

Like Kudzu

by

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*Sincerely dedicated to the memory of my grandmother, Lafayette Lawrence,
and to people
for being beautifully human.*

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“...Up telephone poles,
Which rear, half out of leafage
As though they would shriek,
Like things smothered by their own
Green, mindless, unkillable ghosts.
In Georgia, the legend says
That you must close your windows

At night to keep it out of the house.
The glass is tinged with green, even so,

As the tendrils crawl over the fields.
The night the kudzu has
Your pasture, you sleep like the dead.
Silence has grown Oriental
And you cannot step upon ground....”

—from “Kudzu” by James Dickey

Devotion, NC

As all good Southerners know... after humans are long gone, planet Earth will be
overrun...

—Graham Averill, NC

It was his idea to go hunting. Logan had noticed something in Eloise and he thought the air, the woods, the adrenaline might do her good. She was changed, recently. Quieter. She was flinching and shy when he touched her. When they had sex, or even kissed, Ella stared into some ruptured mirror Logan neither saw nor felt. But then, other times, she jumped him and he could barely yank his pants off quickly enough. When they drove to a movie or to dinner in parts of town where people wouldn't recognize them, Eloise was reserved, cold. Logan didn't know how to help her. But to let Ella languish seemed criminal. He suggested the hunting trip.

His uncle Raymond owned a log cabin in the woods by Mitchell River. There was a game land for shooting deer and turkey, nearby, and the river flowed quick and clear, writhing with trout. Cloven hooves flicked quiet across the hard, mountain ground. Logan didn't hunt, himself, but when he was younger Raymond took him a few times. They only once killed anything—a tall, sturdy buck—but Logan thought he understood it then. The antlers were like the rigging of a ship and Logan wanted them on his own head, tines to the heavens and his face golden in the sun. Logan had never been the one to shoot, though. Not a real deer.

He tried to picture Eloise holding a rifle. She had small hands, but strong. Precise, too. Watching her thread a needle was some sort of artwork; she should have

been a painter, or a pianist, maybe. Instead, Eloise was just unhappy. Her hands would fit well around the shaft of a rifle, Logan thought, the metal length dark against her white skin. Those small hands holding a gun. Logan thought it was absurd. Maybe a little sexy, too. But dangerous. And yet somehow it worked.

When he suggested that they go hunting, Eloise got a queer look on her face, wide and calm, as if she'd just woken up. But she hesitated. She said,

“Are you sure you want to?” As if he weren't the one who had suggested it. She said this as she tapped a yellow-painted fingernail on the shotgun Logan had brought out, his father's, to gauge whether Eloise was interested, maybe, that this was something she could want. Her nail clicked on the gun. “You never seemed to like those shows, the ones on Planet Earth where all the predators are killing the prey.”

“Well that's different,” Logan said. “It's natural.”

“I guess so,” Eloise said. She didn't look convinced. “Well, if you're sure then I'm sure.”

“Of course,” Logan said. “I just wanted to be sure that you wanted to.”

“Oh, yeah. Then sure.”

So they decided.

The days lengthened and dimmed and grew cold. Deer season had been on since September, but only now could you use guns. Logan couldn't imagine Eloise stringing a bow, or working a muzzleloader, and he only half-knew himself. Snow was nearby, you could feel it, there was a chill and a wetness, too, that wasn't just cold or rain. Logan knew the mountains would freeze soon, and Devotion, where the cabin stood, was north of here. If they waited much longer they'd be shooting in the snow. That seemed unsafe. He told Ella, if we don't go now we'll never go, almost

hoping, he realized, that she would change her mind. But Eloise just said Okay, sweet thing, what're we waiting for? and kissed him.

The morning they went it was especially cold. Flakes, Logan knew, were hidden in the clouds. The air was clear and hard, but warped, like ice. When he looked at Eloise's face in the passenger seat he swore he could see red, green, violet in her irises, as if her eyes were refracting the light, their bright black breaking up and scattering in the space between them. They drove into the mountains. They wound up and up. Eloise had packed a thermos of coffee. Black. Logan was disappointed, liking a little sugar even if it wasn't masculine, but caffeine was caffeine. He prepared to drink the stuff. When he opened the lunchbox, though, which Ella had also put together, there were a few packets of Domino sugar tucked inside. She said nothing, but in the passenger mirror Logan saw her smile as he emptied one into his mug.

Logan had met Ella when she was still in high school. She worked at the Food Lion in Elkin, her face, like a drowned girl's, one pale glowing oval underneath the fluorescent lights. Before they started dating—and after—Logan would stop by and buy things he didn't need, berries in March, watermelons, which he hated, or singles of coke, just to have her swipe him out.

It was only after he knew Eloise, knew he wanted her despite the age difference, that he noticed her frailty. Or, what seemed to him as such. Eloise's arms looked like chair legs, thin and light and wooden, as if they'd float. The bones between joints ran too long, seemingly stretched and disjointed to outweigh their muscles. Logan used to worry when Ella carried heavy things. He feared she'd hurt herself. When they first started dating, she'd bat his hands away if he tried to help her, growling, Christ Logan, I got it, though not unkindly.

Eloise seemed wrong in the daylight. She woke early, when the mist hovered thick even down the mountain and the birds didn't know to make noise yet, only a rooster here, or there, and it crowed loud, harsh, cruel and then silence, just a blip, a painful blip, and silence. Logan could picture her then: Eloise, black hair and black eyes and pale, as if she'd look the same in a black-and-white or color photograph. And after work when she'd go to Logan's with a bottle of bourbon and a bottle of coke dusk would already be setting, violet and fog-thick, in the valley. Sun gone.

They got to the cabin just before nightfall. The snow still hid. But Logan waited. Eloise brought in the bags, the hunting books, the food, the vital miscellaneous—a knife, Advil, and two orange vests. Logan built a fire and they settled down. They would go to the stand his uncle had set up early the next morning.

Every January, Raymond brought his snowshoes to scout the area. He was particular. Scouting post- is better than pre-season—the deer are sleepy and disbanded by the hunters' coming, the shots and unfamiliar scents, the red, decomposing fall a maelstrom of terror and turned, white tails. When the snow falls the deer stop. They feel an ending. They regather. Then only, would Raymond take the trail. He would scout, record, and come next season, he would be ready. There was error, of course. There is always error in hunting. That is part of the thrill. But the better you get the fewer the misses. The more targets met. Raymond was very good. There were racks on his cabin walls to prove it. Come November, he hunted.

Two weeks earlier, Raymond had set up the deer stand, shot his game, and left directions for his nephew. He left instructions, too, for when to wake up and where never to go. He told them how much coffee to brew. How many cartridges to bring. How long to wait. Where to look. Raymond wrote, in his careful cramped

handwriting, to avoid where other hunters had their stands, or would have them. To steer clear of, too, were the trails frequented by still hunters. These men stalk a deer fifty feet and then pause, scan, and shoot. But, still hunting is dangerous.

As Logan sat with Eloise that night, he flipped through a handbook on hunting. The “Getting Started” section was colorfully illustrated and the book interested him. In the still section, though, the words waxed melodramatic, Logan thought, and he laughed.

“Hey, listen to this,” he told Ella. She looked up from her puzzle. Puzzles obsessed her, lately, especially this thousand-piece one of a tropical island, which Eloise had brought along. She sat at the table, bending over the puzzle in the candlelight. She was holding two reddish-pink pieces in one hand, her drink in the other. Logan had thought of suggesting they hold off, for the first night at least, fearful of hunting hung over, but when Ella pulled the bourbon from her leather knapsack she looked happy, buoyant, and he couldn’t tell her off like that. He read to Eloise now,

““A hunter can become so focused on searching for “what appears to be” that it may cause the mind to create something from nothing. It has been said that this is due to a psychological phenomenon called “premature closure” and can cause a person to see something that does not really exist.””

“Sounds like premature ejaculation, to me,” Ella said. She chuckled—it wasn’t a laugh. “Sometimes a gun isn’t really a gun.” She snapped a puzzle piece into place, a red among other reds, how she told the difference Logan never knew, and said, “There we go. Only one section left.” She pointed to a hole at the top.

Cardboard, which she used to support and transport the pieces, gaped through an area of blue.

“Nice,” Logan said, putting the book down.

“I call it heaven,” Eloise said. He glanced at her. “It’s at the top in the middle of the sky and I can’t see what’s there,” she said. “Seems about right.” She shrugged.

She rotated a blue piece in her fingers which, as always, looked limber and frail at the same time, like balsa wood. Biting her lip, Eloise half-leaned to try the piece on an edge of the empty section, then pulled her hand back.

“No, not tonight,” she said, more to herself than to him, Logan thought.

They went to bed soon after.

At five o’clock they rose. Eloise was curled in a ball next to him, not quite touching his side but within range of his body heat, Logan knew. She got cold easily, being so small. Her hands, especially. They would turn purple and then white. In fact, that morning, her fingers were tucked snugly in her armpits, as if she might freeze to death even in her sleep. He woke her as gently as he could.

By five-thirty they were stalking through the barren December woods to the stand.

When they got to the place it was still half-dark. That was good. The deer, fearful but not nocturnal, like to move along the edges of daylight. Raymond had marked on the map a small clearing. This one seemed right. It was next to a deer trail, which Raymond had scouted last year and had had good luck with two weeks ago. “Might have a bit of trouble with them deer now, though,” he had told Logan. “On account of my being here so recent, but if you all are quiet and wait long enough, you should be all right.”

Spruce greened the forest but oak grew around the clearing. Some sourgum and blackwood, too. These branches, gray and emaciated, reminded Logan of the singed chair legs they'd found digging through rubble when his uncle Jim's barn burned down. He had cried, at first, eight years old and still allowed to. His mother said, "Look sugar, look there," pointing up. "Barn's burnt down, now we can see the moon." Logan looked and there it was, silver and silent as a quarter. He silenced. The moon is truer than most things.

In the clearing, leaves folded under their boots. There was a queer silence to the air. Logan looked at Eloise. She stood, tiny in a dangling flannel shirt and his Carhartt jacket. He guessed she could feel him looking, and she turned, and grinned. She had this sick, lopsided smile, Eloise, like she knew something you didn't. She blew out her lips, like a horse, and shook her hair.

"Where is it?" she said.

Logan was about to ask, Where's what? when he remembered that they had a purpose, that they were looking for something.

"The deer blind. Right."

They looked around, human and directionless. Minutes succumbed. Logan crouched, finally, and saw movement in front of a large oak. He walked forward, excited and anxious: it could be something other than a deer. He saw feet—heavy black boots, walking through the leaves. He almost called out. He stopped and the boots stopped. He understood.

Raymond had forgotten to tell him the stand was the new kind—not an old, wooden one. True, his uncle had said the setup would be on the ground. But Logan had never seen one of these in real life. Just online. In magazines. He had not

imagined a structure so big and unnatural could disappear like this. Four panels of mirrors folded and adjusted like an oriental screen. Ghost blind, it was called. The mirrors angled down, like funhouse mirrors, to kill the glare and reflect the ground around, making a play at a patch of dead, red leaves and buckled sticks.

What a creation. The ideas we have, men, man it gripped Logan. He stared at the mirrors, which showed a silvery inverted nature, like a gutted fish, eye fixed and mouth gaping. There was a feeling, then. