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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA,  
IRVINE

A View of the Pond

THESIS

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements  
for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in Creative Writing

by

Jacob Hyatt

Thesis Committee:  
Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair  
Professor Claire Vaye Watkins  
Associate Professor Sarah Braunstein

2023



# **DEDICATION**

To

my parents

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	iv
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS	vi
A VIEW OF THE POND	1

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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I must of course express my gratitude to my family and friends, whose kindnesses are too many to count. Thank you all for believing in me while I embarked on this journey. To

my parents, my grandparents, my sisters, my aunts and uncles and cousins, my friends (including all of the friends I made while at the University of California, Irvine), and to all the family who I've lost over the years: thank you for the sacrifices you've made. You inspire me to be the best that I can be.

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## **ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

A View of the Pond

by

Jacob Hyatt

Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing

University of California, Irvine, 2023

Professor Michelle Latiolais, Chair

“A View of the Pond” is a short story that deals with the persistence of grief and the difficulties people face when trying to comfort and connect with others. The story is told partially in the form of a journal and partially in prose. The first movement of the narrative, which takes place in the year 2014, details the excitement of the main character, Julie, as she prepares for college. However, the journal does not proceed past her arrival at the college, and the story resumes ten years later, after Julie has finished college and found work in a small Maine town. The story picks up with her helping the townspeople to search for a missing child, and this passage—told in third-person point-of-view prose—chronicles her relationships to the townspeople as well as some of her past relationships with others. Julie is ultimately the one to find the missing child’s body. Preparing to move away from the small town after this horrific event, Julie rediscovers her journal, and she writes a single entry in it, which makes up the story’s final movement. Here she recalls her experiences with her first-year college roommate, whose declining mental health after the death of her mother led to suicide. Julie reflects on her failure to save her roommate and her failure to be of any help to the deceased child or the boy’s father, whom she was unable to comfort. In the end, she



decides that people cannot adequately be comforted by others and that people are not even up to the task of comforting themselves.

This story, inspired by the author's experiences growing up in Maine, is concerned with the effects that remoteness and grief can have on the human psyche. Genre elements, principally those associated with the horror and crime genres, are utilized to emphasize the outsized nature of human emotion in the face of persistent tragedy. Surreal, oneiric imagery is also incorporated so as to show the (un)interpretability of human suffering and the difficulties that come with reckoning with an uncaring, random, and frequently hostile universe. It is ultimately important to emphasize, however, that the narrative herein is meant to convey the experience of a particular individual undergoing particular circumstances and is not intended as a certain commentary on the world entire.

## A VIEW OF THE POND

March 15, 2014

I have finally discovered a use for this journal. To be quite honest, I have never been the writing type, so when my father gave me this book for my eighteenth birthday, I wasn't entirely sure what I would do with it, if anything. I put it on top of my dresser, alongside the other odds and ends of mine that have piled up over the years—abandoned tubes of lipstick, Canadian pennies, a set of plastic vampire teeth I wore for my last time trick-or-treating five or six years ago—and let it sit there. Each morning for the past three months, I have looked at this little black book when I took my medication or brushed my hair, and I've felt a tiny bit guilty at the idea that not only my father's money but also his hopes for my creative expression have gone to waste. But what on Earth was I supposed to have written about? The sun is still in the sky; the snow comes and goes beyond the window; I go to school and do my homework and read in my bed before I turn out the light at night. I have always felt that people who feel the need to document these things must be incredibly vain, desperate to find meaning in life, or residents of some place much more exciting than the coast of Maine. I suppose they could also be some combination of these.

In any case, I now find myself joining this odd club. I've just received a letter in the mail letting me know that I've been accepted into my dream school, Camden College, one of the finest liberal arts colleges in New England. I get to go to school only an hour from home, most of my tuition will be covered by an academic scholarship, my folks are happy, and my high school counselor can finally stop hounding me for updates. And the school is to my liking. When I went there for a tour towards the end of the last school year, I fell quite in love

with the sloping green lawns, the old brick buildings, the pervasive quiet, the view of the city at the bottom of College Hill shimmering in the bright May sun. It seems like a place where I could be very successful. So, all is well. I am pleased. But, to get a little closer to the point, I have decided that I can now use this journal to document my college days. Surely they will be much more exciting than what I've experienced so far. Then, in four years, once I've begun working my way through medical school (fingers crossed!), I will have a little book of (hopefully) pleasant memories to motivate me during tougher times.

I imagine there won't be much news until late August, when we're all supposed to move in, but if I hear anything before then, I'll make another entry. For now, it's snowing (again), I have about three more hours of homework left to do tonight, in the next room my mother is rehashing to my father the same old complaints, blah blah blah blah....

May 2, 2014

It's been a while!

Truth be told, there hasn't been much to pass along until now. School has proceeded along its usual (dreary) course. AP Physics, AP Calculus, AP Literature... so much work and stress I've begun to believe that AP must surely stand for "asshole puckering." All of us seniors are beginning to get a little antsy, knowing we'll soon be rid of this place and free of each other. My friends, meanwhile, are getting a little bit weepier than I care for. Perhaps I would be as well, under other circumstances, but my medication keeps me pretty calm. And we'll see each other over the holidays, for God's sake; it's not as if after graduation we're all off to the slaughterhouse. Myself, I feel like I'm just on one of those flat electric hallways that they have at airports, simply moving along at a steady pace, being carried slowly forward—biding my time until the real adventure begins.

Anyways, I now have some news to report. I've been looking through the course options, and I feel pretty confident about what my Fall Semester schedule will be. The pain of college is that you have to fulfill certain universal requirements (i.e., classes you wouldn't otherwise take), so it looks like I'll be stuck with Spanish for another year of my life. Hooray. And I'm going to try to get English out of the way, too, while I'm at it, so I'll be taking Figurative Language and Literature as Impressionism, which sounds a little bit like an eye-roll. I mean, the main idea of the course—that literature is to reality as Impressionism is to Realism—is already right there in the title! What else is there to get? I see, then, that the wishy-washiness of the humanities is not something I will soon be rid of, but at least the class should make for an easy A. And, beyond these two, I'll be taking Introduction to Sociology

(satisfying some very nebulous “Cultural Literacy” requirement) and, finally, Biology I. At least there’ll be one fulfilling class, so I don’t go completely bonkers.

So, that’s that. I was a little worried when I first started looking through the course booklet, seeing all those hundreds of options laid out before me and all their terribly vague descriptions, but now the worry is gone. To be honest, it should be easier than all these AP classes. The goal will be to get a solid 4.00 GPA or better this first semester, and then it’s onwards and upwards from there. But I guess I’m getting a little ahead of myself, aren’t I? I won’t be taking my first round of college final exams for another seven months!

Anyways. Not a whole lot else to report on the home front. I can hear Mom and Dad arguing in the downstairs kitchen—something to do with whether or not Dr. Pepper tastes like Cherry Coke, which is their way of inching towards a divorce. I can practically see my mother’s dubious expression, the one she gives me whenever I say my boyfriend and I are going to the movies—which, to be fair, is a face that she’s correct in making. Three-quarters of our trips to the Canary Cinema *do* end up with Charlie and me in the backseat of Charlie’s Camry, though last time he got tired before he finished and gave it up (a first), so I’m thinking the very classic pre-college breakup could be imminent. One can only hope, anyway! I certainly don’t want to be the one to have to initiate it, but I will soon enough if I have to. The last thing I’ll need in college is Charlie’s dopey distractions. And, also, what the heck does Mom know about Dr. Pepper? I bet she hasn’t tasted the stuff once in her whole life. But, then again, neither have I.

July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Well, a bunch has happened. Of course, there was the whole high school graduation rigamarole. I finished third in my class, which is perfect, because it meant I didn't have to give one of those terrible speeches about following your dreams or changing the system or some such vagueness that even the speakers themselves have no real plans of following through on. I'm sure Mom and Dad would have loved another valedictorian in the family (Mom herself was valedictorian of the class of 1966 at her high school in Chelsea), but, alas, I didn't take gym three times to inflate my GPA like *somebody* did, so here we are.

Also, Charlie and I broke up. I had to be the one to do it (sigh), but at least he didn't seem super surprised or absolutely devastated about it, so I guess I was reading the winds accurately enough. He asked if we could have sex one last time, though, which I thought, in an intellectual sense, was pretty disturbed, but, emotionally, I didn't really care one way or the other (that's the meds for you), so we did, and he was quite rough about it—all that porno kind-of stuff, I'm assuming. I guess he must have wanted to get it all out before he was stuck back in the void. Like I said, it was all pretty messed-up, but I have to say, if he'd been half as take-charge in this aspect and other aspects of the relationship all along, I might have reconsidered our breakup. I'm not looking for a guy who handles everything, that's not what I'm saying, but you at least want a guy who seems *interested*, you know?

What else? Oh, yes. I'm job shadowing at the Midcoast General Hospital Maternity Ward forty hours a week this summer, which is fun and keeps me busy enough. And Dad broke his arm playing badminton with the neighbors, the Zielinskis. Slipped on the wet grass and somersaulted just like somebody tripping on a banana peel in a cartoon. Honestly, he's

lucky it wasn't his neck. I saw the whole thing go down, and all I can say is, it's good for him he's married to a doctor who knew what to do. The Zielinskis, who are mere lawyers, just stood there with their mouths open like fish. Anyways, I've signed Dad's sling, which you can't really see all that well because the sling is dark blue and, like most people, we only had black Sharpies on hand, but it seemed like the thing to do, so there you go.

None of this is the issue at hand, though. What's really going on is that I've been assigned my college roommate—which isn't even the craziest part, but we'll get to that. First, my roommate. They apparently try to do this thing where your roommate isn't just a total clone of you, I guess so you'll learn something or whatever, so the thing about my roommate is she's an art major, and she's from Utah. I didn't even know that people could be from Utah, but somehow she is (I'm kidding, of course). At least she's not a Mormon. No offense to Mormons at all, but can you imagine if one of the people who's already knocking on your door to convert you all day every day has suddenly infiltrated the *inside* of where you live? What would she do then, knock on the walls all day each time she wanted to say something to me? It would never stop! I'm being insensitive, I guess, but if I had a roommate who tried to convert me to anything I'd jump right out the window, third story or no.

Actually, she seems really nice and normal. Her name is Natalie, and she writes her emails in mostly grammatically correct sentences that are upbeat and friendly without being obnoxious. She's very Irish-American—red hair, freckles, lanky, pretending halfheartedly to be Catholic. I guess she was a student athlete in high school (a real one, unlike me, who did javelin and shotput for my college resume and for no other reason), playing both basketball and field hockey with a fair measure of success. I saw a few of her field hockey pictures online, and she looked like she'd take somebody's legs out with that stick no problem, which

I admire. I also looked at her artwork—she has a few dozen pictures of her paintings up on Facebook, which we’re now friends on—and they were actually really good, not any of that Jackson Pollock-type bullshit but colorful and careful drawings of people and animals and whatnot. Norman Rockwell Americana kind of stuff, mostly, like women in aprons taking toast out of toasters and little toddlers chasing after beleaguered dogs while an oblivious father drinks beer in front of a box television. There was also an unfortunate series where she was apparently rather interested in painting women crying into their hands, but I guess every artist has to go through some sort of serious phase, and at least the quality outweighed the maudlin overambition. But, I don’t know. This is all just my take on the stuff. I’m no artist. All I know is, she won’t be painting me crying any time soon.

So, yeah, we’ve exchanged some emails and now we’re Facebook friends and we have each other’s phone number, so I guess everything’s going the way it’s supposed to. It seems like we’ll even be a decent-enough fit for each other, just in a logistical sense. She goes to bed by ten each night, as do I. She has no food allergies and she has no interest in smuggling a cat or a dog into the room. She’s very serious about her studies. She doesn’t play loud music or intend on bringing a ton of people by the room. She said she doesn’t even intend on bringing very much stuff, as she’s apparently pretty minimalistic or whatever, so our little room won’t be all cluttered with junk. It sounds like pretty much everything I was hoping for. Who knows, maybe she’ll even end up being a friend, even a lifelong friend. My father is still friends with his first-year roommate, Antonio, who Dad calls my Uncle, even though I’ve never met the guy.

But then there’s what I guess you might call a hiccup. Really, I couldn’t care less, but I guess objectively it’s a little unusual, so it bears mentioning. Within twenty minutes of



receiving the email regarding my first-year room assignment—Room 316, by the way, which, if I’ve read the blueprints correctly, means we should have a pretty nice view of Wake Pond—I got another email from some Associate Dean of Students or Administrative Assistant or whoever talking about how one of the previous year’s occupants had committed suicide in the room in which Natalie and I would be living. Legally, I guess a campus in the state of Maine technically doesn’t have to disclose this information if it doesn’t want to, and even realtors can’t pass along this information to house buyers unless the seller herself asks that it be done—you can thank Mr. Zielinski for that little crash course—but Camden College apparently “prides itself on its openness” or something, so that’s how I’ve come to know all this. This came with a half-dozen phone numbers and URLs for things like the Camden College Counseling Center and the Student Health Center, as if I were going to start hyperventilating because of an email about something that had nothing to do with me. Lastly, the emailer said that if I wanted to choose another room, they could work with me to make alternative arrangements.

Well, I can tell you I wasn’t about to drop everything and run because of a little bit of bad history. You can’t take two steps in this country without being *somewhere* where people died horribly. And suicide is the number-two or -three cause of death of people my age, according to what my former psychologist told me back when I myself was not so great in the head; probably half the dorm rooms at my school had had that or something just as bad happen in them. A suicide here, a murder there, the Dark Arts Club sacrificing the college virgin over there. It doesn’t have anything to do with me.

I was, admittedly, a little curious about the whole thing, though. Who wouldn’t be? The email provided no specifics—no name or reason or method, just that it had happened in

the previous school year—but I figured I could probably put my solid research skills to good use and drum up the answers pretty quickly. After letting the school know that I'd take Room 316, warts and all, I googled recent news articles for cases of suicide at Camden College, and after about ten seconds of clicking around I was looking at a photograph of Kristina Gold, a sophomore biology-chemistry double major who'd been found dead in her room by her roommate back in April. It's crazy to think that this girl had actually still been alive back when I started this journal. When I wrote that first entry, just a few months ago, was she already making plans to end her life? And why had she done so? A couple of the articles mentioned stress and the demands of college, but this sounded like hypothesizing to me. There was no suicide note, not to mention zero direct commentary from friends or family, so what did anybody really know of it? Digging deeper, I turned to her roommate's social media pages, but they'd all gone dark following the suicide; her parents had divorced years ago, and neither of them had very active Facebook pages, so, for now, it's a dead end. No pun intended.

I talked with Natalie about it, too, but only a little. She seemed to have a strong head on her shoulders and expressed that she wasn't going to get all bent out of shape about it. I mentioned that if we found the room to be haunted we could always sue for recompense, and Natalie didn't respond to my quip; probably no reason for the lack of response, though I figured maybe I'd also gone too far with my wit. I'll have to remember that she's an artsy type, so she's probably a bit sensitive. I'll have to remember to be nice.

