along with whatever schedule.”

Dad straightened to see them in the rearview mirror. “I’m sorry Rachel. I can drop you off home, if you prefer.”

“No, thank you,” she said politely.

Joanne lay her forehead on top of her backpack.

At the mall, Dad said he’d pick them up on the other side in exactly two hours. “If someone is trying to take you,” he said seriously. “You never go to the second location.”

“The what?” Isa asked.

“You don’t go *anywhere*—with *anybody*. It’s a losing strategy. You kick, you bite, you scream. You try to hurt them, or if you can’t hurt them, you make it so much trouble to take you that they think twice. Whatever they might do to hurt you in public is nothing compared to what they’ll do if they get you wherever it is they’re planning on taking you.”

The three of them had stopped in various stages of unbuckling their seatbelts and were staring at him.

“Can we go now!” Joanne said.

He nodded, got out and sprang his seat forward for them to clamber out. Walking towards the mall entrance they huddled together, whispering into each other’s ears and looking back. Dad smiled and waved and we drove off—but not far. Dad parked on the other side of the mall, saying he had to pick something up, real quick. My heart raced with the thought of being caught by my sister and I smiled. Inside, Dad unfolded his copy of Joanne’s itinerary and compared it to a map of the stores on a large panel mounted in the middle of the gallery. We walked to the food court on the other side of the mall. I held my Dad’s hand, feeling cagey and alert. Almost there, I followed my Dad’s gaze into one of the stores and caught a glimpse of them through the glass. Dad winked and tapped one finger on his lips and we got some food together. We passed them again on our way back, but they never saw us, and in the car afterward I had to keep myself from looking back at them so I didn’t laugh and give away our secret.

Another time, Joanne asked Dad if she could go to a classmate's after school. He wanted to know if they lived in a house or an apartment, and when she reported back to him that her friend lived in an apartment, Dad said the answer was *no*.

"Apartments have thin walls," he explained. "If there's a fight next door, a bullet might come straight through."

"A bullet, Dad? A Fight! Where do the guns come in? This is stupid! There are plenty of fights that happen in this world before somebody goes blasting at the wall."

"The answer is no. End of story."

When we picked Joanne up form school, she pointed out the window at some of her classmates walking together on the sidewalk. "There are my friends—going to get shot."

"I don't want any more flack from you," Dad said. Then he apologized that she was missing out, and he offered a consolation prize: "Do you two want to go see the city?"

Dad liked places that were unusual. He liked weirdos, misfits, kooks, people he thought were being themselves without apology or even a barometer for how they were being seen by other people. He talked with them; he found something to laugh about with them. He tipped fast food cashiers and gas station attendants, and it made them smile. Sitting shotgun in his car made you feel like Princess Diana. We'd drive down second avenue on weekends and see the streets lined with punks. "Beth, Jo! Look at that!" He'd say, pointing at a two-foot mohawk, dyed green.

"How do they get it to stay up like that?" I asked. I don't know how I expected him to know, but he'd found out sometime, somewhere, along the way.

"They use eggs," he said. "I'm not pullin' your leg! Egg whites and bar soap."

On Burnside there was a record shop called Ozone, across from a grey brick building which was decorated in line drawings of Roman gladiators and had all its windows painted black. A bell jangled when we opened the door, and the warm patchouli smell was like a hug. He liked to watch Beth and I seeing things for the first time: the customers in crazy clothes, mouse and cat skulls hanging from beaded twine, blooping/glooping lava lamps, vinyl spinning on a turntable, and, hanging in a row from the ceiling: tie-dyed shirts with skeletons riding Harleys.

"What do you think of that?" he'd ask. "What do you make of this?"

We liked the music, and the big cabinet speakers they played it from, sounding like there were rough hewn spaces between each part of the sound. The warm air was part of it, and the scratched wood counters with chipped glass fronts with pealing scotch tape at the corners was part of it, and the patchouli smell seemed a part of that. At Ozone, the music felt like something you could breathe in and touch. You could flip through records and, if you found one with a picture on the cover you liked, ask the clerk with piercings in her nose to put it on the turntable.

"What are those?" Jo asked, looking at a collection of papers pinned to the wall. Some had words printed in drippy letters. Others were mismatched, each letter cut from a different magazine, like a killer's note.

"Those are ads for concerts—live bands."

"We call them flyers, gramps," the clerk teased him.

He nodded in agreement. "Flyers."

"Concerts where?" Joanne asked.

Dad leaned close to take a look, then he pointed. “The Paris Theater, that’s right down the road. The Roseland, I’ve been there. The Wonder Ballroom, the Crystal. They’ve got shows all over town.”

“Let’s go to one!” she told him. I looked at Dad excitedly.

“Maybe someday,” he said.

Joanne frowned. “I wonder what my friends are up to,” she mumbled as we left.

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After careful inspection of the lyrics Joanne brought him, Dad agreed to take us to our first concert: a band Joanne liked called The Offspring. I was seven years old and she was eleven. Walking into the Roseland, he pointed out each emergency exit.

“Find them, memorize them,” he said. “And know exactly which one you will run to if you need to get out fast.”

I looked around the room, making my little plan. Joanne rolled her eyes. “Dad…”

“I’m serious,” he said. “What if there’s a fire and the door we came through is blocked?”

“What are you talking about?” Joanne said. “That’s never going to happen.”

Dad stopped. “The front door’s blocked. People are panicking, but you’re not. Where do you go?”

“Dad!” She looked around at the little groups of teenagers, standing in circles, taking their places by the stage.

“We’re leaving if you can’t tell me what your plan is.”

“Joanne, don’t ruin this for us!” I told her.

“There,” she pointed. “The exit to the right of the stage.”

"Why that one?" he questioned.

"Because it's closest to where I want to stand, now let's go." She walked off towards the spot but he stayed put, holding my hand. People were filing in around us and the space by the stage, where she wanted to be, was filling up.

"What if you can't get to that one?" Dad said.

"Joanne!" I yelled. "He's serious." Dad gestured for me to lower my voice. But he would turn around and walk out and waste the price of the tickets that he and mom had had to discuss so seriously. I knew he would. Joanne stared back at us with angry eyes.

"Remember, it could be behind you," he said.

"Then there," she answered. "We'll be standing near the front. If the exit by the side of the stage is blocked there's one on the side there, right over my shoulder. I'll be able to look at both and know right away which one will get me out first."

Dad nodded. "Good," he said, and shepherded us into the growing crowd. There were teenagers all around, dressed in black, with patches sown on their jackets, and their hair spiked and dyed in Kool-Aid colors. It felt like Halloween, minus the candy, I remember thinking.

"They'll really be right there?" I asked, looking at the stillness of the drum set, the guitars, the mic on its stand, quiet as clothes in a closet.

"They'll be there," he said. "Jo got us a good spot." He gave my sister a set of earplugs and put the ear covers he wore when he used the leaf blower down over my head. They had maroon earpieces and the headband was silver wire. My voice sounded underwater when I spoke. *What?* I mouthed to Joanne and Dad. *What? I—can't—hear—you.* And Dad mimed back

to me, moving his laps and gesturing. Then he tapped Joanne on the shoulder with the back of his hand, like asking if she agreed and she laughed and started, too, making big exaggerated gestures until I panicked and pulled the ear covers off to see if they were actually speaking.

"—And that's the big surprise I'm planning for Beth," Dad said.

"I know what you're doing" I yelled. "I'm onto you!"

As the crowd filled in around us I thought of the time I'd hid from Mom at JC Penney, inside a ring of hanging coats. I lifted the ear covers again. People were talking loudly over the music—voices everywhere, mixed up: *Band, Love, Hate, Portland, Fuck, Parents, Guitar*—there was laughing.

We waited for what felt like forever before someone moved in the doorway that led backstage and people started whooping and clapping. "Let's go!" A boy shouted at the empty stage. I saw in gaps between the leather jackets: they were banging on the floor under the spotlights. Dad smiled and said loud over the sound of the crowd: "Are you ready?"

"I'm ready!" Joanne hollered, jumping on tip toes. Before I could answer, four guys walked fast out of the backstage and took their places by the waiting instruments. The guy at the mic shouted hello and asked if we were ready. The crowd applauded—so many hands clapping—and then the sound of it changed shape and they all clapped together, faster and faster and faster. The hair on my arms stood up. I could see each band member through a different gap in the crowd, men with spiky hair and skin-tight pants and heavy boots—the guitarists had little arms and big hands with skull rings and they stuck three fingers straight out while they pinched the strings and their guitars hung low around necks slouched like Disney wolves. Then the drums and the amplifiers broke the air and shook my bones. The singer started singing and people

started moving. Then my body was like one big ear, shaking with the electric grit and beating thunder.

Dad lifted me over his head and dropped me down on his shoulders. The crowd shattered into bucking arms. They were dark and stormy water. Dad was Cape Lookout. His legs were the cliff face below me—they crashed into him. A boy with no shirt knocked Joanne down onto the floor. Dad couldn't reach down to help her. I started to cry. Six arms pulled her up. The boy flailed away, failed back. Dad swayed like a tree in the wind, planted his feet far apart. The boy slammed into him and stayed there, between us and Joanne, shaking, raging. Dad reached out and clamped his hand over the back of his neck and lifted until I wasn't looking down at him anymore. Joanne's eyes got huge. The boy reached up and back and clamped his hands around Dad's wrist, his legs gone stiff. And Dad turned and set him down behind us. Then the people parted and I could see a circle of dirty floor around us that if someone fell or stepped into they would panic and the shoe or body would quickly pull away again.

Now Joanne was outside the bubble Dad had made, dancing and shoving away the flailing, the shirtless with both hands when they got close. She got knocked down again—ten arms pulled her up: she was grinning.

# Chapter 3: Generations

**Moira**

My father had a heart attack when Morgan was one year old. I took him with Denise and I on the plane to Spokane after my Mom called with the news, and Dean stayed with the rest of the kids. We were supposed to get a ride from there to the hospital in Pullman, but it was worse than they first thought and the situation was changing. Mom told us to stay put; they were going to fly Dad to Spokane and she'd drive up in the car and we'd all be together, but he didn't make it. We saw the helicopter landing at sunrise. Within the hour we knew that it had touched down with his body but not his soul.

Denise drove us back to the farm in Mom's car. Mom kept saying she couldn't believe it, that she was sorry, that it was all her fault. Denise told her to stop it and held her hand, and Morgan's crying, too loud in the confines of the car, seemed to keep our own tears at bay. I pulled up my shirt and held him to my breast, felt the heat of his mouth and the sharp pinch of

his teeth. Town thinned to scattered buildings and then we were in the country, passing farmhouses on a spring morning. Morgan suckled milk, and in the new, sunny quiet we found the space to cry. I watched my baby nurse, thinking how he wouldn't have memories like the girls did of visiting the farm in Idaho and watching him work, or of riding in his lap in a tractor or feeding ears of corn to the neighbor's cow over the fence. He wouldn't get to see that subtle deference Dean gave my father whenever they met. He'd met Morgan and held him in the hospital when he was born, but Morgan wouldn't know that. Morgan wouldn't know my father, and he wouldn't know Dean's. I wanted to watch my parents and my children standing beside one another, to see my origins and my creations together in moments of tenderness for years, but time and death and frailty had suddenly begun to chip away at us.

We walked into the house in such an ordinary way. My sister had set her keys on the table, my mom had started the coffee pot, and I'd carried Morgan to bed in my childhood room. I hadn't intended to but I lay down next to him, to take my own breath. The window was open and the old phone was on the nightstand. I called Dean and he answered on the second ring. I spoke softly. "Hi."

"Are you back at the house now?" He asked.

I nodded.

"Moira?"

"Yes, we're back," I told him, and I choked up and started to cry. I swallowed and held it to not wake Morgan, but stifled my breath right along with the sobs and so it came out, quiet as I could make it, and Dean waited and breathed and told me to listen.

"Listen," he said. "I hear the birds outside your window. I hear Morgan sleeping. Is that the breeze in your tree?"

I blinked tears from my eyes. "He's gone," I said.

"I know. I'm sorry, Love."

He arrived with the kids a few days later. Beth and Joanne and the cousins. Dean and four children. My niece told me that he had made them laugh all the way from Portland, and so now they were ready to be sad with us.

I remember the first Sunday after we got back from Idaho. At church the pastor gave me a shout out, as it were, amongst the others who had requested the congregation pray over them and their hardship. He used the word *especially.* "And, especially, we would like you all to include Moira Rideout in your thoughts and prayers, whose father passed suddenly on June 10th. Let us pray now for pray for Moira and her family as they cope with this challenging time." My head was bowed and I felt the uncomfortable weight of the consciousnesses of all those people turned toward me. "And let us pray for…" Scott went on, naming another family and their tragedy, their challenge. I sighed, opened my eyes and took in the rows of bowed heads and the figure of the pastor with his eyes closed behind the tiny microphone on the tip of its black wire stand on the podium. I thought about how much comfort Dean's words had given me, and how by comparison our faith was giving me very little.

*(My grandma's presence was calming. She was neat and orderly and hid her mouth with long graceful fingers when she laughed. She cradled her elbows when she told stories. But in her last years at home, when I began to ask her about the big things, like about my father and about*

*my grandfather, her feelings outran her poise and she spoke faster, with worried eyes. My grandfather, she said, had been overcome with chest pain in the fields, racing rain to harvest the winter wheat. One of his arms was numb by the time he got back into the house, and his face was ashen. She drove him to the hospital in Pullman, where they treated him overnight. In the morning the doctors said he needed more. He died in a life flight helicopter on the way to a modern cardiac unit in Spokane—and my grandma, nearly a hundred years old, couldn't stop shaking her head, saying how she should have insisted on Spokane from the start, how if she'd just insisted he'd still be here—half a century later, balling her bony fists over how she could have saved him.)*

In the weeks after my father's funeral, when I spoke with my mother on the phone, her voice and her cadence stood out starkly as if they were imitations of those she'd always used. I noticed it especially in moments of mundanity, when our conversations veered from the logistics of the farm and her future to things we might have said had my father still been in the next room. Maybe her voice sounded the same as ever, and so did mine, and the fact of it just bothered me, because I always thought the voice and not the eyes were the window into the soul, and if I was imagining the change then we are truly opaque to the ones we love. And how full is life of sensing something is off but not knowing what's wrong? My mom, probably sensing the same dilemma in her own way, would sigh and say she just couldn't believe that he was gone—and we'd be together again in the cavern of a phone line. In a few months she would sell the farm and follow her daughters to Portland.

Dean and I were behind on our credit card payments, and by the time Morgan was two years old, dressed in hand-me-downs and gifts, what we could make in payments was hardly

covering the interest. I stuffed the cards away in our bedside drawer but the balances just crept up on their own. I held out asking for help until the power utility sent us a notice they'd turn off the lights. Then, on the phone with my mother, I heard my own voice detaching from the feelings swelling just behind, heard it continuing on with small empty answers as I wrestled with shame and guilt to change the subject entirely. I started to cry before I got the words out, and she asked me what was wrong. I apologized for the timing, and for having to ask at all. "We're broke," I said. "Drowning." And I asked her to bail us out.

We zeroed the cards and caught up on the bills and things calmed down on that front, but Dean was occupied with the rental, and I was pulled in two directions by the needs of our youngest and oldest children. Jo and Beth had grown up together, close enough in age to enjoy and need the same things, but now Jo was a preteen and Morgan was a toddler and there wouldn't be another era under the same roof that all our kids wanted the same things at the same time.

**Joanne**

Isa and I grabbed our lunch trays and they clattered onto the track in the Beaverton High School Cafeteria. We slid them along listlessly while the line moved, waiting for the only vegetarian option that looked worth a damn: burritos with stale tortillas and plastic cheese and beans that tasted like the oxidized aluminum cans I bet they sat around in all weekend. We found an empty table and sat. After the first bite, my burrito shat all its contents onto the tray. I listened to the swirling din around us, tried to pick any one voice out from the others and couldn't. I felt dizzy and overstimulated. The space under the ceiling flexed and bowed. I dropped what was left of the burrito down in its mess and looked at Isa.

"How's your food?" I asked.

"It's garbage. Yours?" She looked at the tortilla corpse on my tray, with its yellow paper wrapper fallen aside, exposed, indecent, and she pulled the paper back across it and patted the mound with two fingers, like putting it to rest. "She pooped, the poor thing. No one should have to be seen like that." And just as we were starting to laugh about that and wrest any joy from that terrible drudgery, a louder, stupider laughter rose up and three boys in gym clothes came weaving through the tables, knocking empty chairs aside as they passed, and then the one in front slammed Isa's chair so hard it scooted her around ninety degrees from the tabletop. The boy fell down on the hard floor, football in arms. "Sorry!" he yelled like an afterthought and was up and gone—chased—leaving us stunned in the sour wind they left behind. Then, as solution, one of the staff blew a goddamn *whistle*.

I followed Isa's eyes back from where the boys had gone out of sight. "Who are these people?" she said.

“I can’t do this right now,” I told her. “I can’t…”

“Let’s go then,” she said. “Let’s get out of here.”

When we stood that whistle blew again, and all the outrage intended for those boys came down on us. “Don’t you walk off and leave those trays now! Get back here—what are you thinking?”

And when we turned back for the trays, the whole region of classmates around our spot had their eyes on us, and I felt my face burn red.

“That’s right *ladies,*” that asshole security guard said.

*Goddamn,* I thought. *Fuck you. Fuck all of you.* Thinking things I thought Isa might actually say, but she chose prudence. We took our trays, let the mess slide down through the spring loaded trash flap and headed outside for some meek October sunshine.

Carmé and Kurt, this first time we we met them, were out on the island under the flagpole in the middle of the drop-off roundabout. Kurt was wire thin, with a two inch thick strip of black leather around his wrist for a bracelet, which was loose and resting on the widening base of his oversized hand, and his nails were painted a dark, purply red like the polish on his Doc Martin’s. His back was against the pole. Carmé, streaks of blue in her hair, was sitting on the poured concrete backrest of the bench that encircled it. I tried to tell Isa our spot was taken as we made our B-line out of the cafeteria, but she was preoccupied, every imaginable curse stabbing out from her mouth. A car had to brake suddenly for her as she crossed. A couple of seniors looked back wide-eyed through the windshield as I followed her. “Goddamn,” Isa said. “What did we do to deserve this fucking shithole?”

Kurt and Carmé had turned and looked at us. We'd walked right up to them. "I'm sorry. Excuse me," Isa said. "I didn't see you."

"Don't be," Carmé said. "This place sucks."

"You're good," Kurt said. His voice was deep and clear.

And that might have been it, we might have gone back to having our two conversations at a polite volume, the way '*you're good'* invites you to, but we had more than that. We had *this place does suck* and now suddenly there were four of us.

"Fucking shit I can't take these assholes anymore," Isa said.

"She's pissed," Kurt observed.

"Can we adopt her?" Carmé gave him puppy dog eyes. "Please?"

Kurt looked at me. "What about the other one?"

Isa had sucked all the available outrage out of the air and I would have been pretending had I acted as mad as her. My arms felt awkward at my sides. "I'm pissed, too," I said offhand.

Kurt tossed his arms up. "*Heyyy*—let's take 'em both." He had an easy laugh that made you feel good.

I shifted my weight in preparation to shuffle off or sit down on the other side of the pole, expecting the joke to run out of steam at any second, but Isa said their first responsibility as guardians was to find us some decent food and Carmé just knelt down and pulled a Tupperware of couscous and halved tomatoes from her bag and was actually handing it over, her fingers almost scrambling to get the lid off and share. I wondered what she was trying to prove.

"I didn't actually mean—"

"I know, nothing looks appetizing in plastic," Carmé said. "It's better than it looks." Then, from the smaller pocket of her bag, she pulled a clean metal spoon, which the sight of alone, with its difference from the ones in my own family's drawer, conjured a kitchen, a home, a family—and Carmé (who said she was a sophomore) suddenly really did take on the feeling of a mother.

"Stuff they slop around inside is the same they give to prisoners," said Kurt. He pointed at the couscous, with its flecks of parsley and halved tomatoes. "You've gotta try it. Shit's bomb." Kurt, we learned, was a senior, but less like a father than a crazy older brother, his cheeks pale under a rash from shaving, his black jeans and hoodie faded from the sun and hundreds of washes.

Isa was filling her mouth with couscous. "Babe, this day has turned around." She said passed me the bowl.

"I live on that stuff," Kurt said, as if maybe Carmé's place were his second home, her family like his family—some way I couldn't imagine any boyfriend accepted by my own parents, if that's what he was, a boyfriend. If he wasn't, then some kind of friendship with a boy I couldn't imagine, as every boy who'd ever wanted to by my friend had also wanted to be more than friends, but these two, their effortlessness together, really seemed to see each other…

"Your mom's a good cook," Isa said.

Carmé laughed. "My mom can't cook! This is all me, baby. All me."

*No parents then,* I thought. *….Just the two of them, and all the lazy days they must spend together…*

Carmé curtsied. "So thank you."

Isa was embarrassed but powered through it, saying she was impressed in that way that implied her approval was rare, coveted, important.

"She's impressed, Kurt," Carmé said, smirking.

Kurt balled his fists and raised them up towards the flag, howling a pretend shout: "She's impressed!"

Isa gave in, crossed her arms and slouched against the backrest. I laughed and passed the Tupperware to Carmé. "Have more!" she said, taking it and thrusting it back into Isa's hands.

My dad crossed my mind, he and all the times he'd proven that a little bit of homemade food was all it took. Because, suddenly, over a bit of couscous it was like we'd all been meeting there under the flagpole the whole school year. It was like we'd found something we didn't know we were missing.

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The thing about Carmé, which I learned in the weeks that followed—and would never let my parents discover—was that Carmé was half way through the process of getting legally emancipated from her parents in family court. They weren't fighting it, she explained to us under the flagpole at school. After the shock and the hurt feelings there came some understanding, and since then, her mom had been taking her on trips to Target to shop for blackout curtains and kitchen stuff, and they'd talk—*oh isn't this or that cute? Look at this Carmé*—like it wasn't three years early and like she wasn't the only sophomore at Beaverton High working thirty hours a week… like her mom hadn't driven her away somehow, someway that was beyond me, because any parent who would let you make your own decision and leave seemed like one you should be able to stand staying with.

*Mom, Dad. I've decided I'm moving out*—I imagined telling my parents. I imagined my dad helping me pick out furniture for an apartment and made myself laugh out loud.

Isa had been a part of my life long enough that there was a stasis with my parents around our friendship. She was the only friend I could hang out with freely, move from her place to mine almost on a whim. We hung out without a plan or swarms of questions or awkward requests for telephone calls with parents. I almost dreaded the change that I could feel coming. We had clicked with Kurt and Carmé so easily, and the interaction had felt so different than with anyone else at school. There wasn't a world in which we didn't become friends, and goddamn, how fucked up was it that I almost didn't want to be—didn't want the hassle. That was on my parents though, I thought. Not me.

The conversation went like this:

"Dad, can I hang out with Isa?"

"Sure, Jo."

Then, "Dad, Isa and I are going to our friend Carmé's."

"Carmé? Who's that?"

"Just a girl from school."

"I don't know, Jo."

"Dad, what's not to know? That's where Isa is going. No Carmé's, no Isa."

And now he was really paying attention. "Who is this, again?"

"A friend from class."

"Where's Carmé live, Jo?"

"She lives on Lombard."

“Lombard?” (Lombard is also the name of the street in St. John’s where Dad bought his rental.) “In Beaverton?”

“Yes, Beaverton… right by school.”

“Oh. You mind if I ring up her folks?”

“I do mind,” I said.

He frowned. “You mind? How do you expect me to send you over to some stranger’s house, Jo?”

And the accumulated anger of all the denied permissions of my whole childhood surged up, just like it always did, but somehow this one was different. This felt more important and I lost myself in the anger. “You’re not sending me. I’m sending myself. I’m in High School, Dad. Jesus Christ.”

His expression hardened. “No,” he said with finality. “Try again another day, Jo.”

I regretted it, regretted that little flair I’d just had to add to offend him, powerful as it had felt. “Dad…”

He shook his head. “No, Jo.”

“Dad,” I pleaded.

“That’s my final answer.”

“Dad!” …I went to my room in tears, feeling my friendships slip away, feeling them go on without me.

By the end of November the cold and the clouds had won the war. The four of still sat outside, but sometimes the only laughter was when Isa and Kurt and Carmé would relive the debacles of the after hours hang outs I hadn’t been a part of. Sometimes a gust would have a drop

of rain in it, or pull drops from the cord of the flagpole while the buckle clanged and old faithful whipped damp above us. Carmé now brought the biggest Tupperware I'd ever seen, and we sat around and all ate out of it with our own spoons: Tabouleh, couscous, cold spanakopita, baked tofu, or caprese salad drenched in too much balsamic. We ate like cold, shivering queens, plus Kurt, Carmé feeding us like her life depended on it. Amazed by how good cold meals could be, we asked nonsense questions like whether it counted as cooking, and when Carmé announced that of course it was cooking, Kurt started miming a kitchen scene: "Let me cook you up a salad…" and we laughed about that, and then laughed because we were laughing.

On the weekends I called Isa but could only get her mom. No, Isa was out. Isa was with Carmé. *Carmé*: our secret code for Carmé *and* Kurt.

**Moira**

"Mom," Joanne started sweetly. She'd come to me when her father was out of the house. She sat down on the other side of the kitchen table and looked at me squarely like we could be on the same side, be reasonable. "Am I allowed to have more than one friend?" she asked.

"Of course."

"What am I supposed to do here?" This was about him, her eyes said, not me. She and I were on the same side. "What does he want from me? Should I stop talking to new people at school, or what?"

"He just wants to know where you're going to be, and who with," I said.

Jo's voice raised a little. "No, he doesn't," she said. "He wants to call their parents on the phone. He wants to walk me to the door. He wants to do background checks on their neighbors and get copies of their transcripts—"

"Jo," I cut in. "For crying out loud, he does not."

"—itemized receipts! He wants to tail us with—"

"Joanne, cool it. He does not."

"Tail us with binoculars," she spat. "I hate him!"

"*Joanne!"* I yelled "You watch your—" and then hesitated "—damn mouth!" I slapped my palm on the table.

"It!" she said. "I hate *it!* I said I hate *it!* I hate it! I hate it!" She started to cry. "They're going off without me and I'm missing out on my own life and I. Hate. It."

I sent her to her room. I listened to her footsteps going down the hall, heard her door slam. And then in my quiet kitchen I heard my own father's voice—clear: *I wonder if something's happened?*

I knew the memory, knew the moment. Denise had been out on her first date and was coming up on a half hour past curfew. Twenty-three excruciating minutes. I was just about the age Jo was now, sitting at the kitchen table of my childhood with my mother and father and wondering what kind of trouble my sister would be in when she finally showed up.

"It's not like her," my dad had said.

My mom sighed. "Well, we don't know if it's like her or not, do we?"

Dad looked at his watch. He wasn't eating, and he tapped his thumb on the table in a way that made me scared, like maybe something had happened. Another half hour could pass without any sign of her. Maybe we'd have to go out looking, and maybe we wouldn't find her. Maybe our lives were about to change.

"I'm sure she'll be back any minute," Mom said.

A pair of headlights pulled up to the top of the drive then. We looked out the window like we'd been doing each time a car went by on the highway for the last twenty minutes. Some slight relief on my Dad's face was morphing back into worry. *Why weren't they coming down?*

"I think I'll go out there and see what's up," he said.

Mom put her hand down over this arm. "They're probably saying goodnight."

He stood. "Why wouldn't they come all the way to the house, then?"

"You're probably scaring him off staring out the window like that."

Dad didn't look offended, just skeptical of the explanation. "I think something's wrong," he said and started for the door. Through the window, I watched the headlights turn and start to creep down the drive.

"They're coming, honey," my mom said.

Dad was tying his boots, whipping the laces around the speed hooks.

Denise got out the car, crying. Clear as day you could hear her crying through those plate glass windows that wiggled in their frames. My mother and I rushed to the door.

"Are you alright?" Dad asked her.

"No," she sobbed. Her date was getting out of the car behind her.

"Did that boy hurt you?" Dad gripped her shoulders. "What happened? What did he do to you?"

Denise stopped crying and scowled at him. "He didn't do anything," she said.

"You can tell me," Dad snapped. The boy got second thoughts and stayed behind his car door. "Tell me what happened."

Denise shook his hands away and marched past him towards the house. "He didn't do shit, Dad. Found my cat ran over at the top of the drive. Tiger's dead." She shouldered past my mom and I and started to cry again as she ran up the stairs to our room. Dad turned back to her date and hollered something about the time. The boy got back in his car, drove off, and never asked my sister out again.

That night had been a glimpse of my future, too. Dad got a shovel from the barn and marched up the highway to scrape Tiger off the pavement. He dug her a grave and took Denise

out to the Seamus farm that weekend to catch one of the little mouser kittens they almost always had a litter of, but he never apologized for the scene he made.

*I hate you,* I imagined telling my parents, and shuddered. I tried to imagine saying those words and anything happening but getting backhanded across the mouth. I couldn't. That's exactly what would have happened, and worse. Parents were different back then; there wasn't any disobeying, no negotiation. Just *yes Mom* and *yes Dad,* and the setting and clearing of the table to do our part. No mounds of toys to play with like kids had now. The suburbs were piled with plastic toys.

**Joanne**

On a Monday, with the whole terrible week ahead of us, we ate lunch under the flagpole at Beaverton High.

"Poor thing," Carmé said after Kurt asked why I never hung out outside of school, and Isa explained on my behalf that my father was crazy. "Your parents have you locked down tight." My chest tightened. I wanted to look over my shoulder to check that he wasn't walking up on us out of the soccer field, but I resisted. Of course he was not there, not zig-zagging through the break in the chain link, not stepping from the grass onto the sidewalk, not crossing the roundabout or throwing his explanatory smile at a parent whose car he was passing in front of, not already lifting his hand to wave at us and tell me he was spiriting me away for a quick lunch at Mexicali Express—and my friends were not jealous of this (would not be). I imagined him at home, sound asleep in his work clothes, splinters still in his hands, grease under his fingernails. Did he feel something when we talked about him? *He's not crazy,* I wanted to say, but I was too fed up with him to say it out loud.

Kurt shrugged. "My friend's band is playing on Friday." All three of them looked at me.

"In Beaverton?" I asked, and Kurt and Carmé chuckled.

"Downtown," Kurt said. "Northwest, pretty close to Ozone, actually."

And the first thing I wanted to say was that *oh! I've been there—with my dad.* But they knew I'd been there, and it seemed like my dad being such a hard-ass and having taken me to places like that would make them think even less of him, like he was a hypocrite.

Carmé tipped her chin up at Isa. "Tell her."

“My mom is going to be out of town with her boyfriend Thursday through Saturday,” she told me. “You can say you’re spending the night.”

“Your mom is cool, but she wouldn’t lie for me,” I answered.

“Will she have to? I don’t remember the last time your parents asked to talk to her before they let you spend the night.”

Maybe they would let me spend the night there, even knowing that Isa’s mom was out of town, I thought. Because if I asked to spend the night today and my dad decided it had been awhile and called up Sharon to say hi later in the week, I’d be absolutely fucked.

“What do you think?” Carmé asked.

Maybe last year, before Carmé’s name was in their heads they would have let me have a night there without Isa’s mom. But, then again, he probably would have dropped in with doughnuts or pie or pizza at ten p.m., stealing a slice to go, being all ‘unobtrusive’ and ‘fun dad’ while what he actually did was secure the perimeter.

“I can’t ask them until Friday morning,” I said. “I’ll go over to your place after school and after awhile I’ll call home and ask to stay.”

Isa nodded.

“That’s the only way it might work, so it’ll just have to be a surprise.”

“Sounds good,” Kurt said.

Carmé smiled. “I love surprises.”

On Wednesday, Dad took Beth and I to our respective schools in his pickup, with the truck-bed sagging under stacks of flooring. Beth got interested in how things were put together in houses, asking across me how he was going to connect all the pieces and other things like that.

"They snap together like puzzle pieces," he said. Then he turned his head and got real frank with her, catching my eyes on the way to hers. "You put them right down on top of the floor you're covering up every ten years or so. In the old houses the floor gets so tall you've eventually got to build a step-up and raise the ceiling."

"Hilarious," she said.

"Just pullin' your leg. I've gotta rip out the old floor today, that's kind of a fun part. Then I'll cart it off to the dump, and after that the careful, intricate part of snapping all the pieces together and making sure everything is level and even, and making some cuts for edge pieces by the doors etcetera."

"I want to help rip out the floor," Beth said. "And I want to go to *the dump* with you." Something about the way all the fathers in the neighborhood said *the dump* had made it like a reverent place. That, and how occasionally one of them would not just dispose of previously immovable objects, like the husks of refrigerators and old stoves or even a whole car that had been hidden under a tarp for several years, but actually come back with something interesting—a full set of encyclopedias with gold-edged pages and leather covers, or a good-as-new bicycle except its wheels bent like taco shells.

"Not this time," Dad told her.

"Is there going to be a next time?" She asked.

“I have a feeling there will be.” And about then we pulled into the parking lot of the middle school, Beth got out and waved. “Beth I’ll be working for a few days. I probably won’t see you until the weekend. Love you!”

“Love you,” she said, and I slid over out of the middle seat, feeling guilty and excited about the new odds of pulling off my caper on Friday night.

“You’re quiet this morning,” he said as we rumbled back out to the road. I had no answer for him, and we said very little until we got to Beaverton High and he dropped me off.

“Love you Jo,” he said.

I told him I loved him too, turned and scanned the streams of students flowing into all the entrances, seeing neither Isa nor Kurt nor Carmé. I fell in with the herd, went in the main entrance, stepping from troweled cement onto school tile, from airy breeze to hallway din, feeling alone, anonymous and sad.

On Thursday after picking us up from school, Mom told Beth and I that she was on-call the next day, which right away got me thinking that getting permission to stay at Isa’s house and then getting out to the show would be easy. Followed quickly by realizing that Mom wouldn’t want me to spend the night at a friend’s while Beth stayed home alone. So, even with Dad out of the picture, I’d have to wait and see.

The next day at school they asked me if I was coming with them later, and just like the day before and the day before that, I had to tell them that I didn’t know yet. No one, including me, thought that I’d actually go and I could see on Isa’s face how she was changing her mental picture of what the night would be like right in front of me—was that a hint of excitement? Excitement to be out with our new friends without me?

“I have a feeling it’s going to work out,” Carmé said and squeezed my hand. “Trust me, I know things.”

“It’s Friday and it’s still fifty-fifty, but for completely different reasons than on Monday,” I said. “I feel like that’s not a great sign.”

Kurt cleared his throat. “It’s the day of the show and the answer still isn’t no. That seems pretty good to me.”

After school I went over to Isa’s as planned. Her house was still and quiet without her mom, there were papers resting on the tile counter in the dark, and even the click of the light switch felt loud. Isa and I stood around stiff in the kitchen as if I’d never been to her house before.

“Well, call and ask, I guess,” Isa said.

“We just got here.” I gestured for smooth sailing. “It’s gotta be natural, like we’ve been here awhile and are just having such a good time that you wanted me to stay over—spontaneous.”

“Right.” She went into the living room and turned on MTV. It was about three o’clock. Mom always found out at four if her on-call shifts were going to be for real. The time stretched out. Isa and I hardly talked, and the TV was playing features about poppy bands that neither of us were interested in, but we kept watching. When I looked at her she stayed focused on the television and didn’t look back. At one point she asked if I wanted anything and I just shook my head for an answer. My mouth was dry, my palms were sweaty, and it felt like every detail of Isa’s house was standing out: the way the ruffle of brown curtains hung with the daylight passing through them, the dull dirtiness of the tile grout along the edge of the kitchen counters, the

yellow and brown scratchiness of the arm chair I was sitting in. The dumpiness of the couch that Isa had stretched out on, the dark smudges on her white socks. The carpet so brown, the lampshades yellow and orange amounting to brown. Even the light was brown, and in it my red hoodie, my jeans—everything was brown.

At 4:05 I picked up Isa's phone and called with the coils twisted and knocking at my knee while Isa watched my face—watched me lie. My mom had not been called into work.

"Is Isa's mom there?" I didn't remember her ever asking just like that before.

"Yeah," I said, and felt the *no-going-back-now* heat all over my face and in my voice. "She's just at the store right now." Isa lifted her eyebrows. *Damnit, why did I add that on.* It sounded like a lie. I heard clear as day what she would say next: *Have her give me a call when she gets back…* even though those words for sure had never come out of her mouth before.

"I was going to make a casserole for dinner tonight," she said finally. "But that's fine with me."

"Ok," I said. "Thanks. I'll see you tomorrow." And my voice had never sounded quite like that, and it seemed I'd never said quite those words, and Isa was grinning and standing up on her knees on the arm chair, and my mom said "*Bye Jo,"* and I said *"Bye Mom."* I held my breath until the phone was safe on the hook.

Carmé, Kurt, Isa and I got off the number 20 on Burnside and 2nd avenue, right in front of Ozone, with its door locked and its lights off. I looked in the windows and thought of my dad. I'd never seen it closed. Across Burnside, that building with the angular drawings of gladiators on the blacked out windows, on the other hand, was alive. Five or six guys stood smoking, and a

big guy was opening the door to let people in and out. We went down second. Isa and Kurt got into it in a good way about something, and were walking in front and talking while Carmé walked with me. The sky was clouded and dark, and except for the breeze blowing down the street, the buildings tight packed on each side created the impression of being indoors somehow. Burnside at the foot of the bridge had been the city, but 2nd Avenue was a hall. We passed a man on the other side of the street who was swaggering up and down his side of the sidewalk talking to himself, and I paid close attention to how Kurt and Carmé didn't seem to notice, didn't break stride in terms of walking or in terms of their respective conversations.

We went on past barred doors and a man bundled in a coat and sleeping with nothing but the sidewalk for a pillow.

"Is he dead?" I asked. Kurt and Isa stopped and came back.

Kurt squatted down right next to him and lifted the man's collar to better see his face. "He's fine," he said, and we got moving again.

On the next block we started to hear music and Kurt and Carmé picked up their step and suddenly Isa and I were together again trying to keep up with them. "Are you stoked?" I asked her, sarcastic and self-conscious. She shrugged and hopped off the curb onto the crosswalk. On the other side there was a low building with a corner door and a spattering of punks. When the door opened and a couple more came outside, the music spilled out onto the sidewalk like water from a bathtub. The door closed behind them and muted it again. *It must be fucking loud in there*, I thought.

"You here for Statch and the Rapes?" The door guy asked coldly when we got there.

“In spite of all better judgment,” Kurt said and laughed, and the door guy smirked despite himself, like a guard at Buckingham palace. We were here with the right guy.

“Two bucks,” he told us, and stamped the inside of Kurt’s wrist, then Carmé. I had the thought that stamp might not come off and faltered with Isa behind me, wanting to ask but feeling—ridiculously— if I did that this guy might ask if I had parental permission to be there.

“Inside right wrist,” he grumbled.

Carmé turned around and knew exactly what I was thinking. “You’ll sweat it off before the show’s even over!”

I looked back to the door guy wide-eyed and this time he actually chuckled. Then I presented the tendony lump of my inside wrist and the stamp pushed cool against my skin. One more step and I couldn’t hear a thing over the music—it was fast, with two or three voices singing together over power chords and drums that made me want to dance.

“Who is the music?” I yelled into Carmé’s ear.

“It’s the Ramones!” And she bopped her head and took my hands, swinging her cropped haircut back and forth so close it tickled my nose and made me turn my head and sneeze—and the sound of it was lost even to me. Carmé and I danced past Kurt, already talking with a friend, past a table stacked neatly with band shirts and buttons and CDs, into the space in front of the empty stage, a room lined on three sides with little clots of people dressed in black with amazing hair—bleached, dyed pink and dyed green, liberty spikes, mohawks and mullets. We danced into the middle of the room, where it seemed all of them, for all their showy style, were too scared to stand and we danced.

I learned that night, that when the rules are fucked, you don't have to follow them. Parents' rules are preferences, but you have a say, too. Because it's your life. And no one can ever know what your life is like. Your parents were your age so long ago they don't remember what it was like, and with all their crap about how the world was different back then—the same stuff their stifling parents said to them—they end up trying to hold you, at sixteen, to the limits their parents gave up enforcing on them when they were twelve. And if you don't fight back, we'll just continue, generation after generation down this infantilizing spiral, held back and retarded by parents who every generation are more and more stunted by their own anxiety. So scared of the world by the time we're parents ourselves, that the rules our parents held us too at sixteen years old, we'll be holding our kids to at twenty. So, if the rules are fucked, don't follow them. Just say no.

But I was thinking these victorious thoughts and a sadness washed over me. Because I hadn't said no, had I? I'd waited for my Dad to leave town, and for my mom to be distracted and worn out. I'd lied and snuck; I wasn't strong. I was a weasel, and Carmé was getting drunk.

She was offering the flask she'd snuck through the front doors, there at the side of the crowded room, with the band grinding like a sawmill, pushing it in the same way she pushed her homemade meals by the flag pole. Saying, "Poor thing, take some more. You're deprived!" And her eyes were getting screwy, and her skin was growing pale under her make up, so that the foundation was no longer the right color, and the thick mascara was washing her out. Kurt had got Coca Cola from the bar, and we played *pass the whiskey, pass the coke; pass the whiskey, pass the coke,* in a line all the way down the wall from Carmé, to Kurt, to me, to Isa. And the singer jumped into the jostling crowd. The electric guitars were like a buzzsaw.

Carmé slumped forward, put her hands out with splayed fingers to steady herself, then ran, pushing through the crowd for the bathroom.

"Oh shit!" Kurt yelled, but made no move to follow her. A guy in a leather jacket was yelling into Isa's ear on the other side of me, and she was listening with her chin tucked. I ran after her, the volume and the heat swelling as I crossed the middle of the room, through a vapor of beer and sweat. In the bathroom I held her hair, and tried to keep her hands off the grody parts of the toilet. The door didn't lock, and when someone came in behind us I turned and told them to get the fuck out.

"I'm sick," Carmé said. "Why did I go and get fucking sick. Goddamnit. I'm fucking stupid trash I got sick."

"You're not trash," I told her. My heart was racing. The girl under the flagpole, older and cooler than I'd ever be—

"I'm trash, I'm garbage"

—brought low… I took her outside when she stopped, filled a hard, too small plastic cup from a stack still dripping with chlorinated water from the dishwasher on the way out. She kept walking to the door without me and I had to hurry to catch up. We sat on the dirty sidewalk, with our backs against the building, among crushed cigarette butts and the smooth black emblems of old gum Again and again, I lifted the cup to her lips and told her how great I felt she was. In front of us, it was night on a downtown street.

**Beth**

My Dad's friends used to say (and still do when they reminisce) that he didn't have to sleep. When the pastor asked if anyone would like to say a few words, Al Kenzi went up to the podium and said he'd tested Dad once at the Hotcake House on Powell. They sat down at their booth round midnight and went toe to toe and Dad was still talking when the sun came up. "I about made myself sick trying to keep my eyes open," Al said, " By three in the morning all my contributions to that conversation had turned to associative non-sequitur and topical mumbles… but Dean just kept waking up. The longer the night went on, the better he got." They said he never slept, but I know he did. It may be my first memory: Joanne away at kindergarten or first grade and Dad snoring on top of the covers of their made bed. I wasn't tall enough to see his face, but he'd propped his feet over the side rather than taking off his tennis shoes, and the ends of the laces dangled down… There is sunshine in the windows. The house is clean and still and I go through it like a new place, a beautiful dream, where everyone I know walks, eats, watches TV—where Joanne does her homework and Mom comes home from work. Dad's sleeping presence spreads out down the hall… no goblins, no ghouls. It's our house, it's full of our life and I can feel them all…

I did finally get to hit the road with my dad. We had six stops in ten days for a string of bridal shows all over California, but I remember it as endless. We spent the first two days just driving. As we set off down I-5 south, I was remembering what it was like to see Joanne and Dad going out the door together, thinking how even at that young age, I'd felt the twin injury of being left behind and of feeling that no one took seriously how being left behind had hurt my heart. I'd

felt so small, and so frustrated. And it was an unresolved frustration, because when I got to be the age Joanne was when she started going with him (and of course I was keeping track), something had changed and then he had to go by himself. My heart skipped a beat when this trip was taking shape, but it had been a long time since I was little enough to want it with everything I had. Joanne hated Dad now, and would leave the house without permission, or not come home. I was there in Dad's passenger seat, the thing I'd been waiting for for so long, and now that I had it, the topic of conversation was, surprise, Joanne.

"What are we going to do about your sister?" he asked me, but I wasn't even sure I knew why what my sister was doing was so wrong. In the long silences of those first days, I guessed Dad was still thinking about her, asking himself over and over again: *what are we going to do about Joanne?*

Things got better after the first event, and sales were good. Watching him work was like seeing a monument, finally, in person, you'd heard about and imagined all your life. "Your dress is for a day. Your cookware is for a lifetime (backed, in fact, by a lifetime warranty)." That was his pitch, right there in among the dress sellers, too. He got into it in a playful way with one of them, a woman who repeated the spiel back in an incredulous voice. "That's right. Step right up. Who needs a wedding dress when you've got pots and pans?" she said. Then she took on some of Dad's cadence: "We've got stainless steel braziers—with handles! Lifetime guarantee on these handles! Bride got cold feet? You can pick her right up and move her wherever she needs to go!" She got Dad laughing so hard that he couldn't just jump right back into character. He walked over and introduced himself, suggested they come up with some kind of bundle promotion. She

laughed again and said she couldn't picture it. They talked about where they were from and how business had been. "It must be so exciting to be on the road with Dad," she said to me.

We slept in motels, slept in the car. Sometimes, once we got going, we talked from the moment we started driving until the moment we parked at the next event. He told me stories and asked me what I thought about this and what I thought about that. His favorite books were *The Hobbit* and *The Little Prince*. He went on and on about them once he got started, and then about halfway through the trip, he went into a book store and picked up copies for us to read at night before bed.

In Fresno and San Jose, there were one hundred wedding cakes to taste. In San Francisco and Los Angeles, fashion shows for bridesmaids and groomsmen, and of course more wedding dresses—beautiful, flowing, white dresses that made me want to grow up and get married. I imagined my wedding.

In central California, the land looked like it must be summer all year round, and when Dad rolled down the window and stuck his arm out, he got all excited. "It feels like opening an oven door!" he said. I rolled down mine and stuck my hand out into the too-hot wind and he was right: like opening an oven door. Later, when my seat got sore from sitting so long and my eyes got heavy, I leaned my head on the window and the glass was warm on my cheek. We passed a place called Elk Grove. Dad had been quiet awhile and he broke his silence when he pointed out the sign. "My mother's buried here," he said.

"Is this where she lived?" I asked. I'd never met my grandma on my Dad's side.

“No. She got sick on a trip,” he said. “They didn’t have a lot of money, so when she died, they had to bury her right here. Your Aunt Linda’s close, about an hour and a half away in Walnut Creek. But no one else, really.”

I imagined how my Dad must have felt, losing his mom, imagined leaving flowers at some graveyard in the sun. “Do you want to go see her?” I asked.

He glanced at the clock. “We’ve got to push on,” he said.

I knew where we needed to be and how long he still had on the road because I’d asked him earlier, and it didn’t add up. “Are you sure?” I asked. “When will we ever be this close again?”

And I think we passed by the exit just then, left it behind. “I can visit her from anywhere,” Dad said. “It doesn’t make any difference.” He turned to me and smiled. “You know what she told me once?”

I shook my head.“What?”

“Give me flowers while I’m still alive, she said. I won’t have any use for them after I’m gone. It really stuck with me when she said that.”

“Do you miss her?” I asked.

He kind of shrugged. “She’s still with me. And she’s watching over you, too, even though you didn’t get to meet her.”

We got quiet again. Dad drove and drove, kept driving until I couldn’t keep my eyes open anymore, and just sat listening to the road noise and feeling the trembling of the door panel on my cheekbone, seeing a cartoon headstone in the sun, with clumps of long grass around the base where the lawnmower couldn’t quite reach, seeing a curly-haired woman in a plaid dress who I

guess was how I imagined my grandmother. Her image stood still with her hands clasped together near the knot in her sash and looked at me like she was posing still for a photograph and I was the camera. I saw wedding dresses, clear and crisp and close enough to see the stitching and feel the material. Onward the tires hummed, and the shadows of the overpasses flashed darkness on my eyelids. The door panel shook and chattered my teeth if I touched them together. And the things I saw got clearer, and clearer… clearer: the headstone, the old woman, the wedding dress.

*(Sometimes, growing up, one of my sisters or my Mom would tell me the things I were finding were things my dad had loved. Jo would tell me that I was reading a book he'd talk about for hours but she couldn't do his thoughts justice, or couldn't remember them. Mom said there were things I did with my hands that reminded her of him, or she'd give a certain smile when I leaned way over a pan on the stove to examine everything going on in there. Joanne and I lived close by each other in Portland, and we talked about him often enough, and at times shed our gentle tears together, so that by the time I started asking all of them for their stories to write them down Jo and I could talk about him with smiles. Then, on the phone with Beth, notebook ready in front of me, her tears came hard and fast in the first words of the first story she tried to tell me, like she'd never talked about it… like she'd never been given the opportunity…)*

We ended our tour in Reno. I remember Dad made a big deal out of crossing the Nevada State border on a dusty, pine-dotted stretch of highway, saying: "only ten years old and already another state for ya. You sure get around!" And when that event was over, he had a surprise for me. We drove up into the Tahoe National Forest somewhere and met up with my Aunt Linda, her husband and his step-son. We got in late. The car was stopped when I woke up and cool air came

in through the open driver's side door. I could hear my dad's voice saying hello to someone, catching up,. There were tall trees outside in the night. The air felt cool and heavy and fresh.

"You think we'll see any tonight?" he asked. He was coming back to the car now.

"Oh sure, they pick up for the whole week. But the peak isn't until tomorrow night. We'll get you two settled in and get some dinner on the table and head down to the lakeshore after that if we're feeling up to it."

"Amazing, Johnny. Thanks again, thanks so much…" coming closer. "Man alive, look at those stars. The sky! The sky is black! I've never seen the sky so black." He appeared in the door. "Beth? You awake?"

"Yes," I said.

"I've got a surprise for you. Come on out."

We got our bags from the back and I shook Uncle Johnny's hand, and then Aunt Linda, who had the most beautiful smile hugged me and talked about how she couldn't believe how big I'd gotten since the last time she saw me. She asked if I remembered her.

"I think so," I said shyly.

The three of them laughed. "Well, that's a start!" Linda said. "I am just so glad you two are here."

The inside of their cabin was lit dim and the stove and the kitchen table were crammed close together. Uncle Johnny's son came in with something like a wind chime dangling dead-eyed fish, a bit of blood on the top of his hand, the cuffs of his flannel shirt soaked wet. Dad and I sat at the table and they dropped fish into the pan where they sizzled and smoked and stank. I

was scared they'd make me try them. Linda shook the fish in the pan and opened the oven a crack to check on a pan of asparagus and a pan of potato cubes.

"Smells good," Johnny concluded.

"I don't think it smells good," I said. They laughed again.

"C'mon Beth," Dad said.

"You don't like fish?" Linda asked me.

I shook my head and scrunched my face.

"Sure you do, Bee. Just like tuna from a can, except this is the real deal."

So, they *were* going to make me try it. It didn't seem much like tuna from a can at all. Each had a face and fins and a tail. Not to mention there was an errant fish scale stuck on Linda's wrist.

"Yep," Johnny said. "We're roughin' out here. Sure are roughin' it."

Linda took another look at me. "I know what we can do for you. I've got a box a Kraft in the cupboard."

"I thought we were roughin' out here?" Johnny joked.

"Oh, we are roughin' it," Linda said. "But I've got a stash. Would you like that, Beth?"

I nodded emphatically.

That night after dinner, Linda and Johnny led us scooping up blankets and camp chairs and a grocery bag of snacks and we headed around the back of the cabin and down a narrow dirt path through the trees to where, even in the dark, you could sense a big open space below the sky.

“This lake’s special,” Johnny said. “It’s one of the cleanest lakes in the country. So clean you can drink it.” And in the beam of his headlamp, water skimmers hurried away as he knelt down and flooded his cupped hands and brought the water to his lips. Dad said that was incredible and followed suit. I did the same. “Don't drink the whole lake now!” Johnny said.

The first shooting star was like a long white slash across the sky that hung and slowly faded. Dad was right. The sky was black—really black, not like home, where the sky is flushed and holding the color of the street lights. Really black. We settled into our camp chairs and Linda poured hot chocolate and Johnny pointed out the constellations. All at once, I noticed the stars doubled on the surface of the lake, and I was watching the water as the biggest meteor of the night flushed into double being like a struck match and disappeared over the hills across the water.

Everyone cheered and whooped and hollered over it, and then we settled in to wait for the next one. Their son shared where in the sky (“generally”) they were supposed to come from, and I bent my neck back to stare intently at that spot, commanding, without much success, for them to appear. When it got colder, I moved to Dad’s lap and he zipped me into his bomber jacket so we looked sorta like a kangaroo and its baby. Each breath he took pushed me tight against the coat-lining and I watched, here and there, as new stars lit up and fell over the lake until I closed my eyes and willed their “wow”s and “thats-a-good-one”s instead of willing the streaks of light.

“How are Joanne and Moira doing?” Linda asked my Dad.

He said they were doing good. Everyone was doing good.

“Joanne’s in High School, now?”

“Yep,” Dad said and sighed.

Johnny laughed. “Yeah, you lose ‘em for a while,” he said. “But they come back around. They always come back. Right, slugger?” he added to his son.

“Whatever,” he answered in a friendly kind of way. Johnny laughed.

Soon, Dad and Linda were reminiscing about their childhood. She talked about picking strawberries for money when she was younger than I was, and about how scary their Dad had been. “Alice says she used to sit up there in the attic with him and listen to him play songs on the ukulele,” Linda said. “But I sure never got that treatment. All he ever did was grunt at me.” She laughed.

“Well did he know your name at least?” Dad asked her, and they both laughed.

“Mine was the last name he learned,” Linda said. “So come to think of it, he did talk to me: every year at tax time.” They stifled their laughter in the dark.

“There was a good one.” (Johnny spotting another shooting star.)

“Nice one,” Linda said. Then she went on: “Every year at tax time, Dad called me over and asked what all your names were so he could write them on the forms. And he had me spell them, too. Every year.”

The four of them all laughed in a guilty kind of way.

“Sheesh,” Johnny said.

I didn’t want to leave in the morning. I loved the scratchy feel of the comforter, the crisp feel of the air when we woke up, and how there was already a bustling and the smell of breakfast cooking. I asked Dad if we could stay another night, but he said as much as he would love to, that it wasn’t in the cards. Linda said it was a shame; she wished we could stay the whole week. She suggested I eat quick so we could take a walk back down to the lake to see it in the daylight

before we left. Johnny and Dad got to talking and ate slow, but she told me not to worry. We went down just the two of us the second we finished and she pointed where we'd set up the night before, showed me the little schools of minnows in the shallow water, and pointed out the long, scraggly beards of moss that hung from the branches of the trees. It was a small lake, smaller than I'd imagined in the dark—just a blue pool in a low spot between the hills. She said it was her favorite place on earth.

# Chapter 4: Everything But What We're Scared of…

**Moira**

Dean once came back from a cookware dinner party with a hardened look on his face. Joanne was still little and had walked in holding his hand. They'd arrived at the customer's house and found that none of the registered guests were there. It was just this older woman, alone with a grandson, younger than Joanne, who was fixated on cartoons. The house was clean, but there wasn't a thing in it that wasn't worn all the way out. Threadbare cushions and ripped seams on the furniture. Dented lampshades and half-broken blinds. The counters were warped and sunken, the drawers an older style without casters, and the decades of wood wearing on wood had made

them loose in their frames. When Dean asked where everyone was, the woman looked away and explained that things had come up and people couldn't make it (*"You know how it is."*)

It had put him in an awkward situation. He'd bought groceries to feed eight, hoped to sell at least two sets of cookware, and here there was just a single older lady and a child. She said her daughter would be back soon, if that helped. That would make three of them. But it wouldn't make a sale. He'd known other salespeople who would have left right there.

"Where can I take a load off?" Joanne asked the woman, her arms full and her face as excited as every other night to be working with her Dad. The woman laughed, and Dean knew that he needed to cook the dinner. And, of course, when they opened the fridge to stow away some of the ingredients, they found it almost empty. Dean tried to stay in character, but when he got to the part where he'd toast flour side-by-side in one of their skillets and one of his, he was so disturbed by the state of the pots and pans they were cooking in—greasy teflon worn clear through to whatever toxic metal was underneath, rusting saucepans, and soup pots whose handles would spin on corroded screws when you tried to lift them—he couldn't play the game. No guests ever were going to come to this house, and just like he'd been finding his way into other people's kitchens to make a sale, year in and year out with a phony raffle, this woman had played her own game and gotten a load of groceries into hers. He made the dinner, packed her cancerous cookware into one of his boxes, called it '*Temptone's New Buy-back Program To Get Dangerous Material out of Their Customer's Kitchens*' and left her his demo set free of charge.

"It was about time I changed mine out anyways," he said, but we both knew it wasn't true (they were backed by a lifetime guarantee, after all). He added two extra dates to his schedule to make up for it; my mom watched the kids.

Dean's tenant that moved into the rental at the end of 1995 was something like that. Her name was Trisha. She was young and had no credit when she applied, no rental history. She had enough money for first and last's month rent but not for a deposit. She said she'd been down on her luck, but had just gotten a job as a waitress at Slim's and *would-he-please-give-her-a-chance?*

Our own situation was precarious, and I told Dean we weren't in a position really to take any risks. We'd be throwing our lot in with her as much as we were helping her, but Dean said we were on easy street and gestured around us at our home. We could hear the girls playing down the hall. He said, "If I don't give her a chance who will?"

So he did, and for three months the rent check came in on time, with a little installment on the deposit, too. Sometime in the fourth month, an ex-boyfriend showed up, by the fifth he was moved in without a lease agreement, and by month six the rent was coming in late, then coming in partial. Dean broke up a fight between them in the yard—the girl looked thinner, her hair untidy and her clothes unwashed—and sent the lowlife packing, but sure as shootin', in a week or so he was back. Then the rent stopped coming altogether.

**Joanne**

After school, the four of us walked across downtown Beaverton to Carmé's new place. It was drizzling and chilly and she held my hand tight. At a certain point Kurt split off, heading to the transit center to bring back some guys he'd met at a show. They were from the new Arts Magnet High School and Isa, Carmé and I all felt curious what they would be like.

The apartment was pretty well put together. Carmé had a couch, her books and her records, and there was a wide board set on cinderblocks for the television and her collection of VHS tapes stacked beside it. She had romcoms and teen movies mostly, and I felt surprised that it looked more or less like the movie collection someone like Rachel would have had, a girl now into cheerleading and sports, seemingly totally satisfied with the whole experience which hatred of had brought Isa and Carmé and I together. I suddenly felt there must be something to those movies I'd missed.

Carmé gave us a tour, showing off her blackout curtains in the bedroom that let her *finally-get some-fucking-sleep-for-once*, and the Clash and GBH patches she'd sown onto her comforter. In her kitchen, stowed in an otherwise empty cabinet, was a fifth of whiskey and another of cranberry vodka. In the fridge she had a twelve pack of Rolling Rock beer, which her Mom had given her as a house warming gift and made her promise to drink only in moderation. Isa asked if she could have one.

"Darling, don't even ask," Carmé answered. "Don't even ask." And she grabbed another for me and one for herself.

The bottle was cold in my hands, and Carmé caught me staring at her as I tried to decide if I wanted it.

"It's a twist off," she clarified.

"Will it get me drunk?"

"Oh!" She realized what the look on my face had meant. "No. To get drunk you would have to drink five or six. It'll just be refreshing."

I nodded, and twisted off the cap.

"Cheers, ladies," Carmé said, and clanged our bottles hard enough to make the beer foam over. "Let's put on a record."

In the living room, Carmé squatted down in front of her collection and started giving us options. When she came to the Ramones record, I asked if it was the music from the show.

"The Ramones?" she almost shouted. Isa laughed at me. "If we'd seen the Ramones it would have been a different kind of night."

"I mean the music the bar was playing before the bands started," I said.

"Oh, I don't know. Probably."

Isa shrugged, too.

I tallied the moment together with the realization I'd just had over the VHS tapes: that Carmé didn't just like punk, but liked everything everyone else liked *and* she liked punk. They were details that made me feel apart and different from the person that I was supposed to feel different and apart from everyone else *with.* Why had only I remembered the music the venue was playing, even though we talked about it? Why was I absorbing and cataloging all these details that were inconsequential to everyone else?

Carmé put on the record. The music was the same. It gave me the same excited propulsive feeling, like the song was going along with or without me and it was time to have fun.

Then, half hidden in the sounds of the guitar and drums, we realized Carmé's phone was ringing. I had a premonition before she got to it. My heart sunk. And then the worry and hesitation in Carmé's voice confirmed my fear, even before she walked back around the corner.

"Jo, he says he's your dad."

I wanted to curse but I could already feel his listening ear in the room, and I could feel Carmé and Isa's eyes on me. I got up in silence and went to the kitchen.

"Yes?" I asked.

"Where are you?" His voice was clamped tight, without a hint of warmth.

"I'm at a friend's house."

Isa and Carmé sat silent in the other room, binding me in a double performance—one for him, and one for them—both my audiences wanting something different. *No*, I thought. Actually it was me who wanted something different from each of them. I wanted my friends to see me as strong and connected to the kind of family members they'd like to know, and I wanted my father to see me as someone growing up, competent enough to make my own decisions… but I wouldn't get either.

"What friend?" he asked.

Having to answer to him at all made me feel like Isa and Carmé would see me as a child and him as a freak. I put on a happy voice, and answered a different question than the one he'd asked.

"Yeah, Isa and I just walked over to a friend's house after school. Is there a problem?"

"You bet there's a problem," he said. "I had no idea where you were. For all I knew, you'd been tossed into some van on Erickson Avenue."

“Oh, no, nothing like that. I’m fine.” I told him.

“Where are you?” He pressed.

“If you’ve got the number, then you already know.”

“Not necessarily. What’s the address, Jo?”

“I’m just at a friend’s house.” I didn’t want to say *Carmé*, didn’t want him to connect this place to the friend I’d once missed hanging out with rather than let him call her parents. But he’d already guessed.

“Where does this *Carmé* live?” he asked. My friends had started talking about something else again, conferring.

“Don’t let him push you around,” Carmé said in a hushed way from around the corner. I shot my hand up to cover the receiver. I breathed deep. My dad was waiting silent on the other end of the line.

“I’ll tell you where I am,” I said. “If you promise not to come and get me.”

“That’s a promise I can’t make, Jo. Now tell me where you are and we can talk about this at home.”

The embarrassment and shame turned to anger suddenly, like the moment under a microscope when a cell divides. “I appreciate your concern,” I said. “But no. I’ll see you later.” I hung up.

Isa and Carmé were slow clapping when I came out.

“You did it, girl.”

“How did he get the number?” I wondered aloud.

Carmé shrugged. “Is he a cop or something?”

I shook my head. “No.”

“Creepy,” Isa concluded.

Carmé sparked a yellow Bic and held the end of a stick of incense in the flame. “Anyways!” She turned up the music. “Let’s have some fun. Forget about him.”

Carmé’s living room window was right next to her front door. It looked out from under the stairs to the apartments above hers, onto a walkway used by the neighbors to get from the street to their own apartments. Shadows of strangers walking by would slide along the blinds and we’d hear sometimes, vaguely under our music, the snippets of conversation as they passed. About the time Carmé was flipping the record, a set of shadows slid up the blinds, stopped and tried the doorknob.

”It’s me!” Kurt hollered.

Isa got up and opened the door for him. There were three other guys behind him. One with short bleached hair and a guitar in a hard case in his hand like a brief case. Another was wearing a fabric guitar case on his back, and his long bangs almost covered his eyes. The third was empty-handed. He had long dark hair and was already nodding and smiling, showing his pearly whites over Kurt’s shoulder; he had a smile that made you feel good. Two of the three had on black and white Chuck’s.

Kurt stepped inside and swept his hands out like impersonating a talk show host. “This is the Devils: Seth, Devon and Johnny.” They all filed inside.

“Rawboned Devils,” the one with the bleached hair corrected. That was Johnny.

“The what?” Carmé asked?

“It’s their band name,” Kurt clarified.

“What kind of a band name is that?” Carmé laughed.

“It’s from Shakespeare,”Devon deadpanned. “We thought it sounded cool.”

“It sounds more like a roller derby team than a punk band.”

“I told you guys it sucked.” The other guitar player said. That was Seth.

“Whatever,” Johnny said. “It’s a placeholder.”

They made their way in and sat down on the floor around the coffee table with us. Seth took the guitar case off his back and leaned it carefully on the wall.

“Nice place,” Johnny said. “This is just yours?”

“All mine,” Carmé answered.

Devon asked how old she was, and she smirked and said: “Wouldn’t you like to know?” I think he fell in love with her right there and then.

“Do you have any more of those beers, babe?” Kurt asked.

Carmé shook her head. “Not for you.”

Her joke seemed to make the boys nervous. Kurt said something about doing things the hard way and went into the kitchen for the beer, but in the end only Johnny wanted one. Seth waffled back and forth before finally taking one. Devon thanked Kurt and waved it off with ease.

”More for the ride-or-dies,” Kurt said.

“In health class they taught us guys like you would peer pressure us or something,” I said. “I’m a little disappointed.”

Devon pointed and cocked his head. “You do look a lot like the goober in the videos.” We all laughed.

”It’s a free country,” he grumbled, and the rest of the box swung in his hand at the end of his faded sweatshirt sleeve as he walked to put them back in the kitchen.

Another set of shadows marched by the window. I wondered how long I had before it was my dad outside the door. If he had the number, he could get the address. Probably he had called Isa’s mom. My beer was like a cold, unsweetened soda. It tasted like bread and pennies and pooled uneasily in my stomach. I took a bigger sip and interrupted Johnny and Isa to ask her if her parents knew where Carmé lived.

”No,” she said. “They only knew her parents’ place.” It was a relief, but it didn’t matter. A few more calls and he’d have it. “Why?” she asked.

“My dad’s gonna figure it out.”

“You on the run or something?” Johnny asked.

I smiled sarcastically. “Just for the day.”

“Is he a cop or something?” Seth asked.

“No, he’s not a cop.”

“Well, he’s going all Sherlock on your ass.”

Images of my dad making his living flashed through my head: cookware and the county fairs—but that was ancient history—the short lived businesses, the rentals. “He buys properties and rents them out,” I said.

“Landlord, huh?” Seth said. “You know what happens to the landlords when the revolution comes.”

Devon scowled at his bandmate. “Shut up dude. If there was a revolution you wouldn’t last a week.”

"What are you talking about?" I asked.

Seth looked happy to have my question to respond to rather than Devon's jab. "You know: Mao Zedong, the Bolsheviks, the *sans culottes*—"

"Don't listen to any of this art school bullshit," Kurt said, and took a long gulp of beer.

I let them get back to the conversations they were having, about how the old C.E. Mason Elementary had been converted into the Arts Magnet High School and that was the reason they had to pee into half-size toilets and bend all they way over like they were getting ready to take it in the rear to wash their hands in the tiny sinks. *"But it's cool."* They explained how they still had math and some other bullshit subjects, and how still one of the teachers managed to be a pain in the ass. It seemed like the three of them were either fawned on or loathed by the adults in charge of them.

"Do you like the Ramones?" Carmé asked.

"We do more than like them," Johnny said. "We can play the songs."

"Jesus Christ, Johnny," said Devon. "Learn English."

"Fuck off and die. Let's play *I Wanna Be Your Boyfriend.*"

Seth, with the long bangs, turned bright red looking around the room at Carmé, Isa and I sitting with our beers. "What about *Chainsaw*?" He stammered. Kurt laughed at him.

"We'll play 'em both," Johnny said. He looked back at us. "If you want to hear, that is."

"We want to hear!" Isa said.

Carmé lifted the needle off the record with a little static scratch and the room went dead quiet.

”Hell yeah!” Johnny shoved Seth's guitar into his hands. He cleared his throat. “Thank you for letting us play for you.” He said it like it was something he’d rehearsed, was training himself to say. It was endearing.

“It’s our versions,” Seth said quiet. ”Just so you know.”

“Okay,” Carmé said. “I would hope so.”

“You’ll love ‘em!” Johnny said, and he looked side to side at his friends. “I Wanna be Your Boyfriend.”

The one without a guitar, Devon, scooted over and tested the sound of his fingers on the edge of the coffee table. He shrugged. Johnny started them off, playing a pretty arpeggio that wasn’t on the record. When Devon and Seth started singing, they sang two different things, so the sound of their voices mixing in the air turned the sparse apartment, with its curl of incense smoke in the clammy cold, into a little temple. I told them when they finished that, the way they played it, it sounded like the Beatles.

“Never say that again,” Johnny snapped. “Just kidding, that’s awesome. Thank you!”

Seth had stopped blushing and was jostling to get out from behind Johnny and lean forward over the coffee table. He smirked. “Chainsaw,” he said. “Let’s go.”

They started again, and where in the record the lyrics were garbled or hard to understand, here every word was clear, and told a story. It was a beautiful moment. It made me want to stay there, and made me feel my dad was coming for me. I gulped the rest of my beer and resigned myself, wondering how embarrassing it might be when he arrived.

Isa told them when they finished that she liked it better than the originals.

“Never, never, say that.” Devon said, and he didn’t add a thank you, or that he was joking. But Seth, on the other side of Johnny, was absolutely beaming.

Kurt went into the kitchen and came back with the rest of the box of Rolling Rocks and the fifth of Jack. “Ya’ earned seconds, boys,” he said, and took a long pull of whiskey. They laughed because they hadn’t finished the first ones.

When the knock came, I said my brief goodbyes and wormed my way around them to the door.

“Love you Jo,” Carmé said to my back as I reached the little square of linoleum at the entry.

“Bye.”

“Nice to meet you.”

“Bye Jo.”

“Don’t let the fascists get your down!”

I went out quickly and shut the door behind me. My dad and I looked at each other unhappily. He asked if I wanted to introduce my friends and I said no, then I followed him back out of the apartment complex to his truck: my father, protecting me from everything but what I was scared of.

It was a couple weeks before the stars aligned again and I was able to make it out to another show and hang out with everyone int he same place again. Through Devon, Seth, and Johnny I met a dozen more people, from schools all over. Isa and I drifted apart somewhat, each finding better friends than we’d been to each other in that greater world we’d found together. We

maintained a relationship via loving hugs and knowing nods from our separate circles on the dance floor. Once, someone tried to introduce us and we had a time playing dumb and reading each other's minds. The boy was stoned and utterly amazed, lost in an oversized leather jacket, dyed black and studded like armor. We laughed our asses off.

I had a sense of islands of us, drudging through the soulless halls of Grant High, Cleveland, Tualatin, even occasionally Salem and the schools in Vancouver—each group coming with their variation on the theme. The Salem kids were metalheads, preaching the gospel of Black Sabbath and eventually bands with incomprehensible logos made from letters sharpened and branched beyond all recognition. The 'Couve kids were skaters, and loved Pennywise, Screeching Weasel, the Descendants and Bad Religion. If someone from Vancouver and someone from Salem were bonding, it was usually over a band called Suicidal Tendencies.

Seth, from the Devils, or whatever they'd changed the name to, was being drawn towards the anarcho-punk scene that dominated Portland proper, getting the rest of us into the Dead Kennedys, Flux of Pink Indians, and Crass. Between the three of them they knew almost everybody within five years of us in age, and they would get asked constantly when they were going to get their shit together and play a show.

"We're still working on a set of originals," they'd say. Seth disguised his nerves as patience, Johnny was eager to the point of frustration, wanting to just jump into the scene and play a set with four and a half songs, or however many they had. Devon seemed indifferent, though I knew from our one-on-one conversations that the band was his baby, and I had a feeling that without him Seth and Johnny, despite their talent, would be lost.

It seemed that in all this coming together at show venues and punk houses that important things were happening. A hundred people all discovering each other: friendships, loves, bands, fallings out, and that without me it would all carry on at a terrible speed, so the pull to be there was great and my time at home became interminable—just waiting periods between dark bursts of real life in the city, at night.

For the most part, the bands we went to see were in their twenties, but there were enough musicians our age to make me wonder where they found the time. I asked myself who had told them to do it, who had given them permission? Had their parents handed them guitars and drum kits and said "go wild" when mine had signed me up for the rote memorization of classical piano? It had never crossed my mind, sitting down at the keys, that instead of reading the four hundred year old sonatas from the sheet music, that I could find something new, hit a combination of notes that had never been played and call it mine. Why not? The first answer was that it was my parents' fault, for being so disconnected from the things I found meaningful. But then my heart sank: these bands my age weren't doing it because their parents helped them or gave them the idea, they were doing it because they were driven to, because they were artists. They weren't content to hear the music and relish the feeling it gave them. They heard it, relished in it, and wanted to make their own. And what a better way to be in this stupid world—not content to just receive everything as it is, but to add to it and change it and be a force.

**Moira**

I remember when Dean and I dropped Morgan off for his first day of kindergarten. He'd had two corrective eye surgeries the year before and he was small and quiet, and my only hope was that he wouldn't be the only one of his classmates to wear glasses. Dean assured me that either way, Morgan would be just fine, but all the same when we walked in the first thing I did was search in between the other parents for glimpses of the kids, and when I spotted another set of lenses on another boy's face I felt relieved. The alphabet was strung on a colored banner across the top of the back wall, over an inky green chalkboard. Cartoon zoo animals lounged in the crooks and curves of the letters. Then my attention turned to the other parents, some making small talk, others absorbed in whatever toy or game or craft had grabbed their children's attention, and my heart sank. They looked like kids themselves, most probably twenty years our junior. I looked at Dean to see if he was thinking the same. He smiled and shrugged. He had some grey hair on the sides now, and his hair was thinning out on top. In a few more years his widow's peak would be an island. I put my arm around him.

Morgan slid behind me as the teacher came to meet us, and peaked out from around my legs. Dean told him it was alright. After she introduced herself, she knelt down and smiled and put Morgan at ease. She asked him what he liked and then led him to a set of books about space shuttles and the solar system, leaving us with a packet of forms to fill.

"He'll do great," Dean said, and I felt at ease.

Church in those years was becoming a source of contention. Each Sunday, in the parking lot of Southwest Bible, Morgan began his little campaign to attend the adult services with us

instead of going to Sunday school. I explained the adult services would bore him, but he countered that he *hated* Sunday school and that he wanted to color dinosaurs and spaceships, not babies in mangers.

"That's Jesus in the manger," Dean told him.

"I don't even know who that is," Morgan whined. Beth looked over her shoulder like she was afraid someone getting out of their car nearby might report us to the pastor.

"Jesus is Jesus," I said, and Joanne laughed.

Morgan got what he wanted finally by blurting out that everyone but him got to stay together. He *hated* being the only one made to go somewhere else and how it wasn't fair, and that 'softened our hearts.' After that, we let Morgan come to the main services with us, but after the first week he took to stretching full out on the pews and trying to sleep with his head in Dean's or my lap, and in his kid's suit accessorized with untied sneakers and his little tie knot pulled loose he conjured some tiny Wall Street businessman—maybe down on his luck on a bench in central park. Then the fight became convincing him to sit up straight and stay awake, silent and hushed while the pastor gave his sermon.

One Sunday, Joanne wanted to skip church altogether, but Dean wouldn't let her. She started talking about getting dropped off at the park in downtown Beaverton as soon as church was over, which he didn't like either and, instead of answering, he floated the idea of going out to breakfast at the Pancake House—spending some quality time together as a family. Jo pretty much shut up and forced a smile. She spent the drive staring sullenly out the window. Then Beth snapped at Morgan to stop jostling for elbow room.

"God," Scott Gilchrist said to open the sermon, with his practiced smile, and wide open movements of his hands, inviting you in with every turn of his spiel, "is a god of love and a god of justice." He turned and smiled at the other side of the auditorium. "God created us in love—created us to be in a love relationship with him, and to have joy in our relationship with him. Now God is immovable—" He laughed. "God is in—the—picture." And his smile stood in for the laughter, like we all had a collective agreement that it should be there.

Some smiled from the pews. Others stared discerning, as at a salesman. The rest stared troubled, as at a college lecturer in a hard subject. Beth and Joanne and Dean were focused, patient. And I, of course, was looking around the room. I caught another pair of eyes doing the same and we quickly averted ourselves. I wondered how Morgan was doing in Sunday Pre.

Pastor Gilchrist started again: "There is no opting out of our relationship with God. We relate to him by way of his love, of Jesus' love—" he retired the smile for a moment. "Or we relate to him by way of his justice. For it didn't take long (it's right there in the very first pages, in Genesis) for man to stray into sin, for Adam and Eve to eat from the tree of the knowledge of good and evil."

What a mouthful—what a name, and what a concept for that to be the forbidden fruit: fruit from a tree of knowledge…

"Now, God tells us many times throughout the Bible: the wages of sin is death."

Death and justice, and Scott Gilchrist's smile. Sin, and the smile, and the wickedness and serpents, and the smile, and he led us all down that knife's edge over bleakest darkness with jaunty, practiced digressions and the well-timed self-deprecation, in that airy and serious room where the microphone lifted up his voice while the congregations' were lost somewhere under

the stained wood beams and the bright white ceiling which careened between them towards the pulpit. A baby cries near the back and sounds impossibly far away.

"You might say: well, but Adam and Eve didn't die. And that's correct: Adam and Eve didn't die, not physically. And they didn't die emotionally; they still felt and spoke and knew themselves—in fact they were ashamed… But they died in spirit. That's the truth.

"And that's the condition in which we find ourselves to this day. Spiritually dead and wondering, still, how to return to bask in the everlasting light of God's love. But I have good news for you, my friends. Because God has told us how to it. That's right, I have good news for you today. Good news. Good news. Good news!" Scott laughed and paced across the stage.

"Let me tell you about my family dog. Bear with me. Lord, it doesn't take much to make that animal happy," he said. "A bowl of kibble, some table scraps and a sunbeam on the grass and he's doing just fine. But us, we're living in the modern age with anesthetic medicine. You can go to the store or go to a restaurant and find food from any nation on this earth. We have memory foam beds now—no springs!" He stopped and smiled in wonderment.

"A hundred television channels to choose from. But are we as happy as Fido there, with a full belly and a sunbeam?" He looked around.

"No," he said. "In fact, we get everything we've ever wanted and how do we feel? We just end up bored. We have something that Fido doesn't. We have a spirit and in our spirit, that core of our being, we can feel that something's missing. We can feel the estrangement from God that sin has brought. Even if we've never thought of it in those terms, we all feel it."

I looked into my lap and then inward—to see if I could feel it… No, and in fact I'd been feeling pretty good before I got here. I heard, between the lines, that my optimism, and my

simple *be good* brand of faith, my *Jesus loves me yes he does,* country bumpkin Christianity didn't cut it after all. That your relationship with God isn't something you can intuit, or figure out on your own. It requires instruction, requires that beleaguered focus on some of my fellow partitioners faces that I'd looked down on (and what would God think about that?). 'Salvation' was not love, but calculus. Dean's eyes were closed in prayer.

We did drop Joanne off at the park on our way home. And Dean looked hard at the boys she was meeting, fifty yards away, their guitars the only discernible feature. "I've got half a mind…"

"Dean, don't," I said.

He put the car in park and I met his hand at the buckle of the seatbelt. "We'll figure this out. Now's not the time. We can have them over."

We drove off but he was sullen and agitated.

"They play music. That's nice," I said.

He tried to break it dow for me at home: "She has friends she won't introduce us to. Which says to me she's starting to spend time with people who she shouldn't be, and I want to step in before it's too late."

I shook my head. "It doesn't necessarily mean that, Dean. It could just mean she's getting older and wants her space."

"She's got all the space in the world," he said.

"Well, privacy, then. If she's friends with the wrong people it'll sort itself out—"

"Moira."

"—if they're not good friends to her, she'll outgrow them. Don't you think we've done a good enough job… taught her that much?"

Dean clasped his fingers together on the top of the kitchen table. "Will they put her in danger before that happens?" he asked.

I sighed. "Look Dean, Rachael's her best friend. Isa's spending her time with new people. If you forbid Joanne from that then she's down most of the friends she has. What are you going to do? Make new friends for her?"

He acknowledged my point with a resigned nod. "Let's get in touch with Isa's parents then. Maybe they have a better idea what's going on."

"You aren't a fan of Isa's parents anyways. How would that reassure you?"

"I'm just fine with Isa's parents," he said.

"That's news to me."

He shrugged his shoulders. "Maybe I wasn't at first. But I know them. We've known them for a long time."

"Well then, see?" I said. "All you want is to get to know people. Don't walk up on her new friends at the park. Invite them over here. It's just the mystery that's got you riled up, and you can't hold Jo responsible for that."

He sat thinking, trying to snap himself out of the loop-track of concern that he was stuck on and that kept filling his head with wrong ideas for what to do. I think I must have chosen Dean for all the ways he was different than my father—whimsical where he stern and curious where he was closed, but both of them were scared. I could see that now my dad was gone. They

tackled it in different ways, but they had this thing tying them together. They weren't so different.

I grew up with my sister in Latah County, Idaho, four miles outside a town of just five hundred people. The farm alternated growing wheat, barley, peas, rapeseed and lentils. Our mother and father woke at four thirty and we ate breakfast together while the windows were still black with night. We didn't talk much. By the time the school bus picked us up at the end of the driveway, Dad was in the fields, the first sunbeams racing sideways over the earth, projecting a shadow of every bar and shaft of the combine, and even the image of a man, into the field dust suspended on his nightward side.

There had been white groves of birch along the road in places, which blocked views of the rolling fields, and more and more pine and Doug Fir the closer you got to Troy. When we passed the stacks of felled trees at the sawmill, everyone got antsy for the end of the ride, and then we were suddenly closed in by houses and yards.

Fourth through seventh grade held class on the ground floor of a red brick building, across the street from the kindergarten and lower grades. The older kids, eighth through twelfth, raced and jostled each other up the stairwell to their rooms. I remember, when my best friend, Jamie, and I got to seventh, some of the oder boys started teasing us that upstairs was off-limits, though of course it wasn't, and we had no reason to go up anyways. Once, one of them, Rick Murphy, told us to turn around, and when we did, he had his pants pockets turned out and his index finger sticking through his button-fly, twirling it around this way and that.

“Ever kissed an elephant’s trunk?” he said, and then he and his friends shot up the stairs howling with laughter.

*Idiots*, Jamie and I determined. “Just idiots.”

On weekends, the boys would drive their loop from town up to Schumacher Road, which was the northern boundary of our field. They waved to Denise and me on our porch and then kicked up a billow of dust at the crossroads a minute later, and waved to us again as they headed back the other way.

Jamie and some of the town girls got boyfriends the same time as Denise, despite my sister being three years older. It was like that when you lived in the country. Neither of us was getting a ride four miles into town from any boy, and certainly not from our father a damn day before *he* was ready for us to date.

On my first day of eighth grade, Rick found me at the bottom of the stairs. “I’m sorry for all that stuff last year,” he said. “I was a real shithead. I hope you can forgive me.”

I’d barely thought about him unless he was standing right in front of me. I told him sure, and we walked upstairs together.

I waited until November to run any of Rick’s invitations past my father, not wanting to make it seem like he’d been gunning for me since the first day of class, let alone the first day of my last year downstairs.

My dad hmmed and hawed and crossed his arms and couldn’t even look at me. “Rick Murphy? Why doesn’t he go out with a girl his own age? Why doesn’t he go out with Dina?”

My cheeks got hot. I couldn't say because Denise was already going out with a boy who'd graduated last year, but he should have known the way of things. They couldn't have changed that much since he was in school.

Denise, elbows deep in dish suds at the kitchen sink, piped up to fill the silence before I said something stupid. "Ick," she said. "Moira can have him."

"No, she can't *have* him," our father boomed.

"Mom says during the war you had one girlfriend at home and one in Belgium, and you had to break it off with both of them when you met her."

"Writing letters—" he whipped around. "Never mind. We weren't in high school anyhow. The answer is no."

So, the next time Rick asked me out, I'd told my father I was getting ice cream with Jamie after school. It was a day that Mom was going to be driving the grain truck to the silos in Troy and would be able to take me back home. Rick parked us in a soybean field east of town and kissed me 'til my lips were sore.

I was waiting with Jamie outside Norm's Soda Shop on Main Street, just like I said I'd be when Mom pulled up in the truck. I waved goodbye to Jamie and climbed up on the passenger side.

"Did you have fun?" Mom asked.

"Mmhm." I took one glance at her and then, in a hurry, looked straight out the front. "Go, start driving!" I said. She looked me up and down and shook her head before she put the truck in gear, but she if she knew something she never said it to my father.

I remember feeling left behind, remember how, on weekends, Rick and his friend, Hunter, drove by on the Moscow highway, now with Jamie in the back seat, and they'd wave and holler before the car zoomed past, Jamie's hand in the wind. I'd wave back, self-conscious.

One day, finally, Rick walked me to the bus and we stood there, quieter than usual, until the last kid had shuffled up the steps, quiet because Rick actually had something to say.

The bus driver leaned forward. "All aboard M," he said.

I stepped to the door and Rick caught the crook of my arm with his fingertips. "I'll drive you."

I stood biting my lip and he seemed to read my mind. "Tell 'em you missed the bus if they say anything. I'll tell 'em myself."

I looked up at the bus driver and then at Rick, and then we turned and headed down the street. The bus puffed and the driver pulled the door closed. My heart raced. Rick dropped back behind me for a moment and moved me to his right.

"Ladies are supposed to walk on the inside," he said. At his truck, he unlocked and opened the passenger side, waiting like a bellboy for me to get in and sit. He closed the door too gently, and had to open it again and slam it shut. It seemed a long moment, alone, as he went around to the driver's side, taking in the look of his polished dash and the worn seat covers, the floor: all every bit as immaculate as my father kept his own truck.

We made a loop around town before he got on the country road. Big dirigible clouds hung in the sky all the way to the mountains, with fissures of deep blue between them. The ground was wet from a week of drizzle, and there were long glassy puddles in the ditch grass.

“We’ve gotta find a way to have your old man let you out of the house. What’s he thinkin’?”

“No one knows what he’s thinking,” I said, but actually I could still hear my father telling me who he thought would be suitable for me to go out with, telling me how Rick had a reputation he didn’t want me mixed up in. *He smokes and drinks and races!*

“I’ll talk to him,” Rick said, not quite convinced himself.

“No, you won’t,” I told him.

Then it was like he’d made up his mind: “I’ll have a word with him—clear it all up.” He looked at me and smiled. “Parents love me. Who could resist this face?”

I punched him in the arm. “Parents don’t love you.”

“So, you do know what he’s thinking.”

I blushed and shut up. He hit the gas like he just couldn’t wait for it, whatever was waiting for us at the end of my drive. All of me hoped that my father wasn’t in the field, or wasn’t home at all. I closed my eyes tight and visualized an empty driveway. I wanted to will it into being. In the distance ahead of us, the school bus was cruising up a little rise. I could imagine my empty seat, and all the trouble I might have saved myself if I’d climbed up and plopped down there like every other day. Rick put his hand on my knee.

When we got to the rise, I told him to slow down. “They can see your car now from the kitchen window if they’re looking.”

We’d halved the distance to the bus and Rick eased off a bit. I strained to see if anyone was home; it looked like not, but I was squinting to be sure. Could it be? *Thank the Lord.* I breathed deep. Rick did, too; he was all talk.

We were about a football field from the back end of the bus then, and gaining on it, when, coming from the other direction, dad's gray-blue truck pulled into our driveway. Rick took his hand off my knee and clutched the steering wheel.

*He'll drive straight to the house and maybe he won't see,* I wanted to say. *I could get out quick.* But, as we closed in, my dad's truck stopped at the end of the drive and I saw him get out and walk to the mailbox. I saw him lift his arm and wave at the bus, which drove past without slowing. He looked after it, confused, hand still in the air. Then he turned again, and even at that distance, I could see that he recognized Rick's truck. He put his hands on his hips and kept his eyes on us until we were so close that I could see them move from me to Rick to me.

Rick waved, and we rolled to a stop by the mailbox. "Let me get the door!" Rick spat out, but I was already opening it.

"Hi, Dad," I said.

Then Rick was out, coming around the front of his truck in such a rush that he snagged his pants on the grill with a metal thunk. "Mr. Banks! Hi, how you doing. Moira—"

"I missed the bus," I blurted. "Rick—"

"Not by much I guess," Dad said. "Hi, Rick." He walked over slowly and reached out to shake hands, but when Rick took his, they just stayed there, Dad's fingers coming all the way up over his wrist. I saw a muscle twitch on Rick's jaw.

"Thanks for gettin' her home." Then Dad looked at me. "What do you say?"

"Thank you for the ride, Rick," I said. "I'll see you at school tomorrow." And I headed off towards the house.

"Wait up," Dad said. "I'll drive you."

“Moira,” Rick called. “There’s a new movie at the drive-in this weekend. We should go.” He looked back at my dad. “If that’s alright with you, Mr. Banks. It’s supposed to be a real good one.”

“We’ll have to discuss that one, Rick,” he answered. “Thanks again for getting her home safe.” My dad took the mail from the box. “You take care, now.” And then he got back in his truck. I waved at Rick and followed suit.

I shrank in my seat next to my father, waiting for him to scold me as we rolled along, but it was worse than that. He didn’t say a word. I kept waiting for it as the truck came to rest and he pulled the parking brake, waited as he got out and shut the door. Then I was waiting for him to even look in at me through the glass as he crossed in front of the truck, but no. He went up our front steps, and he opened the door, and then he was inside. I had stayed there, in the quietest place on earth, the empty cab of a pickup, taking in the look of his polished dash and the spotless floor—the single, oily rag perched behind the wheel—through tears.

**Beth**

Joanne stood politely with Mom and Dad after the service and offered little smiles and updates on her year in high school to whoever Mom and Dad were talking with. Morgan quietly stamped his feet and tugged on Mom's arm to leave. I found my church friends, a couple of long-haired girls weaving through the adults and taking me by the hand. I tugged on Dad's sleeve and told him I was going with them. He waved his approval and we darted off through the lobby playing tag and getting speed-checked here and there by one of their moms or dads until it was time to go.

Joanne got into the car first and sat unmoving with her arms crossed while the rest of us piled in, apparently totally depleted by her christian daughter act a few minutes earlier and expecting to be rewarded. Dad turned full-around and looked over our heads as he pulled out of the parking space. At the exit, he turned on the right hand signal and Joanne sighed as loud as she could.

"I asked nicely," she said.

"It's Sunday," Dad told her. "It's family time."

"It's *be-controlling-and-force-your-daughter-to-do-things-she doesn't-want-to-do* time," Joanne said.

"How about *see* my daughter?" he corrected. "Take my children out to a breakfast they used to love."

"I still love it!" I hollered.

Mom said something too quiet for me to hear.

"Moira."

”I don’t want being with us to be a punishment,” she said. “If she doesn’t want to go, she doesn’t want to go.”

Joanne was chewing silently on her lip with angry eyes beside me. Morgan was looking happily around the car. Without a word, Dad flipped the blinker the other way and drove Joanne to the park, where he told her that she would be home for dinner no *ifs-ands-or-buts* and made her nod in agreement before she walked off towards a couple of guys playing guitar at the base of a colossal oak. We went to breakfast without her and I got my precious Belgian waffle. After we had ordered and were all eating, the mood lightened and we talked and had our laughs. I found that, in Joanne’s absence, I was more myself. And my parents were more themselves. And, though that night, lying in the dark in my room, the fantasy would rack me with guilt, I imagined that was all of us—Mom, Dad, one daughter and one son.

Joanne called home in the afternoon. When I picked up the receiver and said hello her voice came back cold and monotone. She said to tell Mom and Dad she was at Isa’s and would be back later.

Dad was working in the yard with Mom and Morgan, showing him how to load the yard debris bin. “I should probably go get him,” I said.

My sister answered quickly. “Don’t go get him. It’s fine: I’m at Isa’s house and I’ll be home around dinnertime.”

“Okay,” I said.

“Thanks.” The line went dead.

In the evening, Mom got a pot of water boiling for spaghetti and Dad set out a cutting board—then changed course, picking up the phone and calling Isa's house to remind Joanne that she needed to get home. No one answered.

"I'm sure she'll be back," Mom said. "They probably just didn't hear the phone, or they're on their way already."

Dad set out a bunch of tomatoes and an onion, which rolled across the counter. He glanced back through the first wisps of steam at the clocks on the stove and microwave—one over the other and four minutes apart. "I'll give her a half hour," he said, and started chopping. Mom took out the grater and pulled the little lever that suctioned it to the counter and started shredding carrot. Overhearing them, a knot tightened in my stomach, fear like a tiny certainty that something had happened to my sister. I wondered at the strange quality of her voice on the phone and pictured a shadowy form behind her, making her say the words. Morgan was playing Legos in the living room and I asked him to show me what he was building. A political show was playing on the television and Dad would occasionally come half out of the kitchen and lean against the wall to listen, a knife or spoon in still in his hand. In a little while he called me back to set the table. The plates were down, along with half the silverware, when I heard Joanne at the door.

"There she is," Mom said, but neither of them could see the door from where they were working.

