

But as she turns the page, her finger moves across a box that might as well have said, “Needed: Alice Traille.”

It’s an ad from a daycare called Coyote Kids, seeking a part-time childcare associate with a clean background check, and the ever-promising phrase, “no experience required.” Alice holds her finger on top of the ad and pictures herself sitting in a rocking chair, reading “Mother Goose” to a formation of sedate, toe-headed babies, older employees peeking their heads in the door, marveling at the new hire’s quiet finesse, the calming sweetness of her voice.

She dials the number on the page, cracking her knuckles while it rings at the other end.

“Coyote Kids,” a gravelly voice answers.

“Hi. Yes. I’m calling about the job listed in *The Citizen*.”

There is silence on the line for a moment, broken only by the receptionist’s heavy breathing.

“What?” she finally says, but Alice isn’t sure if she’s asking “what” about what she just said, or “what” as in what job.

“The childcare associate position,” Alice clarifies.

“Yeah, what about it?” the woman says.

“I’m sorry. My name’s Alice. I’m calling about the position. I’m interested in working for you,” Alice says, now pacing about her kitchen.

“Well, you wouldn’t be working for me. You’d be working for Jeremy.”

Alice waits, expecting more, but nothing comes. “May I schedule an interview?” she ventures.

“What was your name again?”

Alice tells her.

“Got any experience?”

She pauses for a moment, looking at the ad again. Perhaps she misread.

“Well, I’m a mother, if that means anything,” she says. The pitch of her voice rises like the tipping forward of a wheelbarrow.

“You can come in Tuesday at three,” the woman says. “Jeremy will talk to you then.”

The call disconnects, and Alice looks at her phone in disbelief. Just like that—an interview. A miracle.

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Coyote Kids Daycare is in Quailwood, off Stockdale and Coffee, equidistant from the park and the dried out, sun-baked bed of what used to be the Kern River. The building is small and square and unexciting, but seems to conceal a promise. Alice goes in through the glass door in the front at 2:45, readjusting the strap of her purse as she

enters. She's wearing heels and a black dress with a blazer, her hair teased out and wavy. An atypical outfit for a woman who's been working at a shoe cleaning kiosk. Two young girls are sitting in the waiting room, using crayons to carve holes in their coloring books. At the counter, a very fat, red-headed woman sits behind a panel of glass, typing things into a computer. Her nametag says *Beverly*. Alice stands in front of her for a minute without being acknowledged.

"Hi," she finally says, clearing her throat.

The woman looks up from her screen over a pair of spectacles that seem impossibly tiny on her face. She looks Alice up and down, but still says nothing.

"I'm supposed to have an interview with Jeremy," Alice says. "It's at three, so I'm a little early."

"Mmmkay," the woman says, and Alice recognizes her rasp from the phone conversation. "Have a seat."

Alice sits down and watches the two girls color for a while. The one who appears to be younger has switched to reading, now, or at least flipping through the pages of a picture book, mumbling to herself and making theatrical expressions. There is something vaguely familiar about this girl, as if they might have known each other before, as if they might have shared a secret, which is a feeling that Alice can't entirely account for. The girl is wearing lipstick and a necklace that appears quite grown up. This is curious, but Alice doesn't think of it for long; she's thinking of ways to nail the interview. A firm

handshake, but not too firm. A little feminine. She can tell him she's been a mother. Is a mother.

A tall, thick-necked man leans into the room from a side door and looks at her. His hair dangles down to his shoulders in dozens of red coils that look like rusted springs.

"Alice?" he says.

"That's me." She stands up and moves toward him and shakes his hand, displaying her best ingratiating smile.

"I'm Jeremy," he says with a smile in return.

The two leave the waiting area and walk down a carpeted hallway with rooms on either side. The doors are decorated with kiddy things: hand-shaped paper cutouts with zebras and parakeets and eagles drawn on them; endearing little poems about mommies and daddies and insects written in colored pencil; encouraging banners call-out boxes mingled in with the artwork. *Be creative! Treat others as you want to be treated.*

Friends are for sharing. As glib as they seem, the aphorisms seem welcoming to Alice.

It's been a long time since her life has been at rest in any kind of equilibrium, and the guileless phrases on these walls, the antics that she imagines occur behind each classroom door, even Jeremy's unorthodox red perm, all of these things seem to foretell of joy and fairness and balance. This is the place she wants to be.

Jeremy's office is at the end of the hallway. He motions for her to sit in a leather chair in front of his desk. "Coffee?" He points toward a shelf with a coffee pot and some

foam cups.

“Um, no thanks,” she says. “I don’t want to get jittery.”

“Bagel?”

“Oh, no. I’m really fine, thank you.”

“So, tell me about yourself, Alice.”

She shifts in her chair a little, looks up at the ceiling. “Well, let’s see. I’ve not worked with children before in a professional capacity, but I am a proud parent.” She pauses and licks her lips, which are suddenly quite dry. “I’ve worked in customer service mostly, so I can—

“What is this?” Jeremy says, but he’s looking at his computer.

“I’m sorry?”

He reels back away from the screen and laughs. “Oh, nothing.” He pounds the desk with his fist, still laughing. “It’s not you. Linda just emailed me one of those screamer mazes. Gets me every time. Sorry. You were saying.”

“Um,” Alice pauses, sitting up straighter. “I was just going to say that I’m a fast learner, and I really have a soft spot for kids.”

“You like kids?” Jeremy asks.

“Yes. I do very much,” Alice says.

Jeremy is looking at his computer again.

It seems to be some kind of implicit rule around here—that you’re always

supposed to be looking at a screen and never at the person in front of you.

“Yeah, well, they can be . . . you know. They can be pretty ridiculous.”

Alice chooses to ignore this remark, not sure if he meant ridiculous as in ridiculously funny, or ridiculous, period.

“How old’s your kid?” Jeremy asks.

“She’s, ah . . . she’s really very young still.” The image of the hospital handout comes to mind. *Making the Most of the Time*. She remembers how little time there was then and decides to lie instead. “She’s six. Months, that is. Almost seven months.”

“You know employees here get free childcare as part of the package,” Jeremy says.

“Oh, well that wouldn’t be necessary. I had a—she has a babysitter. A girl in the neighborhood. Is babysitting her.”

Jeremy nods. “Well, like I said, it’s good that you like kids. More than I can say for some employees, which is part of the reason there’s a job opening in the first place, if you know what I mean.”

Alice nods her head slowly. Is this some kind of veiled threat?

“Anything in your past we need to know about?” he asks.

“Excuse me?”

“Misdemeanors, felonies, drug charges, stuff like that?”

“No sir.”

This makes Jeremy look away from his computer.

“Now don’t start calling me ‘sir.’ I don’t like to feel old, ‘kay?”

“Right. Sorry.”

“You know what?” He stands up and walks over to the coffee maker, interrupting his own rhetorical question. “Sure you don’t want any coffee?”

Alice says yes, she’s sure.

Jeremy takes his cup from beneath the machine and stands in front of a poster on his wall: a panoramic of the Grand Canyon and something about Vision with a capital V. For someone in the middle of a job interview, he stares at the photograph for an unnaturally long time.

“You wonder why a man is running a daycare, don’t you?”

Alice didn’t wonder before, but now she does. She feigns surprise. Who, me?

“Someone with *maternal instincts* should be doing it, I suppose.” He makes his way back to his desk and sits down. “You know I used to be a base jumper? Pro-level.”

“Wow,” Alice says. She has no idea what base jumping is. Perhaps something to do with aviation. Or baseball?

“Yeah. It’s silly, I know.” He heaves out a long sigh and looks around the office.

“Anyway, that was a long time ago. My sister’s always owned this . . . business. Next thing you know, here I am.”

Alice tosses her hands up in mock sympathy. She will agree and sympathize with

anything he says. Literally anything. She needs this job—wants it. More than she’s wanted anything in a long time. She decides to remind him how much she loves children. She says whatever she can do to take some of the burden off of his shoulders, she’ll be more than happy to do. She says these things with sincerity.

Jeremy puts down his coffee cup. “I like you, Alice,” he finally says. “I think you’ll do good here.”

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CHAPTER II

Alice grew up in Constance, Alabama, a rural municipality in the southern part of the state where the newspaper came out twice a month. The countryside was a quiet patchwork of farms and farmhouses as old as the trees and nameless gravel lanes slithering out through the forests without destination, beyond fire towers or strange, lonely electric stations. The town proper rested on a wide plateau toward the western side of the county, made up of a few small businesses, a grocery store, some restaurants, a Methodist chapel, and a Church of Christ. Every few years, a mammoth tornado would rip through and flatten half the buildings in Constance, and the townspeople would rebuild them like children building a sandcastle over and over again in the surf. The stores always looked new.

This was where Alice met Simon, in the summer of 2004. He was living with his grandmother, caring for her while she died slowly in a musty recliner in her den, buried in *Reader's Digests* and pill bottles. Simon claimed to be from Constance, and maybe he was, but to Alice, he always seemed bigger and more interesting than anything Constance could've yielded. He didn't belong, and she liked that about him.

They dated secretly for almost a year. Those were exhilarating times—slipping out through the kitchen door at night and climbing into his truck that waited, idling in the street, or telling her mother she was going to visit Nanna at the old folks' home but really ending up in Simon's grandmother's basement, alone with him. A half-truth.

All of her life, Alice's mother had given very stern orders about love: dating was for fast women; courting is what any daughter of hers would do. There wasn't much sense to this, but Alice later attributed it to her own father's negligence. She'd never known him. Supposedly left for another woman when Alice was an infant. Courting was the Christian thing to do. Sit in the living room and play checkers with your betrothed and discuss the possibility of a marital relationship while your nervous mother eavesdrops from the next room, or the same room. Alice didn't want any part of that. She was an adult, able to make her own decisions about love. Simon didn't go to church anyway. He said he was agnostic, which sounded intelligent to Alice, though she wasn't quite sure.

At any rate, the day it all came out was a week after her 24th birthday. It was hot that day. So hot that you could see mirages of black liquid floating above the low points in the road. She went with her mother, Debbie, to the Dairy Queen in town and they sat in a booth with a view of Main Street, which didn't amount to much. An auto repair shop with used tires stacked up in towers against the brick façade, an antique store, Greg Pinkerton's Mixed Martial Arts Studio, and the gravestone emporium run by the mayor's

son. Her mother had already picked out her gravestone there, a three-foot black granite piece with a dove carved into it, signifying the Holy Spirit.

When Alice told her that she was in love with Simon Agee, and that they'd been dating secretly for a while now, she didn't respond. Only shook her head and let her Blizzard start melting on the table.

"Mom," Alice said. "Aren't you going to eat your blizzard?"

"Are you a virgin?" she asked.

Alice looked down at the table, at her mother's hands, at the varicose veins wrapped around her tendons like thin green snakes under the skin. She couldn't say yes, and she couldn't lie about it in a way that would be convincing. Her mother knew her too well. Alice also knew her mother was aware of Simon's plans to move to California—a place that was, to her, a great menagerie of freaks and movie stars and criminals. This was partly her reason for disliking him. He was adventurous, and therefore dangerous.

What Alice didn't know right then was that her mother would stand up quietly and leave Dairy Queen without her. That she would either have to walk seven miles home or call Simon on her prepaid cell phone. She chose the latter.

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Alice and Simon moved to California in the spring of 2005. They couldn't afford

a moving truck. Simon took his Silverado to the shop and had the oil changed, the tires replaced, and the fuel filter cleaned. They loaded extra coolant, quarts of 5W-30, their clothes, and a box of snack food into the backseat, and loaded all the furniture they could fit into the bed. Most of it had belonged to Simon's grandmother, who was dead going on two months. They were grateful for her bequeathment of used furniture and small appliances which to a more sophisticated owner would have seemed clumsy, dated, smelling of anesthetics and death. To Alice, it was a good start. Simon stretched a tarp over the castle of items and tied it down at the corners.

They were headed for a place called Sumnerville, he told her. He had a stepbrother there who ran an advertising agency and could give Simon a job, despite the fact that he only held a community college associate degree. After that, he promised, they'd be on the headed toward a life of good and plenty. Alice would never want for anything, or not for much, at least. He promised her an elegant wedding, a house of their own, vacations to the wonderlands of the west—Yosemite, The Lost Coast, San Francisco.

No more Church of Christ.

No more sneaking around.

No more tornadoes.

For Alice, the journey was euphoric, at first. The overburdened truck pushing across the two-lane interstate through Birmingham, then across the state border, through

Tupelo, the mounds of pine trees on either side of them paralleling the asphalt like green, miles-long caterpillars. In Memphis, at dusk, they crossed the muddy Mississippi on the double-arching motor bridge that some say divides the East from the West, the bridge's sodium vapor lights perched in hundreds along the trusses, making the brown water below seem on fire. Simon took out a cigarette halfway across and rolled his window down. Alice was brimming with adventure. For the first time in her life, she beheld the spectacle of smoking with admiration and desire. "I want to try one," she said.

Simon looked at her sideways. "You sure?"

She nodded and put one of the cigarettes between her lips and held it out for a light. Without taking his eyes off the road, Simon flicked his lighter on and held it up for her. The paper crackled as she breathed in and its golden glow pulsed brightly in the cab for a moment. She felt very attracted to him, then, as if she depended on his warmth, his motion, his vision, to spark her own frail energy into something sustainable and bright. And it was, for a moment. And she did, for a moment. Then the smoke curled in through her nostrils and found its mark. A deep, wracking cough. A rejection that shook her ribcage, shook her eyeballs from their sockets. Simon laughed because he knew all about it. She rolled down her window, the truck having now reached the west bank of the river, and tried again—this time slower, more carefully. Her body was ready now. She was ready. It felt as though something were drawing itself up from her esophagus, fluttering mothlike at the back of her throat, lulling her brain into gentle delirium.

“I like it,” she said.

“Nah, you don’t,” Simon said.

They drove through Little Rock after a few hours, which was the furthest Alice had ever been from home. After that, she didn’t know any of the cities—Mayflower, Conway, Morriton, Pottsville, Russelville, Van Buren, Fort Smith, all of them barely noticeable from the interstate save for the little green signs that announced their names followed by a number indicating population, all of them sentried by lone truck stops with tall, neon signs at the ends of the off-ramps, glowing like moons. They stopped in Salisaw, just across the Oklahoma border, to pass the night in a motel. Alice was too tired to question him; it was nearing one o’clock in the morning. The clerk said, “S’posed to rain tonight,” and motioned toward Simon’s truck parked in front of the office, the blue, irregular shape of the tarp covering the furniture.

“That’s why we have the tarp,” he said.

In the room, Alice stepped out of her pants and climbed beneath the sheets, destined for the dream world, but awakened again by the touch of Simon’s hand on her leg. The tips of his fingers padded against her skin like a silkworm raising itself up and moving forward, segment by segment, negotiating, circling ever closer to the space between her thighs. Her eyes were wide, then. Blinking. She wet her lips with her tongue and rolled over to face him.

“Hi,” she said.

“I thought you were asleep,” he said.

“I was.”

Morning brought the sound of hard rain outside, clogged gutters and the overflow splattering onto the concrete. And not much to stand against the wind in Oklahoma, so the sound of that, too. Alice heard it from the bed. She nudged Simon, and he sat up so quickly like he’d been a coiled spring all night. They could tell by the familiar sound that this was a merciless rain—the kind that tears things apart and pours through every opening it can find. In the room there was even the pitter-patter of slow, fat drops leaking out of the ceiling and hitting the carpet beside the nightstand.

Alice began to dress in front of the bathroom mirror. “Do you think the furniture’s alright?” she said.

Simon was already parting the curtains to investigate. He was naked.

“Holy God,” he said, flinging the curtains shut again and putting his palms on top of his head. “Oh my God.”

“What? What happened?”

“The fucking tarp!”

After Simon pulled his jeans on, they scampered outside in the rain. As if to remind them he was the only clever being left on earth, the motel clerk came outside, too. The wind had ripped two corners of the tarp from their rivets and the whole thing had

been flailing around for hours, leaving almost everything they owned exposed to the storm. It was all ruined—the wood and upholstery waterlogged, the queen mattress now a great, white sponge. Alice kept quiet as they surveyed the damage, the clerk gratuitously and ineffectively holding an umbrella over their heads.

They went into the lobby and drank coffee and ate Danishes until the rain let up after an hour or so. The sky was still grey. Simon pulled the truck around back of the motel, where they unloaded the furniture into a large, green dumpster. As each piece took its place in the trash, Alice wondered if Simon's grandmother had died for no reason at all. This was her legacy—this ragbag recliner, this table and chairs, this festooned pine headboard—jettisoned from their adventure and into the garbage like an expended thruster.

After they had filled up two foam cups with coffee to go and checked out at the office, they took the main road back to I-40 and headed west again. Simon said out loud that he had hoped to get an earlier start. Then he punched the steering wheel and neither of them spoke for an hour. The rain started again. It followed them out of Salisaw and all the way through Checotah. Dense sheets of it swept across the surface of the Eufala Reservoir where the highway crossed on a narrow peninsula barely above water-level. The sky was all one color in Henryetta, which was no color at all, and the bald hills stretched out for miles around them and the road was straight and ever inclining toward an invisible summit where they might presumably shoot off into oblivion.

The rain abated, and soon stopped altogether. A few of the clouds parted to reveal patches of blue, and the sunlight came through incrementally, melting holes in the stormy shroud like a layer of wax.

“Finally,” Simon spoke up.

Alice turned and smiled at him, glad he had breached the silence.

The truck passed a tall billboard in the trees that read, *With help comes hope. Call the Oklahoma Suicide Prevention Hotline*, followed by an 800 number. Alice shook her head. “Makes sense, actually.”

“What does?” Simon asked.

“The sign. Being out here. This place is God-forsaken, you know?”

“That’s why we’re leaving.”

“It is?” Alice said.

“Well, no.”

The plains in northern Texas were a welcome remedy, but only at first, and only because Alice had never seen anything like it before—the way the land was so flat and so beige and there was nothing standing out against the monotony as far as you could see except for telephone poles and wires along the shoulder. But as the miles accumulated behind them, the scenery took on an emptiness that was both new and familiar, the boredom of this second Oklahoma punctuated by occasional dairy farms—skeletons of barbed wire with blots of cattle circling around salt blocks—and little gatherings of

shanties, clapboards unhinged, shingles clinging by last nails, so remote as to escape the swath of man's wrecking ball.

The intervals between fuel stations became less frequent, sometimes separated by fifty miles, sometimes more. Alice watched Simon pumping their gas. He clenched his teeth and shook his head while the gages turned, but he never went without cigarettes. The pack of Pall Malls seemed bottomless. She thought about their money, what little they had saved, being slowly drained from its bank account and boiling in the truck's engine, then expelled as exhaust fumes on the open country behind them.

They stopped late in Vega for another motel. The only one in town. Sixty-five dollars for the night. Simon fell asleep in the bed while she was wiping off her makeup in the bathroom mirror. She'd been describing the soreness in her butt and turned around to discover he hadn't been listening.

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A sign at the New Mexico border called it the "Land of Enchantment." But again that didn't seem quite right to Alice. It was the land of scrubby, sickly little plants in the sand and hellish redrock formations jutting out in the far desert. The highway dove down to a dry plain and went over washes that were supposedly prone to flash flooding and climbed up again toward a West that never came closer. Alice was driving now. She'd

finally convinced Simon that he should rest and let her take a turn.

“Just,” he said, “. . . just be careful. This is a tall truck. It’s easy to miscalculate.”

He slept for three hours after that, as if he hadn’t slept at all yet the whole trip. Alice rolled the driver-side window down a few inches and smoked one of his cigarettes. She tried the radio, but found only static and some kind of reservation program broadcasting in Navajo tongue. Simon woke up and said he had to pee, but since the next rest stop wasn’t for thirty-four miles, he said he’d pee on the shoulder. Alice waited in the truck while he used his door for cover, leaning against the frame with his jeans unzipped. Big rigs flashed by, headed toward Albuquerque or Flagstaff or maybe even the coast, silent until they were thirty feet away, then loud like a freight train, then silent again. A bend of the wrist, and one of the drivers could destroy them both.

They drove onward. One hundred miles. Three hundred miles. The backdrop was always the same flat panorama of sand and the interstate was going up or down a grade but always in a straight line so it felt as if the world was being pulled out from under them like a rug and after three the sun was blinding Alice and broiling the inside of the truck. They both had sunburns. Simon hadn’t said a word since he’d peed. Once in a while he would shake his head and Alice would look at him, but he wouldn’t talk about it. They were passing a national monument called *El Malpais* when the sun finally set. Even without the light of day, Alice could see the inky silhouettes of the mountains to the

north of them—the Diablos Fuertes, if the map was right. In the desert night, she realized, everything becomes inverted, and things that ought to be dull have their own kind of radiance. So dark you can't miss them. The mountains were one thing, then the ruins of a Pueblo village, then the little white eyes of an armadillo scampering across the road, strangely disembodied.

Alice knew they were almost in Arizona, but she'd lost track of how close exactly; her mind was glazed over with the ineffable horror of the land that she now attached to the word *enchantment*. The truck barreled through the darkness at the base of a rocky hill, passing a semi which was lagging up the incline with its hazards blinking. There were no other cars in sight.

"I'm getting tired," Alice said. "Not getting. I'm tired already."

Simon nodded. "Me too," he said.

"We should look for a motel close by."

He leaned over and looked at the instrument panel. "Low on gas," he said. "Have you been watching the gauge? I told you to keep an eye on it."

"I have been. You were sleeping though," Alice said. "I didn't want to wake you up."

"Well, you should've. Maybe we can find a truck stop soon and fill up. Get some rest. Like a Love's or a Pilot or something."

"Wait," Alice scratched her Adam's apple nervously, "you don't mean sleep in the

truck, in the parking lot. Right?”

Simon looked out of his window and sighed. He was gnawing on the tip of his tongue, which Alice knew to be a sign of distress. He’d done it when they’d lost the furniture.

“Is there something you’re not telling me?” Alice said. “You haven’t said a word all day.”

He laughed once, but not because anything was funny. “Keep your eyes on the road,” he said. “You’ll send us into the abyss.”

Alice wasn’t sure what he meant by *abyss*. The shoulder was flat, not even a ditch there. It wasn’t as if they were driving on the edge of a glacier, but clearly he thought they were on the edge of something.

Alice looked at the highway for a moment and then back at Simon. “Are we out of money? How much money do we have?”

“Enough,” he said.

“Enough for what?”

“About enough for gas to get there,” he said.

“You mean to get to California? That’s all we have?”

“If the math is right.”

Alice watched the white lines on the road disappearing under the hood in rapid succession like bullets of light being swallowed up by an insatiable mouth. “How are we

going to eat?” she said.

“We can get there in a day’s drive, and there’s the box of food in the back.”

“You mean the granola bars? The beef jerky? How are we supposed to make a meal out of that? Shit. I’m hungry *now* as it is.”

“Don’t put all this on me, now,” Simon said.

“Well who am I supposed to put it on? You told me you had enough saved up. That we’d be just fine. You said don’t worry about it. A hundred times you said that.”

He laughed a snide laugh again. “It’s not like I’m the only one who’s been using the money, is it? You realize we’re both traveling here.”

Alice didn’t respond. She squeezed her hands into fists around the steering wheel and stayed that way for several minutes. A billboard supported by an old flatbed trailer announced that a Route 66 station was thirteen miles ahead.

“There you go,” Simon pointed at it. “Thirteen miles.”

“I saw it.”

Simon popped the glovebox open and took out his Pall Malls. He shook one loose and wedged it between his lips. Alice watched him search for a lighter—the lighter which she knew was under her seat. She drew it out and held it for him to see, then rolled her window down and threw it out onto the road. It clicked once against the asphalt before it was sucked behind them so far as to be inaudible.

“Whert the hurl!” Simon said with the cigarette still in his lips.

Alice plucked it from his mouth and crumpled it up in her hand. She threw it on the dash where it slowly uncoiled like a snake.

“That was the last fucking one!” he said. “What are you doing?”

Alice looked at him with wild eyes. “No!” she shouted. “No.”

They filled up at the Route 66 and found a parking space around back that seemed like it had some privacy, but really it didn’t. They were exposed on three sides to the wind and the eyes of the desert.

This lone gas station had all the warmth and welcome of the surface of the moon, and Alice thought it was possible she’d ended up there without knowing it—zoned out at some point during the long drive taken a wrong turn. But the clerk took debit for the gas, so it wasn’t the moon.

The bench seat of the truck offered no recumbent positions; each of them leaned against the side windows with wadded-up shirts for pillows, the breath from their nostrils casting little blossoms of condensation on the glass. Alice could see the broad expanse of the sky above them, so black and so clear as to reveal the glittering expanse of the Milky Way and as many stars as she had doubts.

When she awoke, a sliver of orange sun was inching its way above the mountains and she could hear cars pulling into the gas station. Simon was leaning against the hood outside, smoking the crumpled-up cigarette, which he had apparently done his best to

straighten again. The gas clerk must have given him matches. He was smoking it slower than Alice had ever seen, and she felt sad about trying to destroy it then. She leaned over and knocked on the window, but when Simon turned, couldn't think of anything to say. He somehow mistook her empty gaze as a show of disdain and made a saluting gesture, then threw the cigarette into the dirt and stomped it out. "Happy?" he said, lifting his arms to the sky.

Alice got out of the truck and pushed her hands deep into her pockets. "Simon. This isn't what I wanted," she said.

"Oh. Well, I'll just get you a refund then," he said.

"That's not what I meant. I meant I didn't want to be unfair last night."

Simon started nodding.

"Look, I know you tried really hard to make this thing happen," Alice said. "The last thing I want to be is ungrateful. I just don't know what to do now, you know?"

The racket of a diesel engine turning over and idling drowned out their conversation for a moment—drowned out the air conditioner behind the building, the sounds of the desert, the cactus wrens, the wind moving across the hard-packed sand, the high drone of a 747. When the big-rig pulled away from the station, Alice went on.

"I mean, I have that Discover card, but that's a credit card," she said. Alice had gotten the card in the mail for her eighteenth birthday. She'd saved it with a vague awareness that she might someday need it, at a time such as this. "I'm not even sure . . . I

don't know, you know?"

Simon looked up from the ground. "I was thinking about that," he said. "You know it might not be such a bad idea."

Alice was already shaking her head. "I don't know. I don't want us to be in debt."

"It wouldn't be that much. We'd pay it off as soon as I start working, which'll be in no time, really."

"How much would we spend, though?" Alice said.

Simon chewed his lower lip a moment. "Not a lot, I'm sure. Just enough to get us there. To get us to California."

California lingered on the air. Alice savored the word. To her, it sounded a lot like the word *home*.

"You know, if we're going to buy a house in a couple years, we'll need some credit anyway."

Alice shifted on her feet and tucked a strand of hair behind her ear. She'd never used a credit card in her life, but it seemed like he was right. "Maybe," she said. "I guess we don't really have a choice."

And that was how it began—a bag of pretzel sticks and two Coca-Colas; a gallon of water for the radiator; a tank of gas in Winslow; a private-vehicle entrance fee for

Petrified Forest National Park (which turned out to be little more than a scattering of calcified trees baking in the open sun); a new pair of sunglasses in Flagstaff and one night's hotel stay beneath Humphrey's Peak; an expansive meal at the last Waffle House west of the Mississippi; a hand-made Coyotero dream-catcher; a private-vehicle entrance fee for Grand Canyon National Park, where they stood at the lookout point and soaked in the view for no more than fifteen minutes; a new tire after the blowout in Kaibab (after riding the donut for a day); another tank of gas; another night in a hotel, this one expensive—in Vegas; a few rounds of Blackjack during which Simon swore he could win back what they'd borrowed but only ended up making it two-hundred dollars worse.

It was a whirlwind.

The first few purchases were made only after some discussion and a mutual agreement, but eventually Alice told Simon to keep the card in his wallet, if for no other reason because she didn't like to carry her purse around. The negotiations ended after that. She knew Simon had their best interests in mind. He'd made a mistake is all—a miscalculation. They'd be married soon, which meant that her money was also his money.

At the Grand Canyon overlook, Alice took what would be one of only a few photographs of their journey. Or rather, she asked a bystander to take the picture—a tiny Vietnamese man who answered yes with a toothy smile. Until that moment, the idea of photography had mostly been eclipsed by greater, more imminent concerns, but this was

the Grand Canyon, the singular, yawning treasure of America, and she wanted to remember they had been there together.

She took the picture on a Fujifilm disposable camera that she had Discovered in a gas station. It was the third frame on the roll, the first two being pictures of Simon kissing a taxidermy moose and a blurred window shot of the snow in Coconino. The two of them were dead center in this third picture. Alice had her arm around Simon, but he wasn't looking at the camera lens; he was looking off to the right of it, a little further away, perhaps at some ravens tugging on a crust of bread, or some girl in the parking lot wearing cut-off shorts, or a sign post, or a cloud shaped like a pistol, or a piece of bark floating down from a juniper branch.

She didn't know it then, of course. She didn't know how distracted he was, how he had his sights set on other things, whatever those things might've been. She didn't know she was clinging to a man who had eyes for the rest of the world, and only a waning interest in her—a man who couldn't look a camera in the eye. She wouldn't find that out for long time, as a long time would certainly pass until she developed the three pictures.

*

The desert never seemed to end. It presented them to the sun as a tiny mustard

seed on an altar, a speck of faith being offered up. It spoke to them in dry, deprecating words; you are small; you are alone; you will never make it. When they left Nevada and crossed into California, it was still there—the desert, that is. Neither of them had expected it to still be there, but further examination of the atlas proved that, indeed, the entire southeastern expanse of the state was mostly desert. Mojave desert. The name itself held an unpleasant stigma. It was more lunar landscapes spined with razor edge mountains. It was overheated cars abandoned on the shoulder. It was drivers waiting to hitchhike but becoming heatstroke casualties. Rest stops without running water. Missile testing ranges. Death Valley, yea though they walk through it.

Simon was driving again, had been since they'd started using the Discover card. They drove into Barstow. The pavement that had carried them across the country, all the way from Alabama in one continuous, winding piece, was here at its terminus, or if it could be said to continue, did so under a new name. People called them freeways out here, Simon told her. That's the way his stepbrother talked.

Alice looked around at the city while they passed through and couldn't imagine who in their right mind would want to live there. She closed her eyes and slept. Simon smoked one of the cigarettes he'd Discovered.

The thing that woke Alice up later was Simon's touch on her leg, but also the sound of wind tearing across an open window.

"Look at this!" he said. He'd rolled his window all the way down and was

hanging his head out like a squinty-eyed bloodhound, letting the breeze cleanse him and push against his skin.

Alice sat up and looked around. The desert was gone. In its place were smooth foothills blanketed with an endless sward of grass. Hundreds of squat oak trees sprang up from the ground—weary, but hopeful in their reaching, with ellipses of shade behind them. The trees thinned out and the grass grew greener as they drove on. It was late in the afternoon, almost evening, and yet a strange mist surrounded them, softening the heat of the sun. Soon they were below the fog and the foothills were behind them.

The land was flat again and as they came to the outskirts of the city, the outskirts of home, Alice beheld a sight like nothing else she had ever seen: rows and rows of citrus trees, each planted in perfect symmetry to the next and stretching out in both directions from the highway. The trees were replicas of each other—common shape, common height, common neon fruit glimmering on the branches, ripe with sweet nectar, oranges and lemons and tangerines and grapefruits.

Amongst the billboards for city hotels and restaurants there were grain silos and sprinklers for the alfalfa fields and some fields all dirt but foretelling life with their clean furrows and formations of tree stakes, each awaiting its betrothed. When they left the freeway and took to the streets, Alice saw a dark-skinned man tending a fruit stand. His wife sat cradling a baby. His three other children shrieked and scampered around him.

She thought they seemed extraordinarily happy, or at least extraordinarily quaint, frolicking in the warm sun. “Look at *them*,” she said.

*

CHAPTER III

The first several weeks of work are a slow letdown for Alice. The place becomes a nightmare. The high-pitched clamor of banging Tonka toys and screeching children, the constant messes she finds herself cleaning up, spilled paints, sand from the hermit crab tank, Play-Doh ground into the carpet. Nothing about it is peaceful or predictable like she had expected.

The children at Coyote Kids are subdivided into four sections, or “packs,” as the lingo suggests. Each pack is overseen by two childcare associates, or “Alphas.” Alice is the second Alpha for the three-to-five-year-old pack—the Puppy Pack. Some of the Puppy Pack don’t speak English. A few of them pick their noses and eat the boogers for what seems like hours on end. Some reek of cigarette smoke. One is autistic or has Tourette’s or FAS or something. A handful of them are adorable and clean and polite, and Alice doesn’t mind them. She doesn’t mind any of them, really; it’s just a matter of patience. Her favorite is a blonde five-year-old named Coraline, whom she first saw in the waiting room on the day of her interview. For whatever reason, Coraline always wears lipstick and grown-up jewelry, and her hair always seems to have been carefully

sculpted. Her appearance is alluring, captivating, in a way that five-year-olds never should be.

On a Wednesday afternoon, while the children run and scream around the playground, Alice sits on a bench outside with Janet, the other Alpha.

“Get paid tomorrow,” Janet says.

“Oh, really?”

“Yep. Prepare to be unimpressed.” Janet extracts a nail file from her large purse.

Alice smiles and gives a polite laugh. She notices Coraline coming out from the bottom of a slide and walking toward the water fountain beside them.

“She’s just adorable, you know?” Alice says.

“Who, Coraline?”

“Yeah.”

“She is that.” But Janet shakes her head when she says this.

So Alice isn’t the only one who’s noticed.

Coraline steps up on the stool to reach the spout of the fountain and sweeps her hair away from her face with the back of her hand. As she drinks the water, her eyes meet with Alice’s. The lashes are long and dark, accentuated by mascara.

Alice leans toward the fountain. “Hi Coraline. You look very pretty today.”

“Thank you, Miss Traille.” She wipes her mouth on the sleeve of her dress and steps off of the stool.

“Did your mommy help you get dressed for school this morning?” Alice asks.

At this, Janet grabs Alice’s arm and whispers something into her ear, but it’s too late.

“I don’t have a mommy anymore,” Coraline says.

Alice swallows and opens her mouth to speak but can’t think of anything to say.

“That’s okay sweetie,” Janet says. “You look dazzling. Run along and play now.”

After Coraline leaves, Janet explains that her mother passed away of something last year, and that her father's the one who makes her look the way she does.

“The necklaces were her mother’s,” Janet says. “Ask her where she got the necklaces. She’ll tell you alright.”

“My god, that’s so sad,” Alice says.

“What’s sad is her father. Saddest sack of shit I’ve ever seen. Weird too. Very weird.”

“Weird in what way?” Alice asks.

“In every way. He just gives me the creeps.”

“That’s unfortunate,” Alice says.

She watches Cora climb up a wooden ladder into the lookout tower, which only looks out over the recycled rubber playground and a parking lot and a couple of dumpsters in back of the building. The girl is nimble. She spins hard at the fake steering wheel in the tower, pretending the whole configuration is a giant wooden ship. She’s

having a conversation with herself, and Alice wonders what she might be saying. While she watches her, Alice begins to feel an ache in her chest, rising up into her throat like an ice cube in a drink.

“You alright Alice?” Janet is looking at her, poised to open a granola bar wrapper.

“Hmm?”

“You look like—God I don’t know. You just don’t look so good. Hey, you’re not crying, are you?”

“Oh, no. I’m fine. The sun was just in my eyes.” Alice blinks a couple times.

“It’s so bright out here.”

After her shift ends, after the parents come and pick up their children, Alice climbs into her car and changes into a pair of flats and drives down Stockdale a few blocks to a 76 for some Pall Malls. She peels off the plastic sheath and slaps the box against her wrist, takes one out and lights it with the car lighter. The smoke curls out through the thin opening at the top of her window. Little bits of ash fall onto her pant legs and disintegrate like snowflakes on a warm surface. Before she knows it, Alice has moved on to her second cigarette, and she’s driving and thinking about the girl, Coraline. Coraline is such a nice name. It reminds Alice of the sea—of reefs submerged in cool, blue waters, of schools of fish flitting around.

She stops into a poorly-lit bar downtown—a place called The Sitting Room,

which she's been to once before a few months ago—and drinks a Vodka tonic. A boy in a tie and sweater vest tries to get her number and then tries to take her home, but she tells him she's married, which used to be true. “Where's your ring, then?” he asks, and Alice tells him she's getting it worked on. The boy leaves her and goes back to his end of the bar. He seems lonely. Her vodka tonic is empty but for the ice cubes, and the bartender comes over and picks it up and says, “Another?” Alice nods, takes out a cigarette, but lights it from the wrong end. It tastes like melted plastic in her mouth. She drops it, whole, into the ash tray in front of her and waits for her drink. The bartender says, “Nice evening,” when he comes back, but Alice doesn't answer. She takes the glass from him and drinks it too fast, feeling her cheeks flush and her stomach turn bitter.

“Who's that boy down there in the sweater vest?” she asks, pointing down the bar.

The bartender leans his head across the counter and squints. “Believe his name's Graham.”

“Do you know how old he is?” Alice asks.

“Not sure. Doesn't look a day over twenty-one, though.”

Alice sighs and smears her finger through a circle of condensation on the bar.

“He's awfully cute.”

The bartender smirks and takes her glass. “You good, or you want another?”

“No, I'm finished,” she says, “all finished.”

She pays \$7.50 plus a dollar tip and leaves the bar, hits the seek button on her car

radio a few times until music comes on. An oldies station. *Summer breeze make me feel fine, blowing through the jasmine in my mind.* She drives up Chester Avenue. The sun is all gone but its golden afterglow still paints the sky, the sand-colored buildings and gas stations and palm trees and telephone wires exuding a dull radiance, a hum, a soft, warm current that Alice knows is the liquor in her stomach. She drives toward the foothills along Panorama for a while, following a tributary of the river northeast. To her left, a blonde woman in yoga pants is pushing a jogging stroller down the foot path, her pony tail bobbing and swishing with each footfall a tassel on a party hat. Alice pulls into the semi-circle drive of Panorama Park to watch the woman pass by—a baby impossibly asleep in the stroller, the mother’s face pink with exertion, glowing with the aura of maternity. That could’ve been me, Alice thinks. Should be me.

She gets out of her car and walks to the edge of the overlook to sit on a bench. She can see the blue and green and white runway lights of the airport toward the west, bounded on one side by a grid of symmetrical streets and houses, on the other side by squares of farmland, a darkening mosaic. To the north, the oil fields span outward in a brown, apocalyptic infinity, dotted with hundreds, maybe thousands of oil pumps that look like tiny, robotic cattle drinking from the dirt. It’s where Simon used to work, where he used to spend most of his time. After the divorce, he left town, was working on a rig off the coast of Santa Barbara last she heard, which she took to mean he’s doing well.