So, I guess that's more eventful than many pre-first-year students have to deal with. This journal's off to an exciting start, then! When I told my father about all this, about an hour ago, it even merited the raise of eyebrow, which is pretty serious for him. "How do you feel about all that?" he asked me, and I shrugged and continued eating my dinner (a struggle,

because Mom didn't soak the eggplant). Dad nodded, and then I saw him fiddling with his cell phone. A few minutes later, he picked it up again and looked at it.

"Pat next door says you can't get a discount for the room, legally speaking," he said. Mom nodded, as if she'd been wondering this, too. This is what I have to deal with.

Anyways, that's all for now. Next time I write will probably be after I've moved in—my first night of college! They say that one's the hardest, but, truth be told, I feel quite ready. I find myself looking forward to something, feeling really excited about it.

Which I guess is rare for me.

August 10, 2014

I thought that I wouldn't be returning to this book until later this month, after I had moved in, but there's been another curveball, and this one's quite shocking: I've just learned that Natalie's mother has passed away!

Natalie's text message to me was very formal, direct, and short. She explained that her mother had actually been suffering from triple-negative breast cancer, and they'd thought that there'd be more time, maybe even a lot more time, but then—as it goes sometimes—there was suddenly no time at all. Natalie went on to say that she still had every intention of coming to school, something which I was quite surprised to hear; if my mother, annoying as she can be, passed away, you'd better believe I'd be delaying my attendance. Natalie just wanted to let me know all this because she said there was a chance she might be withdrawn or feeling unwell from time to time these first few weeks of school.

Which seems to be putting it very mildly to me!

I wrote her back as quickly as I could, but, if I'm being honest, the message took me quite a while to write. What do you say to someone when this has happened to them? This got me to thinking about when I will one day be a doctor: if I have to inform a patient and/or a patient's family about serious illness or imminent death, how will I find the right words? Is that something I'll be taught, or is this something I should naturally know, something I should *feel* if I'm meant to be a doctor? Because I definitely *don't* know or feel this kind of stuff. Granted, I have never had a close family member or friend pass away, so I have never had these words spoken to me. I am, as you might say, inexperienced. And, besides, I am not a

very gushy person; I have little practice in expressing myself—something that my dearly beloved former beau never failed to mention.

I thought about asking my parents in an offhand way, but then thought better of it. They'd have probably thought there was something wrong with me if I couldn't craft a simple note of condolence. So I labored on iMessage for a half-hour, marveling with increasing frustration at how powerful and yet how obdurate words can be, and finally I managed "Dear Nat, I am so sorry to hear about your mother. If you need anything at all, please don't hesitate to let me know. I am happy to listen if you want to talk or to give you whatever space you need. I can't imagine what this is like, but I wanted to reach out nonetheless and send along my deepest condolences. Please take care, and, again, I'm here if you need anything. Best wishes, Julie."

Then I went downstairs and told my parents.

"Oh, no," said my father, reaching for the remote so that he could pause whatever was on the television. "Is she still coming to school in the fall, or is she—"

"She is," I said. "I guess her mom'd been sick for a while, so it wasn't exactly a total surprise. But she'd thought there'd be more time."

"Oof," said my mother. "I don't know. Should they really be letting her come to school in her state?"

I tried not to roll my eyes. I have pretty big eyes (not like an alien or something, but still pretty big), so when I roll them, it's obvious, and Mom always catches me and gets after me for it. Instead, I just said, "She seems to be bearing it well to me. I mean, it's her choice, I guess."

"Yeah," said Mom.

“I think your mother’s just concerned about you having to live with someone who’s grieving like that,” said Dad.

Apparently, he could read my mother’s mind, because she didn’t contest the point.

I had managed to maintain my usual blank talking-with-the-folks face up to this point, but now I could feel my whole face turning downwards, the frown coming over it, the unexpected layers of disgust and defensiveness burning just beneath the skin. Why do I feel this way about Natalie, whom I hardly even know? Why do I feel this way even now, as I’m writing this? That’s a hard thing to answer. Maybe it’s just that I don’t like my parents and people my parents’ age talking about people my age like we’re a bunch of cowering idiots. If Natalie couldn’t make it through this pain, then maybe I couldn’t, either, if it came down to it. Related to that, I didn’t like the implication that it’d be a struggle for me to deal with her. I liked her and didn’t want people who didn’t know anything talking badly about her, but, more importantly, I didn’t like the idea that I wouldn’t know how to console or to comfort or even, if need be, to shut Natalie out and not let her pain rub off on me. I guess all of this concern from my parents just feels really infantilizing.

But, still, I kept the eye-roll at bay. I’m not being hyperbolic when I say that Mom would get after me for it. If she could wash out my eyes with a bar of soap like mothers used to do to the tongues of foul-mouthed children, then I think she just might. Instead, I used the most tactically efficient approach available to the upset teenager. I made a brief, difficult-to-interpret comment—“Well, if there’s any issue, I’m sure I’ll feel comfortable letting you know”—and then I turned around on my heels and went back to my room. This is a great technique because your parents are never a hundred percent sure whether you are being

sincere or sarcastic, and you're gone before they can do anything in the way of punishment or, worse, further obnoxious dialogue.

I lay on my bed a while, listening to the clunk of the air conditioner and, beneath that, for the sound of a parent's footsteps clomping down the hall to my room. The one potential aftershock of this technique is that your mom or your dad decides you were being a brat after all and, concurrently, thinks it's really worth the effort to come after you and reignite the already-defused bomb. But I wasn't worth the effort: after a few seconds, I heard the television turn on again.

Then I just lay there a little longer, sprawled out like a murder victim on top of the cool satin sheets, stewing. I guess in that moment I was probably thinking, too, that if my parents didn't think I could handle the emotions of one grieving roommate, then—and I don't even want to write it or even think it, because I hate the idea, and it makes me feel sick to my stomach to consider it, but it's probably true, I probably have been thinking it at least a little bit—do they really think I can ever make it as a doctor? How weak and pathetic do they think I am, if I can't even be in the same space as one sad person?

Yes, yes, I'm sure it's just that they "love me" and want me to be happy and safe and focused on my schoolwork and blah blah blah—but they should know better! If they really knew me, they would know that there is no question of that, regardless of the circumstances. And to view my first-year roommate, who I'm very excited to get to know, right off the bat as an impediment to my success is about the *worst* thing they could be doing for my "happiness," or whatever vague thing it is that they're worried about.

I love them, of course—but God Almighty.

I felt my phone vibrate, and when I looked at it, I saw I'd gotten a response from Natalie. "Hey Julie, Thank you for your message," it said. "It means a lot to me. I imagine you won't hear from me for a while, but see you soon. Nat."

See? I'd done a fine job. Nothing to worry about. As I finish up this entry in my journal, I still feel proud of my behavior and hopeful for the school year. Perhaps Natalie's personal tragedy can even be my gain, as sick as that must sound: how I handle the ups and downs of this poor girl's emotions, such as they will be, will be indicative of just how well I can make it as a doctor. This is what they call a "stepping stone." And if that sounds callous, well, I think maybe everything is just a stepping stone to something else. That's life. It's just that, in my case, I have the wherewithal to know what that next thing will be. I know who I am, and I know what that means for who I will become. Everything between here and there is just practice, just as everything up until now has been practice for this next exciting chapter.