Joanne came in wearing a black hoodie over the clothes she'd worn to church, shredded at the cuffs of the sleeves, the hood synched tight around her face. A lock of purple hair peeked out across her forehead. I opened my mouth wide and covered my cheeks with my hands. She

looked out at me from under her eyebrows and shook her head. I snapped my eyes towards Mom and Dad—Mom was already walking towards the entry, patting Dad's back on the way, saying "…you're just in time."

She turned the corner and Joanne lost her nerve standing there. She made a break for her room, but Mom had caught a glimpse of purple and called to wait. Joanne stopped with her back turned.

"What is that?" Mom said. "Come here."

Joanne took two steps backward and slowly turned. The lock had come untucked and hung now past her eye and down the side of her face—bright and fresh and newly dyed. Dad had stopped stirring the sauce and was looking up at Mom and me, two points of a wordless little triangle.

"Take off your hood," Mom said. It was a sweatshirt I had never seen, something borrowed from one of her mysterious new friends. Joanne shook her head.

"Take it off," Mom said again. Dad was coming now, the wooden spoon he'd been stirring with still in his hand, about to drip sauce.

Joanne, with both hands, reached up and pulled back the hood as he arrived beside me. I gasped. My parents were silent. Joanne stood staring back at us with a shaved head, every hair cut down to the pale white skin of her scalp except a single purple lock. The look on her face was fierce and angry, and her lip was trembling. Her eyes began to water as she looked from Mom to Dad and back, catching my giddy astonished eyes on the way. Dad looked sad and defeated. Mom stood in front of me. She'd crossed her arms and I could only imagine her face.

“Go to your room, Jo,” Dad almost whispered. She lingered another second, then disappeared down the hall. Dad went back to stir the sauce and grate the cheese.

“How much trouble is she in?” I asked as my mom followed suit, but neither answered. “How much trouble is she in?”

“What’s next?” Dad said to Mom without looking up.

Morgan walked stiffly through the kitchen behind them, and then having met no resistance, dashed down the hall.

“Don’t go down there,” Dad said, but it was half-hearted and he didn’t repeat himself or go after him. I followed Morgan down the hall. Joanne’s bedroom door was shut tight. Morgan knocked softly and waited. Joanne, on the other side, was softly crying.

“Your little brother wants to see you,” I said and knocked again. She didn’t move or come to the door, just silenced her sniffling, but she didn’t say to go away, either… We went inside. Joanne was sitting with her back against her bed and smiled through her tears. I closed the door behind me.

Morgan reached out and felt the bristling little hairs on Joanne’s temple and asked her why she did it. She smirked and groaned and started to cry a little more. Her head seemed so small, so fragile, and her face so much younger.

“I hate it,” she said. “Is it terrible?”

I didn’t know what to say. “It’s something,” I told her.

“I’ve made a mistake,” she concluded, and wiped her tears. Morgan looked on in wonder.

“It’s just hair,” I told her. ”It’ll grow back.”

“Right. By the time I’m twenty.”

“Did Isa do it, too?” I asked.

She nodded and took the purple hairs in her hand. “I got the lock. She’s got bangs. I kinda like hers.”

There was another knock at the door. Joanne asked who it was.

“Mom,” Mom said.

Joanne’s face hardened. ”Go away.”

“And if it had been Dad?” she asked through the door.

Joanne smiled despite herself. “Go away *faster*.”

Mom didn’t say anything else. We just sat there, suspended, until we realized she must have left.

“What does it feel like?” I asked.

“I feel like a freak.”

Morgan laughed now, saying she was crazy, and ran his hand fast over the top of her head, sending little slivers of cut hair drifting down to the carpet.

Joanne batted his hand away gently. “It’s just hair,” she said, looking down at the floor. “Just hair.” But all the same, in another minute, she was crying harder than when we’d first come in, crying in a different way: tears that wouldn’t be sharing space with any smirks or clever remarks. I put my arm around her shoulder and squeezed. Morgan sobered and told her not to cry. He liked her new haircut. In a few minutes, she asked to be by herself.

I started seventh grade that year, and when Mom took me to the mall for back-to-school shopping, I bought black jeans and tops like Joanne. My hair lay bright and vivid over my

shoulders against the dark cotton, and once I saw that I never wanted to go back to the frilly white or the flower print again. Black clothes and blond hair—I'd found the key. Joanne had moved on from the Beastie Boys to Oi Polloi, which was too much for me, but she passed along the ones she thought I'd like: The Offspring—which she reminded me I'd seen when I was little—Anti-Flag, Green Day, Pennywise and Screeching Weasel, The Ramones. And when kids at school played Sublime, I told them *We're Only Gonna Die* and *Hope* were actually covers, and I amazed them with the gritty originals from my little zipper case of hand-me-down CDs.

But things were different after that in a way I found hard to explain. Joanne wasn't more free, but Mom and Dad backed off in their delivery, as if they were shaken up, didn't know how to react. They could tell that Jo regretted it, maybe felt sorry for her, but instead of admitting so, Jo hardened, went everywhere with this fuck-you glare. They grounded her, but did it gently, almost asking her to understand where they were coming from. Jo laughed in their faces and said, "I've been grounded fifteen years." The house grew heavy and joyless.

Aunt Linda called me for the first time that year. I had heard the phone ring and then Mom chatting indistinctly for awhile before she hollered my name and said it was for me. She handed me the phone with a smile and then, not knowing who to expect, there was Linda's happy voice asking how I was and telling me she'd seen a shooting star and thought of me. She asked me about school and what books I liked to read, and in another month or so I got a package in the mail: a copy of *Little Women,* signed 'To Beth, from Linda, with love.'

# Chapter 5: Ho Chi Minh Guitar Lessons

**Moira**

Even after three weeks of cruising past his rental property like a cop in an unmarked patrol car, Dean had found no rhyme or reason to Trisha and Roy's comings and goings. He wanted to wait for a moment when they were out, let himself in for a walk-through inspection and find a grounds for eviction. His appeals to Trisha had gone nowhere. At first she'd likened Dean's giving her a chance to her giving Roy a chance, but when the rent stopped coming and Trisha took on her scattered appearance and her speech grew halted and meandering, Dean thought he'd found a way in. He wanted to let her off the hook for some of the missing rent if

they could just get Roy out. He was no good for her and they would get him out together. He could support her at each turn.

I'd told him that he was getting far too involved, but he explained that eviction would be a long and drawn out legal process—a war of attrition that we would lose. Though he agreed with me in principle, he still thought he had a chance of salvaging the situation his own way. It didn't work. Right at the moment of truth, when Trisha seemed to be seeing clearly and understanding that it would be a hard time, but that it would be better for her in the long run—at her fork in the road—she and Roy wound themselves up together like the snakes on Hermes' staff and became like a single entity, fighting with itself, eeking out the next fix, losing all sight of the future and all sight of the humble plans she'd been nursing for herself when she moved in —plans for a healthy life. She lost her job at Slim's, Dean told me.

The moment of fatherly concern, the moment to rid the house of Roy and give Trisha a fresh start had passed. I reckoned that Dean was good for about two more mortgage payments before we started to draw on my account. In the best case scenario—if they were out by next month and the place was cleaned and up for rent again two or three weeks later, Dean would be dead broke when he received the first rent check from whoever the new tenant turned out to be. The urgent mission now was to get rid of both of them.

It was a Saturday morning. Dean enlisted Toby for backup. Joanne and Beth looked after Morgan. Their car was gone when I pulled up behind the truck. Dean and Toby were in the cab, deep in conversation. I got my things together and got out. Both of the truck doors opened. Dean nodded at me and started flipping through his keyring as he crossed the street.

"Hi Moira," Toby said, coming around. "Nice neighborhood."

“Trisha told us after she moved in that when the ice cream truck comes around, it’s all the adults that go running up to it. She was quite amused.”

He shook his head. “I bet.”

Dean snapped a picture of the front of the house with a disposable camera and the wheel clicked as he wound the film. The keyhole sounded grimy and obstructed when he unlocked the door.

An oversized couch with cushions too big to wrap your arms around sagged by the wall behind a coffee table covered over in candy wrappers and soda bottles. A nervous pitbull looked up at us from the tight little ball it’d curled itself into by the arm of the couch. Dean raised the viewfinder of the camera to his eye and snapped a picture. At the sound, the dog wagged its tail and dander puffed into the air each time it struck the cushion.

There was art on the walls: framed pictures of tulip fields and a view down a country road lined with a neat row of elms. There was a floor lamp on the far side of the couch that matched a little light on the side table. A bucket seat on the far side of the room matched the kitchen chairs…I got the impression of layers, of a stylish little living room crowded out by a newcomer’s garbage and a too big couch pulled in off the street.

Dean took a close up of the refuse on the coffee table, a full ashtray half-covered by an empty Cheetos bag split wide.

“Is this her dog?” Toby asked, scratching it on the top of the head.

“No,” Dean said. “That must be the boyfriend’s.”

We moved on into the kitchen. A full bag of garbage had been tied and left leaning against the cupboards by the bin. Ants ran in conga lines up and over and under the kibble in the

dog bowl. It's water dish was murky from a sunken kibble, long since melted, and the floor there looked stained and discolored from layers of slosh and spillover left to dry. Dean snapped a picture.

It was a small house. A living room, a kitchen; a bedroom, a bathroom, but the sensation of intrusion made a labyrinth of it. Navigating around the coffee table was like going around the next bend in a long and winding cavern. Dean poked his head into the bathroom.

"Bad?" I asked.

"It's actually about the cleanest room here." He shrugged. "Everyone's got their red line."

Toby was in the kitchen, looking suspiciously out the window. Dean was in the doorway of the bathroom and the two of them gave me the impression of a little diorama before Dean pivoted into the bedroom and disappeared from sight. I followed him into the dim space. The light switch clicked under my hand and didn't work.

"You'll have to fix this," I said, not thinking.

Dean looked back, mouth slack with annoyance. "It's not the electrical. The bulb's burnt out."

I nodded.

In the little light leaking through the blinds, I could see that the bed was loosely made. The corner of a plastic laundry basket poked out under a mountain of dirty clothes. There were a few dollar bills, maybe the last of Trisha's tips from Slim's, scattered on the nightstand. The carpet was dirty and stained, and in one place whatever had spilled had splashed onto the wall as well. Colors popped in the flash of Dean's camera—the yellow bedspread, a scattered rainbow in the laundry pile—and muted again in the dark.

“Hey Dean, Moira,” Toby’s voice came from the other room. Our eyes shot to the the bedroom door. “We’ve got company, I think.

I couldn’t imagine being walked in on by a stranger, looking through their bedroom, and I rushed out to where Toby was standing. Dean snapped one more picture and came out behind me. The three of us stood looking at the front door for several seconds, like burglars caught in the act.

“The door in the kitchen goes out to the back yard,” Dean reminded us.

“You want to run?” I asked.

“No,” he said slowly. “But it’s there if we need it.”

The front door opened and a lanky man came through with his eyes lowered. He shut the door before he saw us. His body went tight, and he propped open his sleepy, bloodshot eyes, trying to make sense of us. Then he recognized Dean.

“Roy,” Dean said.

“What’s this?”

“We’re initiating eviction protocol per item 17 on Trisha’s lease. Unpaid rent.”

“We’ve been busy, that’s all,” he grumbled. “You’re not gonna kick out Trisha, are you?”

“Trisha is three months behind, and you don’t live here.”

“Everyone calm down,” Roy said. “All you had to do was ask,” he said.

“I’m afraid it’s too late for that. The process is initiated. Meet Mr. Hypes,” Dean said, and gestured to Toby.

"Toby Hypes, *Oregon Tenants and Landlords Authority,*" he said and lifted the Swan Island Metallurgy employee badge that was slung around his neck on a lanyard. Roy looked taken aback. He didn't ask to inspect it any closer.

"I've got the rent for you, actually," he said. "Just one sec." And he shuffled to the end table beside the couch. He pulled open the drawer with his long arm and produced a handful of wadded cash and began a half-hearted effort to smooth and count the bills.

"That won't be necessary," Dean said.

"We have you on unpermitted occupancy of a pet, smoking indoors and failure to maintain the property." Dean swept his arm towards the garbage on the coffee table.

"We were going to clean tomorrow," Roy said.

"I'm afraid it's too late for that."

My arms were crossed. I felt scared in this space that seemed only ours in name—but I was in awe of this new persona Dean had taken on, the mock-ups of procedural jargon.

"Well, if you're evicting us," Roy said. "Good luck." He lifted the blinds of the living room window behind him. "I knew you were scum of the earth, slum-lord fuck—" he raised his voice to a shout on the last word, and the bumbling quality went out of it, replaced by a keen certainty, like the violent promise of broken glass. The dog slipped off the couch and barked at us.

"And when was that, Roy? When you moved in here illegally?"

"Slum-lord Fuck." He took a step towards us. Toby and I flinched, withdrew closer to the backdoor. Dean stayed where he was. "I've been talking to the *Housing Rights of America*. They got free legal aid. We already got our lawyer gettin' ready for your ass."

The *H.R.A*, I thought. As fake as Toby's '*Oregon Tenants and Landlords Authority.'* We were two friendless camps, each evoking fictional higher powers in our respective feelings of utter vulnerability to the other.

"We're going to go now, Roy." Dean said. He looked back and handed Toby the camera. "Why don't you and Moira head out the back and snag one last picture of the yard there."

I pointed at the back door with my brows. Dean shook his head. He wasn't going to settle for anything less than walking past Roy out the front door of his own property. I could tell exactly what he was thinking.

"Dean."

"I'll be right out," he said, and he walked to the front door at Roy's side. Roy threw the handful of bills at him and scared the dog—they fell to the ground in a clump.

"Come on," Toby said.

I hesitated. Roy's fists were balled and he'd puffed out his chest. Dean reached for the doorknob and lines of daylight appeared around him. He went out. Toby and I went out the back, but took no pictures, hurried around the side of the house to the street, where Dean was waiting like nothing at all had happened.

"You two alright?"

We nodded.

"Good. Should we go grab some lunch?"

Toby and I looked at each other and let out sighs of laughter.

Dean didn't seem to understand why and shrugged. "How 'bout Slim's?" He said. "Slim's is as good a place as any." He led the charge across the street to our cars. Toby raised his

eyebrows at me before he went around and got in the passenger seat. I got in my Mazda and followed them down to the bar.

Slim's was windowless and looked closed from the outside. The big rope cordon was pushed up against the tables on the sidewalk, the ashtrays hadn't been emptied from the night before, but inside the lamp's were lit and burgers steaming on the grill. The three of us took a seat at the bar and Dean took a second to admire the black and white subway tile under the barstools, which stood out stark and stylish from the wood floor and wood paneling, and the grid of wooden crossbeams on the ceiling. The Ramones were playing on the stereo—I recognized them from our daughter's collection.

"So, this was Trisha's place, huh?" Toby remarked.

Dean sighed and shook his head and pulled a menu under his nose. "Damn shame," he said. "That girl was so close. She was already through the hard part."

Toby cocked his head. "Who's to say what the hard part is."

"The hard part's the first step," Dean said. "Don't you think?"

"Who's to say?"

We ordered burgers—the western, a mushroom Swiss, the classic, and beers to go with them. Toby told us he'd read an interview with a homeless man that said when he made it off the street into affordable housing it was the loneliest he'd ever been. He'd had community on the street, but there in the building he had a cold hall lined with suspicious neighbors and doors shut tight. "He said the sound of his own key in the lock made him lonely. He moved out and went back to what he knew."

Dean nodded gravely. “She’s gotta go,” he said.

We sipped our beers in silence a moment, and then I asked Dean if he recognized the music. He smiled and said he did. Toby asked us how we were doing on that front.

“We know who her friends are, at least,” I said. Jo still hung out with Isa, but now she had Carmé, and an older guy who’d graduated the year before. There was Seth and Devon, who were Jo’s age but went to another school. “They seem nice enough.”

“Nice isn’t the question, Moira,” Dean said, and I suppose that was true. We wanted to know them better but Joanne had snickered and walked off when we suggested she have her friends over for a barbecue, but I chalked it up to adolescent embarrassment rather than a guilty conscience over the kind of people she was hanging out with.

Toby took a drink. “Teenagers, right?”

Dean chuckled. “I think we might have a bit of a special case,” he said.

“How’s Will?” I asked Toby.

“Ah, Will’s easy,” he admitted. “But Jo’s a good kid. All of them are. We’ve got good’uns.”

We tapped our glasses to that, But I could see that Dean was off-balance over the whole thing, how his daughter had suddenly grown up, passed into a new stage of life without his realizing it and he needed to check his pride and catch up. He hadn’t been wrong per se, but a negotiation needed to happen. The problem was that every time Dean seemed ready for that, Joanne pushed a little further, into new territory that sent Dean spiraling all over again, trying to figure out what it meant and what the dangers were, and how to protect her.

I thought of Seth and Devon, and how Morgan might be when he got their age. “They’re good boys.”

I was trying to comfort Dean but he sighed and said, “Look, we’re not on the farm. This isn’t Moscow, Idaho, here.”

“Farm boys, city boys. They’re all just boys,” I told Dean. “They might be trouble—and they might be fine.”

“That doesn’t put me at ease at all,” Dean said.

Toby showed his palms when I looked at him. “It’s not our job to choose her friends,” I said. “It was our job to teach her to be a good judge of character. Do you think we failed in that?”

“No one can teach you to be a good judge of character. It’s a lifelong project. It’s something you learn on your own, by being in the world—and it’s blind luck if you’re able to learn those lessons before someone takes advantage of you, before you get hurt.”

There was the crack of a billiards ball break from the other side of the bar. I didn’t know what to say back to him, but the feeling I had was that when I looked at Joanne’s friends, under the studs and the patches and the hair and the occasional obscenity on a tee shirt, I was seeing kids, and Dean was seeing men.

“Bad things can happen quickly,” he said. “A disaster comes out of nowhere.” He shook his head. ”Get in the wrong person’s car. Walk away from your drink at the wrong party. It’s not a kind world we’re living in.”

The bartender arrived with our food then, and we started to eat.

It wasn't long before Dean was proven right, in a way. A car accident on Murray Boulevard killed two of Jo's classmates. The driver had been drunk and speeding, and, unlike his passengers—a best friend and a girlfriend, it seemed—he lived. We tried to talk to Joanne about it at home, to make sure that she was alright, but she could smell the moralizing coming from a mile away. She was fine, she told us. She'd shed tears for the people that were grieving but they weren't her people—they were the year above her and she'd only seen them in the halls occasionally. She resisted comparison. They were jocks; none of her friends even had cars. "Why else would you always be having to snag and abduct me at the transit center and at the bus stop?" she said to Dean. "We walk everywhere."

"That's not the point, Jo," Dean said in a low and serious way. "Somewhere, at some point before you're out of this house, you're going to be asked to get into someone's car who has been drinking."

Jo crossed her arms and glanced to her sides.

"When that moment comes, you remember those kids and you remember this conversation, and you call one of us."

She scoffed and wanted to get out from under our moment of parentage.

Dean reached out and rested two fingers gently on the side of her shoulder. She began to shirk away, but stayed. "I'm talking diplomatic immunity," Dean said. "I'm not going to lose my daughter because she's scared of getting in trouble for having had a couple drinks. You know what I mean, diplomatic immunity?"

Jo stood stone still, just her eyes moving back and forth between Dean and me under her cropped hair and that ridiculous purple lock, afraid to incriminate herself by nodding yes.

"I'm not going to lose you that way," Dean said again. "I'm not! Tell me you understand."

"I get it," Jo said finally.

Dean relaxed and sat back.

"…But we're not like them. My friends and I: we're not like them." Then she asked if she could go now. Dean's lips were parted but no words had come out yet.

"Do you understand?" I asked.

"Yes."

"You can go."

And she disappeared quickly down the hall…

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I remember my father sitting far back from the kitchen table with his arms crossed. He wouldn't look me in the eye, which, although I didn't know it, meant that I was winning. I didn't know that I was winning because it felt so awful. Later, in our room, I'd tell Denise that I didn't understand it. Why did he have to make me feel like a criminal for asking for something so normal?

"It's his problem," Denise said. "You got what you want, now don't worry about what he thinks and go have fun."

"I hardly want to go anymore."

"Now, *that's* your problem."

When the day came, I watched from the kitchen window as Rick's truck pulled onto the drive and crept towards the house. Dad was on the tractor in the fields, and didn't stop to say hello.

"Have fun, sweetie," my mom said. She dried her hands on the dish towel and hugged me tight.

Rick ran around to open the door and Jamie and her boyfriend, Hunter, tumbled out to give me the middle seat.

"How are we all going to fit?" I asked.

"We'll find a way," said Hunter.

Then, from our bedroom window, Denise called out "I'm sure you will find a way!"

The three of them snickered and waved up at her. "How you doing, Dina?" Miles called up as he ushered me in first, to the middle seat.

"Oh, fine. As well as Rapunzel in her tower! Have a good time," she said. "And no splitting up!"

I was mortified. That had been the condition my father finally grumbled there in the kitchen. *You can go on a double date*. (I'd thrown a chestful of air out my mouth, barely breathing 'thank you' before I escaped up the stairs.)

"We'll be good!" Rick laughed and waved good bye. Jamie's boyfriend pushed into the cab of the truck after me and then Jamie piled onto his lap and bent her neck to fit.

Her boyfriend laughed at her: "Lean back instead."

She did, and promptly knocked her head on the sheet metal behind the seat. They laughed and she went back to zigzagging her neck under the passenger-side sunshield. Rick got in and

slammed his door. He turned the key so hard the truck engine roared, then he burned out turning around and sped back out towards the highway, cranking his window down. He waved at my father in the field, who did not wave back.

"It's a jailbreak!" Jamie cried.

"We're busting you out of here."

I liked the way Rick leaned far forward to check for traffic, even though there wasn't a soul coming in either direction. He was all messed up. If that was about my father, he should have made a show of taking it easy up the drive, not at looking both ways down an empty highway. I could see the tractor in the rearview. Dad wasn't looking anyways.

Halfway to town, Rick slowed down and pulled off onto a field road. I asked where we were going and he didn't answer. Then, a moment later, I recognized Hunter's Chevy parked alongside the crops and understood. He and Jamie hopped out and waved. They'd see us after the movie.

"My dad will kill us if he finds out," I said.

Rick backed out of the field. "He's not gonna find out."

I could still see Jamie, caught in our headlight beam in Hunter's car, chatting happily. I was sitting on my hands. "The torture I had to go through to even go out with the lot of you," I told him. *That's all I wanted,* I was about to say to say, but I stopped myself. I was caught between them and my father. Jamie had taken it for granted that that's what we'd do. She waved goodbye without explanation or apology. There was no insult; I insulted myself by being the last to know, and now for not being happy about it.

"Relax," Rick said. "Where do you want to go?"

“I want to go to the movie,” I said. “Next time, lie to my dad if you have to, but don’t keep me in the dark.”

He nodded. “I’m sorry, Moira.”

We took off for Moscow. In a moment, another pair of headlights rolled out from the field and started gaining on us. Rick looked in the rearview. It was Hunter roaring up, straddling the centerline, now in the oncoming lane. Rick shifted and started to gun the engine. “Oh yeah?”

Headlights appeared in the distance. “Rick—”

“They’re miles away!” Hunter was alongside us now, Jamie bracing herself in her seat.

“Rick, it scares me.” I grabbed his leg. “Let him go!”

And he eased off. Our engine went quiet and Hunter’s car pulled ahead and got back into the right lane. The oncoming car flashed by us.

“Thank you.”

“You’ve got it,” Rick said, and he gave me his hand to hold.

Hunter’s tail lights shrank into the distance.

So we perfected our system. Sometimes the four of us actually hung out together; sometimes Rick and Hunter switched off who would pick me up, and the other would hide his car in the fields a mile or so up the road. But after that first time, I insisted that if we said we were going to the drive-in, we went to the drive-in. I didn’t put it past my father to go into town and check. Really, though, he was far too tired to be curious; he laid down the law and left it alone.

Sometimes, I'd see them, twenty minutes or so before they were due to pick me up: two pairs of headlights racing down the highway towards Moscow, followed a short while later by one coming back the other way, which would slow down and take the turn onto our property. I prayed my father would never notice.

Rick was a gentleman. He walked on the street side, opened doors for me and always listened when I said no. I liked the feeling that he was straining to behave himself so that I would like him, and that as soon as I was back home, he'd be lighting up and racing the other boys back and forth to town. Whenever, trying to fall asleep, I heard a car passing fast on the highway outside, I felt sure it must be him.

One night, Rick dropped me off after seeing "The Sound of Music." Mom was playing cards with Denise in the living room while Dad finished up the dishes in the kitchen. They were on their last bites of pie and ice cream. Greetings all around. I went to join my mom and sister but Dad called me into the kitchen and sat down at the table.

He smiled. "How was your night?"

"Great," I said. "We had a good time." I stayed in the doorway. Something was definitely wrong.

"Go on, have a seat," he said. He got up and got a slice of pie for me and put it down on the table across from where he was sitting.

"Did you like the movie?"

"Oh, yeah," I told him. "Real good."

"What was it you went to see again?" He asked.

I took a nervous bite of pie. "The Sound of Music."

“That’s with Julie Andrews, right?”

I nodded. “Pie’s good Dad. Thank you. I think maybe I’ll take it into the other room and join them for a game.”

“Sure,” he said, and I stood up with my plate.

“Say, Moira, how did Jamie and Hunter like the movie?”

“I think they liked it alright,” I answered. I was backing towards the living room.

“That’s funny,” he said. “I went into the bakery in Troy before dinner to pick up the pie, and you’ll never guess who I saw.”

I began to ask, but I knew already.

“Hunter and Jamie,” he said. “On their way to Norm’s in that red chevy of his. So they couldn’t have been at the drive in with you and Rick.”

“They ditched us Dad!” I said. “They—”

“How’d they do that?” He yelled. “How’d they ditch you and get all the way back to Troy when you all went off in one car Moira? How’d that happen?”

The pie plate clattered on the counter where I dropped it. I had ten half-formed excuses flying simultaneously through my head about how it happened—*we ran back to Troy to pick up Jamie’s coat, which she forgot and… and…* —but there were tears in my eyes before any of them reached my mouth.

“Never again, Moira,” he said. I was running up the stairs to my room. “You’re not spending any more time with Rick Murphy!”

Those were the last words we spoke to each other for two weeks. Not only could I not go out with Rick, but Hunter and Jamie were too shaken to pick me up from my house, and so I

found myself missing trips into town for football games or anything else that they might have been doing. By the time I found myself back in my father's good graces, Jamie and Hunter had broken up completely, and Jamie was going on dates with other boys. She went out with whoever she wanted, whenever she wanted, seemingly with no questions asked.

**Joanne**

Seth gave me my first guitar lesson on the front steps of his parents' house in Garden Home. *Put this finger there, and that finger—there*, manhandling my pinky onto the third fret of the smallest string.

"You're fighting me!" he said. He was in his chucks and ripped black jeans.

I laughed and apologized. "I wasn't trying to." There was a *Misfits* skull on his t-shirt, and, where it rode up around his waist, a belt of brassy bullets peaked out.

I had two fingers correct on the low strings, but he took my pinky in both hands, pulling my hand off the neck of the guitar "I'm going to have to start all over now!" I told him.

"Never mind that!" He'd taken on the affect of some kind of mad scientist. "Make your joints *bendable*." He worked my finger like the arm of a little machine he'd just greased up with WD-40. "There." He had me put my index and middle fingers back where they belonged. *No—There!* It was chilly and the cold strings felt rigid and dug into my fingertips and hurt. He bent my pinky into place and pushed it down. "This is G chord! Strum! Hurry before anything slips!"

I brushed the tops of of the fingers of my other hand down across the strings and bruised my cuticles: the sound came out in a hilarious disarray. We cracked up.

"Next chord!" Seth announced in a new, kind of soviet character, and we laughed even harder.

He began plucking my fingers from their places on the fretboard, rearranging.

"I don't know how you play this thing," I said.

He leaned back in mock admiration of his handiwork on my fingers. "Pain," he said flatly.

I strummed another awful sounding chord. ”What’s this one?” I asked, about needing to wipe tears from my eyes we’d laughed so hard.

“Nothing, yet.”

I groaned.

“Use your fingertips,” he said. “So you don’t accidentally lean on the next string down. And press harder so they don’t buzz.” The buzzing persisted; he pointed. “Move a little closer to the fret if you can’t—it should be a C chord.”

He asked for the guitar and showed me the right way. The sound was clean when he strummed, and he started to croon the chorus of *Hybrid Moments.*

He sang a little too well and stopped abruptly. “Anyways. That’s that,” he said. He laid the guitar down flat on his lap and rested his arms on it. A neighbor’s cat moseyed across the end of the rough-paved driveway and into a patch of crunchy fallen leaves. Moss crept out onto the pavement from the edge of a lumpy lawn. Seth sat up from hunching over the guitar and leaned back against the house instead. To say something, I complimented his bullet belt.

“Thanks,” he said. “Honestly, at first I just got it ‘cause I thought they looked cool.”

“And now?” I asked.

“Now I love how it riles people up. It’s just a belt at a punk show. But wear it to school and they freak the fuck out. Old ladies scowl at you on the street. They get so offended, and then, on the Fourth of July, they plop down in a lawn chair and watch their grandkids set off fake bombs all night—to celebrate a war!”

“Fuck,” I said. “You’re right.”

“Our country’s been at war with some enemy or other for a hundred years, but no one wants to be reminded. No one wants to actually lay eyes on a bandolier. They want to ignore it. Always have.”

Later that week, Carmé, Kurt, Isa and I were out under the flagpole and it was starting to rain. Our conversation had died and Kurt and I were both looking gloomily across the pick-up lane to the rowdy, lit up little hell of the cafeteria, thinking that it was at least dry in there. Isa and Carmé were squeezing together, stealing themselves against the weather rather than considering other options. There was a flash of black and white by the cafeteria doors, of black jeans and chucks, a denim jacket. Kurt sat up straight and squinted, too, in shock at seeing other punks at our school. We would have met them already—and then one of them looked our way: Johnny. He pointed and laughed and the three Devils hopped down the curb with their hands stuffed in their pockets and the wind catching their hair.

“What the hell are y’all doing out here!” Johnny howled. “They don’t let your kind inside?”

“Mother fuckers,” Kurt said smiling. Carmé hopped up and charged into Johnny’s arms. She kissed each of them like a proper European.

“Someone call security,” Kurt said and Devon looked over his shoulder and saw an actual security guard inside the cafeteria window, scanning the masses.

He jumped. ”Oh, you weren’t joking.”

Kurt got up and he and Johnny thudded their hands together and hugged. “It’s not some faggy school,” Kurt said and planted a sloppy, big-lipped kiss on Johnny’s face.

“They’re to keep us in,” I said. “Not keep anyone out.”

“Right,” Isa agreed. ”This is the last thing they’d ever expect. Someone trying to come here by choice.”

“Aw, they love us,” Carmé summarized.

We couldn’t wipe the smiles from our faces. Our friends from a different school were here under cover. It turned out to be blind luck they found us. There were three lunch periods and they had cut class and walked an hour without even knowing that, just guessing that we had lunch the same time as they did. The wind blew.

“Fuck,” Seth said. “Can we go inside?”

“They don’t let ‘em,” Johnny said again, but the weather had beaten us and we headed across and through the doors and I swear the security guard did a double take at the seven of us —we were multiplying!—but she did nothing. Out of the 2,000 teenage faces she saw everyday, had she ever noticed us? The closest thing to an empty table was occupied by a single boy with greasy straight hair and baggy, self-conscious clothes. His shoulders were turned guardedly inward, slow chewing a bit of wonder bread sandwich he held with two hands.

”Mind if we sit here?” Devon asked him with a nod and a smile.

The boy shook his head and pulled his lunchbox closer, making himself smaller.

“Appreciate it!” Devon told him.

“Thanks man,” Johnny said.

I wiped the stupid, mean smile off my face. Fuck that.

Johnny looked around, taking it all in. “Well!”

“This place would make me want to die!” Seth exclaimed.

The table's original occupant looked around at us in silence, chewing. "I can't hear myself think," Devon said.

And quiet, almost quiet enough to miss, the boy said, "Me either."

All seven of us looked at him.

"Hell yeah," Devon said, and reached over to bump fists with him.

Before any silence had a chance to take hold, Seth handed a heavy bundle in a black canvas bag across the table in my direction. "I've got something for you," he said. Inside was a folded and coiled bandolier of ammunition.

"Oh, shit," Kurt said.

I was so honored I wanted to hug him—had a vision of the long awkward moment it would take me to get around the table to where he was, then the competing vision of Carmé and her kisses and the way that I wanted to be in the world—not tucking my elbows in around a wonder bread sandwich with the crusts cut off, talking too quiet for anyone to hear. I didn't want to be afraid to take up space.

"Dude!" I said, and I hopped from my seat and went around the table and hugged him, even pressing our cheeks together while he reached up over his head to reciprocate. "Thank you!"

"They got her," Carmé lamented. "The anarchists got her. All she'll want to listen to anymore is Crass and she's gonna roll her eyes at me when I put on the Ramones, and…and…and." She bowed her head and shaded her eyes like it was all too much.

I hugged Carmé on the way back to my seat. "Never!" And I kissed her on the top of the head.

"What's the occasion?" Isa asked.

Seth shrugged. "She saw mine the other day and liked it."

"Oh, I see," Kurt teased him. "Jo, he give you the whole Fourth of July speech?"

I looked at Kurt and paused.

"The whole thing about making these suburban bastards actually look at it?"

Seth looked alarmed.

"Yeah," I murmured.

"Ha!" Kurt pointed. "This wanker! I told him all that shit." He laughed loud until it got the rest of us, like it always did, and I caught eyes with the loner boy, still chewing, encircled by punks. His lips curled up in a smile.

When the bell rang Kurt warned Devon, Seth and Johnny that it might be harder getting out than it was sneaking in. Devon chuckled. "What are they gonna do? Put us in detention?"

"Good point," Kurt said. He threw caution to the wind and ended up leaving with them as the rest of headed back to class.

***

There was no way for me to make it to the boys' first show: a Wednesday night in the basement of some house off NE Killingsworth that was only announced the day before. Their practice that week had gotten them all particularly stoked and when someone in the scene offered for them to play they renamed the band *Fearbiter* at the last minute and went for it. I didn't even try to ask or come up with any scheme to get there. Alone in my room, I closed my eyes and could almost hear them, could almost see my friends there in the half-dark across town, the grimy cement floor, cold air spilling in each time someone opened the door to the yard and

ducked inside. Seth said later they'd wanted a soft start—didn't want to make a big deal out of it, but Kurt and Carmé had gone, and a lot of the Grant High School punks. At school the next day Kurt was almost dejectedly indifferent.

"It was too poppy," he said. But Carmé's eyes were lit up, and she called Kurt out for having danced.

"I wasn't dancing."

"You were bobbing your head."

He shrugged.

Carmé turned to us. "They were good," she said. "I mean, it sounded like a first show, but they were fucking good."

Kurt nodded assent. Isa and I looked at each other. There was something in the air, something special had happened. It was the beginning of something. So when word got around that they were playing again in two weeks, this time at the Paris Theater, neither of us were going to miss it for anything. Isa wasn't in danger of that, anyways. If I couldn't hack it, I'd be the only one left behind.

At the park after school a few days later, we met up with them and they couldn't stop talking about all the ways they'd messed up their set—this ending and that transition. Johnny had come in late on a lead break in their best song. Kurt said he'd noticed, but only because of all the faces they'd made at each other when it happened. Carmé insisted the whole set was perfect.

"You didn't miss anything," Johnny told Isa and me. It was last minute. We went for it, and we're better for it. This one is going to be our real first show.

Kurt laughed at him. "It doesn't work like that, bub."

"How many people were there?" He defended himself. "Ten, fifteen?"

"Like thirty!" Kurt said.

Johnny cackled. "It was a test run. Show zero."

"Whatever." Kurt continued to give him shit about it.

I thought about how I would ask my parents if I could go, rehearsed it in my head: *Hey, Dad, my friends are playing a show on Saturday, and I'd really like to go and see them—Hey, Dad, I'm going to see a show on Saturday. It's my friends' band. We're all really excited because it's their first one—Hi, Dad. May I go to a concert on Saturday?* I imagined him asking where it was, finding some esoteric reason why the Paris Theater wasn't an appropriate place for me to be. *It's right downtown!* I would tell him. *It's safe! It's all ages!* My blood boiled. It didn't matter how much it meant to me, it didn't matter how much it meant to my friends. There was a little yes/no circuit in his brain and before I'd even finished asking it might simply flip to *no* and dash my hopes. So I could just go, and ask forgiveness instead of permission. Or I could ask far in advance, so it still felt like an abstract concept for them (but they'd just be noncommittal so they didn't have to fight with me until the last minute. I'd miss it and then there'd be nothing to fight about; no need to defend their fascism). In the end my courage flagged, and I put it off, and when the day came it was my mom's weekend to work. Morgan was at the sitter's. Beth was at a friend's. Dad left around eleven to go to the rental. There was no one around to ask.

The afternoon wore on. The show started at 8, but it would take at least an hour to get there / my mom would probably get home around 6, so I needed to leave early and have someplace to be. I took out a pen and wrote on a notecard from my French binder that was usually used for memorizing verb conjugations: *Went to a show. Be back late. xoxo* — crossed

out *xoxo* and simply signed my name. I got dressed. By 5:30 it was dark as midnight, and you could hear the rush hour traffic on the other side of the woods if you listened carefully. Maybe a Trimet bus purging its steam before it knelt at the stop I'd be waiting at. My heart raced. Our friends were finally doing it. I checked out the living room window to make sure the coast was clear, put on my shoes, then went back to my bedroom for my backpack and stopped one more time in front of the bathroom mirror on the way out. I pretended to fix my chopped off hair and laughed. I was putting on the finishing touches of my mascara when I heard a key in the front door. *Maybe it was Beth*? I hoped beyond hope, but the door opened and I could tell by the steps it was Dad, walking straight across the entry, past the hall, to my waiting note on the kitchen table.

"Jo?" he called.

My face in the mirror changed from the young woman getting ready to go out on the town to a child's. I lowered the inky wand. My cheeks turned red, and my eyes welled up under the dark lines I'd drawn. I wanted to scream—threw open the door and charged down the hall to the entry. There was only one light on, and the living room was dark behind him. The note was in his hand and his face looked tired. His hair was messy and there was dried paint and caulking on his pants and on his shirt, even a fleck on the side of his neck.

"I was just leaving," I said.

He was trying to find some words and I realized I was waiting for him, giving him that power, waiting as if it mattered what he said when I already knew what I was going to do. And what I had to say never mattered to him. I went to the door and turned my back on him, turned the cold metal knob.

“This isn’t how we do things, Jo.”

The seal broken. Wisps of cool night air lingered by the jamb. All I had to do was pull, and the door would open. I opened it—

“Stop!”

—trotted down the porch stairs, down the driveway, and left. It was raining, and the wet pavement glimmered orange under the streetlights. At the crosswalk I turned left down the bike trail: a tunnel of scraggly junipers where the lights were too far apart and always seemed to flicker. In the distance the path took a hard left to go up to the boulevard, so that for long minutes you just walked towards what looked like a dead end—someone’e backyard fence—and you knew that you wouldn’t know if someone was around the corner until you got there. I turned back to see if my dad had followed me, but the street was empty, the crosswalk stripes dull in the night under a sheen of rain.

Turning the corner revealed another long stretch of empty path, lined by the junipers on the left side, and endless, barren privacy fence on the right. It sloped up slightly, and cars whizzed by on the boulevard at the top. I got the distinct feeling that my friends were already there, that the show was started and I was out alone in the rain and would never make the hour and a half trip by bus. The timing was right though, I’d probably get there early. It was just the long winter night fooling me. It had been dark for hours.

Hall Boulevard was a long line of watery lights, the bus stop uncovered. The rain was catching on my short hair like dew on grass. The cotton of my black hoodie started to get cool and heavy over my shoulders with the weight of the moisture. The traffic light was red and the cars rumbled in a line, one or two inching forward impatiently. Then the light turned green and

out of the anonymity there was a turn signal, and one set of lights came out of the stack and pulled into the bus stop: my dad's truck. It sat there, rain pattering the windshield, too dark to see inside.

I crossed my arms and checked down the boulevard for the bus. The passenger side window started coming down in the fast-slow stutter of the hand crank. "Come on Jo," he said. "The jig's up. Get in the car."

"No," I said, and looked down the road into the night again. The bus came around the curve in the distance, hurdling through the clear space between bunches of traffic.

"I can wait," he said.

"Trimet might have a thing or two to say about that," I said dumbly. The bus had caught up with the cars in front of it, halving the distance, and approached as a giant square of grill and glass framed by faded white metal, with hints of light and shapes inside. My dad twisted around and looked back, too.

"Get in, Jo."

The bus slowed to a stop in the lane behind him and honked it's horn.

"I'm not moving," he said to me, but I realized he didn't have to. The bus honked again, long and blaring. I raised my arm and ran back to it. The folding doors snapped lazily open on a dim and humid space.

"…Can't block the bus stop," the driver was mumbling. "What's he doing?" He asked as I dropped my quarters in the box.

"I dunno," I said. "Just some creep."

The driver cocked his head as he put the bus in gear, as if to say *typical*, and then we lurched forward and passed the truck, my dad lost in the dark of the cab and the rain and the glass between us. He'd follow me, I realized. *Easily*. Catch me or make a scene at the transit center where I had to transfer to the 20 to get downtown. *Checkmate*. I sat down and sank into my defeat, looked out the window to see if I could see his truck, circling like a shark, but no. He was probably behind us.

The transit center was where he knew to find me. So, I could get off before then. I mapped it out. With a little luck, I could cut through the neighborhood by C.E. Mason and skip the transit center, catching the 20 on its way up Barnes after it left, and if he didn't see me—if he passed the bus to beat it instead of following behind stop by stop, my dad would be at the transit center when it pulled up, but I wouldn't be on it. I'd be long gone—lost in the night.

I pulled the cord on Canyon and Lombard and the bell tolled its broken little chime. The bus stopped and let out it's hydraulic sigh. I hopped out into the rain, cut across the street and along the front of a dreary strip mall—a barber, a pawn shop, a pay day lender—around the back, past a dumpster that smelled like puke, hopped a fence and came down in the dark behind the red and white rails of a dead end on a neighborhood street. The school was somewhere in front of me, ten or fifteen blocks, and a number 20 stop somewhere beyond that. The rain let up near the school, so that in the night's new quiet you could hear the aftermath of quiet drops falling from the leaves of rhododendrons and rose bushes and the wheel wells of parked cars. I took in Seth and Johnny and Devon's school as I passed, imagined all the freedom and encouragement and opportunity that filled those walls by day: Teachers telling them to *go for it*, parents dropping them off and saying, *Be yourselves. This life's for you. This city is yours.*

I waited most of an hour in the dark on Barnes for the 20, and wished I hadn't caught a glimpse of myself in the big mirror the driver uses to make sure no one's shooting up or starting a fight somewhere in the back. My makeup was running, my lips were blue with cold. At the Paris, I paid at the door with soggy bills half-shredded by the denim seam of my pocket as I pulled them out.

"Are you okay?" The door guy asked.

"I'm fine," I said. He had to wipe the top of my shivering hand with a bar towel before the stamp would take.

Inside, Kurt saw me first, then Carmé turned and her eyes went wide. I was shivering and started to cry.

"Holy shit," Kurt said, and they took me in their arms in a three-way hug.

"What happened to you?" Carmé asked and pulled my head into her shoulder, and the smell of the rain on their dirty clothes felt like home. Kurt ran to the bar and came back with a handful of towels. Carmé held me at arm's length and took in the sight of me. Seth and Johnny and Devon were backstage, she said. They were first. They'd be playing soon. The room was almost empty besides a sound guy coiling up an extra cable on the side of the stage. Kurt pealed off my hoodie and dropped it on the ground with a splash. My t-shirt underneath was soaked through just as bad. He stripped down to his shirt and sent Carmé and I to the bathroom with the rest.

It was a nightmare, its filth lit by a bare bulb, molding stickers covered the mirror, and tags were etched into the glass.

“That father of yours is out of control,” she said, drying my hair. “Arms up.” She took off my shirt and laughed, wrung it out over the sink. “You want to keep this?”

I shrugged. “Yeah.”

She put it in a wad on top of the empty paper towel dispenser. “How ‘bout if it’s still here at the end of the show you can take it with you?”

I nodded. She handed me a towel for my chest and arms—“You’ll put an eye out with one of those,” she said about my nipples—and tried pressing the other towels into my jeans, but it wasn’t doing much. “I’m afraid you’ll have to live with wet legs, dear.”

“I can live with that,” I mumbled. She started handing me Kurt’s clothes in order: a torn white thermal, the identical black Hanes hoodie as mine, but two sizes bigger, with a *Discharge* patch sown on the back, and finally a black jean jacket. Then she did her best to fix my makeup.

“Good as new,” she said. A chord rang out from a guitar amp on stage. “Ready?” I wiped my eyes and hugged her.

“You look punk as fuck,” Kurt said when he saw us. He was standing with Isa then, and another handful of people had arrived. On the other side of the room there were four adults huddled together that I realized must be some of the Devils’ parents.

On stage, Seth cupped his hands around the mic and bellowed: “Come inside. Come inside all ye fuckheads. Come inside.” He looked at the four of us. “Hi Jo. Hi Carmé. Hi Isa. Fuck you, Kurt.”

One of the parents leaned towards the others and shook his head. They laughed at whatever he'd said. The sound guy told them to start. Devon rolled his drumsticks across the toms and Johnny started strumming.

"Come inside please!" Seth howled into the microphone one last time, then he turned to the other two. There was a beat of silence and Devon counted in.

**Beth**

When the doorbell rang at Monica's, it had been dark for an hour and the smell of her mom's cooking was drifting through the house. From Monica's room we heard the front door open and our moms' happy greetings. We'd had a good time and I would have liked to stay longer. We hugged and I walked out of the room. Our moms stood smiling in the doorway, looking back at us, hers in cute jeans and a sweater, mine with a raincoat on over her scrubs.

"Hey bug," she said. "You ready?"

"I'm ready." I hugged her and then went to grab my bag and put on my shoes.

"It was a joy to have her," Monica's mom said. She gave me a hug. "You're welcome anytime."

The house looked dark when we pulled up at home. Mom wondered aloud if anyone was there.

"There's Dad's truck," I said, pointing to the dead end.

"That's weird," Mom said. The cheer she'd put on in front of Monica's mom had faded a bit on the drive back. She looked tired.

We went in, and the house was quiet without the television. The bit of light from the kitchen got stretched thin trickling into the entry and the living room. Dad sat at the table, warming his hands on a mug of coffee.

"Where is everyone?" Mom asked.

Dad looked up at us. "Jo left," he said. "She went right past me and left."

Mom shut the door behind us. "Left where?"

Dad picked a notecard up off the table and held it out for her. "Some show. Evidently."

Mom took it, glanced at it and put it back on the table. “Where’s Morgan?” she asked.

He made a face of suddenly remembering something.

“You were supposed to pick him up.” Mom ran her hand over her face. I dropped my bag against the wall.

“I—” he started and gave up. He took a sip of coffee.

“You’re just going to sit there?” she asked him.

“Moira—”

“You’ve gotta do something,” she snapped. "Either go track down Joanne, or go get Morgan.” And then, under her breath. “Or bring home a paycheck.”

“What did you say?” Dad asked her.

“Nothing.”

I looked from my father to my mother and back.

“What did you say,” he asked again.

“Beth, let’s go,” she said to me.

“Go where?”

“To get your brother,” she went back to the door. I looked from Mom to Dad again.

Dad ticked his chin up towards the front door. “Go ahead.”

When you don’t open the screen door all the way, like when you pass through fast, like we did, it doesn’t catch itself, and the brittle loud impact sounds like you slammed it. If you’d tried to slam the screen door I think it’d actually fight you and hiss closed slowly, but the noise it made seemed to suit my mom, who tossed her purse into the back of her car and shut that door

hard. She jabbed the car key in and turned it like slamming a door. And the silence as we retraced our route back out to Hall was like a door slam, too.

"Are you okay?" I asked her finally.

She let out a long breath. "Your father and your sister—but mostly your father, are going to be the death of me."

That surprised me, that Jo was breaking all the rules—treating what our parents said like it didn't mean anything, and yet Mom was more upset with Dad than with her. I remembered our pastor smiling, saying something about how as God wants travelers to obey the laws of the lands they pass through, that us children must obey our parents. *God says to honor your father and your mother.* "It was Joanne who disobeyed," I reminded her.

"It's more complicated," she said. "I did the same stuff when I was her age. My dad had too many rules to keep track. So many rules that it would have been a full time job to keep track of them, so I just started to pick and choose. When someone holds you down like that, you forget they even love you. You don't feel understood—" she cut herself off and looked over at me. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't be saying this to you."

"It's okay," I said. My hands were tingling, my heart beat quick. The girl in old pictures, who still looked so much older than us even though my mom said that she was our age when they were taken, had come alive. She'd had feelings and heartaches and fought with her parents and maybe flunked a test—whatever. My Mom had a past, was expanding, and changing.

"I'm sorry," she said again.

"What do you want Dad to do?" I asked.

She sighed and flipped her blinker on. “I don’t know,” she said after she made the turn. She thought a minute. “I loved my dad,” she said. “And then, sometimes, I wished I had a different one.” The neighborhood floated quietly by in the rain outside. “I don’t want him to make her hate him. I want him to trust her a little bit… because this is getting out of control. It’s not working.”

“I get it,” I told her.

She glanced at me and said again “I’m sorry, Beth,” but now I didn’t know what she was sorry for.

At Morgan’s babysitter’s, I watched as she smiled and pulled her shoulders back, and glossed over how the plans had changed when Kathy said she’d been expecting *Dean*, and I watched as that glow she’d summoned faded again as she walked back to the car holding Morgan as he cried for some indiscernible reason—and left her looking even more exhausted than she had before.

When we got home, there was still no sign of Joanne, and Dad’s truck was gone, too.

Mom made a box of macaroni and steamed some broccoli, cooking in the same pots and pans Dad used to sell. A little metal vent rattled on the lid of the broccoli pot when it came to boil. When it was done she fixed me a bowl and then plopped a spoonful into a coffee mug for herself. I asked her if that was all she was going to eat, and she answered that she wasn’t hungry.

I was doing homework in my room when Dad got home a couple hours later, and went down the hall. Mom was watching TV in the living room. “I looked everywhere,” he was telling her. “Couldn’t find her.” Then, ”Hi, Bee.” He hugged me with one arm, his shirt damp on my

cheek. Mom didn't say anything back to him, and he just stood looking at the back of her head for a second. Then he patted me on the shoulder and said he had some work out in the garage.

"I'll come with you," I said.

He answered: "Stay up here where it's warm," and I went back to my room and to my homework. I did my long division thinking about what it would like like if I painted my room the same blue as the lines on the notebook paper. I wrote small and preferred college ruled. I had to sharpen my pencil twice before I'd finished, and my eyes were closing on their own. There was a knock on my door and Dad came in.

"Had to come back and see if you were still here!" He sat down on my bed. "You were so quiet." He'd changed his shirt and his hair was dry again. He filled the room with warmth, and made me realize how quiet and lonely my room had been now that the silence was sitting between me and him instead of all around me while I stared at papers.

"How was your day?" he asked. And I told him about a prank some of the popular kids had pulled on each other at lunch, and how my math teacher had given me a challenge assignment this week after how well I'd done on our quiz.

"Man," he said. "Your brain must be about ready to explode with all the knowledge."

I laughed. "It's mostly air," and I knocked on the side. "Got lucky."

There was the sound of someone at the front door, which made him stop and listen, then mom's voice saying, "Look who it is."

I thought he'd leave, but he picked up my notebook and squinted at the page a second. "Doesn't look like luck from where I'm standing," he said. "I'm proud of you."

"Thanks."

He said he meant it. “I love you, Bee. Looks like you got one foot in dream land. Have you got it in you to get up and brush the old teeth before your eyes close?”

“Yeah.”

“Okay.” He patted me on the back and we got up together.

“*You have anything to say for yourself,*” we heard Mom saying, then Joanne’s quiet answer: “*Nope.*”

I went into the bathroom. Dad waved and pursed his lips, then disappeared around the corner. I didn’t envy Joanne, couldn’t even imagine being in her shoes right then, with the faucet and the toothbrush covering anything I might have been able to hear of their conversation. Then Joanne raised her voice—I heard that, but none of the words. She and Dad went back and forth. My brushing slowed. There was a bang, which I learned later was Joanne kicking a hole in the wall, then her heavy footfalls past the bathroom and the slamming of her bedroom door. Another set of footsteps and the bedroom door reopened. Dad’s voice: “This conversation’s not finished.”

“You’re a fascist!” Joanne yelled.

I came out of the bathroom and could see Dad in Joanne’s doorway.

“What did you say?” he asked.

“You heard me,” she said, too scared for a second to repeat herself, whatever the word meant. Then she got her courage and spat it out again: “You’re a fascist.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” He said.

“You’re controlling,” she said. “You act like you’re everybody’s friend and then you try and control everything they do. You don’t want me to have any friends. You don’t want me to

have any experiences. You're money-grubbing, you're lazy, you act like what you say is the word of God—"

"Joanne—"

"You want to buy up all the houses and then make people pay you to have a roof over their heads."

Dad was still in the doorway, just listening, either shocked or doling out all the rope she needed to hang herself.

"What a fucking sociopathic way to make a living," she said. I'd never heard her talk like that.

"A fascist?" Dad snapped. "A sociopath? Sounds like you've been taking your new friends' words for gospel to me. You're saying that I shouldn't have the right to buy an unlivable house and, with my own sweat and blood, make it livable? Huh?" He was talking loud now.

"I don't want to hear your bullshit—" Joanne started.

"What?" He yelled. "Did you start a conversation you don't know how to finish? You want to tell me that that isn't an honest living? You mean to say that if I'm going to do that work, it can't be at my own direction, it has to be reporting to and paid by some out-of-touch, faceless government agent? *I'm telling you* I can't do that. I don't have it in me—"

"Shut up!" Jo yelled. Mom appeared in the hall now, looked at me poking my head out of the bathroom.

"You want to be a communist?" He continued. "Is that it? Is that what you're talking about? Or do you want to go with the church next time they team up with Habitat for Humanity?

You want to chip in, Jo? You want to make your own money? Or you just want to run your mouth?"

"Get out of my room," Jo said.

"This room does not belong to you," he said. "You're a child in your parents' house."

"I'm sixteen!" She shrieked. "Leave! Me! Alone!"

Dad scoffed and shook his head. "End result is the same, you know. Either someone does the work or they don't. Either a house gets put in shape or it doesn't." He shut the door, turned and saw me and Mom behind me. "I'm sorry," he said as he walked by. To Mom he didn't say anything.

It was a long time that night before my eyes felt heavy again, a long time before I fell asleep.

**Moira**

…Where there had been nothingness, now there was darkness, and a flickering light. I'd fallen asleep alone, watching Letterman on two notches of volume—the kids asleep. The house is quiet, but I hear Dean's truck idling outside the window. I look at the time: it's three a.m. The truck shudders off. The door opens, and shuts as quietly as it can and still latch. The old metal sound reminds me of my father. The pillow is cool on my face. I've never had much trouble sleeping, and so it's never bothered me to be woken up. I feel my body at rest, and a peace in my mind that, in daylight, I can't imagine. Dean's key skips across the lock pins in the front doorknob, and he pulls the storm door closed behind him to keep it from clanging. And then there's a sound I don't expect—a wince, or moan, and the steps down the hall are labored, uneven. He comes in.

"Dean what's happened? What's wrong?"

"Is it broken?" he asks. He's leaned against the doorframe, holding his thigh with both hands, trying to make a tourniquet of his fingers. The television flickers on the walls, selling diamonds and pearls. The leg is black, the knee swollen beyond recognition.

"Well, get over here and let me see it."

He hobbles to the bed and sits down. He won't let go of his thigh. The skin is tight around the swelling. He sucks in air when I run my finger across it.

"I don't know," I say. "What does it feel like?"

"Well, it hurts!"

"What kind of pain?" I ask him.

"It'd be dull pain if there was less of it. But it's sharp. It's sharp pain!"

“Is it throbbing?”

“Yes.”

“With your heartbeat, or random?”

He cocks his head at me and kind of smirks. “Heartbeat.”

“You might be alright,” I tell him. I go to the bathroom for the bottle of ibuprofen, and the light wakes me all the way up. When I come back, I can see his shirt’s torn and scuffed, and his shoulder’s scraped. He’s digging in the bedside table drawer for a joint his barber gave him like a party favor the last time he got a perm.

I give him three tablets, he takes the bottle and shakes out two more, swallows ‘em dry.

“Don’t smoke in here,” I tell him.

“How ’bout out the window?”

”Fine.”

He hobbles to the window and it squeaks when he pulls it open. He strikes a match and takes a long drag. He breathes smoke through the screen with his lips pushed out in a gigantic ‘o’. He offers me a puff.

“It’ll make my heart race,” I say.

He nods, goes into the bathroom and there’s a wet sizzle when he flicks the cherry into the toilet. The shower starts.

“Do you need to go to the hospital, Dean?”

There’s a long pause. “No, I’m alright.”

I hear the water, suddenly blocked by his shoulders, stop hitting the shower floor, like the stream is hanging in the air, before it gathers on him and falls in sheets. There’s the whine of the

stream hitting his hair an inch from the shower head. On the television, a manicured woman is presenting silver chains. I turn it off and go to the kitchen for a bag of frozen peas and another of frozen corn to press on Dean's knee when he gets out.

When Dean hobbles from the bathroom and eases himself into bed he lets out a low groan, and says, "I'm gonna have to find a new tenant."

"Why's that?" I ask as I fix the peas and the corn to his leg.

"Because Trisha's three months behind on rent—"

"Three months?"

"Yes. And when I tried to get it from them tonight, Roy ran me over with his car."

"Jesus Christ, Dean."

"I know, I know. Don't say that, will ya?"

"Why were you trying to get the rent at two o' clock in the morning?"

"I wasn't—it's a long story," he says. In another minute or so, he is fast asleep on top of the covers, with the towel still tied around his waist, and his hair still dripping. In just over two hours, my alarm will go off for work.

Dean and I got out of the car together. It looked like the whole police force was lined up along the side street, and the yard and the dirty siding of the house was pulsing with blue and red. I saw Roy and Trisha right away sitting on the curb between two of the squad cars, their hands cuffed behind their backs. I made eye contact with Trisha first. She looked defeated and sad—worn-out—and she watched us pass with indiscernible thoughts. Then Roy caught sight of us and his head came up like a bull dog with the recognition.

“You slumlord! You fuck!” he shouted from the curb.

Dean glanced over and then back as we crossed the yard.

“That’s right, I see you, bitch.” I avoided eye contact, unsure if it was directed at Dean or at me—mulled over how each possibility changed the meaning of the word.

A female cop came out of the house pinching a plastic evidence bag pulled taught by the weight of a handgun inside. We passed her and went inside.

“I hope it burns down!” I heard Roy going on. “I hope your precious house burns down!”

The conditions inside had deteriorated since my last visit. The path from the door to the kitchen was grody and marked with filth. On the wall behind the couch were the syrupy remains of a splattered beer. The cushions drooped and a soiled throw pillow lay where it fell half under the coffee table, looking like it had been stepped on. A couple of bikes leaned on the wall in shambles. A greasy chain drooped and coiled on the carpet.

“Are you the homeowners,” an officer in plain clothes asked from the kitchen.

“That’s me,” Dean said, and extended his arm. The cop stepped over the garbage overflowing from the bin and came out.

“How’s the leg?” he asked. “That was you, right?”

“It’s nothing,” Dean said. “Just some bad bruising. What all have you found?”

The officer shrugged. “A few grams of heroine, crack, plus the accessories. And the 1911—” he turned to me. “That’s a gun—” (I rolled my eyes) and then back to Dean, “which appears to be stolen.” He sidled past us and headed for the front door. “Good luck, Bud.”

“What do we do with all this stuff?” I asked.

“Get a dumpster,” the cop said. “It’s abandoned property.” And he walked out.

There were beads of sweat on Dean's forehead despite the cold—wet, humid cold that seeps through your jacket, dirties you somehow. He was looking around the room, then went to the kitchen. I heard a cupboard open and close. Then he returned with the garbage bin and began to pluck the refuse from the coffee table and off the couch. Through the blinds, I saw them putting Roy in the back of the police car. Trisha, behind him, went in next, almost as if pulled by his gravity. They shut the door behind her.

# Chapter 6: The Dogs

**Morgan**

I remember telling Beth that I would never die—that, if I was dead, I would just stand up. We were coming back from a walk our parents probably made her take with me, and a long, long rain was just beginning.

She seemed annoyed. “It doesn’t work that way. If you’re dead you can’t stand up.”

“Maybe you couldn’t,” I told her. “But that’s what I’m going to do.”

The maple out front was smaller then, with fat droplets falling slowly from its purple leaves while the wind whipped the rain to sheets of mist over the road. I’d lay flopped over the back cushions of our couch with my elbows on the stained wood window sills. Sometimes I’d look down the gap between the wall and the back of the couch and imagine a cleft in the earth. I’d push the air through my teeth and the brown carpet became a river far below, churning muddy against canyon walls. Sometimes it seems like my whole childhood was spent watching the rain

out that window, hearing it torrent off the clogged end of the gutter, hearing it shower the asphalt. I'd open the window and smell the rain through the torn up mesh. I confuse the two things, the smell of the rain and the smell of the screen.

One day in spring, as the rain slowed to a patter and left only the sound of the dripping eaves, a dog came hurtling down the road towards our house. The neighbors' roofs were steaming, and an image of the sun gleamed on the pavement. In three strides, the dog passed from its glitter into the blaze and emerged again. Silver and black, it bounded under triangle ears, bear paws kicking up a spray, wolf eyes celebrating. Its head swiveled for opponents as it made for the dead end on the side of our place. As it passed out of view from the living room, I ran down the hall, leapt to my parents' unmade bed, punishing the springs with each step to their window. My final glimpse: a tail and the black pads of its hind paws whooshing into the thicket behind the barricade.

The rattle of our garage door, thrown open up its tracks, told me that my dad had seen it, too. He had his office there, a space carved from a museum's worth of molding artifacts and books and machines. He turned the corner and scouted up the side yard in his bald-tire tennis shoes, grass-stained from summers of mowing. He had dark hair, which thinned to a widow's peak, and olive skin that had been left pale by six months of clouds. At the edge of our yard he stopped, raised his thumb and forefinger to his mouth, and whistled a word in the language of wild things. The cracking sticks went quiet. After a moment, the wolf head parted a gate of rhododendron leaves and looked blue-eyed at my dad. The ears dropped in deference, and it came slowly out to meet him. I bolted from the window.

When I reached them, the dog was spinning in ecstatic circles, bowing, pushing its face through the wet grass at my dad's feet, then standing and leaning into his legs with all its weight. Finally, it stood upright, latching its paws across my dad's forearm as he knelt down. The dog licked his cheeks and chin, ears back and wide-eyed, like it had found a friend long lost and long missed.

"It's a Siberian Husky," he told me. Its fur shone and the tongue flopped out between wild teeth. *Siberian Husky*. In my mind, the words found their way to the place reserved for wonder and religion: the biggest questions.

The dog's ears popped and swiveled to attention. It let go my dad's arm and sat. A man was striding down the hill with searching eyes and a choke-chain leash. He called whatever name he'd tried to give it. My dad stood and waved.

"Don't!" I hushed him.

"He's here," my dad called.

The man crossed the street to our corner and came up the yard, arms swinging in a hurried, liquid march. The Siberian Husky waited, stoic, at my dad's feet.

"Sorry," he said to us, then his voice cracked like a whip: "C'mon!" He grabbed the dog by the scruff of the neck, but it rooted its feet to the ground until the man had pulled all its weight out beyond its front paws. Finally, it stumbled forward in surrender and barely jerked its snout when the man slipped the loop of chain over its head.

"Beautiful dog," my dad said.

"They are. They've got a mind of their own, though."

“Evidently.” My dad smiled and asked if they lived close. The man’s answer was curt, and he asked no neighborly questions in return. My dad told him to take care.

“You too,” he said and snapped “*c’mon”* at the dog again. He pulled it away, holding the chain short as it looked back at us and dragged its feet.

An argument flared up between my mom and dad before the first day of summer, something about a startup in Fort Worth. I was standing on a chair next to her, watching bubbles pearl out of the scratches in the bottom of a pot of water on the stove. I had a box of macaroni in each hand, turning them over like rain sticks.

“You can find work closer than Texas,” she told him.

“It’s more than work, Moira,” my dad said. “I’d be getting in on the ground floor.”

“That only means there’s a chance you won’t get paid at all. It’s another gamble.”

“Listen. It’s not like we have to put anything up. It’s not a gamble, just a sacrifice. You’ll have to hold things down here, but your mother can help. The girls are old enough to help, too, and I know Morgan’s not gonna give you any trouble. Right, Morgan?”

“I’ll be good,” I said.

Mom removed my glasses and rubbed the steam off on her shirt.

“This thing could be big,” my dad said. “We’ll both be working a little harder, but it’ll pay off in the end.”

They had to about put me in a straight jacket when he left. Joanne hugged him goodbye and wished him luck. Beth, our middle sister, told him how much she’d miss him. I begged him not to go.

He knelt down and hugged me. “Start thinking about something you’d like me to bring back for you,” he said. “And beep me when you want to talk it over, alright?” He shook the pager on his belt.

“Back by the first day of school,” Mom reminded him.

“By the first day of school. I love you.”

In his absence, I no longer woke up to find my mom gone from the house. Instead, we were up together and out the door by five-thirty in the morning, driving groggy through daylight as pale as a newborn baby. She got long hugs from my grandma when she dropped me off.

“Fifteen years and that man’s still giving me whiplash. I let him sell me on anything.”

“Hang in there, Sweetie,” my grandma said. She was a shy angel of a lady. My dad saying that I was in good hands when he dropped me off was usually enough to make her blush.

That summer, her neighbors adopted a Dalmatian, and I was excited until I had to walk alone down the path along their fence to my grandma’s door. It watched through the wrought-iron rails, black-spotted tail swinging, but I didn’t see that its eyes were empty. I reached out my hand and it came alive, barking so that its teeth gnashed and spattered drool. Dust billowed through the rails and got in my eyes, and I fled to the house. The Dalmatian watched hungry from the fence until my grandma had closed the door behind me.

On weekends, I drank juice in a mug and mimicked my dad watching TV to try and make my sisters laugh. He always stood close in front of the screen with one hand in his back pocket and a coffee cup in the other. Nasdaq and Dow Jones, Democrats, O.J. Simpson, and Monica Lewinsky: I could tell it all meant something to him. He seemed part of some wider world. So, in

my impression, I nodded along to whatever the anchors were reporting and said: "I can't believe my ears!" I began to miss him terribly.

Squatters moved into the vacant rental. I overheard talk of broken windows and cigarettes snuffed out on carpet. Needles had been left out in an ashtray on the porch. A couple of my dad's contacts stepped in and tried to sort it out for him, but two weeks went by and things only got worse.

Dad came back early, in an old brown car I'd never seen. I ran out barefoot to the curb and jumped into his arms. Jo and Beth came outside behind me. "Where's your car?" Jo said. Beth had stiffened and had a look of concern on her face that I didn't understand.

Dad smiled. "I got a Mercedes," he said. "You like it?"

"But where's your car?" Beth asked.

He popped the trunk with his key and pulled out his suitcases. "New Mexico," he said.

Beth put her hands on her hips. "Are you going back for it?"

Dad closed the trunk and patted the brown metal roof. "This is a good car right here."

I butted in with my own urgent question, asking if he'd brought back any gifts.

"You lost the Corvette?" Beth interrupted.

He said her name in a reproachful tone as he walked up to her and gave her a hug. Then he hugged Joanne and said he'd missed us. "I missed my kids!" he exclaimed, and we headed up the driveway to the house. He was empty-handed, but I didn't care.

**Beth**

I remember the Goodwill run that year, while Dad was in Texas. Almost everything in my box was black. There were band shirts and a studded belt, ten or twenty CDs in jewel cases, all the fashions and the music that for a year or so made me feel so cool, cool as my older sister, but which more and more had just made me think of screaming fights and slammed doors, Joanne gone and my parents terse and arguing about what to do. And how some days mid-week, it would be like nothing happened. She studied quietly in her room, read the books, did the math, got her schoolwork done—her saving grace, her consolation to our parents for all the rest she put them through.

Dad and Joanne would be thick as thieves and I would watch them joke around or get deep in conversation, wondering if I pulled all the shit that she did, would I still be loved? Because one of us was respecting the rules and one of us wasn't, but between storms, you'd never know it. In the moments between the storms, sometimes it seemed like Mom and Dad still wanted to be together.

I had an idea how to level the playing field, too. If they couldn't keep her from going out, why not take the wind out of her sails a bit and make her share a room with Morgan instead of letting her have her little palace—with everything always just how she liked it—across the hall from the little kindergarten I had to live in. Maybe she could learn a thing or two about family. When I brought it up, Dad told me he that he understood, and he appreciated me. He told me years of positioning and years of work would bear fruit soon. There were big things in the works that would "take the room-sharing issue out of the equation." I'd gotten excited and asked if we were going to move, but he was coy and unforthcoming. "Be patient," he said.

Those couple weeks when Dad was gone felt peaceful. Grandma was in and out with Morgan. I walked to school and back, Mom worked and came home the same time every day, and Joanne did whatever she wanted, whenever she wanted, and though Mom gave her looks, for two whole weeks, there wasn't a raised voice in the house.

I got another call from Aunt Linda around that time. She asked me about school and friends and the books I was reading. She would ask about the characters and the plots, the writing style. When she had all the information, finally, she asked if I thought she would like it in a way that just woke me up inside. It was so natural and so kind, and not in the voice with which a woman talks to a young girl but in the way a woman speaks with her closest friend, someone whose opinions and recommendations she counts on: "Do you think I would like it?" Seven beautiful words it took me until my head was on my pillow and the comforter pulled up over my shoulders that night to realize that no adult had ever spoken to me quite that way and that I loved her for it. I told her I thought she would, and then I asked her how she had been and what was new with her and I knew that she was more than family—she was my friend. Aunt Linda paused before she answered, and in that space I realized that all the while we'd been talking I had heard the melancholy hidden in her voice without realizing. She and Uncle Johnny were separating, she said, but they would still be friends. And I felt my heart breaking for her, and I felt all the sadness she'd been holding even while she'd asked me all those things that made me feel so heard. My aunt never remarried, and she never had children of her own, but she kept in close touch with me and Melissa, another of her nieces.

**Moira**

It was a cool, grey Saturday in autumn, and Al picked us up from the docks at South Waterfront Park in some kind of dinghy for his and Dean's annual powwow. Little waves bonked the lip of the dock in the silence after Al killed the outboard motor. He hopped up and shook hands with Dean and exclaimed how long it had been. Then he turned and put his hand on one of my shoulders and complimented me.

There was a running joke about whether or not he and Vivian lived in a houseboat or a floating home, as anyone who lived in the latter were always quick to correct anyone who presumed to call the place they lived a houseboat. Al flipped the script, saying, "I've got a houseboat through and through, and make no mistake! I'm not chained up to some floating HOA like those chumps away on the other side." He pointed at the row of them with his chin. "I'll keep my money. Thank you very much."

"You're not docked anymore?" Dean asked.

Al looked back and forth at us in surprise. "I haven't docked more than probably thirty days in the last six years, Dean."

Dean laughed. "Well, okay, I don't know what all you're up to. The city ever give you any trouble for anchoring?"

Al put one foot back in his boat. "Here," he said, and reached out his hand to help me in. The boat pitched a little under my weight and I sat down quickly. Then Dean followed suit, declining Al's help, and sat on the plank next to me.

“You’re not supposed to anchor anywhere for more than thirty days,” Al said, then he pulled the cord on his motor and we eased off into the water. “But that’s only enforceable where the city manages.”

The dock shrank away until it was a small feature in among the trees and storefronts and overshadowed by the high rises downtown. We puttered into the middle of the channel and headed south between the high concrete columns of the Marquam Bridge.

“They did a funny thing,” Al went on. “When they drew up the private property lines, like for Ross Island Sand and Gravel, for example. They drew it all out out based on the low water mark, instead of the high, and when those spots are underwater there isn’t a thing the owners can do to stop you anchoring. It’s a right.”

Dean slapped his knee and laughed. High overhead, the interstate rumbled with the noise of passing trucks.

“This town’s paradise for an old river rat like me,” Al said. Upstream the green latticed arches of the Ross Island Bridge framed a wooded point dividing the river in two. Al gestured that way. “I’m anchored off the far end of the island now.”

The motor and the sound of the wind won out over our conversation as we passed under the second bridge. I looked into the muddy blue-green depths over the gunwale and watched the procession of the treeline on the sandy bank of Ross Island. Then it curved away from us. Al kept his bearing straight for awhile until we passed the point, then veered left, carving a long graceful crescent of whitewater. I spotted his boat and then spotted Vivian as we got closer, waving at us from the deck in an oversized Oregon State University sweatshirt.

“You made good time,” she hollered as we pulled alongside.

“Well we got a schedule to keep!” Al said. “We’re professionals, after all.”

She hugged Dean and I as we got on board, saying how long it had been and we ducked through a zipped open sheet of clear vinyl into a clean but cluttered cabin. The walls were dark red between frames of lacquered wood trim. A percolator on the counter steamed and sucked, the pot rich and full. Vivian poured our coffee and Al led us up three steps on the other side of the cabin and around the big square hole which dropped to their bedroom. I held tight to the handrail and spilled a few drops of coffee down onto the ladder. Viv saw and said not to worry, then we emerged out onto the front of the boat and Al asked if it was nice enough to sit outside before quickly declaring that it was.

“We better enjoy it while it lasts,” Dean said. We all agreed.

We plopped down into a collection of lawn chairs, Al closest to the bow. “So!” He sighed and looked around at us.

“So, this is above the low water mark here, where you’re anchored?” Dean asked him.

Al turned and pointed at the shore. “Ross Island Sand and Gravel,” he declared. “Cheers to you. The city tried to come around giving me trouble around this time last year but I had my charts ready.”

“Don’t they hate it as soon as you open up your mouth and it’s clear you know your stuff,” Dean said.

Vivian shook her head. “First thing he does is let them know he’s a lawyer. Poor saps.”

“It’s a beautiful view, anyways,” I said, looking out over Al’s shoulder.

He leaned forward. “If we went around a little further you’d see how they carved it out. Call it an island—it’s a sand and gravel bar really. Ancient. Viv and I, when we first met we rowed out there into the lagoon and dropped a line down.”

“That was our second date,” Vivian said.

“342 feet!” Al exclaimed. “That line just kept falling.”

“Spooky almost,” said Vivian. “The way it just kept going. Made you feel like you were sitting on top of the abyss.”

Al nodded agreement. “They mined it out 342 feet. And then they built this whole city out of the bowels of that island. That’s a lot of concrete.” He shook his head in reverence. “Unimaginable amount of concrete.”

The mug was warm in my hands, the coffee bitter and strong. I scanned the rows of houseboats—floating homes—lining an inlet on the east bank. Al pointed out the green expanse of Willamette Park on the west side. The west hills rose up beyond the trees to Council Crest where, hidden from view, there were mansions propped up over the hillsides on stilts. The city looked regal and resolute downriver.

We caught up. Al asked Dean how things were going with St. John’s and he shook his head. “They’re going. It’s just one thing after the next with that place. Wiring, plumbing, dry rot, leaky roof. Vehicular assault.”

“That house is trying to teach you a few things, Dean.”

“It is. It is. Don't I know it. Teaching me how to be an electrician, a plumber, social worker, dog catcher.”

“Sounds like quite the neighborhood,” Al said. We all laughed.

"That bridge, though."

"Yep."

"From the roof you can just see it. I ought to build a crow's nest up there for a coffee nook." Dean looked into his mug. "Someday though, I tell ya…"

"These things are about patience and perseverance," Vivian said.

"Don't give up," Al said. "Either of you."

Dean and I looked at each other and I turned up the corners of my mouth.

"You know, there are sturgeon in this river." Al said. A hundred years old, thirty feet long. Probably not as big as they are in the Columbia, but it's all connected. Can you imagine those monsters? Swimmin' right under the morning commute? Or fish in the Willamette River older than the city of Portland?"

"Now you're telling fish stories," Viv said.

Dean looked at our friend in admiration, and I looked out at all that slowly moving water.

"Could be," Al said. "Could be."

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Jo's hair had grown back, but she kept it short that year, not quite reaching her chin. I remember meeting her and Magdalene for coffee after their lesson once. I arrived halfway through a conversation about the similarities and differences between Brahms and Chopin. Jo had been working on a piece called Intermezzo in A Minor, and taken enough of a liking to it that she and Magdalene were talking like excited colleagues. I sipped my coffee and listened, Magdalene taking advantage of certain moments to tell me something wonderful about Jo's playing, or her musical sensibilities. Jo and Beth were one of several sets of siblings that she

taught, and it was amazing for her to try and decode the patterns in how siblings learned and felt the music. “Usually, it’s chaos,” she concluded and laughed. “No trends.” More often, she found that her pupils’ musical twins would be other students with no relation, whom they’d never met. Occasionally, when she identified cases like this, she’d try to synch up the pieces that they were learning and set them up as study partners, but with school and parents’ schedules there were a lot of moving parts.

Magdalene touched my hand across the table and renounced her babbling. “How are you doing, Moira?” And the conversation turned to work and family while Jo sipped politely from her mug. Between the lines there were hints of the struggles between Joanne and Dean and I, hints enough for Magdalene anyways, who had heard a lot already through Toby from Dean.

“What are you giving your parents so much trouble for,” Magdalene said, smiling, and put her arm around Jo’s shoulder. “You’re a good girl at heart.”

And Joanne couldn’t do anything but blush and smile, because Magdalene was like a warm light, and was not the one who had to try and stop her, or hold her back.

“Did they tell you I’m bad now?” Joanne asked.

“No,” Magdalene said. “Nobody said you were bad.” She sighed and wrapped her arm around Joanne. “We’re just worried about you, that’s all.” The expression on Joanne’s face was mixed and she kept her hands warming on her mug, but she leaned into Magdalene, into what must have felt like a better intention than Dean’s, and by extension, my perceived totalitarianism. “Not everyone you meet out there is good,” Magdalene said, and Joanne opened her eyes wider and sat straight again. She wouldn’t say anything about it, not to Magdalene, but a line had been crossed.

"Well," I concluded. Our coffees were down to the dregs. Magdalene walked us to the door, and said goodbye to Joanne who walked out first. Then she hugged me, and with a hand on my shoulder said to take care. "Both of you," said, nodding to Joanne on the porch behind me. "Whatever you do, keep talking." She looked intently at Joanne. "Keep talking it out." Joanne nodded, looking ready to leave.

Dean was mowing the lawn, maneuvering the mower around the Japanese maple we'd planted at the corner of the yard. I wanted to be able to talk like Magdalene had, but the best I could do was silence, so her words and her inflection could stay in our ears a little longer. We were back before either of us had said a word.

We found our stride, in a way. Joanne would disappear or fail to come home at the appointed time. With a work alarm set for 4:30 a.m. I'd barely flinch, just tell Dean he was on his own and fall asleep sometime after I heard his truck rumble off. I made a private agreement with Joanne, pleading with her that —at the least— when he caught her she was to get her piss and vinegar out before they got back so that I could get any sleep at all. Dean parked halfway up the street those nights, instead of outside our bedroom window, and stayed on the couch in the living room, but the front door usually woke me anyways, and then I'd hear Joanne's footsteps down the hall. In the morning, I'd wake up feeling not that it was a fresh start so much as a continuation of the previous day's exhaustion.

Of course sometimes he wouldn't find her, and the cat-and-mouse satisfaction I occasionally sensed from him would be replaced by a misery of fear and concern, and a deep brooding that I found hard to read. Self-doubt maybe—the rarest of his feelings. At about 2:30

am, one of those nights, with Dean sitting slump-shouldered on the edge of the bed, rubbing his eyes, the phone rang. What Dean would have heard, slowly drawing his hands from his face and fixing his gaze on me, was a steady, sleep-polluted litany of *yes's* and *mm-hmm's.*

When I hung up, I looked at him and said: "Good news is I know where she's at. Bad news is she's at the central precinct."

He nodded and let out a long breath. "Huh," he remarked, then took his keys from the top of the dresser and headed out to get her.

His truck engine turned over in the quiet dark outside and idled a minute before he drove up the hill and out into the night. The house breathed. Beth and Morgan, I could almost feel them sound asleep in their beds at the end of the hall. Joanne, cold, bleary eyed and buzzed in some harshly lit cell downtown, I thought I could feel that too, but it was probably my imagination. Dean on the empty Sunset Highway? Rolling down into the city between those wooded hills. I felt that. I'd commuted on that stretch so many times it was like I'd left a camera there for my imagination. I could see Dean's hands on the wheel and the stoic expression on his face in the dark as keenly as if I were there in the passenger seat.

I thought of my sister and our father, and their moment of truth, and I call it that because it was the undoable moment. Scary, but not bad, no one could say it was bad in the end. But there was no going back, and maybe now that the thing had happened, I assume maybe this was the thing he was afraid of, if he'd named it to himself, what did he have to worry about? Now he could live in action instead of worry.

Dina told me first that she was pregnant. She was twenty years old and for two days was so scared of telling our parents that she hadn't had time to be scared of giving birth, or of being a

mother. I told her to stop torturing herself and get it over with but she couldn't. Then she went to the bathroom and wretched loud enough I thought our mom might hear. The next day her old self woke up and somehow—maybe it was just how she manufactured the courage to do it—it was like she was looking forward to telling them and after a healthy second portion at dinner she collected our parents plates and looked at Dad with a bitter smirk and told him she was pregnant. Mom gasped and said, "oh, heavens!" but Dad just sat there stunned. When the shock wore off he was furious. It wasn't a liberation after all; he just found new things to worry about.

Denise's boyfriend, Frank, valiantly stuck around for a few months, talking a big game about how he had her back and how he was with her all the way. He said it so much anyone could see he was mostly talking to himself, trying to convince himself. And with our father acting like he was going to kill him, nine months was plenty of time to lose his nerve. Sometime in her third trimester, his courage failed and he ran off to Oregon. Then, in the first year of my nephew's life, my Dad and my sister got into it about how she was dressing. He came home with some kind of house dress from the department store, saying something about how he didn't want her to be the *wrong kind of single mom*. She called up her ex in Oregon and said he owed her a favor. "I don't care what you do, I don't care where you go," she told him. "But just come get me the hell out of here." Two weeks later, he showed up in his same old car. Denise packed up her things, took the baby, and left me that mouser from the Seamus place, by then a big fat tomcat that ran the whole farm—would have been wrong, she said, to pluck him up from all that and stick him in some big city apartment.

…I wondered, then, if Dean and I had arrived, if not at some undoable juncture of Joanne's life, at least upon the undoable opening of a real rift between her and us, or between the two of them at least. Something permanent. Might Dean have been right? Had we lost her?

**Joanne**

We were done. The show was over. The party was over. Seth was driving us from '*Thee O'* on Burnside, and Kurt was sitting shotgun. Isa was on my lap, Johnny was bitch, and Carmé was passed out with her face smushed against the window. She hadn't been coherent for an hour or so, but she'd been real funny until we got her in the car and she fell asleep. Seth kept tapping the power window control for her side so her face twitched up and down, which had Johnny and Isa in stitches until Kurt got defensive.

"Let her sleep, man."

Seth didn't protest. "We love you Carmé," he said over his shoulder, and the car got quiet for awhile. I knew the city by then. We were on Southeast 20th, driving south to one of the other band's guitarist's house—a good friend of Kurt's, where all of us were ready to pass out immediately. One of the roommates was on tour, and there was a double bed for Kurt and Carmé, a couch each in the living room for Isa and me, and talk of breakfast at the Hotcake House in the morning to revive us. Seth and Johnny would head over the Ross Island bridge back to Beaverton. Or maybe I'd catch a ride with them. Things tended to be easier with my parents when the confrontation happened as I was coming out of my room in the morning rather than in through the front door.

The houses floated by in the shadows. We crossed Hawthorne and turned slightly—Kurt shouted under his breath, "No!"—Seth slowed the car.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck, fuck."

Isa turned and looked out the rear window in a panic.

"What's going on?" Johnny asked.

“Now you’ve fucked us,” Kurt said to Seth.

“Why?” Isa said, both of us peering from window to window trying to spot the emergency.

Seth sighed. “It’s fucking Ladd’s Addition.”

Ladd’s Addition: a square, half-mile labyrinth of diagonals and roundabouts which interrupts Southeast Portland’s neat and tidy grid, threatening unwitting travelers longing for their beds with what could be a twenty minute eternity of spiraling hopelessness and double-backing. The houses there were like out of a time capsule, perfectly preserved versions of the run down and fading homes on the straight shot road we’d just been on. The trees were old and twice as tall as everywhere else, branches coming together over the road like the ceiling of a tunnel. Something happened at that moment that none of us would ever forget.

Carmé shot up and leaned far over Johnny’s lap so her head poked out between the two front seats. “Where are we going?” she asked.

“Dom’s,” Seth said, startled.

“Straight,” Carmé said with total authority, pointing out the windshield with her finger like a dagger. Seth let off the brake, and the car picked up speed. “Left,” she said, and it was like an angel speaking through her. “Right.” I remember bracing myself with the grip above the door and across the middle seat to Carm’és headrest, as if she was the one driving, and we might careen off the road any second. In the front, Kurt was doing the same, and looked back at us wide-eyed. “Straight—no—straight across,” Carmé commanded. “Left.” The manicured yards rolled by. “You’re out,” she said, and fell back limp in the crook between the seat and the car door.

“By God, she’s done it,” Seth whispered.

“That’s my girl!” Kurt cheered.

At the house, Carmé whined and swatted Kurt away when he tried to coax her from the car. Then he picked her up like a newlywed and she burrowed her face happily into his neck. I’d decided to head home after all, and Johnny told me to take the front. Isa got out and we were about to hug goodnight when there was a flash of blue and red, and a police car yipped.

“Good on that!” Kurt howled, and bounded up the stairs to the house still holding Carmé. “Big nope!” He pounded on the door, standing on one leg and supporting Carmé on his knee. “Let us in!”

The squad car rolled up, with Isa and I like deer in its headlights. Kurt disappeared into the house and I heard the locks sliding into place. Both doors of the cop car opened and yet another beam appeared in our eyes. “Nobody move,” came a voice out of the blinding light.

One of them went up the steps to the house and knocked authoritatively on the door. The other came around and asked where we were coming from. “A show,” “A concert,” Isa and I mumbled in unison.

“Good show?” he asked, but it sounded like *I ain’t gonna hurt ya.* My stomach turned and I heard a meek affirmation come out of my mouth. He pointed the flashlight into the car and told Seth and Johnny to get out. Their doors unlatched like sighs.

“This is where we’re staying,” Isa piped up.

“Oh, yeah? Who lives here?”

“Our friend,” Johnny grumbled.

“What’s your friend’s name?”

“Who cares?”

Someone inside the house peaked through the blinds. No one had opened up for the other cop, and he was looking down at us, speaking into a radio clipped to his chest.

The first one shook his head, as if to say, *look what you’re making me do.* “Is this your vehicle?” he asked Seth.

“It’s my family’s car,” Seth said, smiling politely.

“So it’s your family’s car. Do your folks know you’re out here?”

Seth nodded. ”Yes, sir. They’re expecting me home soon.”

The second cop came down the stairs and stuck his thumbs into the armholes of his vest. The first one asked for our IDs.

“Do you all know what time it is?” he asked when he’d reviewed them. This time none of us answered. “You all mute suddenly?” he looked at his partner. “You want to tell our friends here what time it is?”

“It’s late,” the other cop said. “Too late for—”

“Sir,” Seth interrupted. “We’re on our way home. One of us is staying here.”

”That’s not what this is about.”

“—We’re on the fucking doorstep.”

“Alright,” the cop said to Seth. “We’re gonna have you go ahead and step over on the sidewalk with my partner there. How many drinks have you had tonight?”

“How many?” Seth asked, incredulous. “I haven’t had a thing.”

“We’ll see,” the cop said, and then reported some code into his radio. There was a crackle of response. “Yeah, all four are minors,” he said.

It took them fifteen or twenty minutes to produce a breathalyzer after Seth passed the balance and coordination tests. Isa and I leaned on the trunk of Seth's car.

Johnny asked them if they were milking the clock, which they ignored, leaving his outburst hanging in the air. Seth blew a zero, then moving languidly, they switched the plastic film on the mouthpiece and brought it over to Isa.

"You don't have to do it," Seth told her. She hesitated. "I had to do it, I was the driver. Nobody else has to do shit."

Isa furrowed her brows at the cop and told him no. He pushed the thing closer to her mouth and said she'd be in a lot more trouble than she already was if she refused. Seth cut him off with total authority. "He's lying."

The cop tried me next. I shook my head, realizing I'd pursed my lips tight like a little girl who doesn't want to be made to eat something that disgusts her. And again, the cop put on that *look what you're making me do* bullshit expression again, and handcuffed us. I found my voice then, suddenly realizing I'd come face to face with an authority that made my dad's bullshit pale in comparison. I asked if they were fucking joking—suddenly wishing, to my complete surprise, that my father was there, despite knowing how truly fucked I was going to be. Hot tears stung my eyes, but none fell.

Another squad car showed up. They sat the four of us down on the curb so long that Isa and I exhausted our thoughts on the current situation and started commiserating about school. Johnny and Seth, further away, were commenting like psychology professors about the body language of the cops, and then like sports announcers about the seemingly random movements they made around from their cars to his, and a second attempt they made to get someone inside

the house to open the door. I started to shiver in the cold. I could feel the time slipping by, feel as if by telepathy my parents growing rage rippling out into the night and over the West Hills like a storm front. I could almost see it rising up behind the red blinking towers on Council Crest and out Skyline.

"They're trying to fuck us," Seth said. "That's all there is to it."

When finally they put us into the backs of the cars, Seth asked if he could at least properly park his car. The cop said a tow truck would take care of it. Then the fucker tried to close the door without buckling me in. I cursed him out, asking if he were really going to drive us somewhere with our hands locked behind our back, and no seatbelt. He ignored me and I kicked his seat with everything I had. "Buckle our fucking seatbelts, you fuck." He acquiesced and we pulled away, Isa and I in one car, Seth and Johnny in the other. The cops got on Grand and cruised north across the whole east side before passing the Rose Garden and going over the Broadway Bridge into downtown and doubling back south to the police station. Isa rested her head on my shoulder and I pressed my cheek into her hair.

The cop at the holding cell was overweight and looked, in contrast to the one who ran the show arresting us, as bored and tired as a night shift concierge. I noted how he resisted the arresting officer's attempts at banter. He opened the barred door without interest and stood there like a sleepwalker while the other removed our handcuffs and ushered us in one at a time. We sat down in a line on a bench against the wall. Through the bars, the officer who arrested us was looking in at us in our cage like a prize. We all saw it, but none of us had the energy to curse him out again. We commiserated with a tired glance up and down the bench. Seth shook his head and

rubbed his eyes. Then the cop stepped out around the corner and came back with four slips of paper and a little half pencil like you'd find at the library.

"Parents' phone numbers," he said. "Now."

Isa wrote first—her parents wouldn't answer until mid-morning. Then it was my turn; I watched the pencil lead drag onto the paper as if in a dream, like signing my own death warrant. My writing looked the same as it did on my homework. Seth and Johnny both wrote quickly, seeing their parents—you could tell—as collaborators who would save them.

It was Johnny who got up and handed the slips back through the bars. He put his arm around Seth when he sat back down. "We're gonna have to write a song about jail now," he mumbled in his ear.

Seth smirked, then turned and looked at Isa and I. "You guys alright?" He asked. Isa nodded. I shrugged my shoulders. "It'll be alright," he said.

The plastic sound of the cop picking up the receiver of a phone bounced off the white-painted cinderblock walls. I rested my head in my palms, smelling the dusty sterility of the room and listening for the beginning of a conversation. He hung up the phone, picked it up again. This time I heard him talking, but couldn't make out the words. There was a softer noise, maybe the cop hanging up with his finger so he could keep the phone at his ear. I realized I could hear him dialing. No answer. More dialing, and again, no answer. I nodded off in my hands.

Voices around the corner woke me up from the flash of dream where Johnny and Seth had been chained to the ceiling by their ankles. The cops faces seemed translucent, their eyes like demons'—they no longer needed any words to coordinate their efforts. The boys didn't seem to mind. They hurled hilarious insults at the cops and pumped their arms to swing around. It was

my dad's voice. I looked up, bleary-eyed and he came around the corner with the cop. I tried to read his face.

"Hey Jo!" he said cheery, his voice like a memory out of childhood. "You're a sight for sore eyes." Then: "Isa! Is that you?" And "Seth, Johnny, how's it going?"

I was shocked awake. The cop's smirk transformed to a dissatisfied scowl. The four of us exchanged looks.

"How was the show y'all?" he went on. The fat cop was unlocking the cell door now. "You guys have a good night?"

"Right up until the kidnapping," Seth answered.

My dad laughed. "You all need rides home?"

"Please," Isa started. Johnny and Seth popped to their feet.

"You can't do that," the thin cop interrupted. "They've got to be picked up by their legal guardians."