She checks her phone. Another voicemail from the Glen at the collection agency.

Mrs. Traille, Glen from Capital Recovery again. Just wondering how you can sleep at night, knowing how much you're in the red. A pause, filled with breathing. I know you're screening our calls, but that won't help. I can call as many times as I want. I will inundate you, lady. My job is to make your life hell. Anyway, call me back when you're ready to make a deal, otherwise you'll keep on getting these messages.

After the sky grows dark and the temperature drops, Alice decides to return to the bar. She knows Simon wouldn't answer a phone call even if she tried him, even if she wanted to drive into a tree on the side of the road somewhere. But there are still other ways, other people to consult. The world is full of anodynes. She pulls hard on the door handle at The Sitting Room and stands in the entryway for a moment, her eyes adjusting to the light. The boy in the sweater vest sits in the far corner with a trove of empty glasses on his table and no women for miles. A neon sign flashes *High Life* about his head in orange script. As Alice crosses the room and pulls up a chair at his table, she doesn't feel twenty-five. She feels much older. Too old for any of this. The boy's eyes are glazed over like globes of amber, his tie loosened.

"You're back," he says.

"How many empties do we have here?" Alice asks, suddenly feeling guilty for her intentions.

"Not enough," he says.

"How old are you?"

“Old enough to drink,” he says.

“You know they don’t give out prizes for that.”

“What?”

“Nevermind.”

A waitress approaches their table and asks Alice if she wants anything. She orders a beer.

“Graham, right?” Alice asks once the waitress has gone.

“How do you know my name?”

“It wasn’t hard to figure out,” Alice says.

“I thought you were married,” he says. “Your ring is getting ‘worked on’ or something.”

Alice bites her lip and looks down at the table. “That isn’t quite true.”

“Pssh. Knew it. Know what else?”

“What?” Alice says.

“I’m rich. So rich, like chocolate cake. My parents, hah. And I dunno what to spend my money on. ‘Cept beer.”

“You know, for a cute guy, you’re missing a lot of tact,” Alice says.

“Tact,” he repeats, feeling the word on his tongue. “Tack, tack, tack.”

Alice rolls her eyes. The waitress returns with tall beer and sets it down on a coaster, then leaves.

“I’m willing to forgive you,” Alice says, and after a moment she adds, “if only for the night.”

“What are you improvising exactly?” Graham asks.

“Implying, you mean.”

“That’s what I said.”

Alice looks down at the table again and clears her throat. She takes her cigarettes out of her purse and lights one, examining Graham from across the table, his boyish face angular and somehow fierce, a hot spirit in his eyes that could be alcohol, or could be a hot spirit. She imagines he’d probably go home with a fire hydrant at this point.

“I shouldn’t be here,” Alice says.

“Then why are you?”

She emits a single, curt laugh. “Don’t know. Do you?”

“Because you don’t want to be alone?” Graham turns an empty glass round and round as if screwing it into place.

Alice looks directly at him, her eye sockets filling with new moisture. “I’m married.” The words come out through clenched teeth, but sound more like a tired attempt than any kind of real assertion. She wipes a tear from her cheek with her shirtsleeve. “I’m married, Graham.” She repeats this denial with the same sentiment that made her cradle an empty onesie.

“I know, I know,” he puts a hand on her shoulder. “We all are. It’s okay.” He’s

maundering, but it seems like he's only giving his best effort at compassion. "I'm really not a bad kid, lady," he says. "I just try too hard sometimes 's all. What's your name anyway?"

"Alice," she says.

"Alice," he repeats. "Ah—lissss. Alice."

Alice laughs, but this time in the humorous way, and she smiles at him. "How old are you, really?"

"Really? I'm old enough for anything," he says.

"Don't order any more drinks, then."

*

Alice awakens from a dream in the morning, wrapped entirely in bed sheets. In the dream, she was in a room, alone. A room of cinderblock walls. The smell of formaldehyde was heavy. A white cabinet on the far side had a sink and a wastebasket under it. She was standing over a polished metal table, looking at a child. An infant. The infant was alive, but not in an ordinary way. The head and appendages were all detached from the torso at even distances and pinned to a tray like a grade school science experiment. Each pin had a small, white label attached, but the labels all said the same thing: *Yours*. She feels sweat on her skin and realizes she's naked. The Sitting Room.

Graham. She pulls the sheets off of her top half, and there he is, sitting fully clothed on a chair in the corner of her bedroom, his head in his hands.

He looks up. “You’re awake.”

Alice stares at him. He’s looking at her with concern, as if he’s figured out all of her problems in the night. He scratches at stubble on his chin.

“Alice, last night, I . . . I didn’t know you very well.”

She swallows, clutching the bed sheet around her chest.

“Is everything alright with you?” he asks.

“What do you mean, exactly?”

“I mean what are those marks all about? Is someone hurting you, ‘cause I—”

“That’s none of your business,” she says and gets out of the bed. Graham looks at her body, but she can tell not for its nudity. She pulls a yellow bath robe from her closet and puts it on.

“Look, I’m really concerned about you. And I really do like you.”

“Did we sleep together or not?” she asks, cinching the waste belt of the robe.

“Almost.”

“Great. Almost. I don’t think you should be here.”

Graham stands up and tries to put a hand on her shoulder, but she hits it away.

“And how the hell old are you anyway? Acted like your age was some kind of national treasure last night. How old.”

He clears his throat. “Nineteen.”

“Good. *Good.*” Alice holds her eyes shut and takes a long, slow breath. “You’re a teenager.”

“So,” he says.

“You need to leave.”

“What difference does it make?”

“Just leave. I’m late for work.”

*

Alice hangs her coat on a hook in the lounge and is starting to pour a cup of coffee when Janet bursts into the room. Janet’s body is of a stature that precludes her from ever achieving a graceful entrance. Her purse scrapes against the door as it shuts. Her keys clash against the steel coffee thermos she carries. Her shoes squeak. Alice starts at the sound of it all and spills the coffee.

“Morning Alpha!” Janet says.

“Hello. What?”

“I said good morning. Something about that confuse you?”

“No, I just—Ow!” Alice scalds her hand on the hot plate in an effort to clean it off.

Janet plops into a chair big enough for two thirds of her and opens a pocket mirror to touch up her lipstick. “You’re awful jumpy today. Are they after you?”

“Is who after me?” Alice says.

“The FBI. The Secret Service. The assassins.”

“What did I do?” Alice has her coffee now, but it’s too hot and she drinks it too fast and releases a strange moan.

“For chrissakes. You’re dense, Alice. Ever heard of a joke?”

“Oh, right,” Alice says. “No I just . . . last night I didn’t get a lot of sleep is all. That’s all. I’m going to the classroom now.”

“Suit yourself.”

The children trickle into Puppy Pack room B in twos and threes, immediately setting about to different tasks, some sending pullback cars plummeting to their death from the edge of the reading shelf, some prodding at the hamster cage, trying to awaken the thing, others building the Great Pyramid of Giza out of cardboard bricks. Alice sits behind her desk, biting at a fingernail, mostly absent. After a minute, she notices Coraline sitting on her mat at the far corner of the room, completely unoccupied. She waits, watches, but Coraline only picks at the edge of the mat. None of the other children are talking to her. Alice walks over and squats down on the carpet.

“You always look so pretty, Coraline.”

The girl is silent. Her nostrils flare out for a fraction of a second, the skin of her

nose milky white and almost translucent, like fine china.

“And how are we doing today?” The words sound patronizing as they come out. We, Alice repeats in her mind. We just slept with someone six years younger than us. We really need to get our act together.

Suddenly Coraline looks at Alice and makes a noise that sounds like “Mepth,” accompanied by such a contorted face that only five-year-olds are capable of. An artless display of embarrassment, Alice thinks.

“Is that so?” she says. “That’s a beautiful necklace you have on. Where did you get it from?” She hasn’t seen this one before. Most of them are costume jewelry—chains with pendants, locket, brightly colored beads. This one looks like pearl.

“From Mama,” Cora says. “From Papa, from Mama.”

“It looks like pearls,” Alice says. She reaches for it. The pale, irregular stones dotting the necklace actually do look like pearls. Authentic ones. The kind a child this young shouldn’t be wearing.

Cora holds her palms up and shrugs her shoulders, still avoiding eye contact.

“Why don’t you let me hold on to those for you—just to make sure they don’t get lost while you’re playing. And I’ll give them back to you at the end of the day. Does that sound alright?”

Coraline furrows her brow and makes pouty lips and shakes her head.

“I’m just worried about your Mommy’s jewelry is all,” Alice says. “I bet the

necklace is very valuable, and I'd hate for anything to happen to it."

"It's mine," Coraline says. "You can't take it."

"Tell you what, Coraline," Alice says, "you let me keep that for you—just for today—and I'll bring you a prize tomorrow. Something of mine, to reward you for your patience."

The girl shrugs her shoulders, and Alice takes this a sign of acquiescence.

She returns to her desk with the necklace in hand, holding it up to the light, feeling the stones with her fingers. From what she knows of pearls, these are certainly the real thing—a little gritty, a little imperfect. She places the necklace gently in her bottom drawer and locks it with the key on her lanyard.

During playtime that afternoon, Janet sits down next to Alice on the bench. This is their routine: wish each other luck in the mornings, then rendezvous outside at playtime to swap gossip—the gossip primarily coming from Janet's mouth. Did Alice know that some of the "Mexican moms" get this whole deal for free because they're below the poverty threshold? Not until now. Did Alice know that Kathy Philburn makes two dollars more per hour than all the other Alphas, even though she's only been there for a year? No, but this is frustrating news, considering her financial straits.

Today, for a switch, Alice is the first to volunteer information. She tells Janet about the pearl necklace, and how strange it is to see expensive jewelry on a five-year-old. Janet warns her that she ought to give the thing back, and that she could get into

serious trouble for something like that if she wasn't careful.

"I think someone might have a soft spot for little Coraline. Hmm?"

"Oh, I don't think so," Alice says. "I just wonder about her is all. It seems like she's always off by herself or something. So quiet. And the way her father puts her together every day—I've never seen anything like it."

"Yeah, well, don't get too close to her. Kids come and go here all the time." She takes out a checkbook and begins writing figures and things into the register. "Worst part is, you never know what happens to them. Not to mention . . . she might be a carrier of her dad's weirdness. You don't wanna catch any of that."

"Maybe I should meet him," Alice says.

"You will, one of these days. And you probably won't forget it."

Alice nods, watching one of her kids climb up and fall down the plastic slide in a loop of idiocy. Sean. The puppy who's always punching her in the buttocks every time she turns around. A dozen yards or so from the playground equipment, under a massive oak tree, Coraline is spinning in circles, holding the ends of her dress and looking up at the tree branches. She trips over her black ballerina shoe and falls down and lies there, looking at the sky. Her dress is bunched up around her waist like a makeshift parachute.

Alice feels the breeze whirring across her ears and hears a diesel engine rattling by out on Stockdale, and the world sounds like it's rushing past at the other end of a tunnel. She takes out a cigarette without thinking and starts to light it.

“Whoah, Hauss!” Janet swats the cigarette out of her lips. It falls in the dirt.

“What the hell are you doing? You can’t smoke out here!”

“Oh, sorry,” Alice says, rubbing at her temples. “Forgot where I was for a minute.”

“You’re really off it today.

“Just today?” Alice says.

Janet laughs and says that’s true. It’s more like every day.

*

The next morning, before she leaves for work, Alice takes the ivory comb that Simon mailed back and slips it into her purse. She hands it to Cora in the hallway, just before reading time. The other children are in the classroom, waiting.

“What is it?” Cora asks, flipping it over in her small hands. The comb has seven thick prongs and a carved handle ornamented by leafy festoons surrounding a dove.

“It’s a comb,” Alice says.

“But it’s yours.” She hands it back to Alice.

“No, I want you to have it. It was a gift to me, but maybe it will be nicer for you to wear,” Alice says and winks at her. “Here.” She takes the comb and kneels down beside Cora, takes a lock of the girl’s hair between her fingers. “You pull your hair back

like this, and put the comb in on top,” she says. “There.”

“Thank you Miss Traille,” Cora says. She paws at the new object with her right hand, discerning its function.

“Well, don’t thank me. But there is one thing you could do for me.”

Cora nods, already consenting.

“Will you be my friend, Coraline?”

Coraline waits a few seconds. She seems afraid, which makes Alice wonder how appropriate the question was, if it meant something else that she didn’t intend.

But then Coraline says, “Yes, okay.”

“Hey, it’s okay. I’m a nice person,” Alice says. “Come here.” She wraps the girl in a hug, still squatting beside her in the hallway. Her hand feels something extrinsic on Cora’s back, beneath her polka-dot dress.

A bra strap—she realizes.

The girl is wearing a bra.

Why is she wearing a bra?

Alice thinks of the father. The clothes, jewelry, makeup, already bizarre, but this is simply too much. It doesn’t make sense. Or Alice doesn’t want it to make sense, at least. “I’m your friend,” she says to fill the silence. She squeezes Coraline tighter to her chest and rakes her fingers through some of the girl’s hair, feeling as if this strange little person—this thing, this idea—she now holds, has been missing from her life all along.

At that exact moment, Jeremy opens his office door, blowing across the top of a coffee mug. He freezes in place, examining what appears to be improper alpha-to-puppy contact. He raises an eyebrow and says, “Alice?”

*

“Here at Coyote Kids,” Jeremy says, but doesn’t finish the sentence. He sighs. “Look. Alice.”

“Honestly, I was just hugging her,” Alice says. She doesn’t mention the comb or the bra strap. “She seemed like she needed it.”

“Alice,” he shakes his head. “Alice, Alice, Alice.”

This reminds her of Graham, and she feels a surge of old guilt at having been so curt with him.

“You just can’t touch the Pup—the kids, dammit. You can’t touch the kids. You really can’t. I mean, you read the Coyote Manual, right?”

“Of course,” she says.

“Then you *know* what the Code says about physical contact. I’m technically supposed to suspend you, but I don’t want to do that, because I think you’re a good person.”

Alice looks down at her hands and says she is sorry.

“I mean, why don’t you play with your own kid? At home. You said you had a kid, right?”

“What?” Alice forgot about her lie. It takes her a moment to remember. “Yes. I do.”

“I may not like it here, but I’ve got to keep up appearances. You know that. And I can’t have employees hanging all over little girls. I don’t go in for that. Understand?” He’s not looking at his computer this time; that’s how Alice knows he’s serious.

“It won’t happen again. I promise,” she says.

Jeremy clenches his teeth. His jaw line and the wrinkles on his forehead stand out. “Consider this a warning, alright?”

Alice nods. Although she doesn’t think she’s done anything all that serious, this isn’t a job she’s willing to give up.

“Never again.”

“Nope,” Alice says. “I promise.”

On the playground that day, Coraline waves at Alice from atop the crow’s nest. Alice waves back, and the girl continues to flap her hand for so long that eventually Alice has to look away to get her to stop. Their brief encounter in the hallway, although strained and uncomfortable for both parties, seems to have ignited a spark of camaraderie.

Alice slips inside and tears out a sheet of paper from a spiral-bound notebook in her desk. She gnaws at the tip of her pen for a minute and then writes a one-sentence note—*For Coraline's Dad: I just want you to know what a sweetheart your daughter is. She is adorable and so well behaved. Between you and me, she's my favorite. Kindly, Ms. Traille*—adding a smiley face at the end. Alice means what she writes, but also intends it to serve as a veiled warning to the father, whatever he might be up to. Maybe this will alert him that certain people know—he'll know that they know, that she knows. And yet there is a tincture of grace and softness to the note that accounts for other possibilities. Maybe the loss of his wife has tragically affected the way he relates to his daughter, and what he really needs is compassion. She finds the wall cubby with Coraline's name on it and folds up the note and stuffs it into the girl's yellow backpack, glancing over her shoulder with more than a little apprehension. But no one else is in the room.

*

CHAPTER IV

Alice is still thinking about Graham. She's conflicted. On the one hand, there is his age. Why would a handsome nineteen-year-old be alone in a seedy bar, making passes at older women? And why her? Why else did they "almost" sleep together? On the other hand, there is a yearning inside of her to see him again. Some nights she lies awake in bed, staring at the chair in her room where he sat, dutifully, like a man waiting in a hospital room for a convalescent family member. She didn't admit it at the time, but in away she appreciated his concern. No one had been concerned for her since Simon, and that was short-lived. It overwhelmed him. But now there was Graham, sitting at the foot of her bed, trying to decode the hieroglyphics of the burns on her body and trying reconcile them with the woman he'd met the night before. Fearing for her safety. Fearing for her well-being.

She recognizes the beginnings of a desire which she has no ability to nurture. He left no phone number, which was probably her fault for shooing him away so quickly. She has no idea where he lives or works or what his last name is or how to contact him in any way, other than wandering down to The Sitting Room and hoping for his

serendipitous reappearance there, which she does try.

It's a Sunday evening when she drives over after work, not remembering the bar is also a restaurant and closes early on Sundays. No cars in the parking lot, but she walks up to the door and pulls on it anyway, fantasizing that everyone might have taken the bus in order to drink responsibly tonight. The door is locked. She cups her hand against the window and sees that the lights are all off, the chairs upside down on the tables. Only then does she read the signs on the door. Sunday and Monday, closed after 3pm. No personal checks. No bills over twenty dollars. This building is monitored by video surveillance. Alice turns and notices the camera, hanging upside down from the corner of the roof like an electric bat. She sits down on the front step and lights a cigarette, but doesn't stay for long. The camera makes her feel nervous. "So that's it, then," she says. "Okay."

The work week crawls along, day by day, a great worm inching toward the garbage disposal of the weekend. Alice feels it doing this. She feels herself noticing the way an hour passes, the way a minute passes, the way a second requires one thousand smaller pieces in order to become a second. She is less friendly with the children at Coyote Kids, has less smiles to offer them, less truisms, less joy. She can tell that her function there is crumbling into a warm pile of mediocrity.

Janet cashes in her vacation days toward the end of the week to visit her sister in Modesto. Her absence from the daycare is not felt so much as it is something added—the

positive health experience of removing a tapeworm from your large intestine. Alice envies her travels, though. She wishes there were enough money in her own account to plausibly embark on a long drive up the coast, one that would best her current record of Sequoia National Monument being the furthest north in California she's ever been. She and Janet earn the same pay, or something close to it, but Alice uses her extra money to chip away at her larger-than-life credit card ransom. Glen Seward has been calling more frequently, each time more unpleasant than the last. To make matters worse, he's been finding things out about her—things she's never told him herself, like the fact that she lost her job at the mall, or that her marriage failed, or that she used to live in Alabama. He must be calling people she knows and telling lies to get new information, she imagines. Of all things, her credit card debt is the tie that binds her to every sabotaged relationship of the past. Her mother, Simon, her old boss at Fresh Kicks, and so on. She wonders what her mother thinks of her now. Probably no less than she did before. And Simon: what a bastard, that he has done this to her, and continues to do it.

The sub who replaces Janet for the week is uninterested in being amicable, probably too hot for it. She spends all of her break time and playground time prating into her phone as if life depended on it, as if someone gave her a few too many cranks in the morning. That, and she applies lotion to her hands by the hour. Alice doesn't mind her frigid personality. It's refreshing to be released from the politics of the place for a while. The gossip. So, for the time being, their encounters in the hallway are marked by a

professional smile and nod from each woman, nothing more, nothing less.

On Thursday, the tedium of the work week is broken by the appearance of Coraline's father. Alice has seen him in passing before, as the man who signs his daughter out at the front desk four days a week. She certainly has never spoken to him or shaken his hand or had the experience of looking directly into his eyes. Her curiosity about him has only been enough to fuel a handful of secret wonderings. The note is as close to contact as she has come. And the note is the reason why, today, Coraline's father bypasses the front desk and comes directly to Puppy Pack Room B to pick her up. Alice's first reaction is to start when she sees him. He stands in the doorway, scanning the room for Coraline, but seeming to also evaluate the finger-paintings and alphabet posters and animal magnets which line the walls in separate clusters. Janet's description of the man wasn't exactly flattering, but it seems now to have been accurate. He isn't attractive, by normal standards: his hair far too thin, his build frail and insubstantial, the lines of his lips almost invisible. It seems as if all of his features are trying to conceal themselves into oblivion. The only striking aspects about him are his eyes, glazed with an undeniable sadness, the openings fixed at one diameter, never aligning in expression with the rest of his face . . . something inside of him disengaged, afflicted, bent beyond hope of straightening.

Alice walks to him and extends her hand.

"I'm Alice Traille," she says.

The man takes her hand and shakes it, casting his gaze upon her. “Herb. Cora’s papa,” he says. His voice is soft and feminine, but decided, like a lizard skittering over a rock and back into shadows.

“Oh my gosh. Yes,” Alice says. “It’s so good to finally meet you. Your daughter is so precious.”

“I read your note,” he says. “Thank you for that.” His mouth is smiling, but again, the eyes do not match.

“Well, you know. I just wanted you to know I’ve got my eye on her.”

Herb nods at this. He continues to stare at Alice for a moment without saying anything. She inhales, as if beginning to speak, but he interrupts. “The comb is just . . . lovely. It’s really nice, too,” he says.

“Oh, that was nothing.” She tucks a deviant strand of hair behind her ear. “I just thought she’d be cute with it.”

“She is,” he said. “Very cute. A woman hasn’t given her jewelry since her mother passed away.”

Alice decides it’s best to pretend not to know. “Oh my god. I had no idea.” She puts a hand on Herb’s shoulder and feels a chill run up her arm. “How long ago was this?”

“It’ll be a year next Thursday.”

Alice sees one of her kids, Nicholas, climbing the bookcase out of the corner of

her eye; she breaks from the conversation to shout him down.

“I’m so sorry. Can’t leave them alone for five seconds.”

“And you shouldn’t,” Herb says.

“Right.”

“Anyway.”

“Well, anyway. I’m so sorry for your loss. I know that must be difficult to raise a child on your own.”

Herb shakes his head. “It’s not.”

“Oh.” Alice is beginning to see him as one of those types who feel the need to disagree with everything. To play devil’s advocate.

“It’s really not.”

“Oh, well good for you,” she says.

“And what about yourself? Is it hard watching them all week in the Puppy Room,” he points to the door sign, “getting off work in the evening with no husband waiting for you at home?”

Alice swallows and looks at him sideways. He must have checked her hand for a wedding ring—the one that she told Graham was “getting cleaned.” Now she wishes she still had it in the first place.

“Look,” she says, “I should probably get back to the room here. Not everyone’s come to pick their kids up yet.”

Herb doesn't answer this; he only smiles and calls to the back of the room, "Coraline, let's go." His arms hang limply at his sides while he speaks, never gesturing, never moving to the hip or the folded position. Alice imagines that he might be a very sharp-witted robot, if it weren't for the eyes. No machine could have those.

Coraline takes her backpack from its cubby and crosses the room toward her father, never looking up from the floor. Herb kneels down and says, "How was your day, sweetheart?" She doesn't answer. He pulls her close by the shoulders and plants a kiss on her forehead, then stands back up. "Bye-bye, Miss Traille," he says. "Maybe you'd like to join us for dinner sometime." It sounds less like an invitation and more like an imposition.

"Maybe," Alice says, but what she means is, "no."

"Great," he says. "Bye, then."

"Yep."

Alice drives to The Sitting Room again after work, but not to stay—only to stop in and see the bartender. Graham is not there, which she expects this time.

"Hi," she says, sliding onto one of the stools.

"What can I get for you, young lady?" the bartender says.

"*Young* lady," she repeats, "I like the sound of that."

"S'what you are then."

“I didn’t come for a drink, actually. You remember that guy I was asking you about last time? The young one in the sweater vest?”

“Sure.”

“Have you seen him in here anymore lately?” Alice asked.

“Well, not for a while I guess. Must’ve been the same time you last saw him.”

“I um . . . I don’t usually do this, but I wanted to leave my number,” she hands him an index card with her name and phone number on it, “in case he comes in when I’m not here. I don’t have another way of getting a hold of him, but I’m sure he’ll remember me.”

The bartender gives her a knowing smile, as if he knew all of this was going to happen. “I’ll see what I can do,” he says. “In the meantime, you keep on showing your pretty face here so I can attract more business.”

Alice laughs once, feeling flattered, but not reassured.

“Ought to put a sign out front by the street.”

“Oh yeah? And what would it say?” she asks.

“I dunno. How about, ‘Pretty Girl Inside Now,’” he gestures, laying out the text with his hand. “Come see.”

Alice laughs again. “I’m no girl anymore.”

“Anymore? Well what are you now? What happened that took away the girl?”

She looks down at the bar for a moment. “You’re going to make me want a drink

after all, aren't you?"

*

The following day, while the kids in Puppy Pack Room B are comatose on their tri-fold floor mats, a soft knock sounds on the door. Alice turns in her chair and sees the receptionist, Beverly's rodent eyes looking in the glass, which she's barely tall enough to accomplish. Alice cautiously opens the door a few inches, like a tenant to an unwelcome solicitor.

"Yes?" she whispers.

"Sorry, Miss Traille," Beverly attempts to match the Alice's whisper, but fails. She coughs loudly and clears her throat. A few puppy heads lean upward from their mats to investigate, then resettle. Alice rolls her eyes. "Sorry to interrupt, but Mr. Zibell is on the phone for you."

"Coraline's dad?" Alice asks.

Beverly nods. "He says it's about her. Something important. I dunno."

"Oh, well . . ." she looks back in the room at her kids. Some of them are whispering to each other now. "Can you watch the room for a minute?"

"Mmhmm."

"Thanks. Just try not to cough like that, okay? Takes a miracle to get them all

sleeping.”

Beverly doesn’t seem to hear. She’s already pushing through the door and heading for Alice’s ergonomic chair. Alice walks down the hall to the front office and enters, shutting the door behind her. The red light on line one is flashing, indicating a call is on hold. She watches it blink—a small, silent heartbeat—and something inside of her takes it as a warning: if she picks up that phone, she will regret it. This is the moment she will think back on and proclaim, *if only I hadn’t*, although it’s hard to categorize this fear. It’s hard to say whether she’s more afraid of the phone call, the man himself, or the possibility of uncovering something she doesn’t want to uncover.

“Mr. Zibell?”

“Miss Traille,” the voice answers. “I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“Well, it’s naptime, but—

“Good. They don’t wake up for anything at that age.”

Alice decides not to contradict him. “What can I do for you, Mr. Zibell? You called about Coraline?”

“Please, call me Herb. Mr. Zibell makes me feel funny.”

“Um, okay. So this is about Cora?” The lobby door opens and an elderly lady in a floral print dress enters, immediately mistaking Alice for the receptionist. Alice holds up a finger and smiles, gesturing that she should wait just a moment.

“Well, it is and it isn’t,” Herb says.

“I’m sorry, what can I do for you, Herb? I really have to get back.”

The old lady is rifling through her purse on the counter now, searching for something.

“Alice, I’m calling to follow up on something I mentioned the other day . . . about dinner.”

“Uh huh.” Alice is barely listening now. She’s concerned the old lady will soon be at her throat.

“How would you like to join me and Coraline for dinner tomorrow night—at Spimoni’s.”

Alice catches the tail end of his sentence and realizes what’s happening. Just then, the old lady’s face lights up and she pulls a piece of paper out of her purse. “Here it is,” she says, laying it in front of the Plexiglas for Alice to inspect.

“I’m sorry, hang on a second,” Alice says into the phone. “Ma’am, I’m not the receptionist, if you can just—”

“I’m supposed to bring this and have it signed,” the lady says. “My insurance company needs it for verification. Verification of what, I’ll never know. That I’m not a liar I suppose,” she’s putting her glasses on now. “Nobody trusts anybody these days.”

“Ma’am, the receptionist is in the back right now. Can you hang on for just a minute?”

“Alice? Are you still there?” Herb says.

“She’s in the back? Oh, okay.” The old lady picks up her paper and starts to walk around toward the hallway.

“Ma’am, no. You can’t go back there.” The lady doesn’t hear, continues walking.

“Ma’am? Stop!”

“Alice? Hello? Should I call you back?”

“Hang on, Herb. There’s this lady. Ma’am just come over here and I’ll sign it. Alice practically yells the last part. The lady looks confused, but she returns to the counter and starts talking about the paper again.

“Do you want to come to dinner or not, Alice?” the phone squawks.

“Alright, yes. Yes, that’s *fine*, Herb. What time?”

“Would seven be alright?” he asks.

“Okay, bye now. See you then. I have to go.” Alice hangs up the phone and scribbles her signature violently onto the blank space the woman is pointing at. “There,” she says.

“Why thank you very much, young lady,” she says. “You know my sister used to come here for her arthritis, and she always swore Doctor Keppler looked just like Robert Redford.”

“Doctor Who?”

“Doctor Keppler,” she says again. “You work here and you don’t know him?”

“Ma’am, this is a daycare,” Alice says.

The old lady is stunned. She looks around her, only now noticing the toys and children's books in the waiting area, the vinyl footprints glued to the floor. "Well I . . . my mouth is so dry right now."

"Are you looking for the building next to us?" Alice says. "I think it's some kind of doctor's office."

"Would you happen to have a stick of gum?"

"I'm sorry, no. I really have to get back to my room," she says. "Have a nice day though."

"Robert Redford, I'm telling you," the lady points a finger at Alice, but she's moving toward the door now, having reestablished her disorientation and decided to be happy with it.

Alice only nods and waves goodbye, hoping she hasn't signed anything terribly important. In a moment the woman is gone. An unnatural silence settles over the office and the waiting area. Alice thinks about what she has just done and regrets it, just as she feared she might. Dinner with Mr. Zibell. Herb. A strange name, even. She pictures him eating a sandwich with a fork, or bringing his own bib to the restaurant, or asking to sit at a table in the very back so he can show Alice his birthmark. In part, she said yes because she was distracted, and Herb was insistent, and saying yes was the path of least resistance. But said yes for another reason, too: because this is exactly what she wanted—to be closer to the girl. At any rate, it's only dinner, only a few hours. Those

hours could be enough time to find some answers, so she will make the best of them.

Why do you doll her up every day and send her off wearing her mother's things? Why is she wearing a bra? How did her mother die? Why do you always look like you've seen a ghost or are one?

When Alice gets back to her room, Beverly is poring over a mass-market paperback through her tiny glasses and two of the boys are punching each other from their mats and a chubby girl named Tabbitha is pushing a wad of Play-doh across the floor like a snowball. Alice blinks hard and forces out a sigh.

"What the hell is going on here?" she whisper-yells.

Beverly looks up from her book at the room, then at Alice. "Are you back?"

Alice throws her hands up. "No, Beverly. I'm just an optical illusion."

"What?"

"Never mind, you can go now."

"That was a short phone call," Beverly says, stalling her departure from the ergonomic chair, which probably smells of onions now, meaning body odor.

"Not really, but thanks for sitting here." Alice makes a point to withhold unearned praise, then she turns her attention to the children stirring on their mats. "Okay everybody," she says, "puppy nap is over, so we're going to take a bathroom break as a class now . . . assuming you made it through your nap without using the bathroom," she mumbles the last part. "When we go into the hallway, I need everyone to be quiet as a

mouse, and . . .” None of them are listening, she can tell, but for once it doesn’t matter. She could care less if they stick gum all over the water fountain or start ripping each other’s ears off. The only thing that concerns her is Coraline. The mystery that enshrines Coraline. The strangeness and silence that possess Coraline. The father that possesses Coraline. The maroon, satin dress she’s wearing today. The eyelashes, long and wreathed like tiny ribcages. The auburn hair, always different, but today bearing the telltale contours of a curling iron, each lock shimmering and radiant. The sandals bound to her feet by little more than fettuccini-sized straps. The jewelry, the cherry red lips, the freckles rendered pale by layers of foundation. The look in her beautiful, green eyes that is not the look of a five-year-old, but of a thing unhinged. She has it in common with her father. This is what concerns Alice.

*

It’s a fifteen minute drive to Spimoni’s from her house. Alice smokes two cigarettes on the way there. At the stoplight on Candle Street, she fetches a bottle of scented body spray from her purse and gives her neck and shoulders a few spritzes. The car fills with the scent of year-old pumpkin spice, and as she pulls into the parking lot of the restaurant, she remembers pumpkin spice is a fall fragrance and regrets dousing herself in it, the current month being June. Surely Herb won’t notice.

Judging from the parking lot, the place is at full capacity, or something close to it. She parks in a compact spot and checks her makeup in the mirror. “It’s so good to see you again,” she says to the mirror, donning a smile. “Hahaha, I *know*. I was just thinking that.” The smile slips away from her like something melting. She turns the mirror back to its normal position and gets out of the car. Why should this be an occasion to keep up appearances? She will obviously go inside, enjoy dinner, be polite, and make it clear that their relationship will remain strictly professional—friendly, at best. Consider him a client, she tells herself. Father of a Coyote Kid.

A young couple leaving the restaurant arm-in-arm pass by her, their breath conjunctively smelling of wine. She turns her head and watches them from behind. The young man leans his head in and kisses the girl’s neck. The girl shoves him and laughs. Must be nice, Alice thinks.

Herb and Coraline are in the front lobby, waiting for a table. Herb is wearing a thin tie and lentil-colored khakis. He looks like an artifact of the 1970s—a baby boomer who stopped aging at 40. Coraline is wearing something different already. A black, high-waisted skirt with a white blouse: kindergarten business casual. Herb stands and bows slightly when Alice enters, but she discourages the formality by waving him down. She doesn’t want him getting any ideas that this is a date.

“Hello, Alice,” he says.

“Hi. Good to see you again, Herb. How is everything?”

He nods, which is not quite a response, but she doesn't press him. "They said our table should be ready in a few minutes," he says, "but if you're hungry enough, we could leave and go somewhere else."

"Oh, goodness, no," Alice says. "I love this place," which is a lie; Alice has never eaten at Spimoni's. "And how are you today, Coraline?"

"Fine," she says.

"You look very pretty, as always."

The girl doesn't answer. She seems quieter than usual.

"So, what do you normally order here?"

Before he can answer, Coraline interrupts and says that she needs to go to the bathroom.

Herb shakes his head. "I told you to go before we left the house." There is no bargaining in his tone. It's as if he's saying he won't allow it. Alice wonders if this is for her benefit, if Herb thinks it rude for some reason.

"Well, that's okay. I'd be happy to take her, if you like," Alice offers.

Herb chews on his lip, deciding. Then he says, "If the hostess comes, tell her we'll be there shortly. I'm going to take Cora to use the bathroom."

"Oh. Alright. I can do that," Alice says.

Herb takes the girl into the men's bathroom. It's a situation Alice has seen before, but still something about it seems off. She might have heard defensiveness in his tone.

Perhaps they are very close. Perhaps it's fine for a man to take his five-year-old daughter to the men's bathroom. Perhaps this is something men do all the time. Something fathers do all the time.

Alice sits down on the bench against the wall and takes a mint from her purse, unwraps it and drops it into her mouth. She pushes it around with her tongue, painting the walls of her mouth. The hostess comes around the corner and steps up behind her podium, examining the chart. She scans the room, and Alice guesses she's looking for Herb.

"Are you looking for Herb?"

"Um . . ."

"Mr. Zibell?"

"Yes. Are you . . . his wife?"

"Oh, God no," Alice says. "Definitely not. I'm just with him. No relation."

"Okay." The hostess laughs a little and apologizes. "Well, the table's ready now, if you'd like to come sit down."

"Yes, that'd be nice," Alice says, and she gets up from the bench.

Herb isn't the most garrulous man Alice has ever met, but he does have an issue with excessive eye contact. She feels him staring at her for most of dinner, which at first makes her wonder if she has food on her face, or if her shirt is too low-cut, or if there is

anything at all she might have done to attract so much attention. But there is no food on her mouth, and Herb's line of sight is directed at her face, not her bust. Every time she looks up from her plate, his eyes are fixed on hers. She can't decide if he's trying to psychoanalyze her or trying to convey some kind of unspeakable vibe, but either way it makes her feel uncomfortable. She tries to alleviate the tension with small talk. She asks Herb how long he's lived in Sumnerville, and he tells her he grew up there. She asks him what it used to be like when he was a child, and he says there were less roads. She asks him why he chose the name "Coraline," and he says he didn't; Coraline's mother chose the name.

"Can I ask you a personal question?" Alice says.

"Isn't that what you've been doing?"

"An impolite one, then." She is planning to ask him about the extravagant way he presents her to the world, as if there might be talent scouts from the *Vogue* tots-division around every corner.

"You want to know how my wife died, right?"

"Oh . . ."

"No, it's okay," he says, then takes a small sip of the merlot he ordered. "It's rather incredible, actually."

"I'm sorry, should we be talking about this right now?" Alice gestures toward Coraline.

“It’s okay. She knows,” Herb says. “Remember how mommy died?”

The girl nods, slowly. Alice tries to conceal her revulsion with a napkin.

“Can you tell Miss Traille what happened?” he continues.

Coraline is scrutinizing the room through her water glass while stirring it with a straw. Her eye is magnified by the water to twice its normal size.

“Cora baby,” Herb insists, “tell Miss Traille.”

“Herb, I really—”

“Mommy fell asleep in the pool.”

Alice almost doesn’t hear her, she speaks so softly, as if no one were listening, as if the statement is only for herself, so she can go back to stirring the water and marveling at the way the ice cubes refract florescent light, so she can sleep at night. Alice is interested to know more, but can’t find it in herself to ask.

Herb says that it’s good for her to talk about it.

“I don’t know. It seems inappropriate.”

“Why would it be inappropriate?”

Before Alice can answer, the waitress comes to the table and asks how everything is. Alice has hardly touched her eggplant parm. It isn’t that good, anyway. Herb says he’d like to order dessert. Tiramisu. Bring three of them, he says. No one speaks for a minute after that. Herb spreads a slab of butter on the last piece of garlic bread. Alice picks up her fork, but her hand is trembling. She puts it back down.

“Fell asleep?” she leans in and whispers, hoping Coraline is only half-attentive.

Herb nods. “She was on medication then. Hormone therapy, for her menopause. The pharmacist told her not to drive or operate heavy machinery, and I always said she should stay away from the pool, too, but . . .” he tosses his hands up, as if he were describing the folly of an obstinate child.

“Oh my God,” Alice says.

“To be accurate, it was the hot tub,” he says. “Brought her heart rate down, plus a little help from the medication. She had a glass of wine with her, too. After a while, she just slipped under.”

“And you, were you—”

“I wasn’t home at the time. Coraline was at daycare. I was at the store.”

Alice wonders why Coraline would’ve been at daycare if her mother was home. They must not have been close. Her mother must’ve been the uninvolved type.

The waitress brings the Tiramisu on three plates and sets one in front of each of them. Alice still hasn’t finished her dinner. Coraline stares at the massive dessert and makes a few nonsensical faces, none of them indicating she’s prepared to eat it. Herb deposits a generous forkful into his mouth and nods approvingly while he chews. Given the prevailing topic of their conversation, his attitude seems flippant, at best.

“You know,” he says, “you always forget that people vomit and defecate when they die.”

Alice decides she will ask for a to-go box. There can be no eating with this man.

“It’s just not something you go around thinking about, until you see it.” He shakes his head. “Then when you see it, you can never unsee it.”

Alice doesn’t answer.

“Delicious,” he points his fork at the Tiramisu. “You’re not hungry?”

She considers excusing herself—from the table, and from the restaurant—but she feels obligated to stay, if for nothing else, for Coraline. The girl has taken off one of her bangles and is spinning it on the table. It spins off the edge and hits the floor beneath them. Coraline goes for it, making a grunting noise as she bends down, and another as she slips off her side of the booth and retrieves the bracelet on all fours. When she resurfaces, her blouse has fallen at one side, revealing a pale shoulder and a sunken clavicle and a flesh-toned bra strap. Coraline has no idea that her top is askew, but Alice sees it, and Herb sees her seeing it. He puts his fork down and reaches over to reposition the blouse in one deft movement. Alice looks at him sideways, an obvious question borne on her face. The man is cornered, she can tell. The curtain has been drawn back.

Herb wipes his lips on his napkin. His face is quickly waxing red. He holds a finger up to Alice, as if to say *Hang on a sec, I’ve got this*.

“Cora, are you hiding something under your shirt?” he says. Coraline shakes her head theatrically. “I thought I told you to stay out of mommy’s drawers.”

“What?”

“Why are you wearing one of mommy’s bras?”

Coraline thinks hard for a moment, scrunching her face up. “You said to.”

Herb lets his face fall into his palm, shaking his head slowly. “Oh, Cora,” he says.

“What is she talking about?” Alice says.

“It’s . . . she’s confused.” He nods, approving himself. “She’s been very confused since Helen died. Always sneaking things out of the dresser drawers and putting them on. I try not to be too hard on her about it.”

“Talented five year old, putting on a bra correctly,” Alice says. She knows she’s going too far; It’s none of her business.

“She is that. Very talented.” He reaches over and smooths back some of Cora’s hair.

“So I guess she likes mommy’s jewelry, too, then,” Alice says, but this time tries to sound playful.

“Oh yes. Loves the jewelry, which I don’t see any harm in. She loves everything about her mother. Sometimes it’s uncanny,” he says.

“Yes.”

Herb takes another bite of his Tiramisu, which means he has regained composure. The waitress comes to the table with a check and says she hopes everything was okay. Herb pulls the check toward him and reaches for his wallet.

“Can I have a box?” Alice says. Then when the waitress leaves, “Herb, you’re not

about to pay for all of this. Let me get mine.”

He slips his bank card into the leather pouch and sets it on the edge of the table, smiling at Alice, ignoring her request, using nothing more than his clairvoyant gaze to divest her of all courage and what had seemed like an upper hand.

If the night was intended to be a date, it certainly derailed itself at some point. Maybe it was the point when Herb felt it apt to discuss his wife’s gruesome, cinematic death. Or the point when his five-year-old revealed her bra strap. Or the point when he took Alice’s hand into his own and said, “Thank you for doing this. It meant a lot to Cora.”

Alice gets in her car, but doesn’t leave immediately. Her skin feels hot and clammy, as if someone doused her with old fruit juice (the pumpkin spice spray, she remembers). The armpits of her dress are permeated with sweat. She’s envisioning a hot shower when her cell phone rings. An 8-7-7 number, which probably means Glen Seward calling with empty threats and insults. The numbers are different sometimes. She tosses the phone on the dash and watches it scoot around, buzzing like a wounded insect. The call goes to voicemail.

In the end, her cigarettes demand more attention than her credit card debt, so she drives around town for a while, away from Spimoni’s toward east town where the country clubs lie vacant at night with their sprinkler heads chattering onto the greenways and where expensive koi sleep with their eyes open in manmade ponds whose only function is

to catch stray golf balls. The daylight is just receding. Children are still out in the neighborhoods, playing in the streets, gathering vagrantly on the sidewalks. They stop and stare at Alice's car as it passes. She stares back at them with, envious of their youth, envious of their games. She wonders what kind of lives they live—insulated lives with mothers and fathers and extracurriculars and plenty of free time. It's too late to want this for herself, but she wants it for Coraline.

Herb has been a front so far, and she knows it now. He's hiding things—a whole mountain of secrets concealed by his pleasantries and his hair-sprayed comb-over. Little Coraline's formal dresses and little Coraline's makeup. Alice thinks about her own scars, the ones beneath her clothing and the ones beneath her skin and the ones beneath even that. How could one incomplete person ever rescue another? And why is she thinking about rescue, anyway? Maybe she's wrong about Herb. Maybe he's a decent man with a low social I.Q. Maybe there's nothing wrong about him at all, and it's some kind of deep flaw in Alice that makes her suspicious of people without reason. But Janet feels the same way about the man, and she barely knows him. *Weird*, she had said. *Just gives me the creeps*.

At the end of a cul-de-sac, she turns the car around and drives back along the golf courses toward her house. It's dark now. The animals of the night will be coming out soon. Coyotes. Raccoons. The moths will pitter patter against streetlamps in fluttering swarms. She thinks of Alabama, what it used to be like at night. She remembers fireflies

the most. In the dusk, rising up from the fields to blink their soft green glows—
thousands of them—like dying embers of the daylight. And then the cicadas. The little
insects with wings that grate against each other like metal on metal. She would hear
them in the trees, each one trying to shriek louder than the next, but from a distance
sounding almost reverent. Alice used to sit on her mother’s screened-in porch at night
and listen to them, long before she smoked, long before Simon, long before the baby.
Some nights a troupe of deer would scamper out from the tree line and stop to graze on
the front lawn, and if she cracked a knuckle or yawned or cleared her throat, the sound of
it would ring out in the night and alert the whole group. Their heads would spring up
from the ground, ears twitching, nostrils flaring, and if she made a second sound, they
would vanish into the trees again, leaving no trace of their passing.

One night, Alice was watching the deer in this same summer liturgy, and she
turned to find her mother at the storm door, a hand pressed against the glass, a mask of
despair her face.

“Mom,” Alice said, inquiring and consoling at the same time, with the same word.

“I miss your father.”

Alice looked back at where the deer had been and nodded, but it was hard for her
to miss a man she’d never known.

She gets home around 10:30 that night, her mouth saturated with the taste of ashes

steeped in menthol. Her gums burn as she brushes her teeth and bathes them in Listerine.

She moves to the bedroom, tugs off her blouse and steps out of her pants, leaving them on the carpet in a pile. On her dresser sits a small jewelry box made of rosewood. It was a gift from Simon, but nothing he went out of his way to acquire, or at least no further than his grandmother's stockpile of possessions. The sides were once polished to a bright sheen, but now they are dulled, their floral etchings shallow allusions to the maker's intent. Alice stands in front of it, deciding whether or not to open it. She decides not to open it, but then she opens it. She decides to lift up the top tray containing her bracelets and earrings and set it aside. She decides to move a few handkerchiefs aside and pick up the plastic baggie at the very bottom—the plastic baggie with a name written on it in black marker. She can feel herself getting weak already, her hand trembling, her lips curling down at the sides, but she doesn't stop. The bag crosses the room with her. It opens at the bidding of her fingers and deposits an object into her palm—something like a seed, or an ancient coin, or a relic from a forgotten cataclysm, the only relic. The relic sits in her palm, the color of tree bark, the shape of a button. It's something she had asked the doctors for. Something that fell short of what she had expected, but was the best she could get. She holds it up at eye level, the fragment of umbilical cord, and says to it, "I miss you so much."

A knock sounds at the door. Alice starts and looks at the clock on her wall, dimly

acknowledging that she's crying over an umbilical cord in her underwear. She finds her clothes on the floor and dresses quickly, buttoning her pants as she approaches the door. It seems like whoever it is should've knocked a second time by now, but there is only silence. Alice tries to peer out through the frosted glass, but she can only make out a figure receding toward the street. She opens the door wide enough to investigate and sees a man walking toward a Lexus parked on the street by her mailbox. Does Herb drive a Lexus? She can't recall seeing his car.

"Hello?" she says.

The man turns around, but it's still so dark; he is only a form with appendages and some kind of face.

"Did you just knock on my door?" she says.

He takes a few steps closer, into the aura of porchlight, and she realizes it's a younger man, and then she realizes it's Graham. He's not wearing a sweater vest this time, only a button-down shirt and a pair of jeans.

"Sorry. I thought no one was home," he says.

"Someone is," she says. Her breath is shallow. "I couldn't get to the door right away."

"That's okay," he says. "I was just going to go." He points a thumb back at his car.

"You don't have to do that," she says, trying not to seem ambitious. Graham only

nods, and she realizes it's still her turn to talk. "Why are you here?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry it's so late," he says. "I just left The Sitting Room, and the guy there gave me your note. I just thought I would swing by, since I remembered where you live."

"That's awfully bold of you," she says. Secretly, though, she's glad he came.

"I know. I'm sorry."

"It wasn't much of a note," Alice says, "just my name and number."

"To me it was a note."

"Oh?"

He nods, folding his arms.

"And what did it say?"

"That you wanted to see me again. That you were still thinking about me. That you don't have many friends."

"I don't have many of friends? Why don't I have many friends?"

"Because I don't have many friends either," he says.

Alice narrows her eyes at him. This is clearly not the same Graham as inebriated Graham. No. This Graham is the kind who shows up late at night in a Lexus, comes out from the shadows all dark and alone and still too young and knocks on your door.

"Will you come in?" she says.

"If that's okay with you."

“That’s okay with me or why would I ask.”

“You might ask anyway.”

Alice shakes her head and turns to go inside, leaving the door open behind her. Graham comes into the living room slowly, looking above and around at the walls and furniture. You’d think he was a building inspector.

“It looks nice in here,” he says. “I don’t think I noticed much of it last time.”

“Well, you wouldn’t have,” Alice shouts from the kitchen, where glasses can be heard clinking. “You can sit down on the couch if you care to. Something to drink?”

“Do you have coffee?” he asks.

“No cream,” she calls, quickly re-shelving two lowball glasses. “That’s really what you want?”

“If it’s alright with you. I don’t do cream anyway.”

Alice takes out her Folgers can and puts a filter into the coffee pot. *Doesn’t do cream anyway*, she mumbles, shrugging her shoulders. The kitchen window isn’t quite a mirror, but at night, when the lights are on, she can see a double-image of herself reflected in the glass. She checks her hair in it and rubs a finger beneath her eyes.

“You don’t have any pictures in your house,” Graham says from the living room.

“No, I guess not,” she says. “Not much need for that. Do you want any sugar?”

“No thanks.”

Alice leaves the kitchen a minute later with a cup of steaming coffee in each hand.

She finds Graham still standing, looking out the front window.

“You know, it’s a strange choice to drink coffee this late.”

“Well, you’re drinking it.” He holds the cup under his nose and breathes in deeply.

“I don’t want you to have to drink it alone,” she says.

“So you care about me, then?”

Alice laughs and says sure. They both sit down, but Graham takes the love seat adjacent to the couch. He’s making an extraordinary effort to be reserved.

After a moment, he says, “I figured I’d probably never see you again. Or at least it would be a while and then we’d run into each other at some store and it would be weird for both of us.”

“I thought the same,” Alice says. She sips her coffee, which doesn’t appeal to her without cream.

“And yet here we are.”

Alice smiles at him. “So what happens now?” she says.

“Well, I’m not sure. I kind of assumed whatever happened would happen naturally.”

“And if that didn’t happen?”

“Then, I dunno . . . I thought maybe we could just talk about ourselves. Talk to each other about ourselves,” he says.

Alice laughs and sets her cup down on a coaster in front of her. "Okay, you first."

"What do you want to know?" he says.

"Does your mother know where you are?" Alice asks.

"No," he says. "I'm kind of like Bruce Wayne."

"You sneak around at night wearing a cape?"

"No, I mean my parents are dead."

"This keeps *happening* to me," Alice says. "I'm such an idiot."

"I'm sorry?"

"People keep springing it on me in casual conversation that their relatives are . . . not currently alive. It's like black magic or something; I keep missing the cues."

"Oh, well I'm sorry to spring it on you," Graham says.

"No, don't *you* apologize. Do you smoke? You know what, just ignore me. Go on with your story. We'll smoke later. *I'll* smoke later. You might not be old enough." The age jokes are becoming a nervous tic, each one less humorous than the one before it, each one drawing more attention to Alice's fixation on the subject. "Go ahead. I'm listening hard now."

Graham appears confused for a moment. "You were supposed to be asking me questions," he says.

"I was. I'm sorry. So, what about your parents?"

Graham shrugs. With his free hand, he's picking at the love seat upholstery. "It

was just a car accident. Not a whole lot to tell, I guess.”

Alice waits for him to elaborate, but he does not. “When did this happen?” she asks.

“A couple years ago,” he says. “My dad and I weren’t close. I was with mom, though.”

Alice nods slowly. She’s looking at Graham in a way she hasn’t before—with tenderness. He’s a familiar breed. A youth without youth. A boy without a mother, living in constant remembrance of the vacuum that death creates.

“Have you ever lost anyone?” he says.

“Not in that sense.” She’s not ready to be known by him. “I never knew my father. My mom raised me.”

Graham nods, understanding. “It’s hard,” he says, “when someone you’d expected to be part of your life for a lot longer just . . .” he makes an ambiguous gesture with his hand, representing death in all of its forms.

Alice looks downward, toward her coffee. A black speck is floating in it. She is trying to use the speck as a focal point—to just focus on the speck and think about the speck and nothing else, which is very hard to do, so she changes the subject.

“So, how is it you drive a Lexus?” she asks. “Was that your parents’ car?”

“Actually, no. They crashed, remember?”

“Right, sorry,” she says. “I’m really not trying to be insensitive.”

“No, it’s okay. I bought the Lexus with some money I acquired,” he says. “I was the secondary on Dad’s life insurance. That, and I washed my hands of the old family business.”

“That sounds like an interesting story,” Alice says. A car passed by on the street, sending a square of light across Graham’s face. In the shadows, his features seem darker and more pensive. “Why don’t you come sit over here?” she asks. “It’s almost hard to hear you, and I promise I won’t bite.”

Graham laughs once and takes a look around the room, deciding. He points at the empty space next to Alice. “Anyone sitting there?”

She shakes her head, so he gets up from the love seat and sits down beside her at a respectful distance. “Ever heard of Corny Corn?” he says without warning.

Alice snorts and says “Yes, unfortunately. Why?”

“That was the family business,” he says.

“Shut *up*.”

“Dead serious. My dad started it up before I was born,” Graham says. “First ever popcorn delivery service. More flavors than Baskin Robbins.”

“Oh my god, so you’re like the Corny Prince then.”

He shakes his head and says not anymore he’s not.

“I’ve never ordered any before. Is it true they have to tell a corny joke when they deliver?” Alice is sitting up on the edge of the couch now, almost frantic.

“God did I hate that, but yes, it’s true,” he says. “This one frat house used to order from us all the time, and they started their own tradition of throwing eggs if the jokes weren’t funny enough, which none of them usually were. I got hit in the eye with an egg one time. Shell scratched my cornea. I had to wear a patch for a week.”

Alice is covering her mouth with her hand, stifling laughter but doing a poor job of it.

“What was the joke you told?” she asks.

“So, I used to know this guy who was addicted to brake fluid,” he says.

“Wait, what?”

“Yeah. It was crazy. He said he could stop any time.”

Alice slumps back on the couch and laughs with her mouth skyward. She says she can’t believe they didn’t like that joke, because it’s very funny. Then she asks him which eye it was, and he points to the left one.

“Looks fine now,” she says. “Hey.”

“What?”

“Your eyes are blue.” Her smile recedes.

“Do you really have a husband?” Graham says

The question falls like a hammer. You can’t just *ask* a question like that. Can’t expect someone you hardly know to tell you her secrets. Alice recreates the gap between their legs that she had narrowed earlier. She knows she must answer him.

“I used to.”

“Divorced?” he asks.

“We were married for a year, and then it just . . . stopped working, so.”

“Just like that?”

Alice nods and says there was nothing to it, really. There never was anything to it.

“Whoever he is, he doesn’t know what kind of mistake he made,” Graham says.

“You’re sweet.”

“What about it?”

“And clever when you’re not drunk.”

“I’d like to kiss you,” he says.

“Graham,” she says, “you’re so young. I don’t think it’s a good idea.”

“I don’t believe you,” he says, turning to face her on the couch. “I think every time you pretend to be worried about me being too young, what you’re really worried about is your being too old, and I want to prove that you’re not.”

“That’s not your job,” Alice says.

“I don’t have a job. I don’t have anything.”

“You have a Lexus,” Alice says, but immediately regrets it.

Graham places his hand on top of hers. He looks directly into her eyes, as if cornering them into some kind of showdown with essential truth. A strange perturbation

courses through her chest, an lightness, an acceleration.

He leans forward and presses his lips against her neck. A bloom of warmth and moisture. Her skin flinches under his breath like that of a nervous steed and she watches him from above with a wary eye. Her fingers sink into the back of his hair, but then she lifts his head away with both hands, the balance of her willpower tilting barely toward restraint.

“I’m sorry, Graham. I just can’t right now.”

He scoots away and looks down at his hands, but seems to be more disappointed in himself than anything else.

Alice laughs a disingenuous laugh, trying to make light of the situation. “Right now I just want to smoke or something,” she says. “You know?”

Graham is still looking at his hands. She thinks maybe he has lost some great

battle inside of himself—a battle to succeed, to make her belong to him, but how could she ever do that?

*

CHAPTER V

It's not until several days later that Alice finally listens to the voicemail from Glen Seward, the one that came on the night of her dinner with Herb. Seward is probably one of the most offensive people she has ever dealt with, but she's becoming numb to his harassment. She imagines him working from home, chatting into a Bluetooth earpiece while he makes French toast in his pajamas. Maybe he has a wife, maybe kids. Maybe they have no idea how depraved he is, because they aren't around when he makes his "work calls." This helps her not fear him.

But the voicemail she listens to now is so horrifying and invasive of her privacy that it destroys the complacency she'd achieved and fills her with hatred. She's driving home from Coyote Kids when she listens to it—just crossing over the river bed on a low bridge at the edge of town. She jerks the car off the road and pulls into a dirt wash with some kind of pump station along the chain-link fence. She turns the engine off, but leaves her hands on top of the wheel, staring into the distance, her eyes mad with rage and filling with tears.

Miss Traille! Your friend Glen Seward, from Capital Recovery again. How's

everything been, living in the red and all? Listen, um . . . apparently you have a kid, which I didn't know about until recently. A little girl, I believe. Just food for thought here, but man, it would really be awful if something happened to you, and little Alice, Jr. had to deal with your debt. Because that's what would happen, you do realize. What is she—seven months old? Eight? Soon as she gets her first job, BAM! We'll be calling her night and day about mommy's credit card she never paid off. Anyway, tell her I said hello. And watch yourself. It's a dangerous world out there. Call me back, lady.

Alice gets out of her car and slams the door. He's got it wrong. She doesn't know how he found out, but he's got it wrong.

She walks over to the chain link fence that borders the river bed and looks down into it. It's barely damp—a shoal of brown water no deeper than a dog could ford. Alice watches the water and mud snake around little copses of trees, depositing thick alluviums of sediment around their roots, turning them into islands. Various pieces of city litter float like dead bodies toward an unknowable terminus. She imagines her hands around Seward's neck, her fingernails puncturing his flesh, tearing at the intricate network of pipes and tendons of his throat. The water is too shallow to envelop a body, to swallow it up with oblivion, but if it weren't, and if she had the strength, and if nothing could stop her . . . she kicks the fence hard. It rattles mutely, the sound swallowed up by the open air around it.

Did Simon tell him? Why would Simon tell him? And why leave out the fact that

their child only lived to be 19 minutes old, and that when Alice woke up from the procedure, the child was still in the room, but already gone? Nineteen minutes. The time it takes to fix your hair in the morning, or bake a pizza, or drive from one side of Sumnerville to the other. No, Simon wouldn't have contributed to this phone call—couldn't have. While she'd slept under anesthesia, he entered the room and saw more death (innocent, familiar death) than a man should have to in three lifetimes. Then who? Who else knows enough? She considers Ronnie—Simon's stepbrother. They certainly didn't leave his home on good terms, which makes faulting him seem plausible. She has his phone number somewhere. Or maybe she should call Glen Seward. Surely he has some kind of supervisor she could talk to, and surely his methods are less than ethical. It probably wouldn't be the first time someone has complained. She could threaten a lawsuit. Maybe he would even get fired. Or it could be that nothing would happen at all, but at least she'd get the chance to speak her mind. To tell him that he is lower than dirt, lower than shit, smaller than the smallest thing she could possibly think of.

Most of all, she just wants everything to go away. The harassment, the debt, the infinite echo of her past calling to her like something at the other end of a hallway. She wants to forget, to somehow not be herself any longer, and in doing so erase the legacy that belongs to her. But this is the order of things, she knows. It always has been. Her mother used to call God "The Divine Orchestrator." She used to say that he always has greater purposes in mind for us, that He works in and through every instance of

misfortune to bring about those purposes. In Alice's mind, her mother betrayed this master plan long ago when she stormed out of Dairy Queen like an indignant child, simply because she couldn't stand to behold the imperfections of her own daughter, couldn't understand that Alice was bored and dead, that Constance had become a parasite to her, the slowness and sameness of it leeching out her youth until it seemed there was almost none left. Her mother lives alone in a farmhouse in the woods of rural Alabama, hiding, it seems.

Alice rests her hands on the top of the fence and surveys the Kern mud making its way slowly south. There are places where little eddies diverge from the main flow and pool into marshes so stagnant they look like photographs of the sky. Regardless of who or what has the most influence over her fate, she knows she still has control of a few things. She can't make the debt go away, but if she can make the phone calls stop, then she can at least ignore the debt for an indefinite amount of time. The harassment will stop. The reminders of Simon and her mother and the baby will stop. She will move on. She will forget.

She trudges back across the dusty ground to her car, reaches through the open passenger window and takes her phone from the seat. She carries it slowly to the fence, to the edge of the river, and turns it over in her hand a few times. There are more conventional ways to deactivate a phone number, but right now, Alice needs to do it *this* way. "Call me all you want to, Glen. You'll be at the bottom of the river." With this last

dictum, she hurls the phone as far out as she can. It soars above the mud for a few short seconds, reduced in size to what might be June beetle, and then disappears into the brown flow without a sound.

*

It is Friday again, the first day of July. The puppy pack is more restless than usual, and Janet, having returned with new energy from her vacation north, is similarly more flap-jawed than usual. Alice is distracted today. The night before, she dreamed vividly of a woman's nude body floating face-down in a pool, the sun high above it casting a dark turquoise shadow onto the bottom. Beside a dry-rotted chaise, a glass table held a glass of something cold and red, the sides of it dripping with condensation. The pool was behind a house. The sliding glass door of the house was open. Alice avoids her co-workers at lunchtime (especially Janet), and polices her kids with minimal interest and even less creativity, all the while thinking about the dream. It's not until the end of the day, when she sees Herb signing Coraline out at the front desk, that she remembers the tale of his wife's death, and it dawns on her where the dream came from. She clocks out and gathers her things from the break room in a daze, in her mind sifting through a host of grotesque scenarios. Herb swapping out his wife's medication for cyanide pills. Herb wrapping a guitar string around his wife's neck while she sleeps. Herb's wife chopped up

in a deep freezer like cow meat.

Then she laughs at herself a little. There's no reason to be thinking these things. She's probably just missing that cigarette she didn't take at lunch. Just hit an extra one on the way home. Count the number of drags it takes to burn down to the filter. The higher the number, the calmer she is—or that's what Simon used to say. But suppose that, beneath her paranoia, there lies a shred of truth? If even one small piece of Herb's story doesn't add up, then the girl could be in serious trouble. Coraline.

Today is Alice's day to lock up the building. The staff at the daycare alternate closing responsibilities, and there are enough people that she only has to take over on Fridays. It's straightforward; turn off the copier in the front office, turn off the lights, lock the classroom doors, make sure the padlock on the playground fence outside is shut, and lock the exterior doors, of which there are three. Meanwhile the rest of the staff *not* locking up scamper out of the building like spooked cockroaches, eager to leave the place. As usual, Alice is the last one there today. She walks the hallways, jiggling each door knob, checking off the procedures in her head, and once finished makes for the door that opens into the parking lot. But here she stops short, thinking of Coraline. She remembers the magnified eye looking through her cup at Spimoni's—a caricatured sleuth with a magnifying glass. *Mommy fell asleep in the pool.* Herb had to have taught her to say that, which would explain why he insisted she repeat it that night. To how many other people has she repeated the same line? And how many of them have questioned it?

She has plenty of reasons to suspect that Herb is not all he seems to be, that he is concealing certain things from the public, and who's to say one of those things is not the death of his own wife, which might or might not have been an accident?

Alice had pushed the door open to leave, but she lets it shut again now, the heavy latch that only opens with a seven-digit code clicking back into place. And Alice clicks into place. She has an idea. It's not without hazards, but since everyone is gone for the day, it isn't impossible either. She goes back to Puppy Pack Room B and puts her things down on her desk—purse, keys, water bottle. She checks the hallway through her door's porthole window. No one is there, of course. If anyone barges in . . . she'll just tell them she came back to rearrange the chairs for a game in the morning. Musical chairs, perhaps.

The wall cubby belonging to Coraline is fourth from the end. Alice is looking for anything that could seem important, anything that might be missed, here in the cubby, instead of at home with Coraline. The skewed drawing of an archetypal, two-story house pinned to the back board won't do. The raincoat won't do. But, low and behold, at the bottom of the cubby sits Coraline's lunchbox, which will suffice. Alice knows the box, as she knows most of Coraline's accoutrements by now. It is turquoise, made of thick plastic, with raised sea shells and a sea horse on the lid, and it comes with her every day. Fortunately for Alice, today it has been left behind. She picks up the box and takes it to her desk. "Okay," she says, drawing in a deep breath.

Her next task is to enter Jeremy's office—more specifically to enter the tall filing cabinet behind his desk, which will require finding both a key to his office and a key to the filing cabinet. Alice checks the hallway again through her window. All clear. She goes out of her room and heads for the reception office, which is her first guess at finding a key. On a wire rack above the fax machine hang half a dozen or so keys, but none of them are labeled for the manager's office. One of them says "Receptionist Drawer" on its blue tag, and on a hunch Alice takes this key down and tries it on Beverly's top desk drawer. The drawer opens.

At first she only sees a few stacks of receipts and some paperclips, but she bends down and looks further back in the drawer and discovers a small gold key labeled, "Mgr. Spare." She tucks it into the front pocket of her pants, leaving the office and shutting the door behind her. At Jeremy's office door, she pauses to listen for any sounds inside and hears none.

The key gives her some trouble, but with a little coercion, the door swings open, whining on its hinges. The office is tidy, showing only subtle traces of use—a foam cup in the wastebasket with brown dregs of coffee at its bottom, the pong-like screensaver recently triggered, the blinds half-turned. For a moment, she pictures him reclining in the leather chair behind the desk, his hands behind his head, staring deep into his Grand Canyon poster and fantasizing about a jump into that chasm. A unexpected man, at least in this place, but he seems to be a good man. He's been fair to her in the past, more than

fair in hiring her to begin with. It would be disrespectful to linger in his office as a burglar, so she will work quickly.

The client folders are alphabetized in the bottom two drawers of the filing cabinet, she discovers. Coraline Zibell is easy to find. She plucks the olive green Pendaflex from between the others and lays it open on Jeremy's desk. The forms have clinical titles—Application for Admission, Childcare Contract, Immunizations, Emergency Contact Sheet, About Your Child—but the information they contain is invaluable to Alice, like treasure. She feels as if she is reading the blueprints for a top-secret government project, finally gaining access to what has been a great mystery until now. It's all written here, in what is probably Herb's frantic cursive. Coraline was born in Prescott, Arizona. No siblings. Her interests are mermaids, swimming, the ocean, and something else Alice can't read. Father's occupation: accountant. Mother: ~~hygienist~~ deceased. Alice skims some of the other pages. What she really needs, she has already found, at the top of the first sheet in the file. Address: 907 Tule Rd. She knows the area. It's further out than she expected, in the foothills, probably a twenty-five-minute drive. She'll need her county roadmap.

A door opens and shuts at the other end of the building. Alice freezes. Who the hell would be coming in right now? She hears footsteps in the hallway, hard-soled shoes clip-clopping like hooves and certainly coming toward her. It could only be Jeremy, unless the custodian has put on Jeremy's shoes and reentered the building after hours. He

will have seen her car, still in the parking lot. He will notice his office door open. She looks at the file on the desk, and decides there is no time to replace it in the drawer, so she snatches up the whole thing and stuffs it under her arm and ducks into the only place of concealment in the room—beneath the desk, in the hollow where the chair scoots into place.

She sees his black wingtips step into the room and hears him say “Hmmp.” A thin wooden panel stands between the two of them. “*Here* we go,” he says, and then some kind of clatter on the top of the desk. Must have forgotten something—his phone, his sunglasses, a granola bar he’d planned to eat on the way home. His feet move toward the door, but not to leave, only to sit down in the chair against the wall. She can hear the buttons on his phone clicking, followed by the muted squawking of his voicemail box recording. His phone snaps shut, and he stands, and Alice is closing her eyes in relief when a receipt-of-payment slip escapes the folder she is holding and swishes out from under the desk like a feather on a breeze.

“The hell?” he says.

Alice cinches her eyes shut and tries to breathe delicately, but Jeremy is coming around the side of the desk now. His steps are slow and measured, as if he already knows what he will see. Alice holds the folder across her chest and tries to look like she belongs there, belongs curled up under her boss’s desk, clutching restricted client information.

“Alice?” He squints at her. “What are you doing? What are you doing in my

office?” Alice stares back, unsure of how to respond.

“Can I help you with something?”

“Actually, I was just . . . You know, I’m just in here to . . .”

Jeremy points at the folder she’s holding across her chest. “What’s that?”

Jeremy now notices the folder she’s holding under her arm. He points at it and says, “Whatcha got there?”

She searches beneath the desk for an answer, looking at the floor, looking at the paneling around her. “Can I stand up, please?” she says. He takes a step back and makes an *after you* motion with his hand. Alice climbs out from beneath the desk without speaking. She drops the Pendaflex folder on his desk, signaling with an open hand that this is what she was doing.

He looks back and forth between Alice and the folder. “What were you just doing in here?”

Alice shrugs and says reading.

“Reading what? Is that what I think it is?” he says. A rhetorical question, since the white tab on its edge clearly demonstrates that yes, it is exactly what he thinks it is. “Alice,” angry now, “exactly what the hell were you doing in here? You’d better have a damn good explanation, and pronto.” On the word ‘pronto,’ he pokes her hard in the sternum, and she almost loses her footing.

Alice’s eyes fill with tears at his touch. His anger surprises her. She’s seen him

be frustrated before, but never like this, which worries her. Is he angry that she burgled his office, or angry about the kind of position she's put him in now?

Jeremy clenches and unclenches his fists. "Sit. Down," he commands, pointing at the chair against the wall.

"This is a *huge* violation of the Coyote Code." He shakes his head and says mmm, mmm, mmm, and sits down at his desk. "I don't know if I can overlook this one. I mean Strike Two, and it's really Strike Three in a way. I heard about the pearl necklace, by the way."

Fucking Janet. She must've snitched. Or maybe it wasn't a snitch. Maybe she just couldn't bear to keep it a secret.

"I don't get it," he continues. "I mean, what is it with you and this girl?"

Alice doesn't answer. She picks at her thumbnail with the nail of her index finger.

"You seem like a good person. And smart. Why can't you just leave her alone? How would I explain something like this to . . . what's his name?" He opens the file and looks for a name. "Herbert."

"I don't know. I'm really, really sorry." She emphasizes both of the reallys. "I don't know what's wrong with me. I just—I haven't been myself, you know?"

He stares at her for a moment, then absentmindedly uses a knuckle to nudge his computer mouse. The screen saver clears off and reveals his desktop background: a photograph of a large bird (a hawk?) plummeting down from a bluff with its wings

outspread and the sun setting behind it. He looks at the screen and sighs, and Alice knows what is about to happen. “I feel like I’m going to have to fire you,” he says. He turns toward her, puts his elbows on his desk and the tips of his fingers together.

Alice laughs once, but only because the scene unfolding is so unreal she can’t believe she’s actually part of it. It’s not as if she’d expect him to do anything different, or even that she hadn’t considered the possibility of getting caught. But the plan had seemed safe. It deserved to be safe. After all, she’s doing something *good* here. She’s trying to protect a child. “Please, Jeremy,” she pleads with him. Her throat starts to feel all knotted up, like it’s going to choke her, which means she’s about to cry.

“I don’t think I have a choice,” he says.

Alice tells him that she is sorry again, but he says he’s afraid that’s not going to change anything. There are liabilities to consider. If he was prone to suspiciousness, he might even say there’s something bigger happening with the whole scenario. This is what’s got to be done.

There is a prolonged silence, and then Alice gets up to leave.

“Wait,” he says.

She stops at the door, her back turned to him, her thumb adjusting her purse strap. She waits for his offer of negotiation.

He draws in breath, in the way of someone about to say something, but then cuts it off and says nevermind.

CHAPTER VI

Without Coyote Kids, there will be no Coraline. She won't see her five days a week, sitting cross-legged on the floor, or twirling around beneath the tree, or spinning the steering wheel on the playground. She might never see her again, after tonight. She wonders if there are other ways to see the girl, if Herb will find out, and if he would let her close again, and if there are other ways besides even that.

She is back in her car now, driving, smoking, listening to a cool jazz station fade in and out of static. Her mother used to say it over and over again: *What you do with your time is your life*. Now Alice fears she has spent more time pulling asphalt and burning through packs of Pall Malls than she has done anything else, ever. Even bearing a child took only seven months. She rolls the window down a few inches and taps off the cherry from her cigarette, watching it explode on the road like a tiny orange firework in her rearview mirror. She has lost all control—not of herself, but of her circumstances. It's not only getting fired; it's also the credit card debt. Nearly ten grand. Seward can't call her for the time being, now that her phone is at the bottom of the river, but he'll find a way, she knows, and meanwhile the debt hangs above her like a prolonged eclipse, and

she walks in its shadow. And she walks in other shadows, too. And she feels as if a thousand different forces have claims on her existence, so much so that there is scarcely a part of her left which she can call her own. And yet, she wants to help someone else.

She has enough money in her account to last a few weeks without pay, at best. That's assuming nothing unexpected comes up. A car repair. Sudden litigation from Capital Recovery. A mugging. She is suspended above the void on a tightrope, where even smallest deviation could send her plummeting into oblivion. The options are scarce. She says them out loud while she drives, consolidating her thoughts into sentences.

"Find another job before money runs out. Ask Simon—no, ask Graham for help. Light the house on fire and climb into bed."

The technique of the third option is farcical, of course; Alice could never withstand being burned alive. But the gesture itself—the gesture of self-inflicted death—is not unappealing. After she lost Mara, she spent a lot of time figuring out how to live again. How to do simple things, like buy groceries at the store, fold clothes, take showers. But this is different. Where there once was an atrocity she could finger, something definite and terrible, now there is only emptiness, and the question is *why* live? She draws a blank. Live for love; live for marriage; live for posterity; live for pleasure; live to fulfill a dream; live because in death every person is alone, and to live is to have friends. Alice can't think of anyone she would call friend. Maybe that's not true. Graham is close, but she has kept herself from him, and you can't befriend a mystery.

Simon used to be her friend. He used to be a lot of things. And though she sees her error now—the error of pledging your life to someone because they offer you a thrill in return, the error of expecting them to love you and expecting yourself to love them—still the thought of him is like an open sore hidden deep inside of her. Again she remembers him rolling across the bed to shield her during the fake earthquake. It always comes back to this moment, like a book dropping open to the same page over and over again because that page, of all pages, has seen the most use. It is the one, identifiable moment in which he came closest to loving her, and her to loving him. If the only promise of death was a perpetual anamnesis of this moment, she would gladly kill herself. But death promises much more than that, or so she has been told.

For the moment, she only knows she must get to Coraline. It's tonight or never. In the morning, Herb will drop Coraline off at Coyote Kids and see that Alice has been replaced, that her puppy pack has merged with Janet's temporarily. Herb will probably ask about this, since that's the kind of man he is, and be informed that Alice is no longer employed there. Who's to say exactly how he will receive this information, but Alice suspects it will put a damper on her access to his daughter, which is the only thing that's important to her right now.

And so, Alice drives in the opposite direction of her house. She skirts the edge of downtown on California Avenue, catching flashes of sun in her eye between the buildings. The high school she passes looks like more like a prison than any kind of

educational institution—the parking lot enclosed by a high chain-link fence, the classrooms by a burgundy privacy fence, unexplainable smokestacks or ladders going to the roof on several of the buildings. She thinks about youth spent in captivity and wonders if this is how Coraline lives. On the opposite side of the avenue, a rail yard houses a formation of inoperative freight cars. She can't remember ever having seen a moving train pass through this place. But it isn't the only depot in town.

There's the movie theater further ahead with two cars in the parking lot. The Maya 16. Then the place that does window tinting and auto trim next to the title loan shop with bars on the windows and an overflowing trashcan outside. She slows down in front of the title loan, watching the neon *open* sign blink on and off, wondering how much they would let a woman borrow against a decades-old Datsun. Probably not enough. Simon only paid \$900 for it. He'd bought it for her when they split up, for which reason Alice sometimes thinks of it as a going away present, for which reason she wouldn't feel good about putting it in any kind of jeopardy. Besides, a loan on it would probably costing more than it was worth, in the end, and be added that to her already insurmountable debt. She needs money.

She drives on, heading east through town, toward the foothills, toward Tule Road. The roadmap is folded into sixteenths on her lap. Coraline's lunchbox is in her passenger seat. The sun is making the sea shells on it sparkle like gems. Alice opens the lunchbox with a free hand while she drives. Inside is a plastic baggie containing two Ls of bread

crust with mustard residue on their edges, an uneaten apple, and an empty string cheese wrapper. She picks up the bread crusts and brings them to her face, smelling them first, then holding them softly against her cheek, then pressing them into her skin until they crumble and fall to the seat. She imagines Coraline as a babe, lying on her back, arms and legs flailing uncontrollably like an overturned June beetle. Alice imagines her breasts filled with new milk, like the milk that came in the day after her own child had left the world. She became sick—a malaise that kept her in bed for several weeks, shivering, sweating, weeping. A second tainted pregnancy, it felt like. Her own body, turning against her. Even now, as she drives, the reverberation of that heat and inflammation returns to her, but only as something imagined. Like a ghost limb.