Goodness, I had no idea I'd wind up being so wordy when I started this journal. Nearly thirty of these little pages filled, and I'm not even at school yet! At this rate, I'll have to ask for another one of these books when I turn nineteen. Dad will be so pleased!

Anyways, ciao, as the Italians say.



August 24<sup>th</sup>, 2014

Here at last!

What a crazy, eventful day. I shall try to summarize it as concisely as possible—I need to get to bed soon, since Orientation starts early tomorrow, as it will for the (probably very tedious) three days after that.

I awoke a little before dawn, my stomach full of butterflies and my arms and legs weightless and tingling. I got ready quickly and then packed my toiletries. Everything else I had already packed over the past two days, but, still, I made another pass through the house, making sure I had everything, but, really, I think, just taking everything in one final time. It's not as if I won't be back—heck, I'll be going home for Thanksgiving Break, which is in a mere thirteen weeks; that's not even a hundred days from now!—but something I had read on some of the online message boards is that home never feels the same again after you've gone to college. Nobody was very good at explaining exactly what that meant, but there nonetheless seemed to be much agreement on this point, so I figured I would take heed. To that end, I took in all of the sights that conjured memories for me—the column of wood against which my height had been measured since I could stand upright; the opulent black urn over the living room fireplace that contained the ashes of our pet dog, King; the large pink stain on the kitchen tile where I'd spilled Kool-Aid as an eight-year-old girl; the faded stretch of wood along the stairway railing, where a million placements of hands had diminished the luster of the varnish. In my bedroom one final time, I fell backwards onto the bed and looked upwards at the ceiling, tracing the constellation of cracks, checking the corners for daddy longlegs out of some deeply-ingrained habit formed I don't know when. I

sat up and looked at my bare desk, the oppressive plum wallpaper, the high pile triexta carpet wavy from the patterns of recent foot traffic. I stood and went to the window and looked at the flat, half-dead back lawn shaded by a coliseum of cedar trees. I could make out the plush red lawn swings, the backs stained with cedar sap, and the green rope hammock listing a little in a hot August wind. Beyond stood line upon line of pine trees, the dense green wood unbroken until the Arctic.

Concision! I'll never get this entry done. And what is to be gained from this description of home, a place that isn't even supposed to figure into this journal? I couldn't tell you. But I think it at least bears some kind of mentioning that, standing there at the window, my throat tightened with genuine sorrow, the emotion so strange and strong it seemed to arrive wholesale from the days before my medication, back from when things were so bad I couldn't handle them, were so bad I worried—I hate to think of it—that I would never be able to handle anything ever again. My eyes burned and I turned away from the window and walked out of the room into the upstairs hallway, where I stood blinking rapidly and breathing deeply, smelling normal, comforting smells like bacon and coffee and the faintest whiff of the dog, King, a mildly musky scent that had never fully left even after he was dead and gone. I don't know why I was so sad. It is not like me—not anymore, anyway, not since I took power over my life and my thoughts. I was—am!—happy about going to school. I feel that things are right and good and as they should be. So why, even in the act of writing this, do I feel an aching in my chest, a little burning fire kindling in the base of my throat, a pain behind my eyes? I was ready, wasn't I? This is a rhetorical question—of course I am ready!—but my body seemed to be trying to trick me into thinking there was something about all of this I couldn't part with. But I have thought it over and thought it over and there is nothing,

absolutely nothing. Everyone leaves home these days, and that is that. This is just the faintest remnants of my Neanderthal instincts, worried about leaving the safety of the cave.

I will be fine.

After breakfast, my parents and I moved all of the big plastic boxes filled with my belongings into the back and the aisle of my mother's minivan. It seemed like little, surprisingly little, this collection of eighteen years. Clothes, bedding, books, a few odd electronics, colorful school supplies fresh from the local Staples—here it all was, not even filling up half of a car. I got in and sat down, leaning back a little in the middle row of the minivan, looking at the boxes, thinking that these belongings seemed oddly without personality, without history. They might have belonged to anyone. I guess I am what they call a "fresh slate." As I said before, I know who I am and what I will be, but I guess there's still a lot of room in there, too, isn't there, to develop a self, to follow avenues of interest, to make friends, to encounter new lovers? These boring boxes, now largely unpacked and crammed like sardines into the dusty underside of my college bed, might be boring now, but the boxes that leave this school in four years—who might they identify then? Thinking of all this, I felt a fresh surge of excitement, one that buoyed my spirits and rid the unexpected sorrow from my mind just as the minivan came to life, as my mother rolled down the driveway and turned into the road. I told myself, in that moment, that I wouldn't look back, because I certainly didn't need to, and I still don't think that I really needed to, but I did look back, anyway, because then I supposed that it didn't really matter, so I might as well, and I watched my house shrink like something out of science fiction, the walls and the roof retreating inwards and inwards as if drawn to some dense nucleus, the house turning with each passing moment into a small house no larger than a shed, then surely nothing larger

than a mere door, then a dot, and then, before I could watch it become totally invisible, we turned onto another road, and the house was lost to view. My parents did not comment on this, so I didn't, either. We were just leaving—or, at least, I was. And—this, I think, is pretty interesting—I understood then that the house you think is your home all your life is one day revealed to not be your home at all; it is actually your parent's home, all along, and you still have to find yours out there, somewhere, somehow, someday. So you don't really have a home at all until you have your real life, and not the fake life you have when you are just a child.

The drive was short. I recognized the towns and cities we drove through for nearly all of the trip, since we drove mostly along the same route we took each time to go to my mother's parent's house in Massachusetts, and then after an hour we took an exit and Mom stopped so that Dad could pee at a gas station and then ten minutes later we rounded a corner in some well-to-do suburbia and I could see the spire of the college chapel pointing up through the trees, then a large brick sign announcing the college, and then, at last, the campus, bright and perfect in the clear morning sun.

And I will have to tell you all about this place tomorrow, at which time I will surely take up the pen again. Now, I find that I've grown very tired, and, as I said, it's a big day tomorrow! So, for now, this will have to do. I must sleep. Talk soon!

END OF JOURNAL

## TEN YEARS LATER

Julie looks behind a tree, dreading what she might find, but there is no body there.

When she turns back around, her own tiny body strangely heavy and faltering in the dense darkness of the woods, the pale beam of her flashlight catches Bill Wells's face. It is a hairy face, almost werewolfish, the black beard creeping too far sideways towards the nose for her liking, the hair sprouting from his ears and from the shaggy bowl-like haircut atop his head indistinguishable in places from the tangled mass on his cheeks. And he has strangely pointed ears, as if he might be more at home amongst elves than here.

He raises a big pink hand to shield his eyes, his own flashlight beam slanting momentarily upwards into the starless sky as he does so, and she lowers her flashlight.

"Sorry," she says.

"It's alright," he says.

They stand there a moment in the mostly darkness. All around them, dozens of flashlight beams crisscross and waver, bob up and down, converge and form grids, like layers of lasers guarding a treasure. For a while, many of the townspeople had shouted the missing boy's name, but now, just a few hours before dawn, they have tired of it. Only the boy's father shouts now. His voice is reedy and airless, the second syllable of the boy's name now an exhausted trailing-off hoarse with desperation. Standing there beside Bill Wells, she hears the father shout again. It's more of a broken whimper than a shout, really. The boy has been missing for over forty-eight hours. Just vanished from his backyard. Julie wonders when the father will stop shouting. Probably when they find the body, or never.

"Well," says Julie to Bill.

Then she nods to him and turns and stumbles forwards into the woods, hoping that the speed of her departure will send the proper message. But it doesn't: Bill falls in beside her. She sees the beam of his flashlight reaching out through the darkness besides herself, then louder and louder she hears his lumbering steps crushing dead leaves and tree limbs, and then she feels his big body once more alongside of her own, the heat and the noise and the overlarge shape of him assertive and insistent.

Bill gestures vaguely into the woods. She knows this because, from the corner of her eye, she sees one big arm shoot out and retreat. Some slimy tentacle darting forth in the pitchblack bottom of the deep.

She wonders what Bill is going to say, how long it will be before he tries something foolish.

"What do you think about all this?" he asks. His voice is calmer and a little higher than normal, as if he is, like many men who have tried to talk with her, on the verge of adopting a philosophical air. We're all just lost in the woods, he might say. Or, Isn't this life hard?

"I think maybe we cover more ground going off in different directions," she says quietly.

He understands her now. She is sure of it. A man's wounded silence is always a loud thing. Yet when he speaks, he is not retaliatory or gruff, like she had expected he would be.

"I'm sorry," he says. His voice is soft, empty-sounding—a respectful levelness. "You're right. I guess I'll go check in with the sheriff."

He moves ahead of her, faster now, somewhat bent at the neck, his broad shoulders hunched a little. She supposes he was only trying to be friendly. And if he was trying to be a little too friendly? Well, now is certainly not the time for that, but she doesn't know that he

was trying to be too friendly, now does she? She has never been good at recognizing things like that. All she has is a memory: him asking her to dance, many years ago, at a high school ball. A very typical high school dance: bloodred punch in plastic bowls with the Family Dollar stickers still on them and half-dead teachers watching the teens nearly dryhumping from the relative safety of the bleachers. She had had no date, and all of her friends had had dates and had been dancing, but still she had said no to him. He hadn't even had the beard then. He had been good-looking, or at least good-looking enough for a high school dance. She had simply said no, not knowing why, not feeling she needed a reason. She had watched his cheeks slacken, his mouth part, at this refusal. But it had been the eyebrows that had done it for her: rather than dart up his forehead in surprise, which she could easily have accepted—which she had even expected—those eyebrows had furrowed in indignation, a little squiggly line like a mordent appearing between them, just over the bridge of his nose. And then he had simply nodded and walked away, hunched, quiet, but to this day she still remembers the outraged conceitedness of those eyebrows, a look betokening childlike neediness, perhaps even a potential for danger. He had wanted her then and hadn't gotten her, and to this day she still does not look at him when they pass near each other on Main Street, to this day she avoids his line at the Shop 'n Save. But now, suddenly, here he is. She allows, though, that maybe she doesn't understand him. Maybe this is an opportunity—not to understand, not really, but at least to smooth things out, to put a salve on decades-old wounds. Why she desires this, she does not know, just as she did not know why she turned him down all those years ago. The only common denominator she can recognize is a desire to remain aloof, to be seen as a nonentity, to be forgotten. Perhaps she does not wish to exist in anyone's memories, one way or another.

“Hey,” she says.

He turns to look back at her. She watches the big body twisting at the waist, the hairy head swiveling, moving just slowly enough that he can feign a lack of eagerness.

“If they’ve found anything or if there are any updates, you’ll let me know?” she says. Her tone is friendly enough, cordial without being inviting.

She imagines he smiles a small smile at her question, but she can’t make out his face.

“Of course,” he says. “If there’s anything to report, I’ll be back in a flash.”

Then he turns back into the woods. She watches him march forward, his head still down a little, one hand thrusting the flashlight out before himself like a sword and the other pushing tree branches out of his face. She watches him a while, her tiny frame simply standing there, taking in the retreating sight of him and the smell of a nearby someone’s cigar and the tinny ring of a flask being uncapped somewhere out there in the dark and then, moments later, being closed again.

She walks along for a minute. A tree branch scrapes along her cheek and she puts her hand there and holds it up to her eyes to see if there’s any blood, but there isn’t. It just hurts. An inkblack rermouse almost indistinguishable from the skies above it screeches above her head from one gently swaying tree to the next. Someone’s cellphone issues forth an obnoxious ringtone, something brassy and halfgarbled, and the owner fumbles it from his pants pocket and silences it, apologizing in whispers, as if they are all at the movies.

She comes up alongside Old Man Turner, a squat toad of a man in farmer’s overalls and a dark plaid shirt hobbling along very slowly through the wilderness. He wears a revolver on his hip in a polished maroon holster engraved with a howling wolf, a cloud-encircled moon; the pearl handle of the revolver winks softly each time it catches the errant



beam of a flashlight. Don Turner is one of those smalltown old men that everyone, even Julie, knows and likes. He fought in the Second World War, which means that everyone gets to pretend to know him, a matter of awed deference, both because he fought in the last completely unimpeachable global conflict and because he has persisted for so long after it with nearly all of his faculties intact.

“I swear,” she says to him, by way of greeting. “One of these branches is gonna take somebody’s eye out before this is over.”

“Whazzat?” he says. She knows she need not repeat herself, that she need only give him an extra second for her words to catch up with him. When they do, she sees his big square head nodding, bobbing backwards and forwards on his neckless body. “Ayuh,” he says. “Good thing we got two of em. Eyes, I mean. Anyways, awful thing. This boy. Awful thing. But we’ll find him. We’ll find him.”

“You think so?” she says quietly. She doesn’t want the boy’s father to hear her doubting this idea, if he is somewhere close by.

“Course I do,” he says, after a second. He nods, and his big fleshy head swivels stiffly so that he can look at her with old man’s eyes that, she thinks, he must believe are wise and reassuring. He probably likes to play this role, the wizened sage assuring the troubled lass. But she does not mind obliging him if he does. “Got to. Got to. I know boys isn’t so much like boys was back along, back when I was coming up. Every boy it seemed like was a Scout or had been or was gonna be. A boy could go three day into the woods with his rifle and come home with a half-dozen rabbits slung on him or dragging a deer and Mother and Father wouldn’t raise no fuss about it. I coulda fought a Sasquatch by the time I was knee-high to a grasshopper.”

“Really,” she says.

“Well, maybe I forget one or two of the details,” he allows. He winks at her—the man’s moist old eye labors in the reopening and finally manages it—and does not do so untowardly, as some of the older men will do from time to time at the Harding Café, if she has made the mistake of being too pleasant with them. “Point is, though. Even if maybe Kris’s boy ain’t that kind of boy, he’ll make it fine two-three nights in the woods. It’s summertime in Maine. Worst that could happen is some big mosquito carry him off.”

She thinks that this is not the worst thing that could have happened to a seven-year-old boy, even in the safest state in America. She can envision circumstances far more calamitous: the boy ripped apart by a black bear, or broken open at the bottom of a cliff, or gone soft and bloated at the bottom of some ravine, or, in a week’s time, after their paltry party has failed to find him, dead of dehydration at the foot of a pine tree, his mouth and eyes agape and his shock of black hair sticky with the sap dripping down the trunk. And this is assuming that the boy is in the woods at all. The only evidence is that the backyard in which he had been playing abuts the woods, as does practically any yard north of Portland. Imagining that for some reason he wandered so far afield of his home that he became lost in the wilderness is, she feels, wishful thinking. She has ideas about what really happened. She can imagine the worst things.