My dad lifted his arm as I walked out and put it around my shoulder. Inside the cage, Seth and Johnny sat back down, disappointed. The cell door clanged closed.

"I'm sorry, boys. Sorry Isa," he said.

"Thanks for trying, Mr. Rudolph," Johnny answered.

I waved goodbye and we turned and walked around the corner. At the desk, Dad turned around and asked the cop who'd arrested us for his name and badge number.

"Excuse me?" the cop spat.

My dad took a slip of paper from the desk and the same pencil they'd handed us to write our parent's contact info. "I want your name and badge number," he said again. The officer

complied, my dad folded the slip into his wallet and put the pencil back down on the desk and we walked out of the police station together.

Outside, his truck was parked behind a squad car on the street. The traffic lights on the corner changed for nobody. Somewhere, somebody, alone, was yelling and shouting into the night, shredding their voice. I reached for the handle and found it locked.

Dad pointed at my waist. “What is that, Jo?” he said sternly.

I looked down, confused. I was dressed in black, the bullet belt Seth had given me dull and brassy around my waist. “My belt?” I asked.

”Yeah, your belt.” His voice was icy.

“What about it?”

“Think, Jo! Use your head.”

I showed him my palms.

“I was forced to wear those. No daughter of mine is going to wear one as a fashion statement.” A little wind tugged at his dark, thinning hair. He was in his blue nylon bomber, paint crusted jeans. I unclasped the belt. The shells ticked on the denim of my belt loops as I threaded it out. “It was a gift,” I said. “I’ll give it away.”

He nodded and went around to the driver’s side. We got into the truck and I set it down on the floor by my feet. The engine turned over with a roar and we rumbled up to the light.

“What’s happening?” I asked him.

“You tell me.” The shifter trembled under his hand.

“The show was over,” I told him. “We dropped off Kurt and Carmé. Seth was about to give me a ride back to Beaverton when they came out of nowhere.”

Dad nodded.

"Why aren't you mad?" I asked, knowing I hadn't chosen my words very well.

"That cop was an asshole," he said. "I wasn't going to give him the satisfaction."

"It was a power trip," I said. "He got us about fifteen minutes after curfew and held us for hours. I didn't even know that was a thing."

"I know."

Dad cracked the window and took Second. We passed the empty lanes of the Morrison Bridge, and then Second Avenue Records, which sat dark behind a plastic closed sign hung on the door. That was where Isa and I had graduated to after Music Millennium, and it had been Carmé and not our parents who had taken us. We crossed Ash Street and I caught a glimpse of Captain Ankeny's, where the outdoor tables were stacked and chained together under the windows. The place would fill up after Burnside shows and if we couldn't get in we could still hang around. I smoked my first cigarette there. They hired Kurt as a barback after he graduated, and we'd see him sometimes striding between the tables collecting empties in a cut-off tee shirt, a folded rag hanging from his apron string. The road curves there and the grid reorients to follow the next stretch of the river, leaving a series of city blocks shaped like wedges. The light at Burnside stays red a long time and a lone car stops to our left and waits to go across. Somehow the streets seem emptier for their being two of us. The driver of the other car is alone and he gets the green before us. He goes through the intersection and up onto the bridge towards the Eastside somewhere. Then our light changes and Dad takes a leisurely left and the truck rumbles underneath us. I see Another State of Mind and the Paris Theater, where Kurt's friend, Stretch, once picked me up on his shoulders. He was a six foot ten crust punk from Los Angeles and I'd

reached up and run my hand across that backlit plastic, touched the marquee, and felt like I was flying. We pass the Mongolian grill Dad likes, and he leans over the steering wheel and gazes up at the windows of apartments. Framed by the Chinatown Gateway, someone is dragging a dirty blanket on a long diagonal across fourth. Tall trees line the sidewalk and the median that divides us from the northbound lanes. The Roseland sweeps by on my side. Satyricon is down a little further and, sometimes, when the shows were right, the crowds from each would become one crowd that filled sixth avenue between them. All the traffic signals are green now. At Tenth we pass the bookstore, the sex shop, Spartacus, with its blacked out windows and the drawings of gladiators. Two guys linger smoking out in front and Dad turns his head and watches as we pass. There's Ozone, where Dad had taken Beth and I to bewilder us and open our minds when we were kids, and Thee O, where I saw my first show without him. The Crystal Ballroom's new neon glowed violet-orange like a fortune teller's sign on the next block, and the brick facade was decorated now with fresh awnings, night-blue with candle-flame stars. We crossed the 405, then took a right on Eighteenth, another on Everett, and sailed down onto the freeway towards home.

**Morgan**

I got back on Dad's schedule after Texas, sleeping in and getting dropped off at my grandma's at a decent hour. I warned him to be careful the first time the Dalmatian was there when we arrived, but with the words fresh on my tongue, it melted at his approach and piddled. My dad reached his hand through the railing and scratched it behind the ear. Its hind leg twitched and kicked, and beads of yellow pee consolidated on the dirt below it.

In the afternoon my dad would get home dog-tired from the rental and say he just had to rest his eyes. He'd plop down somewhere and start snoring with his shoes still on. Then he'd wake to help my mom with dinner and stay up late into the night, dreaming his dreams.

Sometimes at sunset he'd take my sisters and me to climb the turnstile at the high school and run laps around the track. He told me to make my feet like the bottom of a wheel and taught me how to sprint. "You're like a lightning bolt Morgan! Look at that!" he'd say. I ran my first mile there at the end of dusk, breathing slowly cooling air the color of the sky. They shouted encouragement as I rounded the end of each lap, and I felt for the first time the melding of the pain and the meditative certainty that I would not stop until I'd finished.

Our neighbor Magdalene taught piano to Joanne and Beth, and my dad was best friends with her husband Toby, a computer engineer. The two spent their free time taking apart electronics and blackening their hands in the innards of broke down cars. When I cracked the code to riding a two-wheel bicycle, they had looked up from under the hood of his truck to cheer me on.

Toby and Magdalene kept a wily, flat-faced dog named Walter. He was shiny and red, and pranced on muscle-corded legs. I stored away the name of the breed like sacred knowledge: a

boxer. Once, he chased me down the side yard while my dad and Toby were lost in talk. He knocked me down from behind and fit his whole jaws around the back of my head as a climax to the assault of frantic kisses. They ran us down and Toby pulled him away. My dad helped me up and told me I was alright.

"He put my head in his mouth!" I said.

He knelt down and dusted me off. "He slimed you pretty good."

"Look at that," Toby said. "I've got a cowlick and you've got a dog-lick."

They were getting through to me, but I wasn't sold yet.

"Can he shake?" my dad asked.

"Yeah, he can!" Toby brought Walter closer, contained behind the crook of his arm: "Shake—go ahead, shake hands." Like magic, Walter lifted up his paw to put the incident behind us.

***

My dad was frying potatoes one morning, tossing them in a buttery pan with onions, peppers and frozen corn from a bag.

"Please let's sell it, Dean. I'm begging you," my mom said from the table.

"I know it's been a hassle. I know it's been trouble and I'm sorry for that—"

She put her hands over her face. "It's been more than a hassle! We're paying loans with loans."

"A little longer," he said. "It's five blocks from the river. There's bridge views from the main strip down there. Someday, I'm telling you, that place is going to be a gold mine."

“It was supposed to be a gold mine already. I want a date for us to shoot for. If it’s doing nothing for us by that date, we cut our losses and clean our hands of it.”

A flick of his wrist curled a wave of sizzling vegetables over in the pan. “Ninety-nine. By the end of summer.”

“Dean, I don’t know if we can make it through another year, let alone two.”

“We can, I promise you. Joanne will be starting college: either that place is paying dividends or we ditch it. I won’t try to argue.”

Mom sat figuring, nodding silently to herself. My dad leaned over the sink to try a wedge of potato he’d pinched from the pan, and he glanced out through the kitchen window.

“Moira—look. That’s the dog I told you about.” He turned the stove down and lifted me up to see. “The husky’s back.”

It had passed from the dead end through his unfinished fence and was sniffing deliberately along the bottom of our terrace of railroad ties. We went out the backdoor together and it came to meet us, not slap-happy, as before, just calm and pleased. Its toothy smile and hanging tongue read like an apology to my dad for having taken so long. It stayed in the yard through breakfast and sat regal and patient at his side while we pet it and played.

That evening the Siberian Husky was still hanging around, never straying far through the gap in the fence, and it barked when all of us had eventually filtered inside at once. Beth wanted to bring it in.

“What we need to do is take it up the street and see if the owner’s home,” Mom said.

My dad didn’t know exactly which house it was. “Probably no hurry. He’ll come down here looking again eventually.”

“Alright, but we can’t hide it away inside the house.”

He knelt in the doorway and held its face, rubbing the cheeks with his thumbs. “I gotta turn in.” When he got up the screen door rattled like a baking sheet and hissed closed. The Siberian Husky howled.

“Oh, Lord,” Mom said.

Dad looked at her apologetically, shrugged, and in the end he settled into a reclining lawn chair on the grass and closed his eyes. He already looked asleep by the time we flicked off the porch light. Mom got me ready for bed and vetoed that I sleep outside, too. After I brushed my teeth I ran back to look out the door. It had climbed up on top of him in the chair, front paws and snout draped together over his shoulder. The last day-glow was dying through the firs that towered beyond the fence.

That night, I dreamt that every dog made to sleep outside for miles around had heard a call and slipped its chain. Some dug furiously beneath their fences, turning the earth to fine powder. Others took a flying leap and clung to the top of the swaying planks with splayed claws, then scampered over and leapt sure-footed to the ground on the other side. They came from every direction, running down darkened streets. I heard their claws scrape our siding and ran from room to room. They were propping themselves up at every window and smearing the glass with their noses. I crouched in our hallway, the windowless core of the house, overtaken by wonder and fear.

We ate breakfast outside: bacon, waffles, and eggs scrambled with American cheese. Every few bites I got out of my chair and threw a stick for the dog. The morning faded into a day of yard work, and my mom and I pulled weeds while my dad heaved bags of soil over his

shoulder and hauled them to the back. The dog trotted along beside him, tracking every move. I couldn't say when the owner first spotted us, but he must have come searching down the hill again some time after he realized it was missing. I was sitting next to it in the grass when a squad car came crawling down the hill and parked alongside the curb across the street. The officer opened his door and started to cross. Only then did the man who owned the dog show up, this time in his own car. He parked behind the police, and my mom took us inside.

I watched from their bedroom window as my father formed a triangle with the two younger men. He stood square over his feet with one hand in his pocket, gesturing affably with the other. Sometimes he broke into a side-conversation with the officer, leaving the other man to stand waiting, shifting himself from one leg to the other.

I believed in a world in which the cop was judge and jury. The three men were negotiating the future of the dog, and the cop could tell the score. Eventually, my dad seemed to just be holding them up with stories. The owner kept taking a step back, turning away, then getting drawn in again. Finally, he hurried up the bank onto our yard for the dog as if to make up for wasted time.

"Why are they letting him take it back?" I asked my mom.

"They have to. It belongs to him."

"Why doesn't it run away?"

She said she didn't know.

After that I only saw the Siberian Husky a few more times, always from the car as we passed the owner's house on our way to the main roads. It was always leashed, and it never noticed us passing.

# Chapter 7: Summer, 1999

**Moira**

I tried to tell Dean there was no way I would get on board with buying another one while the first one sat empty. But there was a place for sale on Powell he was convinced would be a gold mine—an old house with good bones, zoned commercial/residential. I held my ground, said no, but Dean said property values would only keep going up; if we had to sell the first one tomorrow we'd net ten or fifteen thousand, so there was no risk. We refinanced and borrowed against it, and Dean made his next move.

Day after day I woke to my alarm and got out of bed, awake but hypnotized, it seemed. Dean's snoring ceased, and he rolled into the warm space I left behind, onto his side. I dressed and started the percolator. When coffee was ready, Dean poured himself a cup and sometimes he started my car, got the heat going, and scraped my windshield. Then he went to the kids' room and scooped Morgan, sleeping, from bed, and deposited him in his carseat in the Mazda.

I dropped Morgan with Kathy on the way to work, parked in the garage and met the team at seven for report. All these things done with a quiet mind, my body moving automatically, even our quiet, smiling greetings in the minutes before dawn—especially those. I think a part of me stays asleep all the way through until I'm under the fluorescent lights of the Women's Pavilion, walking that hall lined with doors behind which patients and families wait assured that, should they need help, I'll be ready. That works better than any cup of coffee.

This morning the charge nurse had been briefed by the night shift and came in to the break room to give us our assignments. There were two inductions scheduled that day, and I was assigned to one of them. While I was waiting for her to arrive, the other patient arrived with her husband, an 'older' couple, same age as Dean and I when we'd had Morgan, more or less. The woman came to the desk and introduced herself with nervous kindness. Her assigned nurse was running late so I volunteered to show her to her room and get her settled in.

It was the woman's first child, and I think the term "advanced maternal age" had gotten under her skin. She made light of it as we walked to her room, a subtle pleading for reassurance detectable between her words.

"I was thirty-nine when I had my son," I told her.

"Yeah?" She responded. "So I'm not the only one?"

I smiled. "Far from it. Happens all the time." She'd heard it before, I'm sure, but was happy to hear it again, in the eleventh hour, from me.

The charge nurse caught up with us at the patient's room, knocking briefly before she entered. "Glenda just walked through the door same time as the other family, and they're already hitting it off. You two mind if we switch up the plan?"

“That would be wonderful,” my patient said.

“Of course.” I started the admitting procedures, connected the fetal monitor, and the tracing pulsed to life on the monitor, conveying itself across the dim screen as we went over her medical history and I explained what to expect.

The skin of her abdomen was tight, firm and bulging where the baby pressed a shoulder, or a foot. She winced with his occasional movement. And each time, ever so slightly, for one beat, maybe two, his heart rate decreased—so briefly that it could only be heard, not seen, on the monitor. I told my patient we were all set, and left to gather my supplies to start an IV and draw labs in preparation for the induction. She was on edge when I returned, getting cold feet. “Moira, I just, suddenly I want to be at home. What if we just called this off and waited for him to come in his own time.”

I saw her wince with another movement of the baby inside her, and concurrently, a just barely perceptible delay in the next beat of his heart. Invisible, like it had been before, on the monitor tracings. “It’s up to you,” I told her tentatively, and she looked relieved.

I notified the doctor of her wish, told him I’d like to monitor the heart tones for a while longer to make sure that it was safe to discharge her. He came back in with me to take a look, his entrance looking to the patient to be nothing more than a quick hello and introduction before she left. The doctor looked from the screen to me and raised his eyebrows.

“I think we’re all good here,” he told the patient.

I cut in. “—You know, I’m just hearing something on the monitor that’s bothering me. It’s probably nothing, but…”

The patient looked from me and then, questioningly, to the doctor.

“Explain to me what you’re hearing,” he said.

I explained. “It’s subtle,” I said. “Not showing up on the tracings, but I’m sure you’ll hear it in a moment.” The room went quiet. “Little guy’s been pretty active.” And the three of us sat in silence for ten long seconds. The doctor shrugged.

“You’re in good hands with Moira here,” he said. “How about you stick around for another hour for monitoring, just to be safe.”

Of course, she wouldn’t refuse, but she looked disappointed, uncomfortable.

A minute or two after the doctor left, the baby moved again and I heard the slowing of the tempo of his heart, clear as day. An hour passed, I went to the doctor’s office and explained again what I was hearing, and he followed me back to the unit.

He reviewed the tracing again. “It looks perfect.”

“You can’t see it,” I told him again. “But you can hear it.”

“Arrhythmia?”

“No, just a slowing, and only when he moves.”

“Alright,” he said cheerily. “Let’s get some answers.”

We did an ultrasound. The baby’s shape resolved in gray out of the black and incomprehensible shapes. And along his neck, an extra line, an extra space.

“There, is that a nuchal cord?”

“Could be,” the doctor said. Then he looked to the mother to intercept her fears. “It could be. But it’s common—

“Common?” She repeated.

“Yes. One in three, believe it or not. And usually nothing to worry about. Just means your little guy’s been doing too many cartwheels in there.”

She laughed. “That’s for sure.”

I cleaned the gel from the patient’s belly. The doctor put the ultrasound away and then we excused ourselves and stepped out together.

“I think she’s good to go if she wants to go,” he told me in the hall. “You’ve got my go ahead.”

“Thanks for taking a look,” I said. He walked away and I went back into my patient’s room with heat rising in my cheeks and a pit in my stomach. She wanted to leave. I stalled for another hour, and her disappointment began to verge on annoyance. Trust and caution won out, maybe a kind of Stockholm syndrome.

She took a deep breath. “I think I’d like to go ahead and induce as planned.”

The relief washed over me. Forty-five minutes later it was go-time. We put her ankles in the stirrups. The room buzzed with the adrenaline of the patient, her husband, mother and sister, the doctor, another nurse and myself. I kept one eye in the fetal heart rate monitor.

“All this for me?” She said heavily as a contraction ended. “I feel like quite the star!” Her sister and mother began to laugh, but were cutt off by the next contraction, the patient groaning and crushing her mother’s hand with a white knuckled grip. Her water broke. Her head fell back against the pillows amid calls of “Good,” “Good,” from the doctor and the other nurse.

In the din I heard that once reassuring fetal heart rate dip and slow, unsubtle this time. I placed my hand on the doctor’s shoulder and gestured to the monitor.

“I see it,” he said quietly. “Alright, you’re doing great! Let’s get this done.”

Attention, focus, but not concern registered on the face of the other nurse. The family remained unaware. A couple of minutes later, her next contraction pulled and stretched the space between peaks on the tracing. An alarm sounded.

"What's that?" someone asked.

"You're okay," urged the doctor. "Don't mind that. Push! We're close."

The patient howled.

"Push again!" The doctor said over the alarm.

"Big push!" I said. Crowning. The family added their voices to the chorus. The tracer line stretched with her cry, so far that the peak of the last heartbeat disappeared before the next arrived on screen—a jagged stutter. But the baby would come quickly now.

"Push!"

The baby's head emerged, lips blue, mouth ajar, then the mass of umbilical cord wound about the neck, once, twice, three times… four? So many that all the space between the chin and the mother's pelvis was a winding of sickly gray and blue umbilical.

The doctor reached for it instinctively, struggled for a moment to slip his gloved finger underneath one of the loops. There was no slack to lift the loop over the baby's face and begin unwinding.

His voice deadpan: "I'm going to cut this."

I squeezed the first surgical clamp open, found purchase on the cord and let it bite down beside the doctor's finger. He placed the second clamp, took the scissors from me and cut between them. The tissue split like latex. I cradled the blueing head.

"What's happening?" The husband asked.

The doctor unwound loop after loop after loop. The mother tried to look, but the next contraction took her. “One more big push,” the doctor urged and the babies shoulders popped free, then the arms, and he was out into the other nurses arms. She handed him to me and I lay him down on the pad on the counter. I fit the tiny mask over his nose and mouth and squeezed his first breaths into him. His legs kicked. His fists balled angrily, and the color returned to his face. He began to cry.

The doctor delivered the placenta and placed it on a tray. Even with the umbilical in two pieces we could see that it was miniature—so short that every inch he progressed down the birth canal it had pulled tighter like a noose. There was a collective breath. I picked him up and placed him on his mother’s chest.

The father stooped at the side of the bed, and the mother’s family behind him, these familiar postures. It was another minute before the mother asked what happened. The doctor gestured at the placenta tray with a pair of forceps, arranged the segments of umbilical with the tip.

“His cord was about two thirds normal length,” he started. “AKA two thirds the length you’d want to see so that a loop or two around the neck isn’t an issue. And it was wrapped about four times, so soon as he started down the birth canal it was out of slack and started pulling tight.” He put a hand on my shoulder. “We got lucky today.”

“So that was you,” the husband said to me. “You’re the nurse that made her stay.” They all looked at me. My cheeks flushed.

“Yes, I was the crazy nurse,” I laughed.

“Anything but.”

“Stubborn,” I corrected.

“Thank you,” he said. “Really, thank you.”

“Thank you,” the mother echoed.

Later, when the dust settled, they called me his guardian angel.

**Morgan**

When my sister Beth was in middle school, she put a strip of masking tape across the carpet between our beds in the room we shared. She stepped back to admire her work, and I shoved my foot across the line.

She lay down and took a paperback from the white particle board shelves that formed her headboard. "Strike one."

When she'd found her page I leapt the gap between our beds, shouting something about a no-fly zone. She yelled and tried to shove me off. I balled my tiny fists and wailed on her. Then our dad appeared in the doorway. He ordered that Beth take the tape up off the carpet and led me off her bed by the hand. "Apologize."

I told Beth I was sorry; she stared, furious.

"He apologized Beth. Do you have anything to say?"

"I accept it."

He nodded, sent me out of the room and closed the door. I held my breath and strained to hear them.

Beth's voice came softly: "You said this was the year we'd move someplace big enough to have my own room."

"It didn't work out that way, I'm sorry," he said. "We have a lot to be thankful for, though. I know it's hard, but I need you to watch out for your little brother, not get mad at him."

Joanne had her own room across the hall, and her mattress lay right on the floor with a record player beside it. Handbills and show posters hung from tacks on the wall. She was in high school, getting caught up weekly in hard-driving negotiations with our parents over concerts in the city. Sometimes she was dressed and ready with her studded belt, jean jacket and creepers before she even asked permission. Those nights our kitchen table became a sentry post. My dad would stand his ground at the kitchen table, voice measured but tested, as Joanne yelled herself to tears half-way between him and the front door.

I remember climbing up into his lap and shaking his arm, saying: "Just let her go Dad. Let her go this one time." Joanne looked from me to him, turned, and walked out of the house. He was quiet, distracted for an hour or so until Mom got home from work. Then he went out after her.

Another time, she got permission from our parents to go to a show at the Hawthorne Theater, a sanctioned all ages venue. Her browser history on the computer, which was kept in the garage like an engine part, tipped our father off to the basement show where she'd actually be. Once again he showed up at the house and waded through the maelstrom of jostling kids in black. I imagine electric guitar and a clipping P.A. shredding ear drums. By the band, a bare 120 watt bulb flashed piercing between the heads and shoulders of the audience and the joists of a kitchen floor. Joanne felt a tap on her shoulder and was shocked to find not some bleached-blond friend in black, but her fifty year old father in his paisley shirt, digital detective, nodding towards the stairs, the open night: her long ride home.

On Father's Day morning, sunlight striped through the aluminum blinds so bright that our worn brown carpet looked like gold. Bars of shadow cut an art deco angle up my box spring and onto the bedspread. I was drawn out to the kitchen by cooking smells and the sound of life. Joanne and Beth were setting the table. My mom was scrambling eggs, red-faced and biting her lip, and her voice was strained when she said good morning.

"Where's Dad?" I asked.

Joanne answered. "The rental got broken into last night. He's over there sorting it out."

"I thought nobody lived there."

"That's why it got broken into."

No one had heard his truck rumbling back to its parking spot on the street outside by the time the food was on the table. We sat down to eat, quiet, just the chatting of forks and knives on plates. Our bellies filled, the bacon stopped shining, the toast got soggy. One by one each part of the meal cooled and died in its dish.

I was playing in my room when Beth shouted down the hall that he was home and had a dog. His shadow moved across the little window in the door as we all converged on the entry. There was the sound of his hand on the knob, then the door swung open and he stepped in, singing "*Happy Father's Day—to—me*," to the tune of "Happy Birthday." An excitable, rascally dog balanced precariously on his shoulder, wagging its butt to meet us.

"Where'd he come from?" Beth asked.

He shrugged and his eyes pointed up sideways to where he kept his secrets. He lowered it down. Dirty and disheveled, the dog scooted across and sat like a prince between us. It looked up

apologetically at the only skeptic. My mom crossed her arms. “Dean,” she said. “That is the ugliest dog I’ve ever seen.”

My sisters and I scrambled to think what it is you do with a dog and decided we should take it for a walk. We rifled through the garage for something that could pass as a leash, found no rope, and settled on a thirty foot length of chain. He ran full bore ahead of us, stretching it taut, going out of sight around corners with the chain grinding fenceposts. “Heel!” we shouted at him, myself assuming the word came from the way you had to dig your own heels into the asphalt while you said it to slow a dog down.

Back at the house we piled into the truck to buy some food and a proper leash. I didn’t want to be away from it for even a minute, but my dad insisted that we leave our mom and the dog alone together.

“What kind of dog is he?” I asked.

“Just a mutt,” my dad answered. “Some kind of cattle dog.”

The pet store had only ever been a place we’d stopped by for the fun of seeing puppies and kittens, knowing full well that the only thing I had a chance of taking home was a guppy. But this time the store was for us. I walked tall in the pet store that day, discerning and shrewd as I compared the weight and build of different leashes. Joanne picked a black leather collar with a row of silver studs. Beth and my dad met us at the register with a twenty pound bag of kibble.

The truck crawled home, taking languid turns and pushing off easy from traffic lights that lingered long on red. I pictured the dog in our home, wondered which room he was in and what he was doing. I wondered if my mom was still crossing her arms, if they were having a staring contest.

“He’d come by a number of times,” my dad explained. “I’d be down there workin’ away, and eventually he’d either come sauntering down the sidewalk, or I’d leave the door open by accident and feel these little paws rush up and hit me in the back of the legs. Then he’d sleuth all around the house. I figured he was looking for you guys. Probably smelled you on me.”

“You just took him home?” Joanne said. Beth and I had stars in our eyes.

“He took himself home! He’d been around most of the day, but I thought he’d left until I got in the truck. Must have jumped in the cab while I was putting my tools away. So I said alright.”

When we got home we cheered to find our mom reclined on her bed with the TV muted and the dog nestled against her side. She was scratching the top of its head, smitten. She pursed her lips and slouched into the pillows, posturing for her final protest: “He has a collar, Dean.”

“But no tags!” Beth said. “He must have been a stray for weeks.”

“We should at least check.”

By the time I woke up the next morning, Dad had already left to pick up a Sunday Oregonian. I thought of newspapers as big, unfolded things, like maps, things he sat down and absorbed over long, relaxing intervals at the kitchen table. This one was rolled up tight like a dagger in his hand when he came back through the door.

“Please don’t look,” Beth said, and I agreed with her—as if we’d be doing nothing wrong by keeping the dog if we never knew that it was missed by someone else.

“Already have.”

The ad described him perfectly: *Blue Heeler/Australian Shepherd mix, one year old, brown and gray with a cow-print collar. Missing since June 18th.*

“Let’s see if I can sell ‘em on it,” my dad said. He took the paper out to the garage to make the call. I tried to spy on him, but my mom led me away and the door latched decisively. He returned tight-lipped and pensive, telling us with a patting gesture to ease down and wait.

The owners pulled up an hour later, double-checked the address, and headed up our driveway. Beth and I took positions on the floor on either side of their missing dog and ran our fingers through the wiry fur between his shoulder blades. My mom opened the door for them, saying: “Hi, come on in. Here’s the trouble-maker.”

Their runaway dog popped out from under our hands to greet them. Having pictured them greedy, forced to find their goodness by the sight of their dog crouching by the family it wanted, I thought it damning. The woman knelt. “Hello friend. What kind of adventures have you been on?”

The man reached down and gave him a pat on the head. I couldn’t look them in the eyes. My dad recounted how the dog had come to see him on several occasions, and they laughed and conferred each time that he had slipped out of their apartment and disappeared.

“Never seen an escape artist like this little guy,” the man said. He’s supposed to be a working dog. His mom used to follow me up ladders when I was roofing.”

“No kidding?” my dad said.

“Swear to God. But this one just uses all his smarts to get out and roam.”

Then my dad set it in motion, do or die: “I’d put him to work myself but the kids can’t get enough of him.”

“Looks that way.” The couple exchanged a glance and then signaled my parents with a nod. Dad excused himself and came back with a hundred dollar bill in his hand. He folded it in his fingers as he passed it to them. Beth and I about cried. Our dad had done it.

“Well, I’m glad he found y’all,” said the woman. “He’s like a fox. You sure you can handle him?”

“We’ll take good care of him,” my mom said. “We appreciate you.”

We named the dog Sauvie after an island on the Willamette, close to where he found my dad. He sat defeated for his first bath, then clawed his way out of the tub, frantic, at the first sign that the torture had ended. I was standing on the toilet lid for a good view. My mom reached for the towel, but too late. His neck convulsed like a plucked guitar string, head rocked back and forth, then the vibration tore through his body and a dozen beads of dog water shot from the tip of every hair. We screamed and Mom threw the towel over him. Joanne, belly laughing, unlatched the door to duck out, one shielding hand still up behind her, but Sauvie curled his claws around the pressboard and pried it open. He ricocheted past her legs and left the neon beach towel empty on the bathroom floor before any of us knew what happened.

“Wild dog!” my dad hollered from the living room. We ran to see.

Sauvie tore from wall to wall. He weaved between the chairs under the dining room table. He crouched in front of us, faking left and right as we stood bewildered, like every minute he’d stood still and blank in the bath he’d been charging a battery in some savage corner of his heart. He careened past us and lost traction on the linoleum, hit the wall on the turn, and disappeared back down the hallway. Then he came tearing back, eyes crazy, and propelled himself snorting

across the baseboards. Finally, the battery went out and he flopped down panting in the middle of the floor and smiled while we pet him. “He nearly ran himself dry,” Mom said.

Sauvie slept at the foot of my parents’ bed and met each one of us at the door when we got home, overjoyed, though never quite like when he saw my dad. If it had been a few days, he’d leap five feet up into his arms. Sauvie completed our family. I was the last child, and he was the cap on the bottle.

**Joanne**

I remember the three of us playing Monopoly with Dad on the living room floor. How once, after hours of dwindling funds, right when we thought we had him beat for once, he'd smirked and slightly lifted his side of the board. A bit of orange paper appeared under his finger, and he slid out one of his $500 bills he'd hid there at the beginning of the game. We lost our minds so much that Beth and I both jumped to our feet and put our hands on our heads. Morgan laughed and cheered as if the comeback were his.

***

Armistice Day, I had it in mind because my A.P. history class did a unit about it the month before. And it was fitting. This was mine, the day my parents surrendered. I was seventeen, getting into the thick of my senior year. I listened to records in my room after school while the rain pounded outside. I listened to G.B.H., Abrasive Wheels and Gun Club. Dad left me alone. We'd talk when Mom got home from work.

Beth and Morgan were having some kind of stand off across the no man's land between their beds, and from the sound of it, had come to blows. I looked up at my door, that thin, espresso-stained hollow-core membrane of plywood and veneer—then back to my readings. Not my circus, not my monkeys. The sound of Dad's footsteps came up the hall, then I heard my siblings' hushed and frustrated voices. When I finished studying, around the time Mom would be getting back, I went out to the kitchen for a snack. Dad was cooking dinner, and Morgan had left Beth alone and was playing some kind of imaginative game with remarkably few resources. His hands appeared to be the heroes, the monsters, the bit players, all of it. The furniture was the castle, the mountains, whatever. The kid didn't seem to need toys.

When Mom came in I greeted her with an expectant expression. If she noticed, she didn't mention it, and walked past me into the kitchen where she dropped her keys and purse said hello to Dad.

"Morgan," he called into the living room, where my brother was voicing explosions and the sounds of battle. "Mom's home! Come say hello."

Another explosion—chain reaction, from the sound of it. Dad sighed.