After a while, the city thins out and the land around the highway opens into something of a bald prairie. The Kern River bends toward the road and then joins it on a labyrinthine course into the mountains. There is a point at which a final planted field marks the boundary of agriculture and after which the hills soar skyward on both sides of the road like a parted sea. This pass has no name, but Alice feels as if she's entering a forbidden place to do a forbidden thing. A sign along the shoulder reads "Kern River: 266 Lives Lost Since 1968. Think Safety!"

"I am," she says to the sign.

Beneath the text is an illustration of a stick person swimming with a line drawn through it.

Getting out of the city took the lion's share of the drive. Now she is only a few minutes and a few turns away from Coraline. Her intention is to make some kind of discovery—about Herb, about the girl, about the death of the mother—that will give occasion to her suspicions.

The light of the sun is fading. A half-peach on the horizon, a vestige of the day's fire. The long grade into the hills is beginning to take its toll on the Datsun. The temperature needle flirts with the red zone.

She eases off the gas and says, "Shit, shit, shit. C'mon."

This is one thing that could go wrong.

Or Jeremy could call Herb to notify him that his daughter's caretaker had been snooping in her file.

Or Herb and Coraline could be out somewhere.

Or they could be home and Herb could refuse to let Alice inside.

The turnoff that will redirect Alice to level terrain is nearing. She keeps her eye on the temperature needle. She is asking herself questions. What if she finds what she seeks? Does she have the power to act? What is act?

The road is high on the slope now, protected on the left side by a guardrail coated with reflective paint. Down below, in the gorge, the river threads its way through the boulders and the trees, its flow strong and untapped. Around a curve, Alice sees the turnoff she needs: Gomer Flat Road, named for a rancher or a warden of the old days,

most likely. There is a one-lane bridge over the water and then a slight climb into an expanse of dry fields dotted with oak trees. In the low light, the trees look sickly, like malignant growths on the surface of the hills. There are more of them than a person could count.

Tule Road could hardly be considered a paved road. It looks to Alice like it was paved at some point, years ago, but left unkempt since. The dust of the countryside has blown across it, filling the cracks and depressions like flour from a sieve, giving root to sweetclover and other weeds. At the wide mouth of the road is a short line of mailboxes, maybe half a dozen. Alice slows down, checking the names, accelerating when she sees “Zibell.” Herb’s house is the first one down, on the right side of the road. It’s a modest brick ranch with a built-in garage, three windows along the front. She shuts off the engine and glides to the shoulder. The car is masked by a row of stout bushes at the property line. The curtains are drawn in the living room window, but she can see the light is on, and someone is moving around, casting a shadow into the pool of yellow light on the front lawn. Herb. What is he doing? She shakes her head in disgust, even though he might be building a model train, for all she knows.

Alice looks down at her lap, at the bread crumbs there. The bread crumbs make her question herself for a moment—that she could be so absurd. She can’t go in yet. Not until she reviews her plan one last time. She turns the key one click in the ignition so the radio back on. A nasaly, male voice is explaining the advantages of investing in some or

other company. Alice smokes a cigarette. It's dark now. The crickets are out, ringing in the grass like a thousand tambourines announcing some cannibalistic rite.

The lunchbox will be her ploy. She'll take it to the door and ring the doorbell and tell Herb how concerned she was about Coraline being able to pack her lunch for tomorrow and that she was in the neighborhood anyway. He won't believe this, she knows. Tule Road is only "in the neighborhood" for five people in Sumnerville, and they all live on Tule Road. But something tells her he'll open the door anyway. Perhaps then she can ask him what he does for a living. If he has any intentions of remarrying. That, if nothing else, will buy her some time. She undoes two buttons on her blouse before stepping out of the car into the cool night.

The button on the doorbell is lighted, but it doesn't work when Alice presses it, so she knocks instead. She can hear movement inside the house—a floorboard creaking, it sounds like. The door opens a few inches, and Herb's eyes peer around the side of it, and Alice realizes he probably never gets visitors. He stares at her for nearly ten seconds and then looks behind him once before he finally opens the door the rest of the way.

"Mr. Zibell," she says, "I'm so sorry to bother you, but I was . . . I was out driving and . . ." She holds up the lunch box, trying to seem sprightly. "Thought she might need this for tomorrow."

"Miss Traille," he says, as if just recognizing her, "How do you know where I live?"

“Well, I had to look you up, of course,” she says. “And Alice will do.”

“I’m unlisted.”

“I mean I looked you up at the daycare. We know all about you,” she quips.

He nods and looks at the floor. “Thank you. Thank you so much for bringing that. All the way to my house.”

There is silence—Alice’s cue to hand over the lunch box, which is what she allegedly came for.

“Oh, right,” she says, handing it to him. “I was actually, um . . . are you busy right now?”

He looks over his shoulder again, back into the house. Alice can hear the television on in the living room.

“I’m not sure,” he says.

“Well, I just thought it’d be good to catch up with you. You know, since I’m out here anyway. Haven’t seen you since Spimoni’s.”

She smoothes a piece of her hair back.

Herb shoots a glance at her cleavage, lightning fast, then back to the eyes. But Alice saw it happen. This is good, not because she wants him to look, but because it may work as a diversion. If he thinks she’s there to flirt, he’ll be less likely to suspect her of foul play.

“Mind if I just come in for a few minutes?” she asks. “I really won’t stay long.”

Herb moves his jaw from side to side and then says, “Come in. Please,” with a flat smile. “Will you wait here, in the foyer for a moment?”

“Um, sure,” Alice says. Then, feeling liberal, “Gotta put away your stash or something?”

Herb doesn’t laugh. He disappears around the corner and Alice hears the sounds of small objects being rearranged or picked up or put down, she can’t tell which. A door opens and shuts. Then Herb comes back into sight and smiles even bigger than he had before.

“Won’t you come in the living room?” he says. “You’re in luck, Cora’s still awake.”

“Good. I was hoping to get to see her.”

“There’s a spot for you in the recliner.” He gestures toward it.

Coraline is wearing a pink nightgown, sitting directly in the middle of a large, black sofa with her feet tucked beneath her. Her comparative size gives the impression of a pearl on a felt display box. Alice expects Herb to coax the girl into saying hello, but he only stands beside the sofa.

The recliner is not in the best state of repair—mysterious stains on the armrests, a gash in the upholstery of the backrest—and Herb only warns her that the footrest will fling out unexpectedly after she sits down and it flings out unexpectedly. It seems that everyone is staring at her now, meaning the two of them, waiting for an explanation of

her visit.

“Hi, Coraline,” Alice says.

Coraline looks away from the television for the first time, but not at Alice, at her father. She’s asking him for permission. He nods, and only after this does she say, “Hi, Miss Traille.”

The television is muted, but Alice sees they’ve been watching some kind of British program on PBS. A murder mystery, from the looks of it. Just like the clothes and makeup, this seems too mature for a five-year-old.

“What’ve you been watching, Coraline?” Alice asks.

“Why are you at my house?” she says.

Alice scans the living room, but doesn’t see the lunch box. “You left something in your cubby this afternoon, didn’t you?”

Coraline picks at her big toe and almost smiles.

“Lunch box.” Alice encourages the smile to completion. “I brought it with me so you’ll have it in the morning.”

“What do you say, Cora dear?” Herb says.

Coraline scrunches her chin into her breastbone and murmurs a frail thank you.

Herb sits down beside his daughter and slowly draws in and releases a breath. He seems to be getting comfortable.

“So how has everything been, Herb?” Alice says.

“Everything has been wonderful,” he says.

“Good. That’s good.”

“And yourself,” he asks.

“Well, you know.” She remembers her first conversation with Herb, when he divined that she was living alone. “I’ve been a little lonely here and there.”

“Here and there?” Herb says. “And where are those places?”

Alice laughs at this, but is secretly revolted. She knows what she’s doing. She’s making herself welcome. A diversion.

Herb looks at his watch and tells Coraline that it’s time for her to get to bed.

Which is when she asks him this: “What do you want me to wear, Papa?”

He dismisses the question. “Now why would that matter? Go on to your room and lay down. I’ll tuck you in in a minute.”

“Goodnight, Coraline,” Alice says. She is imminently afraid for Cora. Afraid to leave her alone tonight. Afraid of what Herb was rearranging while she stood in the front hall.

When Coraline has left the room, Herb shuts off the television with the remote control. He folds his hands in his lap and begins to make excessive eye contact.

“You know, I don’t think you ever told me what you do for a living,” Alice says.

“Accounting,” he says.

He seems the accounting type, but Alice doesn’t say so. “That’s good,” she says.

“So you’re a numbers man.”

“You could say that.”

“I don’t really know what I do for a living,” she says. “I mean, there’s the daycare, but that’s not exactly a career.”

“And why not?”

“Well, I dunno. You know.” She’s beginning to have second thoughts about her strategy. It’s not as if the man will accidentally tell her all of his secrets in casual conversation. She looks around the living room, at the imprecise paintings on the walls, the faux flowers in a vase on top of a low bookshelf lined with leather binders, the desktop computer in the corner, attached to a printing machine the size of a small car. If only he would leave the room, even for a minute.

“Alice, is there something I can do for you this evening?” he asks, suddenly impatient.

“Um . . .” If she says no, she will be forced to leave, the meeting having achieved closure. “There is one thing. I wanted to ask you a question about something, but it might take a minute to explain. Maybe you wanna tuck Cora in first, then talk?” Of course, there’s nothing to talk about. She only needs him to leave the room.

He stares at her, unmoving as a bust of himself. Then his stony eyes blink, and he gets up from the couch, walking toward his daughter’s bedroom at the other end of the house.

As soon as he's gone, Alice slips out of the recliner—careful not to provoke the footrest—and sets about investigating the room. She doesn't know what she's looking for, but she knows that Herb is hiding something, and if he lives this far out of town and never has visitors, why would he go to much trouble to conceal anything? The framed pictures above the mantle seem normal, except for the fact that Coraline is a baby in all of them. Helen is in some. Her hair is auburn, like Coraline's. She has freckles, like Coraline. They have the same ears, the same green eyes. No secret messages on the backs of the photos. Alice walks to the computer and taps the mouse with her finger. It asks for a password. What would she type in? There's no time. She scans the room again, replaying the sounds from earlier, what she heard him doing while she waited in the hall. A door had opened and shut. The only door in the living room belongs to what she can only guess is a closet on the side wall. She peers down the long hallway toward Coraline's room for a moment, listening. A low voice is speaking in the dark at the end, which means he's not finished yet. She crosses the room to the closet door and clutches the handle. It squeaks at first, and she freezes, but no trouble, so she turns it the rest of the way quickly and pulls the door open in one fluid motion.

The inside of the closet does not look like the inside of the closet.

No coat rack, no rubber boots on the floor, no spires of weathered board games. It's large for a closet, mostly empty space, about the size of a half-bathroom, walled in with bare, grey cinderblock. Directly in front of her, Alice sees a tripod on the floor next

to a bag with a strap. On the opposite wall, a shelf is anchored into the masonry, bearing paint trays and jugs of something and an apparatus that looks like an upright projector. Strips of film negatives hang from clothespins on a string above the shelf. The images on them are tiny and muted in the dark closet. Has she ruined them by opening the door and exposing them to light? She takes a step further in, straining her eyes against the dimness, trying to discern the individual frames. She can make out spindly, black forms in their pale windows. But the luminosity is inverted, meaning the actual scheme would be the opposite—pale forms against darkness.

Flesh tones.

Alice thinks of Coraline sitting on the black sofa and puts her hand to her mouth.

The floorboards groan in the hallway, signaling Herb's return. On impulse, she snatches one of the strips from the line and stuffs it into her pocket. Then she backs out of the closet. She knows what Herb is about now. His wife gone. His daughter wearing the things she wears, looking the way she looks. The darkroom. The printing machine. Alice can only imagine what horrors are sheathed in the leather binders.

She has the impulse to call him out, let him know that she knows. But what then? This man now seems capable of anything. Capable of attacking her, killing her. His house all the way out here, it's the perfect place to do it, really. And Alice is the perfect person to do it to. No one would ever know.

She'll be discreet—regroup and think of something else.

She closes the door most of the way and then coughs loudly when the latch clicks into place. As he reenters the living room, she pretends to be scrutinizing the reproduction of “Girl in the Woods” that hangs on the wall. In this painting, there is a girl who is in the woods. Alice only knows the title because it’s written on the matting. She fake-starts and turns around to acknowledge Herb.

“I didn’t hear you come in,” she says, her hand on her breast.

“Do you like the painting?”

“It’s kind of like a dream,” she says. “Like a nightmare.”

Herb looks at her sideways. “Was there something you wanted to ask me about?”

“You know . . . there was, but I remembered the answer myself while you were gone.” Alice bonks herself on the forehead. Silly her. “I was trying to think of when Coraline’s birthday was, because I wanted to do something special at Coyote Kids. I just didn’t want her to overhear, you know. So it could be a surprise.”

“August 17th,” Herb says.

“Yeah, I remembered it while you were gone.”

“You remembered.”

Alice nods. “Would it be alright for me to do something special?”

Herb seems irritated now. “Free country,” he says. “Make it as special as you want.”

“Great. Well I should go. You’ve probably got work to do or need to get to bed

or something.”

“That’s really all you needed, Alice.”

On his lips, her name sounds like a threat. She says yes, that was definitely the only thing.

“Alright then.”

Alice walks to the front door. She has the acute feeling of leaving something behind, like when she used to travel with Simon and he would *just know* he forgot an item from the packing list. But she came without a purse this evening. The lunchbox was for delivery. The only thing she’s forgetting, the only thing she’s abandoning, is the little girl sleeping at the other end of the house. Or not sleeping. Perhaps dreaming unspeakable echoes of the daytime.

As Alice crosses the stoop, Herb says, “Please call first if you come again.”

“Right. Absolutely,” she says.

She shuffles across the grass toward her car, waiting for the sound of the front door closing behind her. The sound comes. Her shoes pick up grass clippings from the newly sprinkled lawn and the moisture seeps into her toes.

In the car, she turns on her dome light and takes the film strip from her pocket. On this filmstrip, there is a girl who is naked. The girl is Coraline.

*

CHAPTER VII

Alice speeds down through the hills toward town, coasting when she can to keep the engine cool. She knows the time has come for her to act, but she has to decide what that means and how to make it possible. And it's paramount that Herb suspect nothing. He must believe that Alice still trusts him.

She considers the possible scenarios of intervention: Child Protective Services would come to the Zibell's home—or would it be the police? Or both? They would ask to look around, to which Herb would certainly decline, so they would come back with a warrant, but by then he will have destroyed all the photographs or buried them or left town. If things were to go extraordinarily well, the authorities would take the film strip Alice stole as evidence and raid Herb's home unannounced. Raid the closet darkroom where he hangs and dries nude images of his five-year-old daughter. They would take her into custody wearing that pink nightgown, and she would be handed over to the state, allocated to some foster parent giddy with misplaced benevolence, who would probably sooner pass her off to the next guardian than be her lifelong mother or father or both. Alice certainly wouldn't get her. She doesn't even have a job now, and who would hire

her without a reference? Another mall kiosk? A pimp?

The Datsun has gained momentum now from coming down the grade. It shoots out at the mouth of the pass, pushing 70, and Alice can see the multitude of bright aureoles in the distance that together form the Sumnerville skyline. A goldmine in a sea of black water.

She'll need money. She'll need money to help Coraline, to do what needs to be done. They could get away together. She thinks of calling Graham, as he seems to be the one person left in the world who might be interested in her well being, but she remembers where her phone is—taking calls from Glen Seward in the mud of the riverbed. What's worse, she doesn't have Graham's phone number, anyhow.

"Graham," she says to the night. "Where are you now?"

Since she doesn't know where he lives, her next best guess is The Sitting Room. She drives over to it, parks, and goes inside. Someone else is sitting beneath the *High Life* sign—a woman with a face like dried fruit, practically eating a cigarette. Graham is not at the bar. She drives home and sits on her couch. There's nowhere else to go. The only times she's seen him have been at her own house or at The Sitting Room. She turns on the television and a message appears saying that her service has temporarily been disconnected because of a past due balance. This is when she begins to cry.

The way Coraline was sitting on that couch. It kills her to think about it. The way she looked at her father for permission. The way her limbs were black. Alice aches for

this, more than anything. She goes into her kitchen, feeling like a drink would calm her nerves. Gin is all she has. She takes the bottle from the cabinet above the fridge and pours herself a few fingers and drops an ice cube into it. She sits down on the love seat in her living room, watching the blue screen of her television and the message it displays. *Your service has been disconnected*, it glows. The other lights in the house are off. Alice has been disconnected.

She will drink the glass of gin and go to bed. There is nothing else that can be done, not until she finds Graham. With her free hand, she reaches up to unclasp her earrings and set them on the side table. One of the earrings falls into space between the seat cushion and the frame of the love seat, and she reaches in after it. As her fingers curl around the bottom edge, she feels something there. Not an earring, a slip of paper. She leans into the loveseat for a better angle and pulls out the paper. It's an index card with writing on it, folded at the middle. She opens it fully and then turns on the table lamp to read it. *Alice – 661.555.1439*. She laughs and shakes her head, remembering the note and how immature it was. Then she flips it over, and her heart quickens at the sight of the writing there.

Graham – 661.555.5882

She slams her gin glass onto the side table and stands up, looking at the card. He must have slid it into the couch that night. Written his name on it beforehand and slid it into the couch with some vague notion of the future. Some prescience to see that Alice

would need him again and want him again—if not that night, another night.

He was right. Alice does need him.

She leaves her house, forgetting the earring buried in the cushion, and drives down to the closest place she can think of that would have a phone: the Texaco on Olive Drive. There's a payphone on the side of the building she can use. She stands in front of it, thumbing at the quarters in her pocket, wondering what she'll say. How do you ask someone for enough money to live on for months, enough money to run away? She decides she won't say anything yet—just ask him to meet up. Ask him in person.

She pushes two quarters in and dials his number. After one ring, she drops the phone back onto the cradle and pulls the change lever. She spins around to look behind her, but no one is there. A few people are pumping gas under the flood of halogen lights. There's a homeless man bogarting the pay station, waiting for people to buy gas so he can beg for a dollar. Alice turns back around and takes the quarters out of the change receptacle. She pushes them back into the coin slot and dials the number again. It rings three times before Graham answers.

“Hello?”

“Graham.”

“Who is this?” he says.

“It's Alice. I um, I lost my phone the other day, so this is a different number.”

“Oh. Get a new phone?” he says.

"I'm at a payphone," she says.

"A payphone? That seems sad."

"I know," Alice says. "I was actually wondering what you're doing right now."

"What am I doing right now? Well, until you called, I was sitting at my house, hoping you would call me sometime."

Alice sighs and looks down at the sidewalk.

"Alice?"

"No, I'm here. That's funny, Graham. So, do you think I could come over maybe?"

"Well sure," he says. "Are you . . . is everything okay?"

"Yeah, no. Everything's fine," Alice says. "I just want to see you."

"Sure. Okay. That would be nice," he says, and Alice feels even worse about everything because she can tell he means it. Graham gives her his address and a few pointers about how to find the house. You can't see it from the main road, he says. You have to look for the gate and the sign that says *Scarborough*. She apologizes about eight times for calling so late, but he swears it's no big deal. Ten-thirty isn't that late, he says.

She finds the landmark without too much difficulty. It's southeast of town on Bear Mountain Road. The wrought iron sign stretches in a grand arc over the gate posts at the entrance of the driveway. *Scarborough*. She slows down and turns into it. No house in sight. Just a narrow drive with white fence posts along it, going over the rise.

The property butts up against the namesake of the road—a gentle mountain, which at night looks like a grey blanket tossed on top of something enormous. The higher elevations are peppered with trees. Alice drives over the rise after a minute and finally sees the house, low in the distance, at the base of the mountain. It looks like a glowing sugar cube from this far—still probably a half-mile further—but she can tell it’s enormous, and that the garage has four doors. She can tell from the ancient dung piles in the fields and the way the grass lays flat that horses used to roam them. She imagines a livestock barn stands somewhere out there in the dark, maybe empty.

The house is lit up like a space station. There are floodlights at the corners and landscaping lights around the trees and others pointing up at the exterior wall. Alice notices that the lights inside are on as well—in every room, it seems.

She parks in front in the half-circle drive and knocks on the door. There’s a chill in the air. She pulls at the sleeves of her shirt, covering up her hands and then breathing on them. Graham comes to the door after a minute. He’s wearing pajamas and house slippers and a grin that dwarfs the crescent moon.

“Your place is . . . my god. You know?” Alice says as she steps into a vaulted entryway with a spiral staircase at its center. “It’s incredible.”

“Thanks. I can’t take any credit for it,” he says. “Dad worked with an architect for two years before they ever broke ground out here.”

“It shows,” Alice says.

“Well, you know.”

Alice nods, though she’s not sure what she’s supposed to know.

“Do you have horses?” she asks.

“Used to,” he says, ushering her into the kitchen. The kitchen is possibly larger than her entire house.

“Sold ‘em after a while, though,” he continues. “I couldn’t take care of them on my own.”

“No, I wouldn’t think so,” she says. “Do you have a barn?”

“Yes,” he says, but doesn’t elaborate. “Are you hungry? Or thirsty?”

“Just thirsty,” Alice lies. “But water’s fine.” They’re wasting time, she thinks. She needs to ask him.

He pours her a glass from some kind of contraption on the counter that looks like a cylindrical fish tank.

“Mineral water,” he says. “Would you like to see the house?”

“Oh yes.”

First they go into the family room, where a U of couches surrounds a gas fireplace. An enormous television is mounted on the stone hearth above it. The severed and stuffed heads of big-game animals hang in a morbid counsel around the entire circumference of the room. Elk, brown bear, javelina, a strangely dignified mountain goat, a mountain lion, and some smaller varieties as well—a raccoon, a pheasant, a goose

with its wings outstretched, as if it froze that way when the buckshot took it. Graham tells her his father used to hunt a lot. Travel and hunt. He tells her that his father also was a cheater.

Alice cannot think about any of this. She can only think of Coraline and of the filmstrip folded up in her pocket, but she hears Graham and pretends to listen.

There are many other rooms on the first floor of the house, each one designated for a specific purpose. The exercise room, the study, the library, the piano room. Graham looks at the piano with a smile and says that his mother used to play. Alice wonders why the study is not part of the library.

“She kept trying to teach me,” he says, “but I could never *focus* enough. I still can barely play chopsticks on it.”

“I’m sure it sounded beautiful,” Alice says, as if the piano itself is dead.

The upstairs is mostly bedrooms—seven of them. And a rec. room with a pool table and a wet bar and a smaller, glass-enclosed room inside of it where Graham says his father used to smoke cigars naked.

“I think he had it confused with a steam room,” Graham says. “It still smells like him in there.”

Alice frowns. “So where do you spend your time?” she asks. “It seems like there’s so much to choose from.”

He tells her not really, not when you’re the only one around to do the choosing.

“Is that why you keep all the lights on?” she says.

He looks at the floor for a moment. “It’s just lonely out here, you know? The only house around for at least a few miles. It just—” he picks up a pool ball and catches it in his hand, as if trying to guess its weight. “I just can’t stand to have it dark. If I drive home late, and the lights aren’t on, and I can’t see the house from the top of the rise,” he shakes his head. “It just makes it seem forgotten.”

Alice nods and puts a hand on his shoulder.

“Anyway,” he says. “Let’s go downstairs. Put some music on or something. Too damn quiet.”

They sit in the library, because Alice says the animal heads make her feel watched. Graham approaches a record player in the corner of the room and puts on Simon and Garfunkel’s *Parsley, Sage, Rosemary and Thyme* album and says, yes, that’s why his parents named the place like they did. He leans against the massive, wooden desk in the center of the room, talking about how his father always insisted it was a *reading* desk, not a *writing* desk.

Alice is distracted. She keeps looking out the window, imagining that with her vision she can bore a hole through the hills and soil and beneath the river, miles to the north, to the knoll where Coraline’s house sits. She pictures the girl sleeping in a tiny bed with the covers tucked beneath her chin, her hair spread out in rays on the pillow like a diminutive sun.

Graham waves a hand in front of her face. “Something on your mind, Alice?” he says.

Alice blinks and looks away from the window.

“Graham,” she says, “I don’t want you to take this the wrong way . . . like I’m asking for some kind of charity.”

He looks confused, but says, “Of course not.”

“I’m kind of in some trouble,” she says.

His smile releases. The muscles of his face harden. “I hope nothing serious,” he says.

“Well, no, it’s nothing serious. I mean, it’s kind of serious. Medium serious.”

Graham begins nodding his head, already in agreement. “Whatever it is—doesn’t even matter what it is—I’ll take care of anything you need.”

“Graham. You don’t even know anything yet.”

“Don’t have to,” he says, “I know you.”

“Not entirely.”

He sighs. “I know enough to decide that I’m willing to help you. Now what is it? Tell me.”

Alice rubs the corner of her mouth with her thumb. “I lost my job,” she says.

Graham finally sits down. He runs a hand across his hair. “Alice, that’s terrible. That’s really . . . not good. When was this?”

“Today actually. This afternoon.”

“My god,” he says. “Do you . . . are you going to be okay, financially?”

Alice winces at the sound of the word. The image of her television screen appears again—the first mark of her demise, a sallow headline, still glowing in her living room. She left the television on.

Graham starts nodding again. He’s realized the purpose of Alice’s visit.

“You need money,” he says. It’s not a question. “Whatever you need, it’s yours.”

“Graham, I can’t—

“Seriously. I want to help you,” he says. “Please.” On the word please, he puts his hand on her knee. His touch is soothing. Compassionate. It’s a warm compress on a wound. Alice begins to wonder exactly how much she could ask him for. This is not a question of his means. Judging from the house, judging from the fact that he doesn’t work, she gets the feeling that Graham has access to more money than he knows how to spend. Really it’s a question of comfort—how high of a number would she be comfortable saying out loud? How high of a number would cause discomfort in their relationship? And why should Graham help her anyway? What has she ever done for him, aside from lead him on, giving off just the right amount of friendliness to keep him interested, and yet all the while protecting herself. Trivially reminding him of his age.

“How much do you need?” he says.

Alice shakes her head. “I don’t know.”

“You can stay here,” he says. “If you need a place to stay, you can stay here.” He laughs softly. “Got enough empty rooms.”

Alice clicks her teeth together. “Graham, why are you so nice to me?”

He shrugs. “Is there another way I should be?”

“No, but I mean, why do you *care*?” she says. “My problems aren’t your problems.” The words surprise her. They were Simon’s words, toward the end. New and crushing at the time, but something she says and possibly believes about herself now, even though she’s tried hard to forget them.

“That’s not true,” Graham says. “You mean a lot to me. What else do I even have right now? To be about, to live for?”

“Graham, that’s . . .” she doesn’t finish the sentence. She feels guilty about the things he says, responsible for them, even. Right now, with the way things are, with the way she is, with the way Coraline needs her, Alice can’t stand to be what this man, this boy, *lives for*. And yet, somewhere along the line, she’s let the idea take root in him, and she’s still letting it.

“So let me help you,” he says. He gets out of his chair and kneels down beside hers. He looks directly into her eyes. “Let me.”

Alice avoids his gaze, but when she acquiesces and says, “Okay,” she looks up from the floor at him. He brushes her forearm with the tips of his fingers, and she feels something reverberate up the length of her spine, like a colony of ants traveling back and

forth between her brain and her nerve endings. She can hear him breathing—deep, slow inhalations with the cadence of a raft on a calm sea. Her own breath is emaciated and dry. She wants to float away on him. It’s the least she can do. It’s all she can do.

“Graham,” she says.

“Yes?”

She opens her mouth to speak, but realizes words are not the medium for this moment, not the way to communicate. She leans closer. Graham kisses her, in a way. Their lips come together fixedly, joining but not moving. The kiss is more a state of being than any kind of action. His breath wicks softly against her cheek. The kiss begins to move, his tongue skimming across her teeth, her lower lip going into his mouth. The two of them begin to move. They undress. Find the floor. The great Persian rug in the middle of the room. They sink into its threads. Graham sinks into her. The velvet harmonies of “Flowers Never Bend With the Rainfall” cover them like a blanket. Simon and Garfunkel. Simon. As Graham’s muscles tense above her and he begins to sputter, Alice thinks of Simon.

They lie supine on the rug afterword. Graham takes her hand in his, but she doesn’t squeeze back. She is staring at the ceiling. She wants to leave. Everything is so confused now, and all she can think of is Coraline.

Graham rolls onto his side to face her. She imagines this to be a moment he has pictured before. Then he says, “I love you.”

Alice closes her eyes. Her brow furrows. *No*, she thinks. She feared he would say this, that he wouldn't understand the transaction, that he would take her offering as pledge. Graham seems to notice her apprehension. He sits up and looks at her. His eyes are an emergency.

"Alice?"

Alice gets up from the floor and goes to the chair she had been sitting in before. She starts to dress again, trying not to look at him.

"Alice," he says again. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry, I shouldn't have said that."

"No, it's fine," she says. "It's okay, I just . . ." she feels her head begin to shake of its own accord. Her fingers stumble around the buttons of her blouse, fitting them back into their holes.

"What is it?" Graham says.

"I just really need some money."

Graham stands up. He makes a gesture with open hands, indicating this is no big deal. Something they've already agreed upon. "You can stay with me, Alice," he says. "I'll make sure you have anything you need."

Alice swallows. "Graham." She considers different ways of saying what she's about to say, none of them seeming polite or appropriate, or even gentle. "I just really need money. I can't stay with you. I'm in a lot of debt. The collector has been after me, and I have to pay my rent, and keep my lights on. Things are just really out of control. I

need . . . I need a lot.” Part of this is true—the fact that she needs a lot. But she has not intention of using it to pay bills, and every intention of using it to leave town.

“A lot?” Graham says.

Alice looks down at the floor. “A few thousand dollars,” she says. “Or something like that, if you have it.”

Graham doesn’t answer for a moment. He stands there blinking at her. “I see,” he finally says. He is hurt, she can tell. Deeply hurt. Then he walks over to his pile of clothes and pulls on his briefs and pants.

“Graham, please. I didn’t want it to seem like this.”

His jaw slides forward and then back again. “You know, you could’ve just asked me,” he says.

“I was trying to,” Alice says. “I was trying so hard.”

“I feel like a John,” he says, “some kind of curb crawler.”

“Graham, that’s *not* how it is,” she says.

“Isn’t it? How else would you describe it?”

Alice pushes her thumbs into her eyes, trying to stave off a headache. “I can’t just accept your charity without, I dunno, giving something in return.”

“Right, so I just purchased a piece of your ass,” he says.

“Graham, please.”

He stands up and crosses the room to the doorway. The doors are made of stained

glass. Nothing religious, just an abstract mosaic of colors. He leans on the frame.

“I really . . . I guess I’m just stupid then,” he says. “I just thought there was something bigger going on between us.”

Alice sighs. She wants him to understand—to know that she does appreciate him. That he is meaningful. But she could never tell him everything. Not even half of it. “I don’t know, Graham. Everything is just so awful right now. You’re an amazing person.”

Graham starts shaking his head. He shakes his head for long time and then sighs deeply. His breathing is the raft on the ocean again. “I don’t take it back, Alice,” he says.

She looks up him. “Take what back?”

“What I said a minute ago. I don’t have to trust you,” he says, “but I do love you. For some reason I love you.”

She lets the words set in before she responds. They are nice words. They feel nice to her. “You know I can’t say that back to you, Graham,” she says. “Not right now.”

“How would I know any of that?”

“You don’t, I guess.”

Graham nods slowly. He disappears from the doorway and comes back a minute later, his eyes glistening. He extends his hand and offers Alice a signed check. The amount line hasn’t been filled out yet. “Whatever you need,” he says.

When he says whatever you need, his voice is thin; it comes from the very top of

his throat. Alice remembers the Bible stories from her childhood. She imagines this is what the Son of God might've said and sounded like as he carried his own plank to the top of the hill to be nailed on it. *Whatever you need.* She looks at the check and feels guilty, like she's committed some sort of crime, even though she hasn't yet.

"Is there a time when we can figure this out?" he asks.

She can't be sure, but she nods and says yes. She believes so. She believes that some day they can figure it out.

*

As she drives back toward the road, Alice watches Graham's house in her rearview mirror. It's the only thing she can see in the darkness of the mountain behind her. She wonders what he's doing in there. If he's watching her. What he'll do with his time now.

She asked for a few thousand dollars, but he gave her a blank check, which was like giving her everything he has. It was like giving her himself. He said he didn't trust her, but she knows that's not true, or he wouldn't have done it. How lonely he must be, without a family, and how terrible it is that she had to break his heart. There had to have been another way to make this work. But without Graham's check, on her own, she has about six hundred dollars. And six hundred dollars is not enough money to drop off the

map for a few months. To buy gas and hotel rooms and meals and new clothes for a five-year-old girl and pay cash for it all so no one can follow her. Not even close. So maybe this was the only way.

She drives back into town and stops at the Pancake Palace for a meal and to use the bathroom. Having not eaten since lunch, she orders the omelet platter with hash browns and toast and coffee and consumes all but the coffee faster than the waitress can write up her bill. On the last bite, she realizes the food tastes like old socks dipped in grease. But the coffee is good. She drinks it slowly, plotting her next move. The image of Herb's closet appears in her mind, and the food in her stomach suddenly seems even less appealing. Her gut turns inside of her. There's nothing in the spectrum of realistic possibility that she could attempt tonight. It's after midnight. Coraline is a prisoner in her bedroom. Out there on Tule Road, no one would hear you scream if you did.

The waitress brings the bill. Alice pays it and goes home. Her television is still on in the living room, so she turns it off. The house is dark and quiet, like it always is. Like it has been for a long time. In some ways, she wishes Simon were around to help her now. But she knows he wouldn't agree with any of it. He'd have his own ideas about what is acceptable, which of course would trump hers. But if he could be around, and if they could be married, and if Coraline could've been born to a different mother—to Alice—well, then things would be nice again.

She opens her back door and sits down on the stoop there and lights a cigarette.

One. She takes a long pull. A swarm of moths and beetles flit against the floodlight next to the door. *Two.* She turns the light off to get rid of them and so she can look at the stars. *Three.* That night at the truck stop in New Mexico when she and Simon fought, *four*, the sky was so clear and every star was like a candle flame, *five*, at the bottom of a well. She wonders why that was, what it meant. *Six.* Probably nothing. *Seven.* Or maybe that she should have seen it. It was so obvious, so lucid, she should have seen it coming. *Nine.* A car speeds off in a buzzing crescendo a few streets over, an exhibition without an audience. Simon called them rice-rockets. *Ten.* He had a name for everything he didn't like. It takes her ten drags to finish the cigarette. This is not a good number—much too small. This means she is feeling desperate. She grinds the ember into the concrete step and flings the butt into her backyard. The backyard is dirt. She never planted any grass because she never cared enough. When she and Simon shared the house on in Oildale, they had grass at first, but it wasn't like in Alabama. Not enough rainfall here to keep things growing, or even alive. The grass dies if you don't water it yourself, day after day after day. A marriage can die the same way. *Drama queen* is the name Simon came up with for when Alice starting burning herself.

She goes back inside and looks at her dark kitchen. The only light comes from the LED display on her coffee maker and from the numbers on the stove. She remembers what Graham said about turning his lights on, that it keeps everything from seeming forgotten. Maybe it won't even help, but she gives it a try anyway, starting with the

kitchen light. It reveals one dirty dish on her counter top—a coffee cup—the one she drank out of yesterday morning. Or since it's past midnight, it would've been two days ago. She's been eating out so much lately. From drive-thru windows, from cheap diners. Either that or frozen dinners that don't require any preparation, just a few minutes in the microwave. She's never used her dining room table. Why cook, after all? Why did she turn the light on?

The living room lamps are no better. They draw attention to her empty walls and her drape-less front windows and make the space feel like a prison cell. She sees her gin from earlier and thinks of finishing it. She does finish it.

The hall light bulb is burned out.

The spare bedroom is empty except for a few boxes of junk and an ironing board. It looks like someone is still moving in. She turns the light back off.

With the light on in her own bedroom, she notices how only one side of the blanket on her bed is turned down. She stands in the doorway, looking at her bed for a long time. In her mind, the book falls open to the usual page—Simon rolling over in bed. She turns the light back out. She doesn't want to remember. Forgotten is better.

Alice goes back into her kitchen, takes the blank check and the filmstrip out of her back pockets, and lays them beside each other on the counter—these artifacts, these credentials. Looking at them this way, she feels ill-suited for the task. Incapable, even. How could she just . . . she can't simply *steal* a man's child, even if he is abusing her. It

wouldn't be like in the movies. There would be police to contend with. Police cruisers and police helicopters and police dogs. They'd put out an APB on her car. An Amber Alert. What is an Amber Alert, exactly? Pictures of Coraline on the news, on billboards, her name on the radio, things like that, she imagines. She wouldn't be able to rent a hotel room or board a plane or use her real identity for anything. In all likelihood, they would catch her. No matter how far she ran, they would catch her. And even if she swore she was doing a good thing, that Coraline was in danger and she was saving her, Alice would go to jail. Herb would burn down all the evidence of his filthy venture, and Alice would go to jail.

She should forget it while she still can. Call the police. Nowhere else is open right now, but the police are open. She knows she should call and tell them everything. It would be out of her hands, then. In the hands of capable professionals. Justice would be served. The right person would go to jail in this scenario, and Coraline would go somewhere new and unfamiliar, but safe. Tucked away safely.

But if Coraline is tucked away, then she will be away. Not with Alice.

Still.

Again.

It is in this moment that Alice realizes how little Coraline actually needs her and how it's really the other way around.

Alice *needs* her. Like she needed Simon, but Simon never needed her. Like she

needed to leave Alabama. Like her baby needed breath in its lungs, but God never needed the baby to live.

Alice feels like she has spent her life evolving from one state of exile to the next, geographically and relationally. She has never properly belonged. Not to her mother, not to Simon, not in Sumnerville. Neither has she called anything her own and seen it endure. Her child belonged to the grave before it was even born. She's lived as an accessory—picked up and utilized for an allotted period of time by different people and different conditions, then cast aside at the close of that season, deciduous like the red and golden leaves of the place she grew up in. Maybe it's because she's never exercised her own strength or tried to influence her own trajectory, never been in charge. She just goes.