She thinks of the worst thing that ever happened to her, although it is not of much relevance here, would not at all explain the disappearance of a child. This was in her first year at Camden College, a few days after her first college boyfriend—a braindead Brown Bear tight end with an insufferably peppy Minnesota accent—had dumped her unexpectedly. He had said that she was too emotionally distant, which she imagined was really his way of

hunting for more frequent sex elsewhere. Oh, well; she had not particularly bemoaned the loss. Maybe he had really meant what he said, though, at least a little bit, about her being cold. Sometimes, back then, she had at least wondered about it. But then, just a few days later, she had had her dream. She had been in the forest, in the dream, though she had not been lost or looking for someone who was lost. She was simply strolling through the endless Maine woods, her small and dream-befuddled legs carrying her slowly along a hilly ridge lined with poplars and pines standing tall and unbent and equidistant as infantrymen. In the dream, she had been curiously clearheaded, her vision sharp and discerning. She could see the puffy, ridged cocoon of a caterpillar twirling a pregnant dance at the end of a tree branch fifty feet away. She could see a flash of white as the tail end of a hare phased through the trees like something loosed by a magician. She could see droplets of blood and gore trailing before her along the ridge, cherry-red and fiercely odorful, and she followed them without fear through dense woodland, her small hands pushing aside branches, leaves, spiderwebs bearing bulbous black spiders quivering with hunger, with secret and nightmarish knowledge. She moved slowly, carefully sidestepping the gobbets, the rank red puddles stinking of tin. After ages, the ridge levelled out, sinking steadily into the earth until, following it downhill, she found herself in a quiet flatland sparse of tree but awash with springtime flowers, enormous thorny shrubberies, a field of grasses both green and a pale, alien blue. She inhaled deeply but all there was was the harsh smell of death. Up ahead, she could, with a dream's illogical abruptness, hear something eating, its teeth stupidly furious and unceasing. She moved around a tree, one last tree, a thin white sapling marked by a dripping handprint, and saw a figure. He sat there upon a large flat rock in the center of a clearing, his features partly in profile, his body twice as tall as hers and extremely thin and gray, the skin as ashen as the

long and spattered beard drooping all the way from his face to the ground. The last several feet of the beard were curled between his dirty feet like a rattlesnake. He bent forward from the rock on which he was seated, his back curved and his many vertebrae poking out from the taut skin, what she thought looked like an entire piano's worth of keys trying to escape this mad corpse. It was the face of a man at the top of this mostly man's body, but the skin there, too, was inhumanly gray—gray and severely wrinkled, like a small flake of ash curling into nothingness as it escapes a fire—though she could not see all of his face, buried as it was into the gigantic slab of meat in his hands. His eyes, when they looked up from the meat and saw her standing there at the edge of the clearing, were entirely dead, the being behind them so far lapsed into nothingness that those eyes seemed to negate the very idea of a soul not simply in itself but anywhere at all beneath the stars. And, looking into those eyes, sinking without warning into that deep emptiness just behind them, she could suddenly feel it mounting, the high endless note rising and rising in the still forest air, in her own constricting throat, about to burst out of her like steam screaming out of a kettle at the moment it simply can't be held a single second longer—the *fear*, the fear that had been nonexistent all along but was now going to hit her all at once, with the instant ferocity of madness. The thing opened his mouth, as if he possibly remembered speech—and then, somehow, he did speak, the growl of the words gurgling out from deep inside his throat, coming out from the mouth with anguished thrusts of his wet, red tongue.

“I forgot what I'm supposed to do,” he said.

When she had realized who it was, Julie had woken up screaming so loudly that her roommate had screamed also and, for good measure, rolled right off her bed and onto the floor. Then they had comforted each other, her roommate rubbing her bruised elbow and

stuttering and being unnecessarily apologetic and Julie embarrassed, aghast, and practically without words. She rarely dreamed as it was, and now here, out of the blue, had come this vision of utter madness. What to make of it? Years later, she does not know. Perhaps it had no meaning, then or now, or perhaps it was simply the residual slime of her mind, coaxed into semiexistence by the right combination of happenstances in her day-to-day life. Her roommate, resting a hesitant and birdlike hand upon Julie's shoulder, had asked her if she had wanted to talk about it, but Julie had shaken her head, clamped her lips tighter together until they had formed a thin, bloodless line. Upon hearing about the creepy man-thing, her roommate would have simply brought up Julie's recent boyfriend, thrust too much dizzying pop psychology at her until Julie really did go insane, but it had been more than that unwelcome prospect that had kept her silent, had made her unwilling to share. There just hadn't seemed the words for it, the right words to explain why she had been so frightened, and she hadn't wanted to get it only half-right, or even mostly right. Her roommate would have nodded, believing that she really did understand, but her roommate, or really most people, would have been frightened by the wrong things. The horror had not been the issue, the horror was never the issue. The scary woods, the monstrosity, the dripping meat—the violence of these images had hidden the deeper truth, the sadness underlying the horror. Some incontrovertible hopelessness for which, all these years later, she still lacks the right words. The closest analogy she has ever constructed in her many times working through this occurrence, both alone and in the nearly equally hopeless prison-cell of her therapist's office, is that the dream, and more specifically still the act of looking into those eyes and hearing those terrible words, had been like living forever, waiting eons for some ultimate truth at the end of that forever, only to find out at the very end of time that there wasn't any ultimate

truth, that it all meant nothing. But she might as well have said that her mother had forgotten to get her a cake for her birthday party, for all the help such an analogy or any analogy offered her. And forget telling anyone her flash of recognition—though the identity of the figure in the dream was perhaps the whole crux of the matter, it also reduced the entire thing to an overplayed, even banal joke. Her dream was, is, all the more inexpressible because it is not just terrifying to her, it is also evidence of her deep lack of creativity, her simpleminded life hopelessly without any real subtext, any meaning. The identity of that figure, the stupidity of it, turns her own life into the empty nothingness she had seen in the deep dark wells of that figure's eyes. So, forget it. It is a horror that replays in her mind from time to time, remembered at the slightest provocation, but the one thing it proved to her then, and indeed proves to her now—its single silver lining—is that she can at least *feel*, and feel strongly. She is not completely cold. The echo of your own screams waking you does not so easily go away.

All of this passes through her head in a matter of seconds. She has gotten very good at shorthanding all of this, at condensing all of it to a flash of half-formed images swirling through her mind like something sucked through a drain; it never really existed so much in words to begin with, of course. She pulls herself back to the here and now, to the woods of Harding, Maine, and the boy lost for over two days. To the civilian search-party, the sheriff and two other officers thrown into tonight's motley mix. Nearly forty souls this night, most likely almost all of them desperate to make use of this precious opportunity, to feel useful at this juncture in their otherwise quite dull and morally trivial lives. She cannot think of an event without free alcohol that would otherwise attract so many people.

She realizes she is being cynical and then, on the heels of that, that she has not yet responded to Old Man Turner. He does not deserve her cynicism, certainly. He is known to

have killed so many Germans in Europe that he is surely incapable of doing anything except that it is out of total purity or total impurity. Her own father, laconic even by Maine standards, had once told her that the act of killing completely flattens a person's intentions for anything that he does; thereafter, even a loaf of bread purchased at the Shop 'n Save becomes either his family's salvation or a powerplay in which he steals it from the hands of a lesser family. Or maybe both, depending. There are no longer any shades, no moral grayness. There is really not very much morality left at all, in fact, or even thought. Finally, the survivalist rat race of life has the spotlight thrown completely on it, and all petty shadows disappear. A man sees life and death in everything, thereafter, that he does.

Julie isn't sure that this is all true, but her father had shot himself shortly before her twenty-fifth birthday, so maybe it had at least been true for him.

For Old Man Turner, she imagines it might be the same. They will save this boy's life, or the boy will save himself, or the boy will die. The motivations of the townspeople are probably so insignificant to him as to not exist at all. If Old Man Turner is out here, it is because he truly means to help, if he can.

She wonders, not for the first time that night, why she herself is out here. What would it mean to her to find the boy alive? What, if anything, would it mean to find him dead? What does she want out of this experience, and *should* she want anything?

"I like your point-of-view," she says at last, more to quiet her own mind than anything else. "You sound so sure."

"Eh," he says. "Got turned around a time or two myself in here as a boy, too. The woods spit you out soon enough."

This she does not like the sound of. The woods spitting someone out. The personification is unexpected, eerie. She suddenly feels as if the whole forest is breathing, one great heaving inhalation preparing to abruptly eject them all; she imagines she can hear the hum of it simmering beneath the crunch of their shoes on the forest floor, the rattle of batteries in the flashlights, the raspy click of lighters as people prepare more cigarettes for their weary lungs. She imagines the forest's enormous eyes, somewhere far in the distance, watching with some kind of evil glee as the townspeople stumble about the dark.

"I suppose that must be right," she murmurs. "Hey, listen, I'm gonna go say hello to Charlotte. You take care of yourself, Mr. Turner."

"Always do," he says. "If there's anything to report, I'll keep you in the loop."

*If there's anything to report.* It's what Bill had said. She supposes it must just be the thing to say, this is so like some wartime operation, some guerilla offensive done under cover of night.

"Thanks," she says.

Then she veers unceremoniously leftward, leaving Old Man Turner behind and moving ever deeper into the trees. She had said she was going to see Charlotte Dawes, the town librarian, with whom she is as good a friend as she is with anyone, but this is not really true. If she sees Charlotte, she will certainly say hello, maybe even offer up a joking apology for the half-dozen overdue books stacked up on the kitchen counter back in her apartment, but, in actuality, she has tired of Old Man Turner, his flat Yankee optimism. Nothing against Old Man Turner. Really. She just tires of most people quickly, what with their unnecessary and seemingly affected peculiarities, their plagiaristic sentiments, their arbitrary interests. Her decision to commit herself to a group of this size for an entire night came as a surprise



to herself, though the quiet resolve of the group and the way its purpose deters run-of-the-mill socializing mitigates this somewhat. She had made the decision very quickly, too; there was that. A couple of the deputies had come into the café earlier that day and milled about the counter drinking coffee and conversing in hushed tones, and when she'd refilled their cups, she had heard them discussing the third night's search party. It seemed that another crew of cops meant to lead a group in from the Moosis Trail shortly after the shift change at three o'clock in the afternoon. Julie, who worked the breakfast-and-lunch shift, had realized that she would be free just in time, and the idea had immediately begun to burrow into her mind like some kind of industrious tick. During the rest of her shift she'd envisioned rushing home after work, grabbing the Smith and Wesson tactical flashlight that she kept on the tiny oak nightstand beside her perpetually unmade twin bed, throwing on her running clothes and dousing her exposed arms and neck in bug spray, hurrying back through the town while her rundown little Volkswagen coughed black smoke into the grille of the car behind her, slipping in amongst the group of murmuring Mainers while they massed at the head of the trail. Still she does not know what had appealed to her about any of this, if anything. Perhaps she had simply passed it around in her head so many times during her dull shift at work, the series of images swiveling around in her brain like an ice cube tumbling about some drunk's perpetually swirled glass, that it had come to seem inevitable, not a potentiality but instead a plan. She knows this about herself, assumes it of others, too, who lead largely empty lives: the first thing to pop into her head usually becomes her next action if it is remotely within reason. Why not? Spend enough time alone, and you can see the arbitrary rat race as clearly as someone who's blown away four dozen Germans. You might as well do anything.

Whatever brought her here, she is here now. She walks forward through the woods, breathing in the cloistered forest air, the burning scent of very strong pine. She looks around. They long ago left the trail behind, and there's nothing ahead of them now but more and more woods, sprawling northwards until upper Maine, until the County, until Canada, until the Saint Lawrence River four hundred miles to the north. Where between here and there will they find this boy? Where between here and there will they find his body? Where between here and there will they realize they won't find anything?

Such miserable questions, all of them. Even finding him alive, he won't be exactly the same boy as went into the woods, will he be? Not after he has been through so much fear of death. Will he become like her father, flattened and tired and forever seeing the shadow of whatever hides behind the corner thrown large against the wall? Or will the boy's spirit be larger, sturdier, than her father's had been? Sometimes the innocence of youth is known to keep evil things at bay or at least dilute their strongest effects. She has heard this somewhere. Maybe the boy will be mostly okay. But he won't be exactly the same.

This is stupid thinking, Nietzschean gobbledygook run amok in her head. No one is ever exactly the same after anything at all that happens to them! There is no need to fall down crying about it, to philosophize it until it is all totally torn open, all loose nerve endings, mystery so deep the meanings become banal and counterproductive, something like the futility of finding meaning at all. The hopelessness of the figure in her dream. There is no use thinking about all of it so deeply. If she came out here to do anything, it certainly wasn't to think about so many troubling things. A missing child is enough.

She runs a hand through her hair, brushes the frizz and sweat back across her scalp, as if she might by doing so shove all these useless thoughts deep into the back of her mind.

Her hair has gotten long this year. It goes almost to her waist, and many times on this trek through the woods it has snagged on a branch, or the tickle of a strand against the back of her neck has caused her to envision blackflies there, or a thick green caterpillar loosed from the end of a tree limb to wiggle across her flesh. She has often found herself slapping the back of her neck, the exposed skin of her forearms. She does this now as something slithers into the deep crook of her collarbone, and then she stops and shines the flashlight into the palm of her hand to see if there is anything dead there. Of course, nothing. Just sweat, then, or her mind playing tricks on her, going crazy in the humid closeness of the woods. She imagines she would look quite crazy, slapping at herself every five seconds, if anyone were able to see her do it.

Though maybe they can—she can see some of the people closest to her, she realizes. At least, shapes that she can recognize well enough. Silhouettes of a small town, their occasional shadows thrown fat and large alongside them.

She has a sudden urge to be rid of them all, to be more fully alone even than the cover of darkness provides, so she quickens her pace and crashes forward into the woods. A few flashlight beams catch her, and she darts from out of them, as if the light burns her skin. She rubs more sweat from her brow. She can abruptly hear her own ragged breathing. The vague anguish in it.

The second she is past them all, deeper into the woods than anyone else, she realizes that it was a mistake for her to be here. The darkest fear that anyone can have, that you yourself are cursed, is one she holds, so secret and buried it is sometimes unknown even to her, forgotten like traumas are sometimes forgotten, but she knows it now and feels it now. Her father, dead. Her mother, gone soon after. Her roommate, the roommate she had never

quite been able to handle, whose grief had spilled over into her as easily as water, sideways in the bottom of the closet, the bedsheet triple-wrapped beneath her jaw. That's where it all had started—if I could have comforted her... If I could have comforted her, then I could have known how to save the rest of them—I could have saved myself....

What will she do to this boy by being here? What is she going to find in the dark?

She decides that she will look around the next tree, that she will see what is at the base of it, that if it's nothing at all, she will turn around and go back and head in for the night, and this will have been all of her contribution to this misbegotten enterprise.

She looks, and it cannot be put into words.

Or else, it can be, but there should not be a language for it, no species that can invent language should also at once be capable of the atrocity on the ground before her.

She finds the boy, as she must, forging further ahead into dark than anyone else, than Bills Wells the thwarted lover, than Old Man Turner the killer of men, than the sheriff and the deputies and all the would-be do-gooders of the world. He is hers to find, she who is accursed, she who has always been accursed.

For the few seconds before she begins to shout, he is all hers.