Our conversation took place after dinner. In essence, they were agreeing to fall in line with what my friends' parents, many of whom were just fine, well-adjusted people, were already doing: giving their kids the freedom to move around the city, to be with friends, to participate in life. In exchange (thank my Stockholm syndrome), I'd let them know where I was going to be and which of my close friends I'd stick with. I'd do my schoolwork and keep my grades up (I did that anyways, but I let them have it), I'd work a few days a week after school so I that I was spending my own money.

"And you will never forget," Dad added. "That time I bailed you out of jail."

I nodded. "Yeah, yeah."

I'd signed up for photography class that year, needed something light to round out a tough A.P. schedule. Dad gifted me a Pentax k1000 he'd scored at a pawnshop for a good price and I started the year strong. I was up at the golden hour, before school. I staged Beth in forgotten little corners all around the neighborhood, photographed the dog, and of course The Devils were more than happy to model for me. There was nothing like photographing the shows: moving through a crowded basement cradling the camera over my head. People began to treat

me they way they treated musicians making their way to and from the stage with their guitars, standing respectfully aside in their studs and chains and denim. Bands would crowd around me when I showed up with developed shots, unself-conscious about their eagerness to see their own images, and then stoked, saying things like, “Fuck, film makes even me look cool.” “Black and white doesn’t hurt,” another would say, but the color shots looked great, too, the hues natural and subdued by a slight grain. The photos were gritty like the places they were shot in, often accented only by a single white or a red shirt, or a pair of faded bluejeans in a crowd otherwise all in black. Even my dad complimented the shots. But black and white film stole my heart.

Times were so good, in fact, that when I got my Portland State acceptance letter, we started talking about the possibility of my continuing on under my parents’ roof through summer and maybe even my first year of college. They were scrambling to figure it out, how I could afford tuition while taking on as little debt as possible. “Debt’s a death sentence,” Dad said.

He had gotten a pilot’s license with his G.I. benefits, and had taken a class here or there besides that. He suggested we look into scholarships for first generation college students. My mom reminded him that she’d gotten her associate’s in nursing at Boise State.

“Well, a two year degree shouldn’t count. No one in either of our families has done the whole four year thing.”

“I’m sure it counts,” Mom told him. “It’s a degree. I finished a degree.”

Dad acquiesced. “Alright. Flight school probably counts too, then.”

Mom shook her head. “You didn’t take those classes at a college, Dean. You took them at the airport. It’s first generation *college* student.”

"In any case," Dad said. "There are all kinds of scholarships available if you dig for them. Toby told me the other day that there are whole lists of them now, on the web. And probably few people applying, some of these little ones. If you rack up enough of those, Jo, they add up. You're working a few shifts and living at home… we can make it happen."

I'd met Dom three or four times before he hired me to photograph his band. They weren't necessarily my style, kind of metal, but they were pals, and some of my live shots of their shows had ended up on the insert for their first single, so it made sense. He was twenty-two years old, old enough to have been like an older brother to Kurt at one time, though now they seemed the same age. He was a huge nerd about movies and about guitar playing, and he worked at the adult video store.

I remember the first time we spent the night together, after a house show at his place on 8th, same one we'd been arrested outside the year before. That house had become a fixture for my friends and me, and my Dad, at least, knew which one it was. I told my parents I was crashing there with Isa and Carmé, but as the night wound down they both split for their boyfriends' houses. I was excited, nervous. The house cleared out, the roommates shuffled drunkenly to bed and then it was just us and the hundreds of cans and the last track of the Stitches record coming to an end.

Dom ripped a black garbage bag from the roll and plucked a few cans off the coffee table. The song ended and was replaced by the quiet sound of the needle spinning on the innermost groove. He looked at me and laughed in a resigned way, dropped the bag and we went upstairs to his room. We kissed and talked awhile before he said, "Well, that's about all I've got in me.

Bed?" He turned the light off and put his arm around me, said that was something new and different, something he could get used to. And then he fell asleep before me. Long before me.

We had other opportunities, and eventually another night like that, where I lie awake in his arms after he fell asleep, feeling rejected. "There's a lot of things we can do, a lot of fun to have," he said eventually. "But we can't do that."

Dom was my date to prom that year and we did all the usual things. He floated the idea of telling my parents that he was a senior at Cleveland High School, which was the closest one to his house, but I told him fuck that. We were going to do all the usual stuff. He'd pick me up at home and my dad would answer the door and shake his hand, we'd take the photo, all of it. I wasn't going to hide anything. Also, we couldn't have fooled either of them had we tried. My parents were more suspicious than the gentztruppen.

Their conversation in the entry was casual. Morgan took in the scene for a moment then darted in, hugged me and said to have fun, then he went back to his room.

"Ah, no. I graduated four years ago," Dom answered one of my Dad's questions, laboriously stripping the words of their connotations. But his eyes said it all, he was nervous.

"Oh," Dad said. "Are you in college, then?"

"Ah, no," Dom answered, adjusting the cuffs of his sleeves. "I played in bands mostly after school. Got to do some touring."

"That's great," Dad said with a sort of ominous neutrality. "I'm sure that's it's own kind of education."

Dom's eyes lit up. "Oh, absolutely." He wanted to say more.

“Photo time,” I interrupted. “We’re running late.”

“You’re not running late,” Dad said, and turned back to Dom. “Where did you say you’re working?”

“Blockbuster,” he answered flatly. He’d worked there until about a year ago.

“Which one, right over here on—”

“Dad.” I shut it down.

Then my mom chimed in: “Dean, it’s their night.”

Beth complimented our formal wear. “Very grunge,” she said.

I rolled my eyes.

Mom took the photo with a little plastic Kodak. Then I handed Dad the Pentax he’d given me and had him take a closer shot. We left a moment later, and Dom drove us to the venue in his truck. After an hour or so we ditched and met with friends at the Jolly Inn, where the old biker ladies behind the bar hardly glanced at my fake and made a fuss about us in our formals. They begged me to come and cocktail for them, but I was seventeen and laughed off the offers. All in all, an uneventful moment for how far back it set my Dad and me. The patrols were reinstated, the lanterns in the watchtowers relit, the padded walls fluffed up in solitary. Three months shy of my eighteenth birthday, after I’d already gotten my taste for freedom, he tried to start telling me ‘no’ again. *Mr. Gorbachev, take down that wall.*

It was my Mom that found out where Dom really worked. She dropped me off at Blockbuster in Beaverton to meet up with him, stopped into the Fred Meyer there in the strip mall or somesuch and afterwards caught sight of me walking up Beaverton-Hillsdale towards the Fantasy Adult Video. She must have driven up and doubled back once or twice. When I got to

the parking lot, her Mazda was idling in the empty space next to Dom's truck. She backed out, glaring, and I saw her lips form the words, "Jesus Christ, Joanne" behind the glass of the driver's side window.

She never told Dad. Me and him were already at each other's throats. And Mom and Dad had their own stuff, too. Beth would lock herself in her room and read entire novels in a night, yell at Morgan if he so much as made a noise in his own room. I guess Mom figured things were bad enough.

**Beth**

When things got rocky again, Mom took the day off and picked me up from school. We went out to lunch. She kept saying that she was sorry.

"Why? It's Joanne's fault," I told her.

She shook her head. "Things used to be different," she said. "It never would have crossed my mind to yell at my dad. Parents were different. It was *yes Mom, yes Dad* or else you-don't-want-to-know-what."

"So are you apologizing for not beating Joanne up?"

She kind of laughed and pushed her hands into her face. "God almighty." She apologized again. "My dad used to treat me the same way." She sighed and looked at me, reading my face. "What would you think about going to see Aunt Linda down in California sometime soon? She's been asking about you a lot."

I raised my eyebrows. "Really?"

"Yeah," she said. "Dad and I talked about it. Seems like you could use a break from all this."

I tested in my mind what it might feel like to say that I could use a break from my own family. I couldn't say it, but my eyes welled up and Mom took my hands.

"It's okay to need a break." She smiled. "It's okay to go on the trip, if you want to."

"I'll think about it," I said.

***

Jo's new boyfriend came over from time to time. He'd bring his guitar and play for Morgan and me. He was trying to make nice, prove himself, maybe, but Mom and Dad often

weren't home, and so I think it backfired. I overheard Joanne once trying to explain that Dom was there to hang out with everyone, and if they were trying to hide out from parents they would just be at Dom's house. But that didn't explain why, my parents countered, they were alone in Jo's room when Dad got home.

"Because that's my space," Jo told him. "We just ended up there. Goddamnit. Why is every—single—thing a fucking interrogation?"

Dad sent Dom away.

I sat reading in bed that night, or some night like it, smelling tomato sauce simmering in the kitchen but hearing the surge and swell of Jo's raised voice, then Dad's, then Mom's. Coming out for dinner was like walking onto a battlefield. I dished up a plate of spaghetti and tried to walk back down the hall to my room. Dad stopped fighting with Jo long enough to tell me to come back and eat at the table. I turned around and sat without a word. Mom and Morgan were the only ones with plates. Joanne hadn't sat down, and Dad was turned clear away from the table arguing with her.

"I'm moving out," Joanne cried. "I'm out of here the day I turn eighteen. Twelve midnight, June 7th. Good bye, good riddance. See you never."

Mom put her head in her hands. "We were so close," she said under the shouting. "We almost made it."

Dad looked at her, ears caught by the quiet words, so out of place in that moment, but when he spoke it was still to Joanne. "You're going to throw away your education over some boy?"

Joanne scoffed. "Hardly going to tank my senior year over a few days."

“College, Jo!” He snapped. “Talk to me in five years when you’re waiting tables, either up to your eyeballs in student debt or never made it into a college classroom and your boyfriend is working at the video store. Talk to me then. You’re going to blow it Joanne. All that potential, wasted.”

“You’re blowing it, Dad.” And she tapped into something, raised her voice even higher. “How can you not see that?” And louder still: “Are you blind?”

“You don’t know as much as you think, Jo,” he said.

“I know I can’t stand living in this house anymore. That’s what I know.” She stormed down the hall, a thud shook the wall, and then her bedroom door slammed.

“Dean,” Mom said. He looked at her but she had nothing else to say.

I took my plate and put it in the fridge. “I want to go visit Aunt Linda,” I said.

I treated Dad and Joanne coldly in the week that followed. Things were disorganized. Mom worked overtime and I hardly saw her. In typical form, two days before I was supposed to leave, my ticket still hadn’t been bought. I asked my parents at dinner if I needed to call the airline myself. Dad said to be patient. Then, the next day, while I was reading in my room, he knocked on my door and came in.

“Your flight boards at 3pm tomorrow.” He smiled a bit, sat down on my bed. “I have some things to take care of in the morning, so Mom is going to drive you, and I’ll meet you at the airport to see you off.”

I thanked him, closing my book around my pointer finger to save the page.

“We couldn’t get you a window seat this time, but you should still be able to get a peak,” he said. “Man, do I wish I could be there to see you see it.”

“Thank you,” I said.

He expression grew more serious. “I know things have been tense around here lately. I’m sorry for that. You’ve got to live with it and you have nothing to do with it.”

There was dried paint splattered on his shirt. The collar was blown out, sagging down to his collar bone. His hair was thinning. He placed his hand on my knee and shook it a bit. I’d been missing him.

“I’m trying to watch out for your sister,” he said. “No matter how hard she makes it. I’m trying not to give up on her.”

But I’d seen her report cards. Jo was fine. She was not barreling headlong towards a life on the streets or whatever.

“This relationship she has is inappropriate.” He sighed. “If you’re in high school,” he told me. “And someone in their twenties ever wants to date you, Beth, run the other way.”

She was about to graduate, I thought, but kept it to myself.

He shook his head. “It’s lose-lose if she moves out of here. I don’t know. What do you think?”

I looked into his green, waiting eyes for a long moment. I thought about all the things that Mom had told me, and about how Jo had driven a wedge between them. Dad sat waiting for my answer. I thought about how Jo was going to do what she was going to do, and wasn’t that clear enough?

“I think you should let her go,” I said.

His face dropped. He took his hand from my knee, stood and walked to the door. “I suppose you want to leave, too.” He said. “Maybe you should.” He left my room and gently closed the door behind him.

I didn’t see him before he left in the morning. Mom drove me to the airport and parked in the short-term garage. We checked in and got my boarding pass printed, then we walked to the gate, arriving forty-five minutes before boarding. I looked back the way we had come, at a few unfamiliar faces coming and going.

“Do you think he’s still coming?” I asked Mom.

“This morning he said he was. He said he’d see us here.”

I nodded and we walked to the window to watch the planes take off.

“Are you excited?” She asked.

“Mm-hmm.”

She patted my back. I looked back again to where we’d entered. He wasn’t there. Twenty minutes went by, then twenty more. They started boarding. Now Mom was looking with me. “He sure is running late,” she said. “You know Dad. Always cutting it close.”

“Right.”

Before we knew it, they were calling my section. I hesitated.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Mom said. “You’ve got to get in line.”

I hugged her goodbye, sniffled and wiped my eyes.

“Have such a good time, honey. I’ll wait right here until you take off.” Then she looked over her shoulder and added, “He could still make it.”

And the line drew me forward. The attendant checked my ticket and ID and tore the end of boarding pass. I looked over my shoulder one more time. Mom waved goodbye, and I went through the doorway, walked down the gentle slope of the jet-bridge, and boarded the plane.

**Moira**

The last of the passengers disappeared down the gangplank to the airplane and the gate felt quiet and empty. I stood by the window, looking at the white painted nose of the jet and the pilots with their headsets, sitting in the cockpit. I heard Dean before I saw him. He'd crossed half the terminal at a dead sprint, and arrived breathing hard.

"I can't believe I missed her." He huffed.

I was about to tell him that, the way things had been going, I could.

"We've got to get her off the plane."

"What are you talking about?—" But he bolted to the desk and started telling the attendants they needed to open up the doors. "Dean, what's wrong with you? They can't do that." He just shook his head. They were telling him the same; the doors were closed.

"They're about to taxi," the attendant said.

Dean pulled a sharpie from his shirt pocket and grabbed a baggage tag from the little plastic bin they had screwed onto the front of the desk and scrawled something as fast as he could. He pushed it into her hands with his eyes so pleading that he startled her. She took it, looked seriously at her coworker, who got on the phone without protest, and rushed down the bridge a moment before they pulled it back so the plane could leave.

"What's wrong?" I asked him.

He rushed to the window and looked out at Beth's plane. "I don't know," he said, his eyes upset like animal eyes. "I don't know."

He stood staring at the plane. Soon the attendant came back, gave Dean a thumbs up. "We got it to her," she said. "Barely." And no sooner had she said it than the jetbridge retracted and

the plane backed away from the terminal. We looked hard, but couldn't make out her face in any of the windows as it rolled away. We could feel the rumble of its engines when it sped down the runway. It angled sharply into the sky, rose high over the river, banked to the south and disappeared from sight.

**Joanne**

Dom and the other guys' lease at the old party house was ending that summer. I knew them all, and things between Dom and I were going fine. We were looking through the paper for apartments around finals week, and there were plenty of options. Meanwhile, Mom and Dad at least several nights a week were having serious discussions about how long they could afford for the rental to be sitting empty, about how close to ruin it would bring them if there was another break-in.

"If you need someone in there," I told them one night. "Like, if it would help you guys. My friends and I could move in there."

Dad looked me in the eye. "I'd rather it sit empty than for my teenage daughter to shack up with her adult boyfriend."

I shook my head and went back to my room. It didn't take us long to find a place. A three bedroom apartment on 12th and Salmon. Dad washed his hands of it while Mom helped me pack my things. He had an uncanny ability to be busy every time we drove a load of things over, and when Dom or one of my other roommates stopped by to help. He busied himself. I cried my last night. Just the big stuff was left, all the character packed away into boxes. I remembered Carmé, moving out of her parents house in the middle of high school and her parents making themselves a part of it. I was going to make my first home as an adult, and I wanted to share it with him. I wanted my Dad to be a part of it.

The day they brought their van to move my bed and the nightstands, and shelves, he'd been gone, working on the rental, since the night before. The sun was shining, and the trees were green with new leaves.

The boys were having a good time, reenacting conversations from tour, gesturing at the furniture they were carrying, pretending everything was an amplifier.

"What is that? A Marshall?"

"Doesn't quite weigh enough."

"Ah, a Peavey. Never mind, I'll just plug into the mattress."

My Dad showed up on foot. He said hello and was polite. Dom tried to joke that being in a band made you a mover first and foremost, a musician second. Dad told him good work and went to talk to Mom. He'd had car trouble downtown and taken the bus home to collect some tools and a spare battery from the garage. He needed a ride back downtown. Mom and I were going to follow the boys in the Mazda.

"I'll ride with you and Jo," he said to Mom.

I smirked. "So you'll come see our place?"

"I'll come see your place."

The boys left in the van. Dad said he needed another minute and went back out to the garage. It took him close to a half hour, but when he was done he'd frankesteined together a toolbox for me, and pulled down from the loft-shelves one of the three sets of cookware that were meant to be wedding gifts for me and Beth and Morgan.

"I'm sending you off with these," he said. And we got in the car and drove downtown. At the apartment, Dad made nice with the roommates, shook hands and all that, helped unload the Mazda and checked the place out, but he was cold towards me, turning away at moments he could have started conversation, busying himself actually, with the plumbing fixtures in the

bathroom and under the kitchen sink, testing light switches and smoke detectors and the security of the doorknobs.

As they got ready to leave again, my roommates and I stood politely by the door. Mom smiled and waved goodbye. Dad wished us luck. "Take care of each other," he said. My roommates thanked them and said goodbye. My dad pulled the door closed behind them. I felt frozen as everyone began to disperse, felt an invisible cord pulled tight, felt like my parents were leaving without me. I went out and caught up with them at the end of the block. Mom stooped and disappeared into the driver's seat of the Mazda. Dad was already in. He rolled down the window as I walked up and whatever I was about to say stuck in my throat. There weren't any words. The car started and he looked at me with his green eyes. And I realized that I wasn't looking for anything to say anymore, and he wasn't waiting. We were just looking at each other. The Mazda idled. I was standing close and couldn't see Mom's face, and maybe I wondered if she would drive away. Still, my Dad and I just looked at each other, and there wasn't anger, but there was a sort of challenge, hiding there in our eyes—and there was something else, too, buried on the other side of that. Smiles, the kind of smiles you put on your face purposefully, when it isn't easy.

I took a breath, and it felt so easy just to keep looking in his eyes. *God damn you,* I thought. And then came the answering thought: *Say you love him. They are about to drive away. Tell him you love him. This car is leaving. Say it.* But it felt hard to, and weren't our eyes already saying it all. No, silent eyes and enigmatic smiles and nothing means anything if you don't say it. *Tell him you love him. How long has it been? Six months? A year?*

"I love you," I said.

"I love you, too, Jo."

And still we stared at each other. The car hadn't gone yet. There could be more. *Ask him for a hug,* the voice went on. *Go on, ask him.* I saw Mom's hand on the gear shift, putting the car in drive. The sound of the motor changed. *Ask him.* The car began to roll along the curb. The blinker lit up. Dad raised his arm out the window in a wave. They turned onto 12th and were gone.

Inside, I heard the boys joking around at the end of the hall. Dom came into the kitchen, put his arm around me and gave me a squeeze. Then he opened the fridge, grabbed three beers dangling from their rings and went back to join them. I thumbed the edge of the counter, cracked tile—probably older than the house I grew up in. I looked around at the boxes sitting ready to be unpacked. I went to Dom's and my room. The mattress rested on the floor uncovered, waiting to be made, and my nightstands sat askew, waiting to be pushed against the wall and straightened. There was pretty light falling through the bare rectangle of the window and onto the old wood floor. We'd need to get some curtains.

**Morgan**

Joanne graduated high school in 1999. For the ceremony, Dad tucked a collared shirt into jeans over his hint of a potbelly but wore the same bald-tire tennis shoes as always. Mom had on a pretty patterned dress and wore her hair wavy. Joanne humored the ceremony, and afterwards we crowded around her, all smiles, for photos outside the venue.

The rental, far from being profitable, had held a tenant for a year or so and then the roof gave out. It sat vacant, red-tagged by the city. My dad was contracting for a software sales company to make ends meet and working long hours over the weekends to bring the property up to code before the deadline he'd promised. He wouldn't give it up.

I spent a lot of time in Joanne's room, more sad that she was going than excited about not having to share anymore. School years were long. Things happened so spaced apart that it was hard to believe the time had come for her to leave.

"I have to go," she told me. "At least you won't have to listen to us fighting anymore."

"You'll be able to do whatever you want?" I asked.

She laughed. "Yes, whatever I want. Finally."

I stayed there until she told me that she was going to sleep, and even then she didn't kick me out, just put on a record, turned the receiver down to almost nothing and got into bed. She clicked off the lamp, and I sat against the wall listening to the whisper of music.

Joanne took her posters down corner by corner. Some friends in pegged jeans and tanks with the arm holes ripped down below their ribs came to help her move. We loaded her record player, clothes, lamps and end table into their tour van. Dad took the mattress down to her new place in the back of his truck. Mom and I shuffled my things out of Beth's room the same day. I

took Joanne's—smell of old incense coming off the walls and impressions left in the carpet where her things had been. When we sat down for dinner without her for the first time, I told my parents I wanted a guitar.

Beth left to visit our aunt in California. Mom worked, and whether my dad was making calls from a warehouse stacked with product, or laboring on the rental, I was with him, lobbying for my instrument.

"What music would you like to play?" he asked.

I said I didn't know.

"Then how do you know you want one?"

"I don't know. I just like it."

He nodded. "We'll see."

A couple days later, we walked through the front door and there it was, leaning on the wall in the entryway so it'd be the first thing I saw.

My mom stood by to watch my reaction. "It's yours," she said.

"Your mom bought that for you, and I'm going to teach you how to play it. We'll find a time each week and I'll give you something new to work on."

I hugged them both and thanked them. Then I followed my dad down into the garage and he dug out an old trunk. He looked through it with traces of smiles lighting his face.

"What is it?" I asked.

"Oh, nothing." He cradled up an old blue spiral-bound. Inside were lyrics for Dylan songs, The Animals, Moody Blues and others in ball point pen, all with little capital letters every so often above the words. "That's what we need." He closed his secrets back into the trunk and

shooed me up the stairs ahead of him. “I have to rest my eyes.” he said. “But play around with it a little. Get to know it on your own terms before I start telling you what to do.”

The next day, my dad and I headed, guitar in hand, to the rental. Its shingles were crumbling to topsoil on the mossy roof. He figured he could patch it on his own, get some tenants in there and buy time. In a year or two, when he had the money he’d invest in a new roof, and then it’d be smooth sailing.

He set me up on a stool inside and propped a hand-drawn chart of chord fingerings against the antenna of an old TV, the only furnishings.

“You are all set, bud,” he told me. I was balancing the guitar on my leg, zoning in. “I’m up top if you need anything. Lesson number one is right after lunch.”

“Okay,” I answered. I was testing the bite of the strings underneath my fingers. I didn’t look up.

I heard the aluminum clang of the ladder striking the gutter through the wall. The chords I tried to play rang back in the empty room and I looked up, towards the kitchen with its well-worn floors and countertops. The ceiling creaked with my father’s passage overhead. Then I became absorbed in the feel and sound of the instrument in my hands and didn’t hear him again.

The door burst open awhile later. A stranger ran, disheveled and frantic, into the house and scared me to my feet.

“Is there a phone in here?” he ordered.

I scanned my path of escape.

“Someone’s very hurt outside.” He had a voice for laughing, for offering you a beer, or rambling about escapades. It stuck in his throat giving bad news.

He stopped waiting for my answer and tore through the house. I split for the door. We passed by each other, knocking elbows in a mutual daze. I shuddered at the touch, my mind blank and without a plan—my legs not waiting, running on their own for where my dad should be. I made my escape as the stranger shouted for me to wait.

Outside, in front of the ladder still leaning on the gutter, my father lay face down in the sun across the concrete path that came up the side of the house. His elbow was bent as if trying to push himself up or roll over onto his back, except that he was utterly still. I flinched back through the doorway. The phone stared from its place on the wall. He’d run right past it.

There was the hint of a siren far away. Another rose up from over the bridge, then a fire truck horn shook the glass in the windows, and I understood that somebody, somewhere, had made the call. Sounds you’re only supposed to hear as dopplered wails, passing in an instant, swelled in from all directions. I cowered at the center of a shrinking circle of mechanical screams.

At the Women’s Pavilion at Good Sam, the nurse supervisor called my mom off the floor for a phone call. The man on the line said that her husband had been in an accident.

“Well, send him on over,” she said with an easy laugh. “I’ll meet him in the ER. What’d he get into this time?”

The pause dragged before he answered. “We’re going to have you come on down to us.”

My mom, Joanne and I limped through the front door that afternoon, and Sauvie met us in the entry, his greeting cooled by our silence. I wondered if he knew. I wondered if he could sense the reason why we couldn't speak, couldn't stand, couldn't cry—why we could touch his head but couldn't pet him. We drifted through our house as if we didn't recognize the rooms, coming to rest like fallen leaves. Sauvie kept apart and under the table until the uncertainty of staying away wracked his nerves more than the uncertainty of being near us. He crept out, ears down as if he'd been reprimanded, and sat on the couch beside my mom. He licked his lips.

Beth flew home from California late the next day. They'd conspired not to tell her, even keeping it from our aunt until after Beth had boarded. My grandma drove us to the airport.

Waiting at the gate, I looked across the terminal and saw our dad, young and gaunt, staring lost into the palms of his hands, which were resting in his lap. Joanne saw him too. Mom said it was just some guy. But, if so, it was some guy with no bags—a guy so sad, so shell-shocked, so lost, that it seemed improbable he sat waiting for a friend or loved one to disembark.

Beth's plane rolled in off the tarmac. Every move of the ground crew played out too slow and too fast at once. Ripples of heat passed between the terminal window and the shining white paint of the jet. The apparition remained, as still as if the twitch of a muscle would scatter him in the air. The passengers filtered out from the gate and blocked our view. Beth, fifteen, snaggletoothed and beaming, spotted us and came wheeling her carry-on beside her. Through gaps in the crowd, I caught a glimpse of an empty chair where the figure had been. Then I turned to Beth and we welcomed her home.

There had been a vague plan to tell her on home turf, only after the front door of our house was closed behind us, to somehow contain the disaster within ourselves for the thirty

minutes that it took to return from the airport. But of course that didn't work. I remember the confusion on her face fading to disbelief, then flashes of anger that she'd lived nearly two days in ignorance. As if two days were a missed opportunity, as if it were possible to go back in time and change fate, but only to go back a moment—only seconds. As if it would take a mighty will to undo the passing of a day, and no will on earth was strong enough to undo two. She buried herself in Mom's arms, Mom who could only say *I know, I know*. Joanne reached back from the front seat and kept a hand on her knee. At home, Beth hurried down the hall to the room we used to share.

I had lived my life shy, hiding behind my parents' legs. Few occasions had given me the confidence to take a stand, to codify feelings into conviction, or to imagine I held the power to give comfort. But in that moment, I understood that I'd lived two days in our new world. I'd come some distance, however immeasurably small, from the first hours of hyperventilation and chaos. Compared to Beth, I was a goddamned professional. I followed her and paused, self-conscious, at her doorway. She cried into her pillow. She'd gone there for privacy. She'd hid her face. She didn't want me there. Perhaps she knew a world existed where I had grown bored with the guitar and walked outside, and with us talking back and forth from the ground to the roof, our dad had chosen different steps and never slipped.

"Morgan," she said, and I could hear that concern for me had overthrown her private pain. She took me in her arms. Joanne came in next, and then our mom behind her.

As we huddled together on Beth's bed, I ceased to simply think, and instead I watched my thoughts. They pearled one by one out of darkness inside a shell of bone, over and over in the same way: first, a picture—snippet of my dad cooking, or lying down snoring. Eating a

dandelion out of the yard and looking at me wide-eyed. Drawing faces in his shaving cream. Then, after each image, something like my voice: *That's gone. That's gone. That's gone.* I wondered if the voice was my spirit, something that could keep on going in a different way after the shell is cracked and lost.

The next picture was inside his truck. "*We're going down—town!"* he sings as tunnel lights usher us along. I watch the open day come closer, waiting on edge for the sudden end of the concrete roof, for the blue sky and the buildings shining in the sun. We sail out onto city streets, and the way to the rental flows like water down into one of the city's shady nooks, where the grass is a darker green. I understand I will think of him every time I pass this spot. The words are coming now, that declaration, but I push them back and hold the picture. I erase our destination; it will be a drive that never ends. The trouble is I see only the city passing by outside the window. I didn't know to turn and look at him, and memorize the details of his posture and the faces he made as he guided the wheel. Roadside trees grow together overhead. I watch for feral dogs to tame. The drive never ends. We never get to the house. We never park. We never go inside.

Curriculum Vitae

Michael David Rudolph — MichaelRudolphPDX@gmail.com

Education

**UNIVERSITY OF NEVADA, LAS VEGAS — 2024 (ANTICIPATED)**

Masters of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

**SOUTHERN OREGON UNIVERSITY — 2012**

English Major / Biology Minor, Cum Laude

**GALAPAGOS ACADEMIC INSTITUTE FOR THE ARTS AND SCIENCES — 2010**

Evolution, Ecology and Conservation Track

Professional Experience

**GRADUATE ASSISTANT, UNLV - LAS VEGAS, NV — 2021-2024**

- Taught 1-2 sections of English 101/102 per semester for three academic years
- Provided one-on-one tutoring in accordance with Writing Center pedagogy

**CLIENT RELATIONS SPECIALIST, HAWAII DEED LLC - HONOLULU, HI (REMOTE) — 2020-2021**

- Sold flat-rate legal service packages and coordinated client signatures
- Drafted deeds, POAs and court petitions based on client-provided information
- Filed deeds for recording with the Bureau of Conveyance through an e-filing vendor
- Filed court petitions and exhibits with Hawaii Land Court

**PARA EDUCATOR, PROGRAM FOR INTELLECTUAL EMPOWERMENT - PORTLAND, OR — 2018**

- Designed custom educational materials to inspire and include all students
- Managed community outreach programs
- Provided support for challenging and overlooked students
- Transported and looked after the safety of students during daily outings
- Coordinated with other programs sharing our space

**BILINGUAL ETHICS HOTLINE OPERATOR, NAVEX GLOBAL - TIGARD, OR — 2017**

- Conducted phone interviews with distressed individuals in English and Spanish
- Provided a personal, empathetic caller experience while gathering information in accordance with precise procedural requirements
- Adapted on-the-fly in order to understand and document safety and ethical concerns in unfamiliar industries

- Exercised creative problem solving to faithfully translate written reports of workplace concerns from dozens of local Spanish dialects

**CLASSIFIED SUBSTITUTE, BEAVERTON SCHOOL DISTRICT - BEAVERTON, OREGON — 2014 - 2016**

- Subbed in administrative and para education classroom support roles

**ENGLISH PROFESSOR, DUOC UC PROFESSIONAL INSTITUTE - CONCEPCIÓN, CHILE — 2013**

- Worked to identify and address insecurities, fears and other barriers to learning
- Utilized creative problem solving to empower students from diverse backgrounds
- Practiced self-evaluation to improve future lesson plans and classroom activities
- Provided insightful and constructive individualized and group feedback