This is an opportunity to make things change. She can't forfeit now. She will do what she has been thinking of doing all along. Alice picks up the film strip and examines it under the light. She is grateful the images are too small to be intricately examined. Too small to portray Coraline's expressions, to pick up her freckles, to display in detail the secret places of her body that no one should see until she is old enough to govern access to them. But Alice can tell what's happening. She is sure Herb has enlargements that are not so merciful. Perhaps thousands of them. So many lewd reproductions of his daughter that he has forgotten who she really is. To Herb, she is an image—a mute, lifeless dummy on which he projects his vile fantasies. To Alice, she is a five-year-old girl without a mother. Herb possesses her, but she doesn't *belong* to him. Alice can make

her belong. They can belong to each other.

She puts the images back on the counter and picks up Graham's check. She smells it, without knowing why. It smells like paper. Like nothing.

She is not going to kidnap Coraline. She is going to rescue her. How can she do this without being pursued by half the law-enforcement in the state of California? The only way would be if, somehow, Herb didn't report her. How could she keep him from that? Alice looks down at the filmstrip again. It is the key, she realizes. It is her power over Herb. Despite its evil properties, she thinks of it as a gift.. If she can catch Herb in a public place, on neutral territory, and if she can show him that she knows about everything, he'll have no choice in the matter. If he attacks her, people will see. If he calls the police, she will call the police.

Alice begins to pace around her kitchen, chewing a thumbnail. She'll need to pack tonight. Pack for a long time. What about Coraline? Coraline won't be able to pack. She'll have her backpack and her lunchbox. She'll be wearing something obscene. Alice will need to cash Graham's check, but that can wait. Where will they go together? The desert is east, the coast is west. Mexico is south. So north, maybe. It gives her the most room to travel. To travel far away.

One of her eyelids begins to twitch, probably from exhaustion, but maybe from anxiety. She rubs it and sees Coraline looking at her through the water glass at Spimoni's. Maybe she was looking for a different world, then.

Alice goes back outside and smokes another cigarette. Seven drags this time. She goes back inside and packs a large duffel bag with all of the clothes she usually wears and her toiletries. There's a can of pepper spray on a key chain in her underwear drawer. She tosses it in the bag with everything else. The cardboard box that Simon mailed to her months ago is sticking out from beneath her bed. She eyes it for a moment, trying to remember what was inside—if there is anything she should take. After deciding no, there isn't, she pushes the box further under the bed with her toe until it is out of sight.

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CHAPTER VIII

Alice drives back and forth along Stockdale until she sees Jeremy pull in. Once he enters the building, she takes a spot at the far end of the lot, next to the dumpster. If he didn't call Herb last night, he probably won't this morning, or at least she hopes not. The staff comes in an hour before parents do, so there's certainly time for everything to go wrong, and for Alice to lose the element of surprise.

She takes the keys out of the ignition and waits in her car. It's 8:05. A latte colored Prius pulls in, and out steps the sub who stood in for Janet those few months ago. Alice sinks down in her seat, lowering her eyes to the level of the door lock. She watches the woman trot across the parking lot, a tube skirt hugging her track-and-field posterior, the wind playing on her honey-colored cape of hair. Alice wonders if she will even be missed.

Penny arrives next, and Janet not far behind her. They walk in together with similar porpoising, overburdened steps. Janet appears to be gossiping about something already. Just wait until they find out about her termination.

Alice sits up again. She reaches into the backseat and unzips the duffel bag, takes

out the can of pepper spray. With its red trigger on the top, it resembles a detonator of some kind, as if instead of inflicting pain at close proximity, it will set off an explosion somewhere else, somewhere remote, and the effects will not be immediately measurable. Maybe this is exactly what it would do. She hopes it doesn't come down to that.

She runs through a checklist in her mind.

The pepper spray is good.

Negatives are in her pocket.

Graham's check—in the glovebox.

Atlas—in the backseat.

Clothes packed in the duffle.

Gas tank is full.

What will she say? She will say, *Look at these? See these? I found these in your closet. I know all about you.* She tilts her rearview mirror down and watches herself rehearse. *The way I see it, you've got two options. You've got two options, the way I see it.* She tries to look very angry and intimidating at the mirror. She clenches her jaw tight and makes her whole face tremble with rage. That should work.

8:35. A red Ford pickup slows down on Stockdale with its turn signal on. It's a late 80s model—the one she saw in Herb's driveway. It's him. The truck turns into the Coyote Kids parking lot, and she can see Coraline riding shotgun, looking like a porcelain doll Herb propped up and seat-belted. The truck pulls into a spot near the door,

and Alice sees the parking lights go on. She tenses up and says *Shit, shit, shit, here we go*. She opens her car door and steps out onto the pavement, wobbly at the knees. All of her paranoia from last night and the nights before that returns with new zeal. The questions. What if Herb decides to follow her? What if someone comes out the door of the building and sees her? What if Coraline hates her for what she does? It's too late for any of that now. She is walking toward Herb's truck. Its idle gives off a low rumble like an loomshaft rocketing back and forth. In one hand, she holds the pepper spray. The photos are in her back pocket—the more deadly weapon of the two, surely. Her free hand is knitting itself into a frenzy. She can't stop blinking.

At that moment, Coraline looks out of her window and sees Alice and waves at her. It's the kind of wave where the hand isn't actually waving, just opening and closing, like a tiny, throbbing heart. At the sight of it, Alice almost changes her mind. She almost gives up on the whole plan. But then Herb leans over and looks as well, and he doesn't seem happy. He nods, but no wave and no smile. Alice's first thought is that he knows. But how would he know?

Herb takes his key out of the ignition and steps out of the truck. Coraline waits in her seat while he walks around the front; this must be the protocol. *Don't get out until Papa comes and opens the door. Don't do anything unless Papa is specifically telling you to do that thing*. But Herb approaches Alice instead. She tries to still her left hand but fails and is forced to conceal it in her pocket. She feels the filmstrip with the tips of her

fingers. It's folded into eighths like a map. Eight photographs.

"Alice," Herb says. There is no inflection in his voice. No charm, no delight, no question, just plain, flat resolve. She knows she made herself an enemy by coming to his house. She is someone he must keep at bay now.

"You're not inside, like usual," he says.

Alice skims the back of her teeth with her tongue, searching for words.

Herb looks her up and down. She knows he's wondering why she's wearing jeans and a sweatshirt.

"Headed in, or . . ." he trails off. His eyes narrow.

Alice can feel her heart pounding, as if Coraline's hand held voodoo powers over her. She looks into the truck. Herb notices the look, that something's not right about it.

"Listen, Alice," he says, stepping closer. "I've been wondering, why did you come to my house last night? I mean, why *really*?"

Despite her preparations in the mirror, Alice now finds there are no suitable words to announce the actions which she is about to commit, no way of explaining herself except to just do it. She sees Herb's eye wander down to her hand—the one that clutches the pepper spray. There is a fraction of a second, here, where Alice is able to pinpoint the internal motion of his gears—the appraisal, then the awareness. In the instant before the cycle completes, she raises her hand to his face, thumb on the red detonator switch. She opens her mouth but only forces out air.

Herb is not frightened or surprised, as she imagined he would be. He draws in a breath slowly and exhales, staring at the canister as if it were a mosquito asking permission to withdraw blood.

“What are you doing, Alice?” he says.

“You,” she starts, “you fucker.” Her teeth grate against each other.

His eyes close, and he begins to shake his head. “I knew it. I knew you were playing innoc—

“Shut!” Alice shouts, but then looks around the parking lot. Other parents will be coming any minute now. Things have to stay civil, if at all possible. “Shut your mouth,” she says quietly. “No more talking.”

He throws his eyebrows up, as if to say, *suit yourself*.

Alice lowers the pepper spray and takes her left hand out of her pocket, holding the negatives between her fingers. Coraline is watching, and there’s no way to avoid that. But like her father, she does not seem frightened or surprised. She does not seem anything. Just a pair of eyes.

Alice holds up the negatives so Herb can see. She holds them in the air for years, it seems, forcing him to confront his own guilt.

She can tell he knows what they are right away. “What do you want?” he says, not addressing her by name anymore. “You obviously want something.”

“Coraline.”

He laughs once and says, "Forget it," but Alice doesn't flinch. She keeps holding the negatives in the air. They are heavy. They weigh as much as eight little girls.

"Coraline," she says again, holding the images a little higher.

Herb kept his cool until this point, but he finally starts to fissure, like a mountain opening up under pressure. The corner of his lip twitches. He cracks a knuckle.

Another car pulls into the lot, driven by a mother who looks vaguely familiar. Alice wonders which of them is jeopardized more by the presence of a spectator. She wonders if Herb wonders the same thing. She decides to be the first to seize the upper hand.

"Act natural," she says. "You're going to give her to me, and then you're going to go inside and tell Jeremy that she is no longer enrolled here because times are tough. And then you're going to leave."

Herb looks down at the pavement and then back up at Alice. "Or I suppose you'll turn me in," he says.

"You suppose right."

The mother gets out of her car and waves to Alice. Alice thinks her name is Suzanne. She waves back. Suzanne slides open her van door and takes her baby out of his car seat. She enters the building carrying the child and several bags. This is good.

"You can't get away with this," Herb says.

"You've gotten away with worse."

“You’ll never be able to—

Alice whips the pepper spray back up. “Just *do* what I’m telling you,” she says.

Herb puts his hands up in surrender, but Alice tells him don’t do that. Just get Coraline out of the truck. He gets the girl out of the truck and kneels down and whispers something to her that Alice doesn’t hear.

Then Coraline walks over to her and says, “What are we doing, Miss Traille?”

“We’re, um, we’re going for a little trip today,” Alice says, her voice shaky. “That sound fun?”

The girl looks back at her father, and Herb nods to her, which means it is done. Alice flashes him one last scowl, but really she is terribly nervous. She takes Coraline by the hand and walks her to the Datsun, parked by the dumpster. Coraline keeps craning her neck around, questioning the situation and her father’s approval of it, not minding where she is walking. She steps on a piece of litter on the asphalt—a plastic bottle—and almost falls, except that Alice has her hand in so tense a grip that the girl sort of dangles for a second, all the while still moving forward.

Alice doesn’t look back. She is focused on the car. Already calculating the turns she will take out of the parking lot, right onto Stockdale, left onto California, then the freeway, then no more turns for a long time. At least not for a while.

*

CHAPTER IX

Simon's stepbrother lived on the northwestern edge of Sumnerville, in a squat, two-bedroom rental. Alice remembers being surprised when they drove up to it for the first time. For someone who ran an advertising agency, she'd expected a more lavish home, or at least something above average. This house was underwhelming, to say the least—not because she thought she deserved better, but because it wasn't part of the California she'd dreamed of. A cement path running perpendicular from the sidewalk led up to the front stoop, which was only a cement pad level with the yard. A single flowerpot holding a cactus sat on the ground next to a plastic lawn chair. The siding panels were discolored. The only openings in the front were the main door and a tiny, double window next to it.

As it turned out, the concept of "advertising agency" was something Alice had misinterpreted. What it really meant was that Ronnie sold ad space on pharmaceutical bags. He was a regional salesman for Rx Express Suppliers, the company that manufactured the bags, so the only things he "ran" were his vehicle and his mouth.

Simon hadn't misinterpreted any of this. In fact, he seemed to have known it all along, and as they undressed for bed their first night in Ronnie's spare bedroom, Simon

played it off like it was no big deal. It was Alice's ignorance that led her to the misunderstanding.

"I don't see what problem is," he whispered. The house had wood floors, and it got very quiet at night. So quiet they could hear Ronnie getting comfortable in the next room. "I told you what he did for a living a long time ago."

"You didn't tell me *exactly* what he did," Alice said without whispering.

"Sshhh! I did tell you." He peeled off his t-shirt and stepped in front of the mirror to finger-comb his hair. He always fixed his hair before he got in bed, which made no sense. "I mean, you knew."

"You said he ran an advertising agency," Alice whispered.

"He does."

Alice rolled her eyes and lay back onto the mattress. There was no bed frame—just a box spring with a full-size mattress stacked on top of it.

Simon came over and sat on the edge, next to her. He put his hands on either side of her and leaned down to look into her eyes. It was his way of showing sincerity, this looking into her eyes. But every time he did it, she believed him a little less.

"Honey," he said, "I love you so much."

"But . . ."

"But nothing." He shrugged. Then, after a moment: "But you're gonna have to have more of an open mind about living here. It's not Hollywood and mansions and

Land Rovers, like everyone back east thinks.”

“Back east,” Alice repeated the phrase. It sounded strange.

“Yeah, back east.”

She laughed out of her nose and then said, “Simon, you know you haven’t kissed me in three days.”

“What?”

“Yeah.”

Simon gnawed on his tongue and looked away for a second. Then he looked back and called her “Sweetie” in a cloying voice. He leaned down to kiss her on the lips, but she turned and gave him her cheek instead.

Later that night, she awoke to the feeling of Simon climbing on top of her. He’d taken off his underwear and was now tugging hers down her thighs. She was groggy, and this was not the kiss she wanted at all, but she didn’t stop him. It was the kiss he thought she wanted. That had to be worth something.

*

Ronnie didn’t have the authority to offer Simon a job in any official capacity, but he unofficially took him on as an “apprentice.” Simon rode around town with him, learning the ropes, stopping in at different businesses and vendors to make the same stale

pitch. For this, Ronnie gave him 20 percent of commissions in cash and furnished him a Wendy's combo meal every day for lunch.

This was all Alice knew of the job. Since they weren't paying rent, they stashed away most of the money Simon made, week-by-week, in anticipation of getting their own place. Simon told her they would be there in two months. He said Ronnie could get him a real position in the area after a while. He *said* Ronnie said that, but Alice had never heard Ronnie say that. She took her news directly from Simon, and it was getting harder to tell whether or not the things he said were true.

Another thing Simon had said was that he'd marry her when they got to California. They were going to buy Alice a yellow dress to wear—because California was “The Golden State”—and elope on the beach. The Lost Coast. He'd talked about the Lost Coast as if it were a mythical realm.

“You wouldn't believe it, hon. It like . . . it's unreal. Like the coast of Ireland, but it's America.”

During his teenage years and into his early twenties, before Alice knew him, Simon had been something of a backpacker. The Lost Coast was a place of legend for him. In Alabama, or in the whole of the Southeast, for that matter, there was simply nothing that compared. He'd shown her photos of it in a magazine once. Forested hills and bluffs diving down onto black sand beaches and wildflower meadows littered with ancient driftwood. He was right; it was unreal. But Sumnerville was a lot further from

this nuptial paradise than she'd imagined (it would be a nine hour drive north, almost to the Oregon state line). And after a few days went by, then a few weeks, they were still further from eloping than she'd imagined.

She kept asking him when, and he kept telling her soon. Probably it was just about money. It would take a hefty sum to get that far north—to buy the food, the hotels, the gas. They were trying not to use the Discover card, now that cash was coming in. So probably it was the money thing. What other reason could there be?

Ronnie started bringing a girl home in the evenings after a month of them living in his spare bedroom. He didn't introduce the girl; the two of them would just go into his room and shut the door. It was all but discrete, with the acoustics of the house being the way they were. Every night he would do this, Alice and Simon would lie awake, listening, because there was no way *not* to listen. She never knew what Simon was thinking, but Alice was always thinking about how come theirs wasn't that way. Loud. Passionate. New. Theirs was becoming a procedure—something more like eating lunch or taking a dog out to urinate than making love—which meant it was the same every time. Less engaging every time.

She worried. Alice worried that Simon was jealous. So one night, when they came together, she yelled out. Only it didn't sound like she'd wanted it to. It was more angst than rapture, a little too nasal, a little too abrupt. When she did it, Simon seemed irritated. Her effort had the opposite effect of what she'd hoped: he didn't touch her

again for two weeks.

*

The morning sickness set in around the same time that Simon's ride-along gig fell through. She'd had a prescient feeling about both events. The job loss didn't surprise her simply because it was never substantiated to begin with. The baby, well, she'd had a feeling about offspring the night she yelled out. It was as if her cry was a momentary surrender to the forces of procreation—to God. She'd chosen it. She'd chosen something that Simon was not happy about. Or maybe it was only his melancholia that made her feel this way. When she gave him the news, they were driving back to the house from a place called Happy Jack's. They'd eaten pie. It had been a date. The avenues were dark. The orange streetlamps flashed across Simon's dark eyes in a long string. Alice reached forward and turned off the truck stereo.

First she asked, "So, when do you want to get married then?"

He gave the usual answer. "Soon.

Then she said, "How soon? Really soon? This week? This month? What do you think, specifically?"

He sighed and nibbled at his thumb knuckle. "Alice. I really can't say."

"Can't you?" She waited. He didn't answer. "Do you love me?"

He turned and looked at her—that again. “God, yes. Of *course* I love you. Why would you say that? Of course I do.”

The truck took a curve on Manor that pressed her up against the door a little.

“Good,” Alice said, “Because I’m pregnant.”

He just kept staring at the road, the whole way to the house. Wouldn’t look at Alice. Wouldn’t say anything. It was as if she’d ruined it all. All of their plans. All of their freedom. Hence, the melancholia.

But when they pulled into Ronnie’s driveway, he finally said, “You know what, that’s great, Alice. That’s good news.” He petted the steering wheel as if it were the baby’s head. “I’m happy.”

“No you’re not,” Alice said.

“Yes, I am. I’m just worried, is all,” he said.

Alice said that she was worried, too. But she didn’t say what about. She knew that, even if Simon loved her less than he had at the beginning, he still cared for her, at least on a basic level. She knew that their common heritage—the South, the church, morality—would compel him to marry her now, simply because it was the right thing. But she didn’t want to be married because it was right; she wanted to be married because someone wanted to marry her, because that person loved her.

When they went inside that night, Ronnie was drunk in the kitchen. His girlfriend, to whom they’d still not been introduced, was not with him tonight. He started

talking about how love will always disappoint you, how it consumes you, how it deceives you. He said that women were evil, all of them whores, which is when Simon finally said, “Hey now. Take it easy, Ronnie.”

“And this one,” Ronnie pointed at Alice. “Why’d you bring her out here with you, anyway?”

“Ronnie,” Simon said.

“I mean, I don’t get it.”

“Ronnie, you’ve been drinking.”

“Which trailer park did you dig her out of?”

“That’s *enough!*” Simon shouted and took a step closer to his brother. “This woman is my—this woman is going to be my wife. Going to have my child.”

Ronnie was too drunk to look surprised, but you could tell the news registered with him. He lifted his glass at them and said, “You two.” Then he shook his head.

Alice looked at the floor, but she was livid. Livid at Ronnie’s insult, and at being called “This woman” several times in the same conversation. She knew it wouldn’t work anymore. Ronnie had been harboring some kind of secret resentment for them, or for her, and now that it was out in the open, sharing a roof would be uncomfortable for everyone.

Simon tried to apologize for his brother later, tried to tell Alice that it was okay. Things had gotten out of hand. It wouldn’t happen again. But Alice knew he was just biding time. She nodded at his entreaties. She even kissed him. This woman wouldn’t

stir the pot. This woman would play along like she was expected to.

Ronnie stopped talking to them both. Alice didn't understand why, but thought maybe he was jealous of what they had—their love, their child, their sex (did they have those things, truly?). A week later, he knocked on their door in the morning and without explaining himself, said, "I'd like you to start paying rent. Five hundred a month."

This was, of course, more than Simon cared to let go of for a spare bedroom and access to the fridge. He decided since they could get their own place for not much more, it was time to move out. He'd saved up a fair amount—enough for a month's rent and groceries.

Alice certainly had no objections. In fact, she thought that if they had their own house, it would make them feel more like a couple, more inseparable. And maybe then, Simon would marry her.

Four weeks since they made love. Six since her last period, which meant she was six weeks along, if she was doing the math right.

They found a place outside of Oildale for \$650 a month. The neighborhood looked like it had suffered a plague or a housing crisis and everyone had stopped caring about life. Lots of overgrown yards and dilapidated fences and broken-down vehicles. There was a dusty, grey-green tinge to everything. There were wrought-iron bars on the windows. But since Simon still hadn't found a replacement job, it's what was in their price range. A single-story stucco with two bedrooms and a leaning carport. Simon

purchased an air mattress and two plastic lawn chairs before they moved in. Alice didn't ask for more; she knew they couldn't afford it. They'd agreed to stop using the Discover except in cases of emergency. But she did think about the truckload of furniture they'd lost in Salisaw in the rainstorm. It seemed like so long ago, though it had only been a month-and-a-half. What she wouldn't do to have that mattress, that loveseat, or even the walnut end table with the backing peeled away. What she wouldn't do to go back. As much as she denied it, there was a part of her that wanted to go back. A recent development.

On the first Monday after they moved into the new place, Alice sat at home reading a book on the different stages of pregnancy while Simon spent the day looking for a job. They couldn't both look for jobs, since they only had the one truck. Alice wasn't sure anyone would hire her, even if she did look. Who wants to take on a pregnant woman, knowing she'll only quit her job in nine months, or eight, or sooner? She mentioned this to Simon, and he said it was too bad, but she might be right. It was too bad, though.

When Simon came home at half-past four, Alice knew he hadn't been looking for jobs after all, because he was holding a yellow sundress in one hand and an unopened bottle of champagne in the other.

Alice stared at him, a half-smile slowly appearing on her face.

"What's this?" she said.

Simon held up the wine and said, “It’s from Napa Valley. That’s around here somewhere, I think. Or maybe it isn’t.”

“I’ll take the dress,” she laughed, “but keep the wine. I’m pregnant, remember?”

He looked at the bottle for a moment, ruminating, then comprehending. “Oh yeah. The no-drinking thing.”

“So, what’s the occasion?” she said, though she already had a good theory about it.

“Well.” He looked around the room; this was obviously uncomfortable for him. Alice thought it was cute—as if they were just meeting, and he were once again a shy, reticent, island of a man. “I guess most couples have parties the night before they wed. You know, the guys do their thing, and the girls do theirs.” He paused for confirmation. Alice’s smile grew larger. “Well, since you and I don’t have any friends out here or anything, I figured we could do our party together.”

“I would love that,” Alice said, and she meant it. “When?”

“I was thinking tonight, actually.”

“Grand. What will we do?” Alice was standing up now, pacing around the room with excitement, her hands cupped over her mouth.

“Now, hold on a minute,” he said. “Is this dress going to fit you though?”

Alice stopped and looked at it.

“‘Cause, I mean, you’ll need it for tomorrow.”

She was so pleased with him in that moment—it was as if he’d been withholding through the past month, keeping a secret catalog of her most precious desires, in order to fulfill them all in one night. She looked at him with new fervor and let it color her vision. He appeared heroic then, wearing a slim plaid shirt with the top buttons open and well-contoured jeans, holding that dress up on its hanger, waiting for her answer with those glistening, sapphire eyes. Even though she had never stopped being young, she felt her youth resume its vigor. This was another first moment, a moment of rapture. She was making love for the first time, in Simon’s grandmother’s basement on the loveseat, with an old Elvis Costello record spinning behind her, and Simon in front of her. She was trying her first cigarette at night over the Mississippi River. She was getting married.

“It’s a size 4,” Simon said. “You’re a size four, right?”

Alice bit her lip and said “Let’s see” and then slid her jeans down and stepped out of them. She pulled her blouse over her head and crossed the room in her underwear, deliberately sashaying. She told Simon to put the dress on her. He did that, and she was a size four, so of course the dress fit her. It fit her just as well as the idea of being someone’s wife fit her. It fit her as well as his hands fit over her hips when he drew her in for a kiss. After he kissed her, and without knowing why, Alice said thank you.

They ate dinner at an expensive German restaurant, where a string trio played Bach while they ate. The meal was close to seventy-five dollars. When the check came,

Simon said they should put it on the Discover. He didn't want to take it out of their savings.

They went to the Valley Plaza Mall afterward. He wouldn't tell her why they were there until they walked into a store called Millennium Diamond, and he told her to pick something out. A ring. Did he think it was a good idea? Yes, he thought it was fine. Alice didn't think it was that fine of an idea, but she was enjoying herself so much that she agreed to pick one out and put that on the Discover card as well. She picked up a quarter-karat ruby at first, but that wouldn't do, Simon told her. He took a full-karat diamond on a filigree band from further back in the display case and slid it onto her finger. She asked him if he was sure. It was awfully expensive.

"I won't have any wife of mine wearing some microscopic pebble," he said. "I'm sure."

The ring was spectacular, she thought. And it was a one-time expense, after all. The whole night was a one-time expense, if you think about it. So she would stop worrying about the money.

They drove downtown through the market square where there were street vendors set up under glowing, white tents, selling wares and delicacies. They bought funnel cakes and boiled peanuts. They laughed loudly in the street, and Simon let out a whoop for no reason. Whenever a vendor would solicit them, Alice would pull Simon in close and kiss him in front of the person. It was like they were drunk.

Further down, there was a carnival set up in an empty lot behind the old chocolate factory. There wasn't much to it—only a dozen or so rides and shooting galleries and that sort of thing, but they somehow made an hour out of it. Riding the Ferris wheel, the bumper cars, the Tilt-a-Whirl, the Topple Tower, eating cotton candy and feeding it to each other, throwing darts at balloons and missing nearly every time. Eventually Alice doubled over and threw up onto the pavement. Simon patted her back and cleared her hair away from her face. It was the baby, she said. Really she was having a lovely time. It was nothing he had done. Probably just the rides—all that motion at once. But something about the vomit perturbed Simon. It was not welcome at their party. It was not fun. He shook his head and said no, they should probably be getting home by now.

Alice didn't want to go home. She wanted to enjoy her last night of being a Miss. She wanted to savor the anticipation of what tomorrow would bring.

"Let's not go home," she said. "I'm fine now. I promise."

Simon dropped the napkin she'd cleaned her mouth with into a trash can. "No, I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea."

"Simon, please." She grabbed his hand. "I want to stay out late. Let's go somewhere wild and secluded and lie down. We can—I don't know. We can stay up all night, and watch the sun rise in the morning."

He shook his head and sighed. "Honey, you're pregnant."

"So? That doesn't mean that life is over or something. Does it?"

He shrugged.

“Does it? Is that what you think?”

“Alice, please.”

“Please what? Please stop asking you to spoil me?”

He looked away from her, into the distance. He looked at the colored lights of the carnival rides swooshing and stirring against the black sky like so many kaleidoscopes.

When he looked back, he said, “Look, let’s just get married, okay?”

He said it with the tone you might use to suggest running an errand. Alice didn’t argue with him. And though she felt on the verge of crying, she didn’t do that either. She just said fine. That was fine. They should just get married.

He had surprised her again. His capacity to be cold and ugly had surfaced again in the midst of this beautiful evening. He was really very ugly, she thought. Ugly for the way he kept tricking her into loving him. What did he want, anyway? Maybe she should’ve listened to Ronnie that night in his kitchen. It didn’t seem like Simon had any reason to start with for loving her, for bringing her to California, for marrying her. The only reason now was the child.

While yet unborn, that child had a will and was using it to bind them together. She thought it was possible that child was the love of God finding her again, or showing her it had never left. Like the stubborn walnut tree in her mother’s yard, clinging to the earth with its immense roots as every tornado of the last century swept over it, bending its

bough, sucking away its leaves. She was grateful for that child. She would love it, and already did.

*

They didn't drive to the Lost Coast to elope, like Simon had said they would. Alice had hoped beyond hope that he had a surprise planned—that he would nudge her awake before the sun had risen and brush her hair aside and say that he had packed their bags in the night. But in the morning, she awoke before him, and after they had both risen, the Lost Coast wasn't even mentioned as a possibility.

Simon smiled at her in the kitchen while the coffee pot gurgled and said, "Happy wedding day."

She made an effort to seem pleased.

"Hey, I love you," he said.

She turned to look out the window. "I love you too."

"If it's alright with you, we'll have our breakfast and then go on down to the courthouse." He stirred his coffee and took a sip of it.

"Yes. That's alright with me." Alice knew she wasn't doing a stellar job of exuding happiness, and she knew Simon could tell, but it seemed like they were beyond that. There was a tacit understanding between them that they had wandered into a

scenario for which neither one of them was prepared—an understanding that neither of them was fully invested in that scenario, and yet they were both trapped by it. She wasn't even sure if they loved each other anymore. But for the sake of the child, they had to try.

“I think it'd be nice to get a room in that Rosedale Place, you know? It's right on the river,” he said.

Alice laughed. “There's no water in the river.”

“Well, it's not like we were going to swim in it,” he said.

“Maybe I'd like to swim in a river somewhere. I think I would like that.”

Simon let out long sigh, which meant that he didn't want things to get difficult today. That's what his sighs usually meant.

The conversation seemed to have run its course. Simon left her alone with her thoughts by the sink. It was clear that her wedding day had already been charted out. She would elope at a municipal courthouse, with no one around to clap or throw rice or give her presents, and then take her one-night honeymoon in the same city where she lived, in a middling hotel that overlooked a dried-up riverbed, all for a man who had less and less affection for her with the passing of each new day.

She poured herself a cup of coffee and brought it to her lips, but then thought better of drinking. The bitter, earthy smell of it slipped down into the bottom of her stomach and roiled around there, turning her mouth sour. She leaned over and retched into the sink.

Seven-and-a-half weeks, now.

*

The fruits of Simon's job searches were bleak every day. He would come home after a few hours of driving around in a polo shirt and khakis and report that such and such business was fully-staffed, or that such and such company required a bachelor's degree or a certification he didn't have. The Bank of the West called him in for a first interview, but not for a second. That was the closest he'd gotten.

Their meager savings were running dangerously low again, and they'd picked back up with using the Discover card. For meals. For gasoline. For a living room sofa. For a small television. For a mattress and a bed frame. The card gave them "rewards points" or something. That's what Simon told her, to make her feel better about it. They were being rewarded for stacking up debt. Later on, they could cash in those rewards for—well, Alice didn't really know what for.

Simon made hints at the prospect of Alice working. "What will you do?" he asked her. She told him she didn't know yet. She didn't know if she could. She felt so sick all the time, and again, who would hire her, unless she lied to them? In truth, she was afraid of working. Since her only experience was a brief stint as a waitress at a restaurant in Constance, she knew the kind of work that would fall within her reach now:

restaurants, fast food, retail, at best. It would be a nightmare, she imagined, to navigate such a job with her current aversion to strong smells, her need to use the bathroom every hour, her exhaustion. Simon didn't make anything else of it for a while.

He decided to set his sights lower. Said he had to, or they would starve. Alice knew he was right, but something about the adjustment troubled her. This isn't what either of them had come to California for—to grovel. They'd come to live prosperously and adventurously, in a place that seemed to be a cornucopia of opportunity. They'd come to remake themselves and to be happy. Maybe there was still a chance. She hoped there was still a chance. If only they could get through this season of life, and be on to the next. A rite of passage. A temporary symptom of living in exile.

Simon looked around at some contracting outfits and warehouses, and then came across a man who told him there was work in the oil fields that paid better than most things blue collar in town.

Alice asked him if he was sure about it, that it was something he would like to do.

He said no.

He stayed on the porch until three in the morning that night, working his way through half a case of beer and finishing his pack of Pall Malls from the day. Alice kept waking up, expecting him to have come to bed, and finding herself alone. She'd walk to the living room and look out the front window and see him on the porch, his silhouette hunched over in a lawn chair, brooding, defeated. He must have been thinking about the

job and the kinds of things he had to do for his family. She never told him about it, but that night, she felt like she had a hero again, even if he was disheartened. He would be their cornerstone. He would save them.

The oil company gave him a spot on one of their well teams. He didn't even have to interview for it, which wasn't exactly a good thing. The way he described it to Alice, he'd be working on a zone of pumpjacks—those monstrous robotic arms that rock up and down, pulling oil from the ground day and night. They called them “nodding donkeys,” Simon told her. That sounded about right. It would be long days, he said. He would be tired when came home. But the pay would be enough for them.

Alice's morning sickness got progressively worse. At 10 weeks, she signed up for state-subsidized insurance and went to see an OBGYN. The doctor—a thin, grey-haired Indian woman who always smelled like a sweet spice Alice couldn't place, and always sounded like she had a mouthful of peanut butter—told her the nausea was normal. Some women didn't have it at all, some only for the first trimester, others the entire pregnancy. It was reassuring at the time, but as soon as she'd gone out of the safe harbor of the medical office, she began to worry again. It wasn't morning sickness, really. She didn't know why everyone called it that. Hers lasted all day. She walked around the house feeling as if something heavy were pressing on her stomach from every side, and when the feeling rose to an unbearable level, she would run to the bathroom and vomit. Was it

the baby? No, the baby was small, too small to hear the heartbeat, too small to press on her like that.

Her misery grew so severe that she could scarcely function. The nausea and the ceaseless tensing-up of the muscles involved with vomiting weakened her body and gave her knife-like headaches throughout the day. She always thirsty. The dishes piled up in the sink. The laundry piled up on the floor in their bedroom. Little tumbleweeds of tangled hair and dust scampered across the wood floors when the A/C kicked on. She stopped cooking dinners. Simon was tolerant, but not sympathetic. He tried to pick up the slack when he wasn't working. He tried to clean the house, to do the grocery shopping, to cook. But after a few nights of Alice saying she couldn't eat what he had made because of the smell, he turned accusatory. He told Alice the headaches were her fault, because she worried too much about everything. She was always worrying that something was wrong with the baby. He told her she was being dramatic, psyching herself out, and it was taking a toll on her body. Simon was a doctor, now.

"Oh, really? Headaches are my own fault?" she said. "You think I'm giving myself headaches." She wondered if he was right, though. She did worry quite a bit. Every lurch and spasm of abdominal pain, every new sensation, every dizzy spell, made her fear for the vitality of the thing inside of her. Maybe it was trying to communicate with Alice through her own agony, to warn her that something was wrong. I'm hurting, and so you must hurt with me, because I belong to you.

After this brief exchange, Alice was stricken with a migraine that endured for six days. She stayed in bed with one of Simon's black socks draped across her eyes to keep out the light. Otherwise, she would turn off every light in the house and close the blinds and watch muted television. The whole week was a febrile staggering between the bed and the sofa and the toilet. Simon made some attempts to comfort her—bringing hot tea with honey to the bedroom, keeping wet washcloths in the freezer and bringing them out to soothe her forehead—but the attempts were quickly retracted at the first sign of their failure, almost in irritation. His actions were supplications that seemed to come more from his need to have a healthy, fully-functional wife than from any kind of true sympathy. He wanted her to get better *for* him. He even said it, on the third day of the migraine, sitting on the edge of the mattress.

"I need you to get better for me, okay?" He let the backs of his fingers graze her cheek.

Alice looked at him with little slivers of her eyes. It was all she had the strength for—to open them this much.

"Your fingers smell like oil," she said.

"I'm sorry. I'll go and wash them."

"No, don't. It smells nice."

"Don't joke," he said.

"I wasn't joking. It's the baby. She likes the way Papa's hand smells. She likes it

that he works hard.”

“I hate my job,” Simon said. “And it’s not a she.”

“No?”

“Of course not.”

“Well. We’ll see,” she said. “You’re always more sick with a girl.”

Simon stood up and walked to the bedroom window. He twisted the thin wand to open the blinds, and Alice expected a blinding flood of sunlight, but there was only a soft, red glow. The day was almost over, and she had hardly moved.

Simon bent one of the blinds down with his finger and looked out toward the street.

“What do you see?” Alice said.

“A man on a ladder.”

“Oh.”

“He’s cutting down the dead fronds on his tree.”

“Why?” she said.

“I don’t know. Because they’re dead, I guess.” He sighed and looked back into the room. Alice couldn’t tell if he was looking at her since the light was coming from behind him. “I think you might be depressed,” he said.

She made an effort to sit up in bed a little. “Depressed?”

He shrugged. “You know, like, chemically. You don’t . . . *do* anything anymore.

You don't enjoy yourself."

She closed her eyes for a moment, wincing at both his words and a shock of pain at her temple. "Do you still love me?" she said on exhale.

"See? That's exactly what I'm talking about. Why do you keep asking me that?"

"I guess I'm not so sure anymore. That you do."

"You know the answer. You know I do."

She lay back down in the bed. He probably did love her. This was just another thing she'd been worrying about too much. And the depression—he was probably right about that, too. Her pain was real, not imagined or self-imposed. But there was something else feeding on her. Something making her weak, siphoning out her strength down to the marrow of her bones, it felt, down to the soul. It wasn't the baby. The baby was simply sharing her body, a quiet tenant. It wasn't even California; she could see herself being happy here under different circumstances.

Simon stepped away from the window and walked to the foot of the bed. His steps were measured, as if he were trying to discern the number of them it would take to cross the room. He leaned on the bed frame with both hands and looked down at her. She still couldn't make out his face; the dim light from the window had ruined her acclimation to the dark of the room. He could have been scowling. She couldn't tell. He was only a black outline of himself, filled with impenetrable shadow and all the menace of something demonic.

“I’m going to watch TV for a while,” he said. “Get better, okay?”

Alice mumbled, “I’ll try,” though she knew it was beyond her power.

The next day, Dr. Suvari told her over the phone to drink water and come in if the headache didn’t let up in 48 hours, which it did. Dehydration, probably. In a way, Alice could see this being her fault.

Twelve weeks, now. She wanted to feel the baby move, but it was too soon.

*

After a month at his job, Simon came home and said that he had made friends with a few of the guys, and he’d be going to the bar with them after Friday shifts. He mentioned a Nelson, a Ramón, and a Jorge. Alice didn’t see any problem with it, in theory. It was just that he hadn’t made any great efforts to court *her* attention as of late. Friday nights, for newlyweds, seemed like they should’ve been reserved for the pursuit of romance. In his defense, though, she had been sick and all but incapacitated lately. She acknowledged that.

She didn’t look the same in the mirror anymore. She’d been slim her whole life, with noticeable curves only in the ideal places where ladies should have them. Now she was distended in the middle and soft all over, with the physical resign of a flaccid tire. She chose clothing that fit her over clothing that flattered her—sweats, maternity pants,

XL t-shirts. Her body was like a boat sinking, quickly bailing out sex appeal to make room for another passenger. She understood the biology and the necessity of it all, but still, it was difficult to experience. And was it supposed to be happening so soon? She'd been watching a lot of television while Simon worked, and sometimes, without understanding why, she would linger on the infomercials about miracle diet solutions and exercise programs. One of them was some kind of Pilates specifically for pregnant mothers, which sounded ridiculous to her. She couldn't look away. There were women on the show, months ahead of her in pregnancy, still sporting four-pack abs. Alice chalked it up to the miracle of television: the perfect lighting, maybe some airbrushing, a lot of airbrushing.