## THE JOURNAL REVISITED

Preparing to move far, far away, how surprised I was to find you among my belongings. I thought I must surely have thrown you out, but here you are, little black book, at the very bottom of a cardboard box. My father, my poor father, would be so happy to know that I kept you, if he were still alive. But I can't imagine it was a conscious decision on my part. It is a happy accident, or maybe an unhappy accident, that has returned us to each other.

I forgot all about you, I see, practically as soon as I walked onto the grounds of that school. That makes sense, of course. I had a lot to deal with, so much more than I expected—school, friendship, lovers. But then again, really I am talking about Natalie, first-year roommate Natalie, who thought that she would carry on with school anyway, and whose presence slowly infected me like a poison. That room claimed another. It nearly took me, too.

No, I don't believe in any of that stuff. Not really. It is a disservice to the victims of the evil of this world to bring in nonsense. Natalie had a hard life. So did I, whether I wanted to admit it to myself or not. And I didn't. Not then, and hardly even now. How will you persist, after all, knowing that your life is cruel to you? If you admit something like that, isn't it game over?

But, of course, I see now that you must reckon with all this, this unceasing hardship, or else you cannot truly cope. Yes, I've learned a thing or two in this life, even if it does nothing to lessen the pain. I guess it's not about lessening the pain, either. It's about lessening *others'* pain, and learning to live with your own. Even knowing you will fail at both.

I don't know what I'm talking about. I couldn't tell you why I picked this up again, except that I felt some compulsion to finish what I'd started all those years ago.

I can't really do that so well, though. I'd intended this to be a journal of my college days, but college seems forever ago now. I guess I could focus on Natalie and everything that happened with her, but that's not really a story, and I'm no storyteller besides. She thought she was ready for school, even despite the death of her mother, but she wasn't ready. She wasn't ready for anything, and life didn't allow her to figure out how to be ready. Instead, she wept incessantly. During the night, of course, such that I heard her cries even in my dreams, but even during the day, too. Once right in the middle of our introductory sociology class, the only class we ever shared, she was suddenly taken by a fit of sobbing, and she had to run right out of the room.

I didn't know what to do. I ate meals with her, I talked with her. I asked that she focus on her dreams, her art, her future—that this is what her mother would have wanted of her. I accompanied her to the frosted glass door of a school psychiatrist and waited an hour in the lobby for her return. But she went only that one time, and then only because I had urged her to. Afterwards, she seemed almost worse, as if in finding no solace in that place of refuge she felt herself completely without hope. That's what I figured, anyway. I was often, then, trying to get inside her head.

My mistake.

Then one day I came back and found her in the bottom of the closet. There was no note. Who would she have written to? Not to me. I had been of no help. Not to her father, whom she loved too much to offer up parting words.

I couldn't reach her. I couldn't find the boy in time. It seems I am cursed to come in the wake of these things, to be a witness only. Of course I do not like it.

They asked me questions at the college. After it happened, I mean. One afternoon I found myself at a long table in a room I'd never been in before. The things they asked me were simply humiliating. "Was there any indication that she might do this?" "What had she been saying over the previous few days?" "Had you and her ever talked about death?" I felt as if they wanted to pin the incident on me. Or maybe everything then made me feel that way. Maybe I did feel to blame. Maybe I was. Had I not seen how bad she was, how already-gone? What kind of a friend was I, not to sense the full dimensions of that pain?

In a way, the dead boy is not so bad, even though he looked far worse than Natalie had, leaning a little in the bottom of the closet, her pale face reclined, as if she were only napping. The boy looked far worse, but at least I did not know him. At least I was not responsible. Though I wonder now if maybe I had ventured out sooner, perhaps I might have found him in time. If I had gone out into the dark more quickly, as soon as I knew, then maybe he might have been found before he bled out. Probably not, of course. But did I try as hard as I might have? Did I? Did I back then?

And of course you get to thinking about all the things you don't try hard enough at, about all the people who suffer and die because of your laziness, all your failings, the children who make your electronics, the enslaved people mining your minerals, the workers who toil into despair to give you the things you never even needed. If you think you are a good person, you are a fool. You should hate yourself, whoever you are, as I do.

I guess we do good things, too, though. Maybe we do. I don't know.

I had a dream the other night. This was three nights ago, about a week after I found that boy's body. I thought I would dream about him, like I had dreamt a hundred dreams of

Natalie after she died, of her asking me for help, of her walking around a corner and not being there once I'd followed her around it, but I never dreamt of the boy at all.

Instead, I dreamt I was in the woods, in those old, old woods, walking, following a trail of blood. I could feel the blood squelching in between my toes, I could feel its coldness on the undersides of my feet.

I walked what felt like a long time without much happening. Dreams are almost always like stories in that they're condensed down to the action, the good bits, as incomprehensible as those might be, but this dream wasn't like other dreams, and I walked a long time with the blood in between my toes, not much happening except for that walking, the walking and the premonition ringing in my brain that there would be something at the end of all this.

And at last I found that old man again. He sat still upon the ancient stone, crouched like a gargoyle. His hands were wrapped around a dripping piece of meat and he was trying to eat it. But now his teeth were all gone and he could only rip at it with his bloodied gums. There were enormous tears in his eyes, and soon enough there were enormous tears in my own.

As soon as I started to cry, he looked up at me. He took the meat out of his mouth and cocked his head like a dog. His beard dripped and shook a little with his movements, like some scared thing was hiding inside of it.

"I'm so sorry," I said. "Please let me help you."

"I forgot what I'm supposed to do," the man said, as he had before. He put the meat down on the stone and covered his face with his hands, and I could hear him sobbing. "The pain... I've forgotten everything because of the pain. This is all I know how to do anymore."



I started to walk towards him. I didn't know then, nor do I know now, what I was going to do. I'd like to think I was going to comfort him. But then I woke up.

I don't know. That's just something that happened.

Something else that happened happened just after I found the boy. That very night. I yelled for help. I screamed. No one was there and then suddenly everyone was there. I could hear them—their groans, their cries. Someone vomited. And of course the boy's father was down there on the ground, holding him, completely overcome with grief.

I know what you're wondering. What happened to the boy? But you already know, deep down you already do, and I'm not trying to tell you about that. Imagine what you will, what you hate to think but are thinking anyway, and you will be right. Whatever you might think of me, I haven't the heart to describe it.

Well, I don't know how much time passed, but after a while the boy's father was helped up by the sheriff.

"Easy, easy," said the sheriff, as if the man might fall over. "Easy does it."

The boy's father walked a few paces, and then he came to an old fallen tree and he sat down on it. He put his head in his hands. Everyone was watching him and pretending not to. They looked at all these terrible forms in the dark.

No one else was doing it, so I walked over towards where the boy's father was sitting.

And I probably know what you're thinking now, too. You're thinking that the old man in my dream was this man, that I'd repurposed that old dream to process these events, and that, while I wasn't able to do anything for the old man in my dream, maybe I was able to do something for the dead boy's father—or maybe I didn't, and the guilt of that is why I dreamt about failing to comfort or help the old man in the dream.

That sounds like a nice story, one with an arc, one that makes sense. But that's not really what happened. I *did* go over to the boy's father, and I *did* sit down beside him, but I knew even before I did it that I would not comfort him, that I would not comfort myself. I knew this then, and I certainly know it now, knowing that that old man in the dream isn't the boy's father. He is not just the boy's father. He is also me.

He is also *you*.

Do you understand? No one is coming to help you. Or maybe some fool will try, but they'll be too little too late. Always. The damage has been done.

And you're already gone.