Friday nights turned into Monday and Friday nights, being that "Mondays are hard to cope with." And soon this became Monday, Wednesday, and Friday nights, or Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday nights, or some other configuration that involved Simon coming home late several nights out of the week. He worked long days, as it was, until seven o'clock. Since it was nearly autumn, that was just before the sun set. Not that that had anything to do with it, since there were plenty of oilers who worked the graveyard shift. If Alice was depressed or unstable—not that she was—his staying gone so much was making it worse. The more time he spent slinging oil and cavorting with "the guys," the less convinced she was that he loved her at all. He was changing, Simon was. He wasn't the same man she'd pressed up against in that dank, Alabama basement,

or the same man she'd snuck out of her upstairs window to meet in the church parking lot at night, or the same man who'd had inexorably hopeful ambitions for moving to the West Coast and doing something different with his life. Their life. He had seemed hotter and brighter in those days, like a young star. His talk was new and invigorating, his movements jaunty. And everything he did came with ease. He spoke to Alice's mother with ease, despite her obvious disdain. He lit his cigarettes with ease. He treated waitresses and cashiers and strangers as if he'd known them since childhood, quickly learning their names and using them at the end of each sentence. He drove his truck with ease. He turned into hunting access roads at night with ease and kissed Alice with ease and took off her blouse with ease. She unraveled for him, toppled like a Jenga tower given a swift flick at the bottom tier. That was the part about him that she'd loved the most—that he knew how to take her apart.

But he was quieter now, and more passive. On his days off, nothing intrigued him. His smiles were conservative in size and frequency. She'd have thought each one cost him five dollars. He'd grown a beard and taken to wearing his work clothes on off days. Alice asked him why he didn't put something else on, but he always avoided the question. Why did it matter? he would say. Clothes are clothes. When he came home from his nights out with his friends, sometimes Alice would be in the kitchen, and she would notice a kind of residual happiness in his mannerisms. Whistling, twirling his keys, things like that. But the happiness must have come from his friends, since it

seemed to leave him so quickly upon entering, upon seeing Alice at the table, waiting up for him.

“Hey,” he’d say.

“Hi,” Alice would answer as gleefully as possible.

“You’re not in bed.”

“No.”

He would go to the fridge and take out a bottle of juice or a carton of milk and drink directly from it and wipe his mouth and avoid making eye contact, which troubled her. Then he would stretch his back and yawn, saying that he was tired. One night, Alice asked him questions about his activities—just out of curiosity, nothing prying or suspicious. Where did you go? Who all went this time? Was it a nice time? He seemed irritated that she should ask. But he told her they went to the Silver Canteen over by the city sign. There was Nelson and Ramón, whose names she remembered, but then some others she didn’t know. Carl, Arturo, Brett, Frankie.

“Oh,” she said. “I thought it was always just the four of you guys.”

He laughed a little and said that he worked with more than three people.

She told him she knew that; she just hadn’t imagined it being such a blowout every time.

“It’s not,” he shrugged. “People just sort of come or don’t, whenever they can.”

She nodded. “Well, you certainly never miss an event.”

He looked up at the ceiling and inflated his cheeks with air, letting it seep out like air from a leaky balloon.

“Brett and Frankie,” she said, pausing. “Are those guys’ names or girls’ names?”

“What?”

“Not that it matters. They’re just the kind of names where you can’t specifically tell.” She said it derisively, with an affected little wobble of her head. Because it did matter. It mattered greatly. If her husband was out three times a week, being drunk and festive with mixed company, while she stayed at home, sick and overweight and alone, carrying his child, well, that would mean he were a terrible person.

Simon squinted at her, and after a moment said, “They’re guys . . . not that it matters.”

The next night, Alice went to bed early, alone, and awoke alone in the morning. She went out to the living room and found Simon sleeping on the couch. She rubbed her eyes and asked him why he was sleeping there. Because he didn’t want to wake her, he said.

Alice pulled a chair out and sat at the dining table, which was only a few steps from the couch.

“You didn’t want me to ask you anymore questions,” she said, and this wasn’t a question.

He sat up and the remote control fell from his lap. It clacked against the wood

floor. “No, that’s not it, Hon. I just—it was late, and I couldn’t sleep, so I stayed out here with the TV on.”

Alice held up a hand. “No, I get it. You’re punishing me. It’s fine.”

“That’s not what it is. I just told you.”

“Know what?” she said. “I’m learning not to believe what you tell me anymore.”

“Seriously? Really?”

“Yep.”

He rubbed circles into his temples for a moment, as if the whole situation was just too much for him—an inconvenience. “Okay. You want me to be completely honest? You really want to know why I’m out here?”

She shrugged, unsure if honesty was even attainable anymore.

“It’s because you sweat the bed.”

Alice lowered a glare at him. She was insulted, but also skeptical. This couldn’t actually be his reason.

“It’s like I’m sleeping with two women”—then he quickly edited himself—“two *people*. It gets so hot.”

“Two women?” Alice said. She had noticed the slip and heard nothing else.

“Oh, no. Don’t—Alice. Don’t go there. You know what I meant. I meant, like, you and the baby. Like, you’re not your normal size anymore.”

Alice stared at him. “You really know how to make a bad thing worse, don’t

you?”

Simon laid back down on the couch in defeat. Or maybe he had just decided it was a bad idea to talk anymore.

“I have an ultrasound appointment on the third,” Alice said, standing up. “She’s going to tell us the sex. I need you to drive me.”

“Is that a Tuesday?”

“Mmhm.”

“Okay,” he said.

“Good. Maybe we can ask them about my sweating problem.”

*

As Alice entered week 14 of pregnancy, the nausea and headaches receded but were replaced by the swelling of her hands and feet and bouts of seeing spots in the air. It seemed like her body was having an allergic reaction, indicating it wasn’t ready. It didn’t accept. It wouldn’t harbor this foreign entity for long. She’d heard about swelling before, but thought it would happen later on, toward the end. It was all happening too soon. The diamond ring from their mall purchase grew tight around her finger, forming little red ridges on either side of it. When the tip of her ring finger started going numb, she decided to take the ring off, just to be safe. She wasn’t exactly heartbroken over

parting with it. It had been a daily reminder of her own brashness, her own complicity with Simon's brashness, in everything. Every time she'd looked down at it, or in the corner of her eye caught its glimmer, she felt guilty. It was ridiculous for her to wear such a monument to excess when they could barely afford to keep the electricity running, when they were already in debt, and not yet through their first four months of marriage.

After that, she kept it in its felt case, the case open on her night stand, as if she were ever contemplating the proposal.

When Simon noticed, he said, "What's wrong with your ring?"

She told him it didn't fit anymore, and not that she couldn't stand to wear it.

"Swelling. What swelling?" he said.

"Simon, look at me. I'm almost four months pregnant."

He squinted and looked her up and down like he'd never seen her before in his life. Then he said okay.

He came home at seven that Friday, which was her first clue that something was wrong. She was on the porch, reading the final chapter in her pregnancy book (this one about labor), when he pulled up. He came around the front of the house and got her to unlock the storm door.

There'd been an accident at the oilfield. It was his fault. He'd lost his focus and made something called a Samson post fall down into one of the wells, and it had caused

some piece of equipment or other to lock up and break. The Samson post had almost killed a man who was down there. Simon hung his head low when he told this part. He was ashamed. The foreman was docking his pay to replace the part, which meant he'd bring home a hundred dollars less every week for a good while—maybe a year. He didn't know what they were going to do. He'd think of something, he said.

Alice couldn't be mad at him. The mechanics of the incident were gibberish to her, since she knew nothing about working in an oil field, but it sounded like an accident, which meant it couldn't be helped. She told him it was okay. She wasn't upset.

"Let's just figure out a way to get by, for now," she said. "What about the Discover card?"

They weren't allowed to pay the rent with a credit card, he said with a laugh.

They could pay for other things with the Discover card, though, she said.

"Groceries. Insurance on the truck. All of that."

That's when he told her the card was maxed out.

"What do you mean maxed out?"

"I mean we can't borrow any more with it," he said.

"How much have we spent?" It wasn't possible. A mistake, surely.

His jaw worked for a moment. "Seven thousand."

"Oh my God." She shook her head. "Oh my god. There's no way." How could they have spent that much? She ran through a list of times she remembered using the

card—on their trip out, for the furniture, for their honeymoon. She wondered if Simon had been using it on his own. He kept it in his wallet, but that was only because she didn't like to carry a purse. And why should that matter? They were married now. Her money was his money. Her debt was his debt.

She wasn't surprised when she woke in the morning to find her engagement ring missing from the night stand. In a way, she was even relieved. She could stop looking at it every day and night. Besides, it was only a ring. An asset. It meant nothing.

When Simon came home, he told her he was sorry, but he had to do it. They were going to be okay now. He stopped going out after work then. He even came back to bed. Alice didn't relish the idea of poverty, but in a strange way it seemed to have saved them. Her husband had reclaimed her as his own. He put his hand on her stomach and said that he loved her and he loved their child. He said he was sorry again for the accident. She couldn't tell for sure in the dark, but it seemed like he might have been crying.

"You know what would be nice," he said. "Some of those glow-in-the-dark stars to put on our ceiling, so we could look at them together."

Alice made a happy grunt and nestled in closer to him.

*

After Alice had changed into the papery, blue gown and lain down on the exam

table, Doctor Suvari told her she was going to put some gel on Alice's stomach, and that it would be cold for a second. She took a paper towel and used it to pull down the front band of Alice's sweat pants, revealing the edge of her pubic region and a sparse veil of dark, wispy hairs.

Simon held her hand and smiled. He told her not to be embarrassed, which she certainly was.

"Has the nausea come down?" the doctor asked.

Alice nodded. "Still having dizzy spells, but no vomiting lately. They're not really dizzy spells, but I don't know what to call them. It's like I see spots everywhere, but then I sit down and they're gone. "

Dr. Suvari squeezed a blob of clear gel onto her lower-abdomen and used the tip of the transducer to spread it around. She was right, it was cold. The screen flashed a grainy image of black and white smears.

"And are you having any other symptoms or problems?"

"Um, no," Alice said. "Well, it does seem like my hands and feet are swelling a little. And my face. Doesn't my face seem swollen, Simon?"

Simon shrugged, probably afraid to insult her.

"The nurse said you've gained eight more pounds since your last visit," Suvari said.

Alice grimaced and said, "Is that a lot?"

Suvari nodded. “You’re only at sixteen weeks. You want to be careful.”

Alice flashed a quick glance at Simon, but he was looking at the computer screen, trying to make something out of the nebulous swirls and static.

“I want to do some tests on you this week, but let’s look at baby first.”

Suvari moved the transducer around like a paintbrush on Alice’s belly, but kept her eyes on the screen. They all watched in anticipation of the reveal, but there was nothing there. It was like space before the creation of the world. The computer speakers let out a low susurrus, a stifled, alien transmission. Simon made a joke by asking if there were two babies in there. And then it appeared. The head and the torso, and the spindly, arms and legs. One of the arms was holding its face or waving in front of its face; Alice wasn’t sure which. The speakers quelled for a second and then picked up a quick, percussive rhythm.

“You hear the heart?” Suvari said.

Alice smiled. It was the most beautiful sound she’d ever heard. More beautiful than any music.

“Do you want to know what it is?”

Alice nodded yes. Simon says that he hopes it’s a baby.

“Well, it looks—wait a minute. Yes. It looks like you are going to start thinking of names for a baby girl.”

Alice reached over and touched Simon’s arm. He said, “Wow,” and laughed once,

but she wasn't sure how to take it.

"Is this what you wanted?" the doctor asked.

"She's exactly what we wanted," Alice said.

Before they left, Suvari said she was going to send Alice home with a protein test kit. She should pee in the container for three days, keep it refrigerated, then bring it back to the clinic. Suvari said it was fairly standard—just to make sure her symptoms were benign. Simon laughed a little when the doctor handed over the kit. He couldn't believe Alice had to put her urine in the refrigerator.

On the way home, Alice kept picturing the computer monitor, not when her daughter had appeared, but just before, when the image was still blurry and without form. She thought about where the baby was before it was inside of her, before it had a body. Where its soul had been kept.

Simon was smoking while he drove. His window was down. They stopped at a light. The truck idled heavily and seemed like it might die, but didn't.

"Do you think life can be eternal?" Alice said without looking at him.

He recoiled a little and made a face. "What?"

"Like our souls. My mother used to say that."

He said, "Hmm." The light turned green, but they had to wait to turn right. An elderly man with a hunch was scuffling through the crosswalk. It looked like he was

talking to someone, but he was alone.

“She said our souls have never *not* existed. It’s just that we don’t . . . we don’t know about ourselves until we enter a body. And then it’s the same at the end of life. Our bodies die, but *we* never really die.”

Simon shook his head. The old man finished crossing, and they were able to turn. “I thought we were done with all that.”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m done with *all* of it. Maybe with most of it, but I could never be done with all of it.”

“You’re sounding strange, Alice.”

“I just—I was thinking about where our little girl was before she was in her body. Maybe she was with God.”

“No, I don’t think so.”

“But why not?” Alice pulled her shirt up and rested both of her hands on her belly. “Simon, what if she knows everything? All the secrets of the universe. But she could never tell us, because she’s an infant. And by the time she learns to walk and speak, she will have forgotten.”

Simon didn’t answer right away. He turned the radio on, but couldn’t seem to find a station he liked. Then he said, “That all sounds pretty silly, Alice.”

“Yeah, maybe. Are you happy, anyway?”

“Well, sure,” he said.

“I mean are you glad it’s a girl?”

He nodded. “I was hoping for a boy, but it’s alright.”

“It’s not like she’s second-best or anything,” Alice said.

“No.” He finished his cigarette and tossed it out the window. “I just can’t believe we’re having a kid at all.”

“Well, we are,” Alice said.

It was eleven o’clock in the morning. They pulled into a Jack-in-the-Box. Simon said he was hungry and Jack-in-the-Box was the only place that served breakfast sandwiches past ten. She could tell he was annoyed by the way he parked the car, swinging it into a spot with little concern for how straight it ended up or how close they were to the car beside them. She was afraid to ask what was bothering him, not because she didn’t know, but because she didn’t want to hear him say it out loud.

They went inside and stood between the stanchions in line. Simon peered at the menu. Alice was too troubled to think of what she wanted. She kept looking around the restaurant at everyone, suddenly self-conscious of her belly. Everyone looks at you when you’re past a certain point of pregnancy. They think it’s within their rights to stare, as if you’re pregnancy is some kind of public issue and everyone’s pregnant *with* you. They smile. They assess. Probably wonder if it’s legitimate. If it’s twins. How far along you are. Alice could feel herself starting to sweat. They stepped forward in line.

The door chime went off and two women came in with a short, stocky man. The

man had a dense beard, but beneath it looked Latino. His hand was on the small of the first woman's back, guiding her in. She was taller than him, but only because of the three-inch wedges strapped to the bottom of her feet. Her legs were smooth and bronze and showing all the way to the buttock. She was confident, but not beautiful. The second woman came in behind them. She looked like she could be the first woman's sister, but younger sister, with more sense, with a better face and more prudence about flaunting herself—a quieter mischief in her eyes.

When the three of them got in line behind Alice, she looked up at the menu, pretending not to have noticed them. She asked Simon if he knew what he wanted, which is when he turned around and saw the two women and the man. He looked startled, like he was about to run, but then the bearded man noticed him.

“Simón!” he called out in a voice that was far too loud for the inside of a restaurant.

Simon donned a pleasant face and said, “Hey, man. What the heck?”

“What the heck to you,” the man said, reaching across Alice to shake Simon's hand. Only he didn't shake his hand; he juke to the side and gave Simon a soft punch in the ribs. The two women were smiling, but hadn't spoken yet. It seemed like there was an inside joke between them.

The man said he had missed Simon the past few nights. Where had he been?

“Oh, you know, just . . . at home.”

Alice raised her eyebrows. She was beginning to feel very excluded, and also very curious about who the women were.

“Arturo, this is my wife, Alice,” he finally introduced her.

Arturo took her hand and kissed it and said that it was un placer to meet her, that Simon hadn’t mentioned how beautiful she was. She cringed, but more for the queerness of the situation than for the man’s candor.

Arturo looked down at her belly. “Simón! What is this?” He put his hand on her stomach, which she did not tell him he could do. “You are a Papa? Why you have you never told me?”

Alice stepped away from his touch. The next person finished ordering at the register. They all moved closer to the front. Alice made a point of looking at Simon and then inquisitively at the two women.

He cleared his throat, hesitating. “Alice, this is Arturo’s girlfriend,” he said, motioning toward the older, taller one. The woman reached her hand out and shook Alice’s. Then she said her name was Frankie.

“Frankie,” Alice said. The last reserve of trust she’d stored for her husband left her in this moment, like a small flame being extinguished. “Simon said he worked with a Frankie.”

“Oh, no. We don’t work together,” Frankie said. “That’s only Arturo. We just come to party.”

Alice pursed her lips. “To party? That must be lovely.”

Frankie laughed, not picking up on the sarcasm, and turned to introduce the other woman. The other woman, of course, was Brett.

“I’ve heard your name before, too,” Alice said. “Imagine that.”

Brett nodded. “Simon mentioned he had a wife.”

“Did he? That was awfully sweet of him to mention.”

Alice turned to face Simon. His face was flushed and glossy with sweat at the hairline. He gave her an imploring look, which only made things worse, but then it was their turn to order and he said, “Why don’t we go ahead and order?”

Alice said she wasn’t hungry. She hadn’t been hungry in the first place, although in all likelihood she would’ve asked for a milkshake and some tots if Simon’s gay posse hadn’t come in and made themselves known. She knew what he would do now. He would try to whisk her out of the place as quickly as he could. He would come up with some kind of elaborate story on the ride home about how everything was just fine and there was no need to be worried or suspicious. She could already see him already working on something, while they waited for the food. His eyes wouldn’t stay still. His fingers were drumming on his leg. He even had the audacity to smile at her, which was quite obviously a ploy.

After Arturo and Frankie and Brett had ordered their food, they all stood together, waiting. She knew Simon had lied to her, but she wanted to know why. Despite the

oddness of it, this run-in, and these people, might be her last shot at the truth. She sifted through a catalogue of recent events in her mind, suddenly feeling suspicious about it all—the ring, the credit card, the accident, even his coming back to bed. It was all wrong.

Frankie and Brett were talking to each other with low voices, smiling. She interrupted to ask them if they were sisters. They weren't. They waited for Alice to follow up on her question, but that was all she wanted to know. If they weren't sisters, that would mean Brett came out "to party" of her own accord—for some other reason than solidarity between siblings.

Arturo was using his hands to mime some kind of box or square object and saying something about, ". . . the *only* one you could fit on there. No way, man. He don't get it, man."

She interrupted him, too. "So, Arturo," she deliberately pronounced his name without rolling the Rs. "I heard about that accident at the well."

Arturo tilted his head sideways. "Accident?"

"Yeah, with the Samson post. Fell in and almost killed that guy. Simon was telling me how bad he felt about it."

Arturo furrowed his brow and looked at Simon. "What she is talking about? Fell into where?"

"Uh, yeah," Simon winced. "It's crazy. I guess I didn't tell you about that. Um . . . you know, I really don't wanna talk about work right now, though."

Arturo laughed disproportionately loud again and said yes, he knew what Simon meant. Alice thought she might have seen Simon wink at him, but she couldn't be sure.

Their order came out, handed across the counter by a man who looked like he might have been the manager. He told Simon to enjoy his meal and have a great day. Simon ignored him.

"Ready?" he said. His tone was falsely cheerful.

Alice shrugged. She looked the girl named Brett up and down and made a point of shaking her head. Simon nodded goodbye to his three friends and headed for the door. Alice followed him at a distance of a few paces, to demonstrate her ire, to disassociate herself.

In the car he started off with, "Now look."

Alice kept her head turned away from him, out the window. A row of date palms along the median stirred in the wind, their long, thin trunks seeming to almost break under the strain of motion.

Simon told her it wasn't like she was thinking. Everything was platonic.

She said she hadn't mentioned it, so why was he being defensive?

He just knew her. Knew what she was thinking. He started to unwrap his breakfast sandwich.

"I thought you were with 'the guys.' You told me they were men, which was why I could live with sitting in the house alone every night and not come with you."

“Honestly, they haven’t been coming around that long. And you’ve been so . . . you’ve been sick and everything.”

“So you lied?”

He didn’t answer, which meant yes.

“Why didn’t Arturo know about the accident?” she said.

“That? I don’t know,” he took a formidable bite of the sandwich. Melted cheese oozed from the side and caught in his beard. “I guess I just hadn’t told him yet.”

“He didn’t know? How could he have not known?”

“He wasn’t there when it happened, alright? What is *with* you?”

“What is with me?” She turned to face him now. “Our baby is *with* me. I am *with* child. And you are with those young *fucks* every night.”

“It’s not every night,” he said, “and it’s not . . . ‘fucking,’ certainly.”

She looked back out the window. They were crossing over the bridge at Manor now, where you could see the gully carved by the river, when it used to still run through Sumnerville. Alice imagined what it might have been like; she pictured a fast, cool current, frothing white around rocks and clear blue in the shallows where darting minnows and waggling turtles might have gathered. She’d been told the town had chased it further and further back into the hills over the years, plumbing, building, irrigating, drinking it through a straw, until all that remained was a slow deluge of muck.

“It was you, wasn’t it?” Alice said.

“What?”

“There was no accident. And you maxed out the credit card, didn’t you?”

“Alice, I told you. It’s . . . It couldn’t have been helped. Look, we’ve both been using it.”

“We have? What have I bought, then? What have I ever bought Simon? Who’s been keeping the card? *My card.*”

He let out an exasperated puff of air—not exactly a sigh—and crumpled up his sandwich wrapper as if punishing it.

“Let’s not fight like this,” he said. “You can’t just blame everything on me in a matter of minutes. It’s not just me, you know?”

Alice mumbled, “It’s always been you,” but in a voice that was too quiet for Simon to hear. She reached for the cigarette box that was resting in the center console, with no clear intention other than destroying herself a little and showing Simon what he’d brought her to. She wanted him to feel bad.

When she put the cigarette in her mouth, he asked her calmly, condescendingly, what she was doing—as if she were a foolish little girl. When she took up the lighter, he said, “Alice, stop,” but she wouldn’t stop, so he had to snatch the cigarette out of her mouth with one hand while he controlled the steering wheel with the other, and the truck almost went off the road. Then Alice said she was starting to feel dizzy; the spots were coming back. They were silent the rest of the drive home. She knew he didn’t believe

her, of course, but the spots really were there again, floating softly on the air, little black snowflakes.

It was back to sleeping in separate rooms again, or at least being in separate rooms. Alice could rarely sleep—if she did fall asleep, would awaken repeatedly to the sensation of something pressing down on her chest. An electrifying weight, like frigid hands. She wondered if Simon suffered the same.

*

CHAPTER X

Neither of them speak for miles, which is not what Alice expected. She expected Coraline to be full of questions, ever turned around in her seat, looking behind them. But it seems fear has paralyzed her. She is complicit, like a mule bowing to its yoke.

Alice is driving Northwest on Highway 99—Golden State Highway. The road is flat, banked on both sides by thousands upon thousands of tangerine trees planted in painfully straight lines—the region’s trademark which has been both magnificent and tedious to Alice in the span of a year. The trees seemed the gateway to enlightenment upon her and Simon’s arrival, and now again seem significant as an exodus to freedom.

She is careful not to exceed the speed limit, to always use her turn signals when changing lanes, and she generally spends more time looking in the rearview mirror than at the road in front of her. Surely, they are not safe yet.

Alice turns to look at Coraline. The girl’s hands are folded neatly in her lap and her gaze is fixed on the floorboards, almost as if in prayer, but not quite like that.

“Don’t you want to look out the window?” Alice says.

Coraline lifts her head in acknowledgment, but doesn’t make eye contact.

“I always like to look out the window when *I’m* riding somewhere,” Alice says, but then she thinks better of her choice of topic. It’s not as if they were on a tour bus together. And why would the girl want to look out the window anyway? She probably has one thing on her mind, and it’s the one thing that Alice isn’t ready to talk about yet.

“You know, you don’t have to be scared,” Alice says. “I’m your friend. I’m a good friend, Coraline. We’re going to have a lot of fun—

“When am I going back to Papa?” she interrupts. Her little voice is hushed, not whiny or quavering or demanding, just hushed—soft and round like the petals of a flower.

Alice feels her heart break a little. But perhaps it’s too much to expect enthusiasm out of a captive. She cannot answer the question now. Not truthfully. Not untruthfully. She decides to equivocate.

“You know,” she begins, “I think we’ll be gone for as long as it takes.”

This answer seems to appease Coraline. She is quiet. She looks out the window now. But after a few minutes of doing that, she says, “I want to go back, Miss Trille.”

Alice sighs. She lifts a hand off the steering wheel, but it’s a false start. Nothing comes out of her mouth. She has to be careful. It’s important for Coraline to understand why she cannot see her father again, but not now. Not until Alice has put a safe distance behind them. Not until she can engender trust and friendship. Otherwise, why should the girl believe her? Her small, ruined life is all she knows.

Alice doesn't have a final destination in mind—more a series of achievements she must accomplish. She will drive until she feels safe, and that Coraline is safe, and that no one is looking for them. She will show Coraline the beauty of the West, much of which she has yet to experience herself, in hopes of winning her heart—as if, somehow, the mountains and forests and white waves crashing against the coast will make Coraline love her. Graham's check will see them through when they need it. After that, she'll stop in the first town that feels right and look for work. And after that, who knows? She doesn't know.

“We need to get you some nice things,” Alice speaks up. “Things for our adventure.”

Coraline starts to swing her legs back and forth on the edge of the passenger seat. “I don't know where we're going,” she says.

“Well, we're going wherever we want. Isn't that nice?”

“Why isn't Papa here?”

“Papa can't really come on this trip,” Alice tells her. “We'll talk about it later, okay?”

Coraline doesn't answer. She wrinkles her nose.

“What kind of clothes do you like, Coraline? We're going to buy you some clothes?”

“I dunno,” she says. “Papa gives me clothes.”

“Sure. Sure, I know that. But what do *you* like? Dresses? Stockings? Pants?”

Coraline draws or writes something on the window with her finger and says,
“Yellow.”

“Good! You like yellow.”

Coraline turns toward her and smiles for the first time that day, and in a flash Alice remembers her own exuberance on the day Simon came home with the yellow sundress and the wine.

“What did you make on the window?” Alice says.

Coraline shrugs and says she doesn’t know.

“What did your Papa whisper to you when we left? What did he tell you?”

Coraline shakes her head, but Alice isn’t sure whether she means that she doesn’t remember or that she won’t tell.

She laughs and says that’s okay. They can talk about it later. They can talk about everything later.

Alice keeps driving, through Delano, Tulare, and Visalia, almost two hours. By the time she’s convinced no one is following them, they’ve made it to Fresno. This is where she stops to buy Coraline new clothes and things she might need for the trip—a toothbrush, a coat, a child’s sleeping bag.

First, they walk through the racks of a consignment shop together, and Alice keeps

pulling yellow things out from the formation to ask Coraline if she likes them. The answer is yes every time, but more of a compliant yes than any kind of real preference. After a few minutes of this, Alice tells Coraline she is going to stand back and let her pick out anything she wants, and that she can have it. Coraline stares at her sheepishly for a long time, then down at the floor. Alice can tell she has no idea what to do.

“Go on. Look around,” she says.

Coraline finally starts to move. She walks slowly down the aisle, raking her fingers across the blouses and dresses on their hangers. She gets to the end of the aisle and looks back, and Alice tells her to go on again. Coraline moves to the back of the store and looks at the knick knacks on the shelves, which isn’t what Alice meant for her to do, but she doesn’t stop her. Coraline sticks her finger into the dial of an old, rotary telephone and turns it once. She runs her finger along the handle of a tennis racket. One section of shelving is filled with televisions of different sizes, some tuned into an infomercial about knives, others to static. Coraline watches the group of televisions, but it’s hard to know why. She turns the knob on an older CRT set and it clicks off or switches to a channel that broadcasts the girl’s dim reflection.

Alice approaches from behind. This will be harder than she imagined. She’s thinking about how they can’t linger—about how they really need to pick out a few things and hit the road again—when an elderly employee pushes a cart full of picture frames past and says, “Your little girl is so precious.” The woman smiles like a chipmunk

and scrunches her shoulders up to her ears. Her comment catches Alice off guard. This is something she hasn't prepared for: public image, what people will think, what to tell them. She wonders if Coraline heard the comment, but Coraline has abandoned the televisions and is now reaching into a box of assorted cameras.

Alice nods at the woman and says thank you.

"She looks just like you," the woman says. She starts to leave her cart and approach Coraline, but Alice stops her.

"Don't—um . . . she's very shy, really. She gets jumpy around strangers."

"Oh," the woman looks surprised. She puts her hands back on the handle of her cart and looks Coraline up and down, differently this time. Alice flashes a smile at the woman and she wheels her cart away, through a set of swinging doors in the back.

Coraline holds up an old metal-body TLR and looks at Alice through the viewfinder on top—surprisingly, the correct way.

"Oh, dear," Alice says. "I look awful."

"Put this hand up there," Coraline touches her neck, "and the other one on here."

Alice blushes a little and steps forward and snatches the camera from Coraline. She tells her it's not polite for a lady to touch herself there. Coraline's face goes sour, like she's swallowed something acrid, and she begins to cry.

"No, no, no," Alice kneels down and hugs her. She doesn't want to create a spectacle, all things considered. "Hey, it's okay. Coraline. I'm sorry. I didn't mean to

get angry. I was just embarrassed is all.”

Coraline sobs something about her papa and something about the cameras and something about going home. People are looking at them from the front of the store.

Alice is surprised the cart woman doesn’t reappear.

“Are you sad? Is that it?”

Coraline calms herself and looks up at Alice.

“Okay. That’s fine. We’ll make a deal. Will you make a deal with me?”

Coraline shrugs.

“I’ll buy you an ice cream if you pick out four outfits to wear—just four—and if you keep going on the trip with me.”

“And we’ll see papa then?”

Alice hesitates for a moment, then says yes, they will see papa then. The lie is difficult for her to muster, but she doesn’t know of any other way to convince the girl.

Coraline eventually picks out four outfits, two of which Alice has to put back and replace with others because they’re the wrong size. They leave the consignment shop and drive to a Wal-Mart off the 99, where Alice speeds through the aisles, tossing things in the cart that she thinks they will need. Coraline asks her if papa is there at the store somewhere. No, he’s not at this one. We’ll meet him soon, she says.

Alice buys lunch and ice cream cones for them at the McDonalds inside the store and then drives back onto the freeway. They eat in silence. She hopes Coraline won’t

ask her again about seeing papa, but she knows this is too much to expect.

The city shrinks behind them in the rear view mirror, reducing itself to a grey-brown mirage on the horizon. Here, a railroad track parallels the freeway for as far as Alice can see, and soon they've caught up with a train. Alice starts to point it out to Coraline, but sees that she has fallen asleep with a carton of happy meal fries in her lap. She imagines what cargo the freight cars carry—pallets of chicken eggs in the refrigerated cars, maybe produce, maybe lemons from Sumnerville, maybe pools of caramel colored grain poured in from a silo. And the cargo she carries—another treasure from Sumnerville, a freckled little girl sleeping under a veil of moussed hair, a life she must save. When they stop for the night, she will make Coraline change clothes, change shoes, wipe off her makeup and lip gloss, brush out her hair. She will redeem her, make her new.

While Coraline sleeps, Alice rolls down her window a few inches and smokes a cigarette. She wonders where the hell they're going and what they're going to do when they get there. She's heard of people fleeing to Canada when they're on the wrong side of the law, but surely it's more complicated than that, not that anyone's looking for her yet. Not that she knows of. If they were, being in another country would certainly make her harder to track down. Maybe the child protective laws are more lenient there. Maybe she could find a way to cheat the system and make Coraline her daughter.

Halfway through her cigarette, she starts to think about second hand smoke and

what it could do to a child. Coraline could get sick. What if she has asthma? Alice is supposed to be the one doing right by her. Surely, asthma would've been listed in her paperwork at Coyote Kids. Was it? She decides the risk isn't worth it and tosses what's left of the cigarette out the window and rolls it down the rest of the way, using her right hand to fan out the cab of the car. She can smoke later, away from Coraline, when they stop.

Coraline stirs at the sound of the wind rushing across the window. She awakens and looks at Alice fearfully for a moment, probably not remembering where she is.

"Rise and shine," Alice says. "We're in Modesto."

Coraline says she has to go pee pee, and where are they going? Apparently Modesto means nothing to her, which it wouldn't to a five-year-old.

"Do you have asthma, Coraline?"

She looks puzzled by this. It's clear that she has no idea what asthma is. She says she has to pee again.

They stop at a gas station on the south side of town, where flat, industrial buildings occupy most of the land. The bathrooms are on the outside of the building. Alice gets the key with the paddle from the clerk and tells Coraline to hurry and come back inside when she's done. Maybe she'll buy her a treat from the store. Coraline looks suspicious of this, but she nods and takes the key.

Alice picks up a magazine from one of the isles while she waits. It's a travel

magazine, the cover bearing a high-resolution photo of someplace alpine and snow-covered. She flips through some of the pages and finds a articles on the high sierra climate, winter sports, the most photogenic trails. She remembers her trip with Simon to see the Sequoia trees, which they'd thought would be plainly accessible—tourist attractions you could simply drive to and get out of your car and look at. They drove to the wrong land preserve. The national monument instead of the national park. The road grew narrow and the mountains began to swallow them and still they had seen no mammoth trees. Not by the road, not up on the ridgelines, not down in the valleys. Only the reedy spires of young pines and the round, green canopies of perennial oaks. They came to a remote mountain village—named something with “Alpine” in it, population 61—where the server at the coffee shop told them the areas containing most of the giant Sequoias were inaccessible for several more months, when the snowplows would finally venture into the higher altitudes.

There was only one giant Sequoia they could see. The people of the mountains referred to it as the “Stag tree.” It took a long drive, deeper and higher into the wilderness and a short hike through three feet of snow to reach this esteemed pillar. A sign at its base said it was over 2,000 years old. Alice remembers thinking the tree was older than Jesus Christ. There were things in those hills older than Jesus Christ.

“Miss?” It’s the clerk talking. A middle-eastern-looking man with white hair and skin the color of coffee beans. His *Miss* sounds more like *Meece*, and Alice isn’t sure

he's addressing her until he says it a second time.

She re-shelves the magazine and says, "Sorry," thinking he plans to chastise her for reading without buying.

"Miss, isn't that your daughter?" He points out the front window.

Alice cranes her neck to look over the shelf and sees Coraline running toward the four-lane highway with the bathroom key in her hand. "Shit," she says. She pushes through the front door and runs out to the road, chasing after Coraline, yelling her name and telling her to wait and asking where is she going?

Coraline does not answer. She runs across two lanes of traffic and onto the median. Traffic isn't heavy, but there are more cars than Alice feels comfortable with. This is it, she thinks. She'll be discovered. She'll go to jail. Maybe even end up in the same cell as Herb. She picks up her pace and reaches the highway, yielding to an SUV before darting across. Her lungs fill with heat, which is equal parts dry summer air and the effects of her smoking habits.

"Coraline!" she wheezes. "Cora, baby." She tries Herb's pet name as a last resort, despite how dirty she feels uttering it, but Coraline keeps running. She scampers across the other two lanes, narrowly missing a yellow Mustang and a Mac Truck. They whirl past her, close enough and quick enough to blow her long beige dress up to her elbows like a lampshade being lifted from a bulb.

Alice stands in the grass of the median, panting, waiting for a break in traffic.

Coraline has slowed, but she's trotting down the opposite shoulder now. She'll be hit by a car, Alice fears—whacked in the head by an oversized rearview mirror and spun around like a foosball goalie. Alice cups her hands over her mouth. "Coraline! Stop! Stop, goddammit, or you'll die!"

Coraline trips over a divot in the asphalt and falls hard on her hands and knees. It looks like she's crying. She gets back up, wincing, the front of her dress streaked with black, and starts to run again, this time with a limp. Alice knows then that the girl will never stop; she'll have to catch her and take her by the arm; she'll have to be forceful. She doesn't want to be forceful, but people are beeping their horns as they drive past, some of them slowing down to investigate.

"Fine!" she yells at Coraline. "I'll take you to your papa then. You want to see your papa? Then stop running." It's a cruel trick, but there is no other way.

Coraline stops running, as Alice knew she would, and turns around to face her. Her face is red and puffy from weeping; Alice isn't sure if this is because of the fall or because of her desperation. There is finally a break in traffic wide enough for her to cross. She reaches Coraline quickly and kneels down, taking the girl's hands in her own. Her palms are scraped and bloody, peppered with gravel from the road. There are spots of red showing through her dress at knee-level.

"Let me see your knees."

Coraline sniffles a few times, catching her breath, and shows Alice her knees.

They look worse than her hands. Some of the blood is trailing down her shin, flowering into the white band of her sock.

“Look at you,” Alice says. “I’m trying to help you. I’m *nice*, Coraline. You can’t run like that again, okay?”

Coraline nods, but begins to cry more profusely, and Alice knows she is afraid. The bathroom key is a little ways back, on the shoulder where Coraline fell. Alice picks it up and walks Coraline back to the gas station. She is already thinking of ways to sidestep her lie about Herb. There may come a time, very soon, when the truth about him becomes inevitable, when his little girl will have to know of the devil in him, know that he is perverse, know that his love for her was sick and possessive. Alice hopes she can make Coraline understand these things.

Inside the store, the clerk asks if Alice’s little girl is okay. He says they sell first aid kits. While Alice pays for one, he points a finger at Coraline and says, “Can’t be running out into the cars like that. Very dangerous highway, little girl.”

Coraline stares at him, but doesn’t acknowledge his comment. It’s possible that she’s never seen such an exotic man before. Alice smiles at the thought.

“Such pretty green eyes,” he says. “Green like the emeralds. You are very beautiful, little girl.”

“Say thank you,” Alice tells her, but she doesn’t say it.

“And what is your name, dear one?”

Coraline mashes her face into the crook of her arm.

“Tell the man what your name is. What’s your name?” Alice puts her hand on the back of Coraline’s hair, as if the hair is her own, as if she chose the name herself. It’s part of the act, but she wants to believe it.

Coraline drops her arm and speaks up. “My name is Coraline.”

“Ah! Then green like Coral. It’s perfect!” the man says. He is excited, as if he just solved a riddle.

Alice tells him that he is very kind, but that they have to leave now. They have a long trip ahead of them. The man tells them goodbye and follows them outside and stands on the sidewalk, watching from a distance while Alice cleans and bandages Coraline’s scrapes in the back seat of the Datsun. When they drive away together, the man is still standing on the sidewalk, waving now and looking like he’s seen a long lost friend for the first time in years. As they take the onramp to get back onto the freeway, Coraline asks why that man talked so funny. She asks if they are, indeed, going to see papa. Alice tells her the man talked funny because of how pretty she is, and yes, of course, they are going to see her papa, and she should sleep now.

Coraline is quiet at first, looking out the window with ambivalence at the flat vistas rushing past them, her hands ever folded in her tiny lap. After a while, her eyelids grow heavy and her head begins to droop, and soon she is asleep. Alice smiles at this,

wondering at how the din and vibration of the road beneath them can be soothing even to her, like the white noise and gentle motion of the womb to an infant. She read about this once, in the book about the stages of pregnancy, and thought it was ironic at the time. Babies do not like the quiet; it is a calm that is too calm, a peace that is too peaceful.

There isn't much to see north of Modesto, but it's different than Sumnerville, primarily on the basis of having deciduous trees. It's hard for Alice to tell what they are—maybe hickories, or maples. She wonders if they change colors in the fall, like they did back east. Sumnerville has little to offer of that ilk.

The sun is sinking, now, glinting in her eye from the west. She turns her rearview mirror to the side for shade and the filmstrips from Herb's house fall down into her lap. She forgot that she'd put them there, tucked them under the elastic after leaving Coyote Kids that morning. She flashes a glance over at Coraline—still asleep. What would she think if she knew Alice had the photos? Does she even understand what they mean? Does she even understand what it means to be naked? Alice knows that when she wakes up, she will ask about her papa again, about when they will see him. She knows she can only delay for so long. Maybe it's time to go into a city again, find a way to distract Coraline with excitement and activities. She'd like the Golden Gate Bridge, Alice bets. She'd like the bay, the ocean. For that matter, Alice wouldn't mind seeing it all herself. Certainly better than hearing about it or reading about it or having a husband promise over and over again to take you there.

After dark, she pulls into a hotel outside of Hayward that looks affordable, if appearances mean anything. It's a single-story affair with a lit street sign that reminds her of church signs from Alabama, except this one reads, "Hot Breakfast, WiFi, HBO," instead of "No one cometh unto the Father, but by me." Things will only get more expensive the closer they get to the city proper. San Francisco, that is.

Alice parks in front of the office. The sound of the brake lever ratcheting into place wakes Coraline. She is groggy. Alice tells her to wait there.

The double rooms are 74.99 a night, the clerk tells her inside.

Alice furrows her brow and looks around the lobby, as if to say, *This place?*

"Or there's a single king room for 69.99," the clerk says. "One left."

At first, Alice dismisses the idea. "No, no," she says. "The double is good." But just before the clerk swipes her card, she says, "Actually, yeah. Let me take the single room." The decision isn't fully formed when she makes it, but she convinces herself it's about saving the five dollars.

When they enter the room together—119, on the far west end—Coraline stops short in the doorway and stares at the bed. She scratches at something on her hip. Alice strides in, affectedly confident, and sets about making the place feel homely. This is to signal that all is well; there is nothing to fear. She takes her shoes off. She opens two of the plastic water cups and sets them next to the faucet and puts Coraline's new toothbrush from Wal-Mart in one of them.

Coraline doesn't move.

"How would you like to see a really big bridge tomorrow?" Alice asks her.

"Is this *my* room, Miss Traille?"

Alice crosses the room and puts her hand on Coraline's shoulder. She looks at the bed with her, suddenly feeling guilty about the whole thing. On her part, Alice had thought it might be nice, might be comforting, to somehow muster cuddling together. But maybe that's misguided. The way Coraline is staring at the bed troubles her. She wonders if Herb has ever shared a bed with her, and whether or not that was all he did. Her own voice calling out across the highway echoes again like a ringing in her ears. *Cora baby*. "Well, no. It's our room to share," she says. "But I'm . . . you're going to sleep in the bed, and I'll take the floor."

Coraline looks around at different places on the floor.

"How about I'll sleep right over there," Alice points at the spot between the bathroom and the dresser, "and you can have the bed all to yourself."

Coraline smiles a little at this and says okay. She walks to the bed and sits down on it, her feet still a few years shy of reaching the floor. Alice sits next to her and has just turned the television on when Coraline asks if Papa is coming to stay with them, too, like Alice promised.

"Well, I didn't promise *that*, now did I?"

Coraline looks as if she is going to cry, which would be just awful. Alice doesn't

think she can bear to see the girl cry one more time. It makes her feel guilty. It makes her question the whole configuration of their relationship. Savior to a helpless one. Or tormentor, captor to a helpless one. *One of these little ones*, she remembers the bible verse. Her own mother used to quote it when she talked about the public schools teaching evolution in Constance. “But whoso shall offend one of these little ones which believe in me, it were better for him that a millstone were hanged about his neck, and that he were drowned in the depth of the sea.”

But Alice isn’t offending or leading astray; she’s leading away, to safety, to a better life, to having a mother again. Anyway it’s just a verse. Maybe it means something, maybe it doesn’t.

“Coraline, can I ask you a question?” She turns the television back off.

“Okay.”

“Can you tell me how your Mama died again?” Alice hasn’t forgotten the story; she just wants to hear it from Coraline. She wants to know if Herb was telling the truth.

Coraline shakes her head, her whole body, for that matter. Alice knows she’s still thinking about her Papa.

“If you let me ask you a question, then I promise to tell you what our plan is for your Papa.”

Coraline considers this. Alice takes her silence as agreement.

“Tell me about your Mama. What was she like?”

“Pretty,” Coraline says. “Pretty like me.”

Alice nods and says very seriously, “You are pretty. I saw a picture of your Mama at your house.”

“When you were snooping?”

“What?” Alice draws one leg up onto the bed and turns to face Coraline. “Is that what your Papa said I was doing?”

“I dunno.”

“Well, he must’ve said that, because who else would’ve said it?”

Coraline doesn’t answer.

“I wasn’t snooping, Coraline. I just came to *see* you.” Alice shoves her onto her back, trying to seem playful, but Coraline seems frightened by the action. She lies very still with her arms at her sides like a person waiting for surgery. On the inside, Alice calls herself stupid for thinking it would’ve been a good idea. She feels like she’s not thinking straight. “Well, anyway. So your Mama was pretty. What else was she like?”

Coraline squeezes her eyes shut and covers her face with her hands.

“Was she nice?”

“No,” Coraline says through her hands.

“She wasn’t nice? Why not?”

“Because she wasn’t.”

“Sweetie, I can’t hear you very well with your hands on your face. Did your Papa

tell you she wasn't nice?"

Coraline takes her hands away from her face and says, "Yes!" in a very exasperated way, as if she is tiring of Alice's questions.

"Well, that's too bad," Alice says. She lies down on her side, parallel to Coraline on the bed now, looking at the delicate profile of her face. She is tempted to reach out and touch her, to brush her cheek softly with the backs of her fingers, but it's not the right time. It's probably never the right time for that. "Can you tell me how she, um . . . how she passed away again?"

"What?" Coraline is obviously not familiar with the expression.

"How she died."

"We *told* you already. In the pool, sleeping. Because she was very bad."

"Well, that's not bad, Coraline. That's just an accident."

Alice is hesitant to keep prying, but she wants to get to the bottom of everything. Maybe just a few more questions.

"Did you see her?"

Coraline rolls onto her side, turning her back to Alice.

"Did you see her that—"

"Yes. I saw Mama dead out there, but not her face."

"Why didn't you see her face?" Alice sits up.

Coraline reaches out her hand and points a finger at the drapes on the hotel

window. She seems to be tracing an outline of something. “She had a bag there.”

Alice shudders at this. She immediately remembers her dream. The body floating in the pool. The sliding glass door open. “On her face? She had a bag on her face?”

“Mmhmm.”

Alice takes Coraline by the shoulder and turns her back over to look at her. She almost asks why. Why did Mama have a bag on her face? But she already knows. She knows exactly why.

“Coraline, sweetie. Can you sit up for me?”

The girl sits up slowly, unsure of herself.

“I need to talk to you about your Papa.”

Coraline’s face softens at this. She almost smiles. “We’re going to see him now?”

Alice sighs. She shakes her head. “Has your Papa ever taken pictures of you, at your house?”

Coraline looks down at her hands. She shrugs.

“Remember when you were looking through the camera at the store? Remember when you asked me . . . to put my hands in different places, and I said that wasn’t something a lady does?”

“Okay, I’m sorry,” Coraline says.

“Sweetheart, I’m not mad. I’m just—I’m trying to figure out, has your Papa ever

asked you to do that with your hands? In front of the camera?”

She furrows her brow and rolls her lips in.

Alice takes one of Coraline’s hands and holds it between her own. “I know about your Papa’s camera,” she says. “I know about all of the pictures he takes.”

“I’m not supposed to tell anyone. Papa says it’s secret.”

“That’s alright. You don’t have to tell me anything. I know already. But that’s what I want to talk to you about. What your Papa was doing . . . it’s not right. It’s not nice, you see?”

Coraline blinks hard and looks around the room. Her feet start to kick again at the edge of the bed.

“Did your Mama know about the pictures?”

“Secret. Everything is secret,” Coraline mumbles.

“Little girls are not supposed to take off their clothes in pictures,” Alice says, feeling her temper rise, but not at the girl. “And if someone tries to make them, that person is a bad person.”

Coraline’s lower lip turns down at the sides. Her eyes go crystalline with tears.

Alice takes her in her arms, almost violently. She strokes the back of Coraline’s head and shushes her like a mother shushing an infant. “But you’re not a bad person, Coraline. You’re a sweet girl. I’m going to protect you, okay?”

Coraline’s small frame trembles in her embrace. She inhales sharply a few times

and lets out a long wail that conflates with the word *Papa*. The word is shrill and sorrowful—the twice repeated opening of a mouth. It is hunger. It is lamentation. A primal utterance, like breath being drawn in and released, molded into soft syllables that cry out, *Father. Why have you done this?*

Alice squeezes her tighter and says that she loves her, that she won't let anything happen to her again. It's impossible to know if her words are any comfort to the girl, if her daring rescue is perceived as such, or if it even *is* such. It's impossible to know if Coraline thinks of her as a heroine, as someone who loves her, as someone bearing the truth, or if Coraline thinks of her as Miss Trille, who smells like cigarette smoke, who is keeping her from seeing her Papa.

That night, Alice tells Coraline to go into the bathroom and wash herself under the shower. When she's done, Alice hands her a towel and one of the new outfits through the door and tells her to put it on. It's a pair of denim shorts with blue flowers embroidered on the pockets and a yellow blouse with lace around the bottom. Coraline comes out with the blouse on backwards and black streaks on her face where the water has dripped down through her eyeliner.

Alice helps her turn the blouse around. When Coraline takes it off and looks up at her, a question of trust borne in her eyes, Alice says that it's alright; they're both girls. It doesn't feel like it's alright, though, given everything that's happened to Coraline, given

the fact that she barely knows her.

She sits her down at the small table by the door and uses hotel tissues dipped in water to wipe off all of the makeup. Coraline keeps her eyes closed the whole time. When Alice finishes, there is a pile of wadded tissues on the table, each one stained with colors like a heap of painter's rags. Coraline opens her eyes and Alice says, "There you are."

Alice asks her if it's alright to brush out her hair. Coraline says no at first, and no again when Alice adds *please*, but finally yes when Alice promises to be gentle. Alice moves her chair around behind Coraline. She takes the child's hairbrush she bought at Wal-Mart and pulls off the price tag. There are a few bobby pins in the back of Coraline's hair, holding the bun together. Alice takes them out, one by one, letting the hair unfurl in sections. She starts at the bottom, drawing the brush through slowly against the palm of her left hand. The brush catches at first—impeded by whatever products Herb gummed up his daughter's fine hair with—but then gives way, and the hair feathers out and becomes soft and light as if freed from a burden. Alice works her way further up, taking more hair in her palm each time, making longer strokes. She imagines Herb sitting in a chair behind Coraline, performing similar motions, but to put the hair up, to contain it. She imagines Herb dabbing at Coraline's eyelids with makeup wands. Alice is undoing what he has done. She is the antidote to his poison. In that respect, she thinks, they actually have a lot in common. They have one thing in common, one person,

and that means everything.

Alice doesn't sleep well that night. She lies on the hard floor beside the dresser, her mind at work about Coraline, about how the evening might have seemed to her, about where they will go tomorrow, what they will do, how long she can get away with this, whether or not Herb is following them. Surely, if he were, he would've caught up by now. There would have been some kind of confrontation. Alice wonders if she's made any progress with Coraline, in the sense of convincing her that her father is evil. There was something in that cry, in the way she said *Papa*, that sounded like change, recognition, but what kind of recognition?

Something is wrong with the vent in the room. Alice turned it on to warm the place up, but it blew out scorching air instead of comfortable heat. The medium setting didn't work, so she turned it off.

Now it is cold. Her blanket is too thin.

For some reason, she expected Coraline to toss and turn in her sleep, perhaps haunted by nightmares of her father and her new awareness of nudity. She wanted that, even.

But the girl is still.

She sleeps on her stomach with her arms splayed behind her, a picture of tranquility.

*

In the morning, they eat a few donuts in the lobby and get back on the freeway. Coraline slept in her new outfit, but it still looks better than anything Herb ever put on her—more appropriate, anyway. Alice makes a mental note to get pajamas somewhere . . . for both of them. They can't be lounging around in their underwear every night or sleeping in their clothes for the next day.

After a few minutes of driving in silence, Coraline asks where the bridge is. They're crossing through San Leandro at the moment, so Alice tells her it's not yet. She tells her the city doesn't have only one bridge; it has a bunch of them.

"Millions?" Coraline says.

"No. Not that many. But more than one."

"Are they as big as our school?"

Alice laughs. "Bigger than that, even," she says. It seems like Coraline is in a good mood. She wonders how much of this can be attributed to her naiveté about the whole situation, and how much to authentic enjoyment. Probably she's just forgotten about her father, momentarily distracted by the novelty of this new place and the things to see in it. In a way, this is what Alice had hoped to achieve. But she doesn't want it to end there. She doesn't only want Coraline to be distracted; she wants to win her heart, to earn her devotion. And the best way to accomplish that, it seems, is to spend time

together.

Alice drives through Alameda and they catch their first glimpses of the bay between hotels and industrial buildings on the west side of the freeway. Coraline starts pointing at things and asking *What is that? What about that? What is that machine doing?* Alice tries to keep up with her curiosity, which is suddenly in rare form, but she's just noticed that the temperature gauge on the Datsun is getting higher than it usually does—about three quarters of the way to the red zone.

That's a crane, she tells Coraline. It's for lifting heavy things.

She isn't sure what exactly happens if the needle enters the red zone. Simon has talked to her about this before. The water pump? Something about the radiator? He always used to carry water for the radiator in his truck. Maybe it needs water. When they stop, Alice decides, she'll pour some water into the radiator.

A toll station guards the entrance to the Bay Bridge. It's nine o'clock, Tuesday morning, but traffic is heavy. People are probably still driving into the city to work. Alice stops at the toll station and the lady inside asks for four dollars. Alice fishes in her wallet. There are only two dollars. The woman tells her, without compassion, that they take credit and debit, which Alice can't blame her for. The line of cars behind hers seems to be growing insurmountably long. In front, too, for that matter. Alice hands the woman her debit card. There isn't much left in her account—at least not considering the scale of traveling that lies ahead. She reminds herself to cash Graham's check, which is in the

glove box, tucked inside the flap of the vehicle manual. She should call him, really. But what would she say? *I'm doing great. I'm in San Francisco with a five-year-old I kidnapped.*

Alice pulls away from the pay station and is struck at once by the magnitude of the bridge. Five lanes across, and she can't see the end of it. A great sea serpent that rose up from the bay, centuries ago, and turned to stone. She is grateful for the traffic, now. Glad for the slow pace that allows her to look up at the trusses and cables high above them, at the dark, grey water below them. The cars crawl forward in intervals, never exceeding 10 or 15 miles per hour. The whole bridge is a river of taillights and honking horns.

"Look at this," she says to Coraline about the view. "Isn't it just unbelievable? You know, I read in a brochure at the hotel that this bridge is more than four miles long."

Coraline is slumped down in her seat, holding her hands over her face.

"Oh, no. Sweetheart." Alice puts a hand on Coraline's shoulder. "It's okay. The bridge is very strong. We're safe."

"I don't like it."

"Well you're going to miss seeing everything," Alice tells her. "Look. I can see the city up there. And there's an island out there. Sailboats. The ocean. You know, if you look really, really hard, you might be able to see all the way to Japan."

"No you can't."

“Okay. Well, suit yourself.”

“Are we almost done?”

Alice starts to explain that no, they actually have quite a while to go before they reach the other side, but she stops midsentence. The needle on the temperature gauge is climbing again, which is strange because they aren’t even moving at the moment. It reaches the red zone, and Alice hears a gurgling sound coming from the engine compartment. She says *Shit* and shuts the engine off as quickly she can, hoping this will save the Datsun from whatever catastrophe might befall it, should it linger in the red. She rolls her window down. The gurgling sound is louder, like someone blowing bubbles into a drink with a straw.

“What are we doing?” Coraline says. “Why are we stopping?”

“I don’t—just . . . just hang on a second.”

Traffic starts to move again. The person behind her honks his horn. Alice turns the engine back on and drives forward. The needle is down to the three-quarter mark. The cars in her lane travel a hundred yards or so and stop again. With the engine idling, the needle begins to climb. It reaches the red again, and Alice pulls the key out.

“Oh my god,” she says. “This is perfect. Magnificent!” She hits the steering wheel with her palm.

“I’m scared,” Coraline says, quietly.

“That’s okay,” Alice says. “That’s alright. We’re fine.” But there is a strong

possibility they will not be fine. They're stuck in heavy traffic on a 4-mile-long bridge, driving a car that can't idle without overheating. There is nowhere to pull over, nowhere to turn around, and a long line of impatient drivers behind them. She certainly doesn't want some state trooper getting involved—taking her plate number down, calling a tow truck for her, asking how old her little girl is. That could only end one way.

Traffic is moving again. Alice cranks the engine back on and pulls forward. The cars are in motion for few minutes this time, braking on and off. The needle climbs, touches the red. The engine gurgles. Traffic stops again. Engine off.

Alice continues this way for ten minutes, maybe fifteen. At one point, her lane is stopped for so long she considers popping the hood and getting out to look, but decides against it. Doesn't want to draw attention. In her head, she begins to pray one sentence over and over again like a mantra. *Please let us make it.*

Coraline asks why they keep stopping. She turns around in her seat to look behind them, then suddenly yells out, "Papa!"

Alice starts at the sound of his name. She looks in the rearview mirror and sees a red Ford pickup back a few car lengths and two lanes over. A late 80s model, it looks to be. Her skin goes cold at the back of her neck.

"Turn around," she tells Coraline. "Look forward, okay? Look forward."

"Is that Papa?"

Alice checks the mirror again. The lane next to them has moved, and some of her

view is blocked by a U-Haul van now. She can only see the nose of the truck. The likelihood of it being Herb . . . fairly small. But if it's likely even a little bit, then it's still likely. Her lane is moving again. She turns the engine back on and inches forward, hardly even looking in front of them. Where did he go? She can't see the red truck any more. The moving van passes her. There's an SUV behind it. The truck slips into view again, this time the back half of it. She taps her brakes to let the SUV move past her and is just starting to catch a glimpse of the cab of the truck and its driver when Coraline shrieks. Alice looks forward just in time to stomp the brakes, inches from colliding with the bumper of the car in front of them. The tires screech.

Alice catches her breath and looks in the rearview mirror again. The lanes are all moving at their own pace and she can't find the truck. It could be anywhere. If it was Herb, he could be anywhere. He could do anything.

The needle is touching red.

She tells Coraline that it wasn't Papa. Just someone driving the same kind of truck.

When the bridge reaches Yerba Buena Island and the westbound lanes merge and stack on top of the eastbound lanes, something gives way—like a drain being unclogged—and the flow of traffic returns to highway speed again. With the cool air passing over the hood of the car (or at least this is Alice's theory), the temperature needle sinks back down to the halfway mark.

Alice pulls into the first gas station she sees—a 76 off of First Street—and waits in the car for twenty minutes or so, scanning her surroundings, making sure there are no red Ford trucks, no Papas looking for their children. They are resting, she tells Coraline. It was a long drive across that big bridge. Did you like that bridge? No, Coraline didn't like it. It was scary.

She goes into the 76 and buys a jug of radiator fluid.

When she opens the radiator cap, a brownish liquid bubbles over and spills into the engine compartment. Something tells her there is more going on than depleted coolant, but she pours the jug in anyway and replaces the cap. Until she's cashed Grahams' check, it's probably not the best idea to make any large expenditures, even on a car repair. Maybe she'll cash the check today. It just doesn't feel right—her using Graham's money for her own illicit expedition, and not just a little of his money. She should call him soon. In some small way, she even wishes he were here with them, but that could never be.

Coraline is hungry. Alice can hardly think of food. At the sight of the red truck, the risk of this journey became apparent to her again, and now she can only think of danger. Is it possible that Herb has been following them the whole way? What if he called the police? Surely he wouldn't have been so foolish. Besides, they wouldn't have made it this far under the sanction of an Amber Alert—an all-points-bulletin on a beige

Datsun hatchback. Then again, knowing what she knows, there isn't much she would consider Herb incapable of.

They eat at a crowded sandwich shop downtown. So crowded they have to sit outside in the cold. It's much colder than Alice had expected. She'd thought the bay would be warm. Places near the ocean are supposed to be warm. The towering commercial buildings around them do little to block the wind. In fact, they seem to act as a kind of funnel, channeling each frigid gust directly along the street. Alice finds herself scanning the faces of pedestrians on the sidewalk, making sure none of them are Herb, half-expecting to see a dark hood blow back in the wind and reveal his glassy eyes, filled with rage.

Coraline has eaten half of her grilled cheese and abandoned the rest, mystified now by the trolley cars throttling up and down the hill beside them. Alice starts to tell her to come on and finish up, but stops herself. There is a spectacular quality about the trolleys—the chinking sound of the metal shanks sliding along the track, the old-world reds and golds and greens of the trams, the people inside, looking out at them. Trolleys wouldn't make sense for Sumnerville; too flat. And there certainly weren't any trolleys in Constance. The closest things she can think of are the white government buses that used to pass through town, filled with young recruits on their way to Fort Rucker, a shaved head in every window.

Coraline holds her arms and says she is cold. Alice is cold, too. Her skin is pink.

The hairs on her arms stand up. Alice drives them to Leavenworth Street and parks at a meter. They walk to a souvenir shop a block south of Fisherman's Wharf and buy two sweatshirts with hoods and *San Francisco* printed across the chest. The shop doesn't carry children's sizes, so Coraline now wears an adult-xs that hangs off of her like a deflated parachute, the lettering almost wrapped around her whole body. Still more appropriate than anything Herb ever put her in. Although, not ideal for a little girl.

When they leave the shop, there is a man painted completely in gold on the sidewalk, pretending to be a statue, or pretending to walk like a statue, if statues could walk. Alice suspects from the homemade appearance of his costume that he is some kind of bum with a creative edge. The man approaches them and issues a mechanical wave to Coraline, who seems very unsure of him. Alice smiles politely and keeps walking, taking Coraline by the hand.

The sidewalks and open areas are busy with slow rivers of tourists, many of them wearing the same city sweatshirts. Seagulls line the benches and railings and some of them alight in gaggles on the pavement where people have dropped food. Nothing is untainted by their shit. The seagulls are black and white and grey, which seems an appropriate embodiment of the city's own dimness. The bleakness of the weather is refreshing to Alice. It hardly ever rains in Sumnerville, and clouds seem to pass over with the infrequency and disinterest of out-of-town visitors. Nice, now, to see the atmosphere in a vulnerable state, like a woman who's left the house without makeup and

in her worst outfit.

As they are crossing the street, Coraline speaks up. “Miss Traille.”

“Mmhmm?”

“What are they doing?”

Alice looks around to see who has suddenly piqued her interest—a woman taking a picture of a gull with its head poked through a burger paper, an older man with a tripod set up and his camera facing out toward the bay, toward Alcatraz, shrouded in fog.

“They’re taking pictures, sweetie.”

“Why?”

It occurs to Alice that Coraline may be entirely unfamiliar with the use of cameras for sentimental and aesthetic reasons. Even in the consignment shop, away from her father, the girl had picked up a camera and immediately thought of lewdness.

“Well, that bird looks awfully silly, doesn’t it?” Alice tries to explain.

“Yes.”

“And the man is taking a picture of the water, and the island, and the view out there.” Alice sweeps her arm across the seascape. “It’s pretty, don’t you think?”

“But I’m pretty.” Coraline skips a little to keep up.

“Of *course* you are. You’re beautiful. But there are other things that are pretty, too. Like mountains and sunsets, waterfalls, the snow. Here. Let’s sit down.”

Alice uses a newspaper from the ground to brush off a spot on one of the benches

and they sit down there, beside one of the docks where a few dozen people are disembarking from a blue, tourist yacht. The greenish baywater laps at the pilings beneath them. It looks very deep.

“You know the best thing about you?” Alice says.

Coraline kicks her legs back and forth on the edge of the bench and says no; she doesn’t know.

“You’re not just interesting to look at. You’re pretty on the inside and on the outside.” With this, Alice ruffles Coraline’s hair with her hand. She gets a laugh out of her, which is possibly the highest point of the trip so far.

“I want to take pictures of things,” Coraline says.

“You do? What do you want to take pictures of?”

“Everything,” Coraline says. “Everything and you.”

*

That night, Alice rents a room for them near Market Street, in a place called the Vagabond Motel. It was the cheapest motel she could find, which means it’s also one of the shabbiest. The motel itself is housed on the fourth floor of some building called The Newberry, which also leases space to a printing agency, an accident law firm, and a place that sells bail bonds. They have 14 rooms, total, with two shared bathrooms at the end of

the hall. Parking is three blocks up the street in an underground pay lot. For these humble accommodations, Alice pays \$87—far more than she’s comfortable with, but again, the cheapest she could find without notice.

The room is dank-smelling and dimly-lit by two lamps beside the bed. A sink is bolted into the wall below a small mirror. A dark stain stretches across the ceiling by the window. Alice wonders if it’s mildew, or perhaps an old splattering of blood from a gun firing inside of a tenant’s mouth. In this kind of neighborhood, the possibilities seem endless. At least there is a window.

She parts the curtains and finds the view to be of the dead space between their building and the next. Not quite wide enough to be considered an alley. She could touch the other building with a broom handle if she wanted.

“I’m scared,” Coraline says. She’s sitting on the bed. “Are we going to stay here?”

Alice turns around. “Well, yes dear. I . . . this is the nicest place Miss Trille can afford right now.”

“I don’t want to stay here.”

“It’ll be alright, okay? You don’t have to worry about anything. We’re safe.”

Alice isn’t sure she believes this as she says it.

“I don’t *like* it,” Coraline says.

“Hey, remember the bridge today? Remember that?”

Coraline nods.

“You were scared then, too. But we made it, didn’t we?”

Coraline looks down and picks at the lettering of her humongous sweatshirt.

“We made it across that big bridge, just like I told you,” Alice says.

“It’s itchy in here.”

“It’s itchy?” Alice laughs a little. “That’s just the air, sweetie. The air is dry.”

Coraline frowns. She is not swayed, but there’s nothing to be done. They’re here, and Alice has already paid, already parked the car, already carried their things in.

“You take the bed again, okay?” Alice leans down and tries to meet Coraline’s gaze, unsuccessfully. “You take the bed, and I’m going to sleep in this chair, in *your* sleeping bag.” Alice takes out the sleeping bag she bought the other day and unfurls it with a little flourish. A large print of Dora the explorer and her talking backpack covers the front of it. Alice had seen bits and pieces of the show when she was pregnant, flipping through channels at home. It seemed like something kids were interested in these days. She’d almost watched an episode herself, at the time.

Coraline eyes the sleeping bag and seems vaguely interested.

“Have you seen this before?”

Coraline shakes her head no.

A little after 1 a.m., Alice awakens to the sound of a whimper. She sits up in the

recliner and looks at the bed, but Coraline is still sleeping. A dream, probably. Alice lies down again and tries to get comfortable. The sleeping bag is too small, meant for a child, after all. It only comes up to her elbows. The recliner is too small as well, requiring her legs and back to buckle in the middle. She considers moving to the floor.

The whimper comes again, and this time clearly from Coraline. These are the nightmares she'd expected. So they *do* happen. Alice pulls the sleeping bag off and crosses the room to sit on the edge of the bed. She puts her hand on Coraline's forehead. The girl's face twitches—a wince, it seems. She rolls over onto her side and makes the noise again.

Alice gives her shoulder a gentle shake. "It a bad dream. I'm here."

Coraline starts awake and looks at Alice, surprised. "I'm itchy," she says.

"You're itchy? What?"

"I'm itchy all over."

Alice clicks one of the beside lamps on and pulls the covers down. "Let me see."

Coraline gives her a bashful look.

"Come on, let me *see*," Alice says, a little forceful. Coraline slowly lifts up her shirt. Her side is peppered with tiny, bright red bumps. Without asking, Alice picks Coraline up and stands her on the floor. She rips the fitted sheet off of the bed. The contours and seams of the mattress are alive, moving with a colony of tiny, dark bugs.

She almost gags at the sight, but is more angry than disgusted. This fucking

place. Damn this place.

“We’re leaving,” she tells Coraline. “Um, you need to . . . you need to take off your clothes.”

Coraline looks surprised.

Alice remembers what she told her, about being naked.

“It’s alright this time,” she says. “There are bugs in your clothes. We have to throw them away, okay?”

Coraline says “Okay.”

“I just want to see where they bit you.” Alice nods at her own suggestion, almost willing Coraline into agreement.

The girl fumbles with the button on her shorts and slips them off. Then her shirt. She starts to reach for her underwear, but Alice stops her and says to keep those on.

All over her body, along the backs of her arms and legs, on her stomach, on her neck, a legion of the same red bumps. Even a few on her face.

Alice sighs. For a moment, she thinks of her own red marks from a year ago, in that darkest of times. They match now, the two of them. Like mother and daughter.

The hotel manager denies everything. A short, Chinese man with a washboard forehead and enough pride to double his height.

“Bed bug? In *my* hotel?” What a ridiculous, impossible suggestion.

Alice demands her money back, but he tells her this cannot happen. “You want fancy hotel, then go. But I keep money.” He points at the sign by the desk. *No refunds after midnight.*

“I’m pretty sure that’s not legal,” Alice says.

“What?”

“Not legal. *Illegal.*”

“Yes. Legal,” he counters.

“Fuck. What is wrong with you?” Alice raises her voice. “Look at her.” She points at Coraline, who is feverishly scratching at the bumps on her left arm.

A faint wave of acknowledgment slips across his face as he looks over the counter. He sighs and opens the cash register drawer. “I give half,” he says, handing her a few bills.

“Whatever,” she says. It’s two a.m., and she’s in no mood to be arguing fact or fiction with a hotel clerk who barely speaks English.

They take the elevator downstairs and walk the three blocks back to the parking garage. The street is somehow dark and light at the same time. Dark as the night where the storefronts are closed or where the buildings separate to form alleys, and yet illuminated in between by the magenta and yellow hues of neon signs and headlights and taillights streaming past them along the wet streets. The kinds of places that are open this time of night: a concert hall called The Warfield where the janitor is sweeping trash off

the sidewalk in front; a rowdy-looking bar with music thrumming inside and people coming in and out with lit cigarettes; a Subway restaurant with no one in line; a Little Japan Electronics and Camera store (for some reason); a gentlemen's club called The Crazy Horse with neon silhouettes of naked women above its black, wrought iron gates. Alice figures there probably aren't any gentlemen inside. She catches Coraline looking up at the naked silhouettes, and she wants to tell her to look away, or to somehow explain what this place is and why the women are there even though they shouldn't be, but she can't think of anything to say. Maybe sometimes the evils of the world surpass any explanation. She is embarrassed to be walking here, at this hour, with a five-year-old girl. The parking garage is a block away.

Alice takes them down through the stairwell at the street, down three floors to the section where she'd parked the Datsun. F13. The duffel bag she carries is heavy. She wants to drop it into the trunk. She wants to sleep somewhere, but where?

Something isn't right. From a distance, Alice can tell the dome light is on inside of the car. Did she leave it on? She never even uses it. Why would it be on? As they get closer, she notices the driver-side door is open a few inches, which makes her break into a kind of trot.

She pulls the door open the rest of the way and looks around the inside of the car.

"Seriously?"

The center console is flipped open, its contents disheveled or thrown onto the seat.

An empty Altoids can, lipstick, a tire gage, receipts. Nothing of value. Then her eyes go to the glove box, which hangs open like a mouth with a broken jaw.

“Oh God,” she says. The glove box is empty. No CDs, no car manual, no Graham’s check; it’s been wiped clean. She backs out of the car and looks around the parking garage, sees only cars, and little Coraline standing by the bumper with a finger in her nose.

“Thanks a lot, you son of a bitch!” she yells into the emptiness. Her voice echoes at length. Coraline flinches a little. “Not you, dear,” she tells her.

She’ll have to call him now. Call Graham and explain what she’s gotten into and that he needs to put a stop payment on the check or else someone might empty his entire bank account.

So that’s it, then.

It’s all over.

She was going to cash the check in the morning and keep moving. Should’ve cashed it yesterday, or the day before that, but she’d been waiting for it to feel right. Now there is nothing. Her own bank account is circling the drain, dangerously close to empty. She can’t go back to Sumnerville. Herb will be after her, if he isn’t already.

That’s when she remembers the filmstrips. Tucked into the elastic of the visor mirror.

“No, no, no!” She spins around and leans back into the car and flips the visor

down.

Nothing is there.

The other visor is empty as well. She looks under the seats, in the side pockets of the doors, under the floor mats.

Gone.

Alice takes Coraline in her arms and squeezes her in a way that's beyond affectionate. She squeezes her so hard that the girl's body lets out a squeak, like a dog toy being squished. "I'm sorry, sweetheart," she tells her. "I'm so sorry it didn't . . . it just didn't work out like we wanted."

Alice stands up and begins to pace back and forth next to the car. She mutters under her breath that she's ruined, completely fucked. Beyond redemption. Without the negatives, she has no leverage against Herb. Nothing to threaten him with, should they ever cross paths again. They are the only evidence of his crimes. No one else knows. Nothing else has left his house. If she returns to Sumnerville, she'll have no option but to give the girl back. But if she keeps running, she'll go broke. Perhaps she could go as far as her money takes them, then find a job at something. At what? And what would she do with Coraline during the day? Even enrolling her in school would prove complicated, since Alice isn't her mother. Canada crosses her mind again. Home school crosses her mind, but she's not even sure what that means.

She stops pacing and looks at her car. The weather-stripping along the bottom of

the window has always been dry-rotted, but there is a new chink in it now, aligned with the position of the lock. Someone must have slim-jimmed it or used a coat hanger to pop the lock up. It doesn't make any sense to her—why someone would target *her* car, a banged up rattletrap with all the lucrative promise of a rusty penny. There are plenty of nicer cars to choose from in the garage. Newer ones, more likely to have valuables inside because their owners are more likely to have money. Even more bizarre, they didn't take her radio, which seems like it's always the first target.

And the filmstrips. Why would someone take them?

The red pickup that was behind them on the Bay Bridge, and then gone again like a phantom—she thinks about it now. Suddenly the parking garage feels close and stuffy, like it's hard to breathe, hard to think, like there isn't enough space.

It's Herb. She knows it's Herb.

He's sending her a message.

He wants his daughter back.

He's killed before. He's killed his own wife. So what's stopping him from doing the same to Alice?

She looks around the garage, panicking now, checking the dark rows of cars for a red Ford pickup. There's a Ford pickup in F11, by the support column, but it's green, not red, and no one is inside of it. A red pickup up where the exit lane bends around the curve—GMC, not a Ford. He may not be here now, but she's sure that he *was* here, and

he can't be far. Alice considers the possibility that he's been watching her all along. Watching her stop for gas, watching her hotel rooms, watching where she ate, watching the way she handled Coraline. Did he see the incident outside of Modesto yesterday, when Coraline ran into the highway? Could he have driven by? She can only assume so. She can only assume he's seen everything.

Alice puts a hand on Coraline's shoulder without looking at her. "We need to go now," she says.

*

CHAPTER XI

A dainty patch of electric-blue flowers came into bloom outside of her window.

Cornflowers? She wasn't sure. The flowerbed had seemed barren before, and aside from this sudden growth, still was. It was odd to see flowers in the middle of October, but then again, this wasn't Alabama. It was still warm, still green. She stood at her bedroom window in a nightgown, her hand on her belly, improvising verses of song. "My little cornflower . . . blue eyes that never cry . . . hmmhmmmmhmm . . . little flower of mine."

She peed into the red, plastic container from the clinic for three days, keeping it in the fridge between uses. It sat next to a loaf of bread and a half-empty quart of milk. There was never much in the fridge. Just those items and a foam take-out box and some condiments. She'd read all kinds of brochures about nutrition and eating for a baby, but her appetite was always spare because of the nausea, and she was always eating alone, so what drive was there to eat healthy? She sometimes ate bread with mayonnaise for lunch, or a sleeve of crackers, or walked to the Quikstop on the corner and bought corn dogs. She sometimes skipped meals altogether. She was worried about the test. What if the doctor could extract from it a catalog of meals eaten or not eaten and the nutritional

content therein. Would she think Alice a bad mother?

When she took the red container back to the clinic, the receptionist accepted it with disinterest, as if this were the five-thousandth container of urine she'd handled in her career. Alice felt like she might have been returning a library book. The woman sent her home without more than a couple of words.

Two weeks later, there was a voicemail on her phone from the clinic, telling her she needed to come in; the results had come back. She still wasn't exactly sure what she'd taken the test for in the first place. Something to do with her symptoms—the spots, the dizziness, the rapid weight gain. She'd heard of pregnant women stricken with diabetes. That could be it; maybe she had diabetes. From eating so terribly, from lying around all day. Wouldn't that be perfect? Another thing for Simon to fault her with. Not that it mattered any more. It seemed like they were destined for failure, the two of them. Had been that way from the beginning. Fault didn't have much to do with it, or didn't help it make sense, at any rate.

When Doctor Suvari talked to her, the first thing she said was, “Now, I don't want you to panic about this. It does happen sometimes, and there are ways to manage it.”

Simon had been waiting in the car, which was his way of pouting about everything. Alice went out to him holding a sheaf of papers and bearing fresh lines on her cheeks where tears had marked their trajectory. When he saw how troubled she was, he cut the act and asked her what was wrong. Alice folded up the center console and lay

across the front seat, putting her head on his lap. Her arms wrapped around him, clenching his back, kneading it.

“What do you want to name our little girl?” she said with a muffled voice into his stomach.

“Baby, what’s wrong. Name her? Why do we have to name her already?”

“Because I might have her very soon.”

Eighteen weeks. It was much too soon.

Simon drove her from the clinic to Sumnerville Memorial Hospital. She was to be on supervised bed rest indefinitely, or at least until they could guarantee that mother and baby were stable. Alice didn’t understand. She felt stable—not perfect, but stable. It wasn’t about that, Suvari had told her. Not always something you feel acutely. Like the way blood runs through your veins but you don’t feel it and you’d never know if it wasn’t flowing correctly until some instrument measured it and told you. Blood flow had a lot to do with it, actually. There wasn’t enough blood flowing to the placenta, which meant the baby could be malnourished, growing out of proportion, weak and shriveled in the arms and legs and minor organs. Its body could be filling with acid.

At the hospital, they laid her down in the triage room and gave her an I.V. with blood pressure medication. They hooked her up to monitors and put sensors on her stomach for the baby. In a matter of minutes, there were wires sprouting from her body

at every open spot like vines from a ruin. The nurses told Alice to try and relax.

Simon got angry and said “Relax? *Relax?*” But left it at that. They were both helpless. He paced the room.

After a while, a female doctor who seemed far too young to be a doctor came in and introduced herself as the doctor on shift. She said Alice’s complication was not uncommon.

“Yeah, we know that already,” Simon said. “Precramping syndrome. Now what are you going to do, Miss?”

“It’s preeclampsia, actually. And we’re basically going to monitor the baby’s vital signs and do some ultrasounds to make sure—boy or girl?”

“Girl,” Alice said.

“To make sure she’s doing okay,” she finished.

Simon threw his hands up. “That’s it?”

“Well, there really isn’t a cure for it unfortunately. The only cure is delivering the baby and the placenta, but we want to keep her in there as long as possible so she can grow.”

For some reason, Alice found herself comforting Simon. He was sitting in a chair beside her bed. She reached out and took his hand into her own and squeezed it tightly. His palm was coarse and strong, a testament to the world of dirt and machinery it manipulated each week. He was upset for her, and that made him the only person she

had.

Things seemed to be all right for the baby. The young doctor was somewhat concerned about the size of the lungs, but aside from that, the signs were positive. Still, they needed to keep her there and monitor the things they monitored—her index finger, her arm, her wrist, her heart, and three points on her stomach.

After a few hours, she was allowed to take a break and walk the halls with Simon in her gown. They went to the hospital cafeteria and bought coffee and oatmeal raisin cookies. Alice could see through the windows it was getting late, the sun slinking low like a beaten dog. She asked Simon again what he wanted to name their little girl.

He scoffed and said they didn't need to name her, because everything would be fine and they would have plenty of time to think of names afterward.

She reminded him that her condition wasn't going away. It was something you didn't recover from until the baby came. She told him that she thought her body might be trying to communicate with her.

To her surprise, he didn't scoff at that. "Maybe it is," he said. "What would it be trying to say?"

She thought for a moment. "That everything is wrong."

Simon said he didn't think so. He asked her how the cookie was.

"What about 'Mara?'"

"We don't need to name her yet."

“But what if we do? What about ‘Mara?’”

“Why?”

“From the Bible. Do you remember?”

“No.”

“It means ‘bitter.’”

“We definitely don’t need that. Just eat your cookie. Come on.”

She hadn’t touched her cookie. Or the coffee. “Her name used to be Naomi, but she changed it to Mara on her own. I think because God let her husband and her sons die.”

Simon looked at her strangely, fearfully, as if her eyes had turned into spiders and were crawling out of their sockets. “Hey. Alice, are you okay? You sound strange. You’re slurring.”

She hadn’t noticed. Was she slurring?

“Jesus. Your nose is bleeding.” He lurched from his chair and applied his napkin to her face. “Let’s get you back. Come on. Let’s go back.”

“You always want to go,” she said, and this time she could hear herself slurring. It was the *only* thing she could hear—her own voice, between her ears, an underwater sound. “You always want to leave places.” And then the spots came back, and she was falling, but Simon caught her.

They took away her walking privileges after that, unless it was to cross the eight feet of floor that led to the bathroom. Even then, she was to call for help. They upped the dosage on the hypertension medicine. A nurse was assigned to check on her every hour, though it was never the same one. New ones kept coming in and introducing themselves and telling her they'd be taking care of her for the day, or for the night. But then they wouldn't come back. They were all so young—younger than her, students probably. Was she providing valuable on-the-job training? It was probably a novel experience—a rare opportunity—to tell a dying woman that everything would be alright, that they were going to take care of her, knowing full-well that it wouldn't, and they couldn't. Were there other women at the hospital who were going to die?

That's what it was; she was sure of her own imminent death. Or if not imminent, eventual. She'd heard a lot of grotesque medical cautions like "placental abruption," and "pulmonary edema," brain damage, liver damage, kidney damage, seizures, and so on. She pictured a maelstrom of blood and gore spraying about the room while the doctors extracted and saved her little girl at all costs, leaving Alice to die in repose on the table, legs splayed wide over an empty womb, hoarse from screaming. They could place Mara on her chest, and Alice could feel her daughter's warm skin and feel her root around, open-mouthed, for something to suckle, and watch her open her puffy eyelids for the first time, and then Alice could breathe her last. She didn't let on about any of this to Simon, since she wasn't sure he'd take it well. It'd be better for them not to talk about it,

anyway, if she were going to die. But that was why she thought of 'Mara.' It was a pretty name, if nothing else. A name for a child who would enter the world in tandem with its mother going out.

Simon went back to work during the days. He had to, of course. But he came to see her every night, even slept in the room with her, in the pleather recliner that folded into a cot. They'd moved her into a suite with its own bathroom and shower and TV hanging from the ceiling. Simon would bring a change of clothes and leave directly for work in the mornings, before the sun had risen. She almost started to forgive him, but after the lies, the infidelity, nothing could be the same. The dizzy spells were less frequent, now that she was lying down most of the day.

*

The second weekend she was there, Simon stayed at the hospital for three days straight, never leaving to get fresh air or pick up food. He slept in the recliner, showered in her room, and bought meals at the cafeteria. She kept telling him to go, to take a break, but he said it was alright. He wanted to be there.

Alice's meals were provided by the nurses. That Sunday, it was chicken broth soup, boiled carrots, whole wheat toast, and a carton of apple juice. Simon looked at the tray they'd brought her with heavy eyelids.

“Your food makes me sad,” he said.

She smiled. The news was on their TV, volume muted, captions scrolling across the bottom of the screen. She read them for a moment but didn’t remember what they said. She leaned over to face Simon. “Hey.”

“Yes?”

“Nevermind.”

“What is it?”

“Nothing.”

“What were you going to say?”

“Nothing. Just that I’m still mad.”

“I know,” he said.

“You do?”

“Sure.

“Well, it’s nice that you’re here anyway.”

“Of course I’m here,” he said.

“Of course you are.

*

Things started to turn sour when Alice passed 20 weeks. Her blood pressure was higher, instead of lower. The baby's lungs were too small. They put Alice on a steroid to help the lungs grow faster. There was talk of inducing labor. Alice asked if the baby would survive. The doctor (the one who was usually there during the day) said there was no guarantee, but if they could wait until 24 weeks, it would have a better chance.

“Mara,” Alice said. “Her name is going to be Mara.”

The doctor nodded.

“Listen. You keep my little girl alive, no matter what. I'll die. If you have to bleed me dry, then do it. I don't care, okay?”

The doctor nodded again, but didn't necessarily agree. She said they were going to do the best they could to get everyone through.

*

Alice couldn't sleep at night anymore. Partly because of the hypertension, but more because of the insomnia her fears created. Simon tried to stay awake with her, but couldn't. His body was exhausted from work, from a day of crude oil and hot sun. Alice hadn't felt the sun on her back in over a month. It was December, now.

*

At 27 weeks, the doctors told her it was time. An emergency C-section. Your baby isn't getting enough blood, enough oxygen. Your baby won't survive if she stays in the womb. No matter how many times they told her it would all be fine, she didn't believe them. She could feel it in her chest, in the way her skin tightened and grew cold and her pores itched at the mention of *C-section*.

Four days before Christmas, they wheeled her bed out of the room, down the hall, into a different room, an operating room. Simon kept his hand on her forehead, kept whisking her hair out of her face, reassuring her. She smelled his oily skin and tried to focus, but she could barely hear him. Her concentration was on her belly, the delicate motions inside of it. She asked the nurses over and over again, she asked whoever was standing beside the bed in scrubs, "Is she going to be okay? She's going to be okay, right?" They seldom answered her . . . too busy spouting off hospital jargon about this and that piece of equipment and milliliters and centimeters and levels and rates. Simon wasn't allowed to come into the room during the procedure. It was a sterile environment.

Finally, after a few minutes, the hullabaloo quieted, and tall, bony man with a beaked nose came in with the girl doctor from earlier and said he'd be the one performing the C-section. Performing, he said, like a music recital, or a man jumping 17 cars on a

motorcycle.

The girl doctor sat down and took Alice's hand.

Alice looked into her eyes and saw pity, finality. She started shaking her head and tried to move her hands, but there were wires clipped to them.

As if she could run off and save her child.

The girl doctor told Alice that they were going to put her to sleep and take the baby out. She told Alice there was a very real possibility that her baby would die. It was quite small, and quite young, and probably would have a lot of trouble breathing, if it did survive. She said Alice should be prepared for anything.

Alice was prepared for nothing. How could she be? "No," she said in a kind of moan. "I was going to die. I was supposed to."

"I'm sorry," the girl doctor said. The surgeon was already preparing his instrument table on the other side of the room. "Before we put you under, I'm going to have you look over this sheet. There are some options for what to do after the procedure, depending on what you're comfortable with."

The sheet said *Options for Stillbirth: Making the Most of the Time*. It had a bullet-point list of things that were supposed to be nice to try when your child came out of the womb already dead.

- L • et the doctors describe your baby to you, then decide if you'd like to hold the baby

- H • old/cuddle your baby
- N • ame your baby (if haven't already chosen a name)
- T • ake photographs of your baby with the family
- M • ake hand/foot impression of your baby's hands and feet
- T • ake a lock of hair from your baby's head
- A • sk the hospital chaplain to speak with you/pray with you

Alice cried. She said she didn't know. "I don't know," she said. "I don't know I don't know I don't know. I want to see my husband. Where is my husband?"

"Sssh," the girl doctor said.

"Oh, God. Why are you doing this?"

"Sssh. We're going to put you to sleep now, okay?" the girl doctor said. "You won't feel anything at all."

And she didn't. Not at first.

*

CHAPTER XII

Alice drives all through the night, taking the Bay Bridge back out of the city, heading up through Emeryville, and with the atlas in her lap, deciding to skirt around, move back inland for a bit, then cut north again at Walnut Creek and take the 680 across the Carquinez Strait, which is where Coraline stops scratching her arms and neck and stomach and finally falls asleep, and where the moon dips below the water, signaling the approaching dawn. From there, she travels north, with no clear motive except to ditch the sociopath who might be following her. One crazy person fleeing from another.

She thinks of Graham, of the position she has put him in, and for a moment feels sick—a familiar roiling in her gut—only this time it's guilt that nauseates her. Or maybe she's been awake too long without eating.

A small town along the 5 called Corning is where she finally stops, just as the dawn is breaking over the dark ridge to the east. The land is flat here, spread wide with low hills and oak trees much like Sumnerville, but somehow milder. The grass softer, the air cooler, the freeway smaller and quieter—only two lanes going in either direction.

Alice is near extinction. Her eyelids feel heavy. She has that grimy feeling in the

back of her throat that she gets when he hasn't slept in a long time.

Coraline's head is slumped over in the seat, leaning against the window. Alice decides to leave her be while she makes a call. No sign of anyone following her. Only one other car at the gas station where she's parked: a Pontiac that probably belongs to the clerk. Alice steps out and stretches her legs on the hood of the Datsun and smokes a cigarette, watching the cars and 18-wheelers pass by on the freeway. Only two or three of them per minute. Time has slowed here.

She must call Graham. He'll still be asleep, she guesses, but 6 a.m. is better than 2 a.m. The index card with his number has been in her duffel bag for the past few days, where she packed it with a vague expectation (and hope) of using it. But she'd hoped to speak with Graham again on more celebratory terms. Not like this.

She holds the card in her hand now. It's folded in fourths, torn at one edge.

Graham – 661.555.5882.

She approaches the payphone at the corner of the parking lot, next to the coin-fed air pump, and looks back toward the car. Coraline is still asleep, her head now slumped down into her chest.

It takes a full dollar in quarters to make the call since it's a different area code from here. Only one quarter left in her pocket now. She hopes he'll pick up, but also hopes that he won't. What will she say? How could she even begin to explain? The phone rings. A tanker truck downshifts on the off-ramp. It says *Tidewater Oil* on the

side.

“Hello?” Graham’s voice answers.

“Graham.”

“Alice? Is that you?”

Without being about to account for it, Alice starts to cry. She feels like Graham is the only person left in the world who knows her, which is tragic since he doesn’t really know her that much. The way he said her name—it sounded like he was worried, like he’s been thinking about her, like he’s been distraught without her there and without knowing where she was.

“Alice?”

“Yeah. It’s me,” she manages and then holds the phone away.

“Where *are* you? Are you crying?”

“No,” she says. “It’s windy. I’m . . . I’m in some town called Corning.”

There is silence on the line. The Tidewater Oil truck is pulling into the station now, lining up next to the fuel reservoirs.

“Well what are you doing *there*?” Graham says.

“I’m just—I drove from San Francisco last night.”

“San Francisco? Alice, I haven’t heard from you in like a week. I’ve been worried. And you haven’t cashed my check. What’s going on?”

Alice stills her breathing and checks behind her. The oil man is fixing a hose onto

one of the reservoir covers. Pontiac. Still no other cars at the station. Datsun. Coraline is awake, sitting up, looking at her, which is almost startling, like seeing a dummy come to life on its own. “I um . . . I’m trying to think of what to say.”

Graham laughs, but not in a funny way. “You still haven’t paid your rent yet, have you?”

Alice is silent.

“Alice.” There is a rush of wind in the speaker, which Alice assumes is Graham sighing. “Look, I know you probably feel guilty about what happened at my house. And honestly, I’m not ecstatic about it either, but I gave you that check because I wanted you to have it. No strings attached.”

He’s too sweet for his own good, Alice thinks. He has no idea what he’s getting into, no idea the kind of person he’s getting involved with. She wishes there were a way to let him go—to just fix the mess she’s made and let Graham return to his life. She doesn’t deserve him. That’s what it is, really. The reason she’s withheld herself from him. It has nothing to do with age and everything to do with punishing herself.

“Hello? Are you still there?”

“Yes. I’m here.”

“Please, Alice. I don’t know what you’re doing in . . .”

“Corning.”

“In Corning. But just come home, and use the money.”

That's when she tells him she lost the check. She tells him that's the reason she called in the first place. She tells him she's kind of in a tough spot right now, involved with some things she shouldn't really be involved with.

He tells her not to worry about the check; he can call the bank and put a stop payment on it. "But what do you mean 'tough spot?'"

Alice considers hanging up right then. She could hang up the phone and drive away. Going forward, her survival would be uncertain, but Graham could remain blameless and uninvolved.

He asks her again. What does she mean?

There is a touch on her leg. It's Coraline; Alice didn't hear her get out of the car and walk over. Coraline asks if she is talking to Papa.

Alice tries to cover the phone and tell her to go back to the car, but it's too late.

"Alice? Who is that?"

"Who is what?" she says, waving Coraline away.

"I'm hungry," Coraline says.

"Who is that, that just said they were hungry? Was that a girl?"

Alice swears and tells Coraline to get back in the car and just wait, which she does.

After Graham asks her a few more times what's going on and who was that, she panics and slams the phone down onto the receiver.

Coraline sits down on the asphalt, leaning against the Datsun's front tire. Alice lights takes a cigarette out of her back pocket and lights it and stares at Coraline through the blue-grey cloud of smoke. There is nothing left to do, it seems, but stand here and wait for Herb to find them.

The payphone rings. It's much louder than a payphone should be. Loud enough to be heard from miles away. Alice lets it go for a while, wincing a little at each fire-alarm ring. On the seventh ring, she spins around and picks it up.

Graham asks her to please tell him what's going on, so she does. She tells him who Coraline is, who her father is, what he has done, what she herself has done, what happened to the check. She tells him everything.

"Is this serious?" he says after a moment. "You're not making any of this up?"

Alice wishes she were, but no. All true.

"Holy shit."

"I know," Alice says. "I know. I'm crazy. You must think I'm crazy now, if you didn't before."

"Alice."

"What?"

"Don't say that."

"Well, it's true."

“No it isn’t. You’re not crazy. I don’t think you’re crazy.” He waits. “I just think you’ve made the wrong decision here. A few wrong decisions.”

Alice knows he is right. For what seemed like a moral undertaking at the beginning, things have gone awfully sour in a thousand ways.

“It says we’re running out of time.” She reaches into her pocket to take out the one remaining quarter. “I only have one quarter left.”

Graham asks how much time that is.

It’s one minute. She pushes the quarter into the slot. It clinks down into the bottom of the machine.

“Alice, I just . . . wow.” His tone is careful, as if he suddenly sees her in a different light, as someone who is dangerous, volatile, someone to tread softly around.

“You think I’m crazy,” she says.

“That’s not it. I just think you should come home. You should do the right thing.”

“I don’t know what the right thing is anymore,” she chokes out. “What is it?” She looks over her shoulder again. She was louder than she meant to be. The oil driver is looking at her. For a fraction of a second—the time it might take for a fly to alight on a windowsill—the man looks like Simon. But he is too far away to tell. She knows it can’t be him.

Graham tells her to calm down. He says he can’t make her do anything, but if it was him, he’d go straight to the authorities—find a police station or something like that

and tell them everything she just told him. “Before things get any worse,” he says.

“They don’t just shrug this kind of thing off.”

“I don’t want to lose her,” Alice says.

“Alice, she was never yours to begin with.”

“We’re almost out of time.”

“You know, everything makes sense now,” he says. “You make sense now.”

“Why?”

“That night at my house . . .”

“The machine is beeping,” she tells him.

“Okay. Do you have money to get back?” he says, rushing his words now.

Not quite, she says.

“What gas station are you at?”

“Citgo.”

“In Corning?”

“Yes.”

“I’m going to see if they have a Western Union.”

She holds the phone closer, trying to feel his face against her own. She is sorry for everything. “Graham, don’t do that.”

“Just do what’s right,” he says, “and come home.”

She starts to say something about that night, at his house, but the call disconnects.

*

The woman behind the counter has Alice sign the Western Union form and then counts out five-hundred dollars in twenties. Alice uses two of them to pay for her gas. The oil driver is behind her in line. He's finished pumping the reservoirs full and is now holding a Butterfinger and a Diet Coke. A tall, bearded man hiding beneath the shadows of a Mossy Oak hat—not Simon. She can feel him looking at the money. It's quite a large stack of bills.

A heavy responsibility, which she isn't sure she's cut out for. Graham seemed sure.

She stuffs the cash into her purse and slips past the Mossy Oak man.

Coraline is waiting in the car, which is now parked directly in front of the store. Coraline asks her again who she was talking to on the phone. "It wasn't Papa?"

"No, it wasn't Papa. You know what, though?" Her voice is shaking. "I love you, Coraline."

"Okay."

"I know I've always just been Miss Trille to you, but I really do love you." Alice nods while she says this. "You're like a daughter to me. I wish you could understand that."

Coraline pushes the window button up a click and then down a click. Nothing happens since the engine is off, of course. “Miss Traille?” she says.

“Yes dear?” Alice thinks she is going to say that she loves her back—that this will be the moment of breakthrough, when everything she’s done will finally pay off.

“Papa said that you’re a liar.”

This announcement is like a quiet, but sharp sound startling Alice awake in the night, like invisible, cold hands on her chest. It’s painful to hear, not because Herb said it, but because she can tell that Coraline almost believes it. Or maybe she does believe it, wholeheartedly. Maybe she’s believed it the whole time, and now she’s only testing Alice’s response.

“When did he say that? Is that what he whispered to you when I picked you up?”

Coraline nods.

“Well, that’s not true, sweetie. I mean, we all lie sometimes, but that doesn’t make us liars.” More cars are pulling into the station now. The day is in motion. Alice thinks of the cash in her purse and decides to lock the doors. She locks her side first, then leans over Coraline to lock the passenger side. The electric lock has never worked. Not since she bought the car.

Coraline looks at the lock rod on her door for a moment, then says, “What makes us liars?”

Alice struggles to find an explanation that doesn't defame her own choices over the past few days. This proves difficult. "Hmmm," she says, "I suppose someone is a liar if they tell a *lot* of lies."

"How many?"

Alice puts her key into the ignition and turns the car on. "One thousand lies," she says. "Buckle your seatbelt. We have to go now."

"Where are we going?"

"Home."

*

As they drive north, Alice tries to account for her feelings toward Graham. She tries to understand why she broke down like that on the phone, at the sound of his first word. Was it guilt? Was it frailty? She tries to account for his unrelenting generosity, his irresistible kindness. In one way, she misses him. In another way, she could never do what he asked. Even if he is right.

Five hundred dollars isn't a lot in the grand scheme of things, but it might be enough to get them further out, enough to bide some time until Alice has a better idea. In this, she knows she has betrayed Graham again.

When they pass through Redding and cross the bridge over the turquoise waters of

Shasta Lake, Coraline says she doesn't recognize the water. "I didn't see that before," she says. "Are we going the right way?"

"Yes, dear," Alice says. "We're just going a different way home than we came."

This seems to satisfy the girl, though Alice isn't sure what kind of expectations she has about seeing her father again. Hopefully, she won't ask about that.

They pass through alpine forested areas and the hills get sharper as Alice continues to drive north. There are mountains in the distance with whitecaps of snow reaching above the clouds. She thinks she has lost Herb for now, if he was indeed following her. Perhaps it's the wildness of the land around her that makes her feel this comfort, this new safety. The more afield the hills and passes and the smaller the towns, the further away she and Coraline have managed to escape. She wonders if they could run like this for years—simply drive until the past has lost its wind and collapsed on a side road behind them, until they've grown old in tandem and seen every secret place of the country, until Coraline forgets where she has come from and instead fills the vaults of her mind with new memories of Alice and of their freedom together.

"Isn't this beautiful?" Alice says, swiveling around in her seat to take in the vista. The Datsun has come over the crest of a ridge and in front of them stretches an endless canopy of evergreen trees, sweeping down into the valley where a river threads through them. The valley is bathed in golden light from the morning sun.

Alice rolls her window down to take in the air. “Couldn’t you just breathe that air in forever?”

Coraline smiles a little bit at this. She makes an effort to smell what Alice has just imagined out loud and pretends to appreciate it.

Coraline says something, but Alice can’t hear her over the sound of the air across the open window. She presses the button on her side to roll it up, but the window stops halfway, as if the motor were tired. She waits a few minutes and tries again, and the window moves up the rest of the way. This has happened before, but usually with the passenger side. The car is slowly dying, and to Alice, this almost seems appropriate.

Just beyond the Oregon state line, the freeway begins to climb again, up a long, steady grade. Alice takes it slow, keeping an eye on the temperature gauge. The sun is high now, beating down on them—not ideal for keeping an engine cool. She’s hoping the radiator fluid she added will be enough to keep things under control. Given that she lost Graham’s check and now only has a little more than five-hundred dollars, she certainly can’t afford any car repairs at the moment.

She looks in the rearview mirror to check how far she’s made it up the grade, and that’s when she sees it: a tiny red vehicle at the bottom of the hill behind her. It looks like a truck from this distance. Is it a Ford? She can’t tell. Maybe it’s an SUV. It could be anyone.

Coraline yawns and says that she is thirsty. They don't have any water in the car. They'll stop soon, Alice says.

The red vehicle is gaining on her. It's a truck; Alice can tell with certainty now. She checks the temperature gauge. Nothing is happening. So far so good.

The truck moves closer; she can make out the grill. A horizontal grid with a blue oval in the middle. A ford, and an older one judging by the shape of it. *Shit*. Alice tries not to show her panic to Coraline. For some reason she starts to whistle, then thinks better of it and turns on the radio instead. She hits scan, but all the stations seem to have commercials instead of music, so she turns it back off.

She could pull off at an exit, but if Herb is in that truck, who knows what he might try. Better to just keep driving. If it's not Herb, then whoever it is will inevitably pass her or lag behind again at some point. She can make out the silhouette of the driver: looks like a man wearing a hat, or a taller woman with short hair? Does Herb wear hats? Alice spends so long looking behind her that the Datsun runs onto the rumble strip for a moment and gives out a violent shudder. She swerves back into the lane.

"Coraline, does your Papa wear hats sometimes?" she asks.

Coraline shrugs. "I don't know," she says. "I'm really thirsty, Miss Traille. Can I have some drink?"

"Yes, sweetie. We're going to stop very soon." Hopefully. Hopefully the truck will pass them and they will stop. Hopefully Alice will keep her life today.

Something makes a loud click and the front end of the car shudders slightly. The a/c coming from the vents goes warm. Alice says what the hell and asks Coraline if she touched any of the buttons. No, she didn't touch anything. Alice turns the a/c off and then back on again. She slides the climate control knob all the way to the hot side and then back to the cool. The air is still warm, getting warmer, in fact, even though the temperature gauge on the dash reads normal.

The red truck is still behind her, still coming closer, but not changing lanes or exiting. It seems to be headed straight for them, like a ship appearing on the horizon at sea and slowly drawing near. Alice speeds up a little. The cruise control on the Datsun is no longer functional, so it's hard to tell how consistently she maintains speed.

The gap between her and the red truck begins to widen, but the truck is not shaken. She tries to get a better look at the driver but still can't make anything specific out.

Coraline complains that she is thirsty again and says that it's very hot in the car. She's right. It is hot. The midday sun is turning the inside of the car into an oven—that, coupled with the faulty a/c. Alice tries the knob again, but the air coming out of the vent is still warm. She presses the window button on her side. The glass moves down a half-inch and then stops. Coraline's side doesn't move at all.

It seems like the truck behind them is accelerating to match Alice's speed, and yet the driver keeps his distance at about 50 yards.

A mile further. Two miles. Ten miles. The truck is still there, following them.

“Miss Traille, I don’t feel good.”

But she can’t stop now. The red truck would be upon them in an instant. Herb would be upon them. The road is level now, bending to the right around a small bluff topped with sparse trees. Alice considers pulling over onto the shoulder. If she did it fast enough, he might pass them. Or even if he didn’t, what could he try on the side of the freeway? There would be other cars. Witnesses. The sun is pouring in through the windows. It’s getting hotter, muggier. Difficult to breathe, almost. Alice presses her window button again, then tries Coraline’s. Nothing happens.

The red truck comes closer. It’s definitely a man driving, a thin man. Is he wearing a hat? It’s hard to tell.

“I feel funny,” Coraline says.

Alice barely hears her. The truck flashes its headlights at them and she nearly cries out. The gap between the two vehicles is closing. The truck flashes its lights again. Alice looks around for something to cover Coraline with. A blanket, a jacket. But what good will that do? He’ll know. He’s been watching them all along. There’s nothing to be done. She can’t outrun him forever, not with his daughter captive, not with the kind of man he is.

The truck’s left-hand blinker flashes and it moves into the other lane.

“God, please,” Alice mumbles.

Without much forethought, she hits her brakes hard and pulls onto the shoulder, a cloud of dust kicking up in a storm around them. She looks over her shoulder just in time to see the red truck whirl past them, an elderly man wearing a derby cap at the helm. The man points at the Datsun, but Alice can't tell why.

It's not Herb.

She begins to laugh, but not in the funny way.

She opens her door and gets out and looks up at the sky and laughs some more. As she turns around, she notices the fuel door is hanging open, the gas cap dangling from its plastic connector.

"Look at *that*," she says. "Coraline, I left the silly gas door open. See that?"

Coraline doesn't answer.

Alice leans into the car, hoping to share in this victory with Coraline, even though the girl has no idea of the danger that just bypassed them.

Somehow, Coraline is asleep, which Alice thinks is strange since she was just asking for water and complaining of the heat not five minutes before. Alice calls to her again and gets nothing. Coraline's head is lolled back on the seat rest, her mouth open. Alice nudges her shoulder and her head rolls limply to the side.

*

Alice barrels down the freeway, pushing 100, trying to remember the last time Coraline had a glass of water, or anything to drink, for that matter. They've been driving all morning, into the afternoon. Before that, they'd stopped at the Citgo. Coraline went inside with her to use the bathroom after she filled up the gas tank. Was there a water fountain? She can't remember. And before that, they'd driven through the night from San Francisco, and Coraline was asleep. More than twelve hours, then. That can't be right. Alice feels hot, but she isn't sweating, which means she's awfully thirsty herself. She begins to shake her head over and over again. What has she done?

The atlas shows a medium-size town further north along the 5 called Medford. There should be a hospital there, if anywhere.

Coraline's chest rises and falls slowly beneath the seatbelt, but the breaths are shallow. Alice tries to keep an eye on her without going off the road. She holds a finger under Coraline's nose to feel her breath. To make sure. Every once in a while, she calls out her name, but the girl does not stir. Once, she even tries, "Cora baby."

She can't decide whether it's best to pull over and air out the car and find some water to splash on Coraline, or whether to keep driving and get to the hospital. If she chooses the latter, she knows she will lose Coraline. How can she check her into the hospital without any paperwork? Without knowing her social security number? Without explaining the nature of their relationship? But is preservation worth risking the girl's life? Surely not. Most definitely not.

In this moral frenzy, Alice begins to pray. *Don't let her die. Just . . . I don't know what to do. Help me. Please. I don't know what to do.*

The windows are still stuck. The a/c is still tepid. Nothing is getting better. Nothing will ever get better. Alice thinks of what Graham told her. She thinks about doing the right thing. Considers the possibility that she's been making the wrong decisions for herself. The wrong decisions for Coraline. For the first time, she tries to lay aside her own desires and think about what's best for the girl—what she actually needs, more than her father, more than Alice, more than this helter-skelter freedom drive.

Signs for Medford attractions appear on the shoulder. Restaurants, hotels, fuel stations.

One of them shows a blue square with a white H in the middle. Alice puts her blinker on.

At the entrance to the Rogue Valley Medical Center, there is a speed bump. When Alice drives over it, still going 30, Coraline opens her eyes and begins to look around.

“Oh, thank God!” Alice says. She pulls into a spot in the patient parking area.

“Where are we?”

Alice doesn't answer her. She gets out of her side of the car and trots around to open Coraline's door, letting the cross-breeze sweep through the front seat. She crouches

down on the pavement and touches her wrist to Coraline's forehead. The skin is hot to the touch, but dry.

"Sweetie, how do you feel?"

"I'm thirsty," she says.

Alice nods. "We're going to get you some water right now. You scared me, little girl. You scared Miss Traille."

"Why?"

"Because I thought I was going to lose you."

The remark doesn't seem to register with Coraline. Her eyelids wilt half-closed and Alice grabs her shoulder.

"Hey there. Don't . . . please don't." Alice feels her eyes burn with tears. With the passing of each second, her responsibility becomes clearer. She looks across the crowded parking lot toward the emergency entrance. A police car is parked on the curb outside.

Coraline keeps her eyes open now, but her neck seems weak—too weak to hold up her head. She looks directly at Alice and says, "Papa."

Perhaps she is delirious. Hallucinating.

"No," Alice says. "I'm not Papa. I'm not him. I'm Miss Traille. Your friend." She thinks about Herb, about the kind of person he is, why he would do the things he did, why he would keep his own daughter like that, a caged animal in his house.

A minivan pulls into the spot beside them and a woman gets out and takes her son from a booster seat in the middle row.

A booster seat.

Alice laughs to herself. She didn't even thought about a booster seat, this whole time. Some mother she'd be.

The woman carries her son toward the door. He is moaning about something and holding his ear, his limbs wrapped around his mother like a koala to a branch.

Alice leans Coraline's seat back so she can rest her head. She looks at the emergency entrance again. In the back seat, she finds a scrap of paper from a mail advertisement. On the back of it, she writes a note. The note takes her a very long time to write.

When she finishes writing the note, she leans over and kisses Coraline on the cheek.

"It's time for us to go inside now," she tells her. "Time to get you something to drink. Get you cool. And safe. Safe from everyone."

Coraline mumbles something incoherent and puts her fingers in her mouth. The gesture of an infant.

Alice skims over the form on the clipboard the receptionist handed her. It asks for a hundred things she can't provide: allergies, social security number, physician's name, the list goes on.

She leaves the pen where it is—connected to the top of the clipboard by a silver chain—and instead folds up her note and slides it under the form.

The girl's name is Coraline. Her father and I cannot take care of her anymore. Please find someone who can.

Without looking at the clipboard, the receptionist tells her it will be about five minutes.

She knows it will be much longer than that. A whole lifetime longer.

Coraline is sitting in the waiting area by herself. She is slumped over with her head on her knees, staring at the floor.

Alice takes a paper cup from the water dispenser in the corner and brings it to her. She stands above her and scratches her back for a moment, knowing she'll cry if she tries to say much of anything.

"Coraline?"

The girl sits up and looks at Alice—through her, almost.

"Drink this, please."

Coraline drinks it and wipes her mouth.

"I have to go to the bathroom, but I'll be right back," Alice says. "Some nice people are going to come and make sure you're alright in a minute, okay?"

Coraline nods.

"I really do love you," Alice tells her. "That's the truth."

“Yes, I know,” Coraline says.

“Okay then.”

With that, Alice steps away, and when she is sure Coraline isn’t looking, she walks out through the automatic doors, which make a kind of rising and falling sound, like something begun and finished all at once.

*

CHAPTER XIII

The freeway takes her south again. It has always taken her—like something with a will of its own, dragging her, helpless, from one station to the next, from bad to worse, from hopeless to lost, from Alabama to a California that ruined her. Other times, it seems a perplexing wilderness, made for drifting in irresolute circles over long periods of time.

Now, she drives to Sumnerville.

Things will be different when she returns. She doesn't have a job, for one thing. But she also might not have a place to live. Her credit is ruined. Her rent is almost a month late, and this isn't the first time. Herb will be looking for her, if he hasn't been already. He might find her. As long as he never finds Coraline. That's the important thing. But suppose he did find Alice (Sumnerville is a small place), what kinds of horrors could she expect? He'll be prepared this time. Perhaps there is a spot chosen for Alice in the deep end of his swimming pool, and maybe she would deserve that.

She is sick over what she has done. More harm than good, perhaps. But there is hope for Coraline. There has to be.

The road winds back through the forested foothills and lakes and gradually back down to the plain of central California. Alice has managed to work the window down a few more inches, but it's still miserably hot in the car, and humid now, too, since a long bank of low clouds has rolled in from the sea. The air smells like a storm.

It's sad, she thinks, how everything life has begun to afford her in the past year, everything she's attempted, every hope she's kindled, has been a tease in the end. Her ideas about happiness, her marriage, her child, her jobs, Coraline—it's all ended prematurely. And maybe that's not a coincidence. It's possible that she, Alice, has been sabotaging herself all along. It's possible that she was naïve about moving, about Simon. Possible that she never really understood what it meant to break through the *idea* of a person and love the person himself. Possible that she ruined the miracle of her job at Coyote Kids, that she took a good thing, a blessing, and perverted it with her own overbearing sense of tragedy. It's possible that she has ruined Coraline's life, and that the death of her own child, those six months ago, was her own fault. She should have been happier about everything. She should have eaten better. Exercised. Left the house more.

Perhaps God is trying to tell her something, by all of this, and by the deep blue clouds of this storm that doesn't seem to belong on the West Coast. It reminds her of the kinds of storms that used to sweep through Constance—great and furious purging forces, separating the weak from the strong, the stable from the unstable. Families and

businesses and schools that were starting to make progress of one kind or another, snuffed out by rogue bursts of wind and hail. Sometimes people died.

Alice uses her left hand to jiggle the window again. It moves further down this time, several inches. She notices an old mark in the soft crook of her arm, a raised, pink half-moon shape. That one was the car lighter from Simon's truck. Maybe it's time to follow through. The old question resurfaces. *Why live?*

It could be the tortuous drive, could be the heated coffin the Datsun has become, her own remorse, the lowest of low points she now occupies—but Alice suddenly feels the need to vomit. She gulps it down long enough to pull off at an exit and retch into the grass beside the off ramp. She stands up and wipes her mouth on her sleeve.

There is a Shell station at the corner. She will drive down there and buy a drink; that's what she'll do. Maybe sit down for a minute and think about everything. Buy some lunch. Perhaps there is a side road around here. Somewhere secluded where she can get comfortable, at last. A place where no one will find her for a while. She wants to be at rest when it happens. Maybe asleep, even.

Lunch at a gas station sounds disgusting, which almost makes her vomit again.

There are too many choices in the refrigerated section. Colas, juices, ales, sports drinks, smoothies, even milk. After a minute, she finally decides on water and then heads for the aisle with health and hygiene items. There are two different kinds of sleeping pills

to choose from. One called Easy Rest, which promises to be fast-acting. The other, Unisom, is labeled as extra strength. Alice picks up the Unisom. Twenty-Five tablets. Is that enough? Her hand trembles. She puts the package pack down and looks toward the front counter. The clerk is reading a magazine.

Alice scans the rest of the aisle. Lip balm, bandages, condoms . . . her eyes stop on a hook near the top that holds a row of “Early Response” pregnancy tests.

She sees herself puking on in the grass of the off-ramp, remembers feeling sick during the drive last night.

No, it can’t be. A ridiculous thought. So ridiculous she scoffs out loud at the sight of the tests.

But then she thinks of Graham and the night at his house when they came together. Had she been ovulating? That would seem improbable; the doctors told her it would be extremely difficult for her to have children again. Maybe even impossible.. But what part of her life hasn’t been that way?

Her head feels both empty and too heavy at the same time. She doesn’t want this. Not for herself, and not for Graham. She doesn’t want to be afraid again, to bear the weight of another death besides her own.

Then again, there could be hope. She could bear the weight of life. There could be hope for everyone, she supposes.

She takes one of the paper boxes down from the hook and pays for it together with the water. Outside, the clouds finally break open, and it begins to rain. The rain sweeps across the freeway, and the parking lot, and the building, with a sound like an unearthly whisper.

[(END)]

References

Seals and Croft. "Summer Breeze." *Summer Breeze*. Warner Bros. Records, 1972.

MP3.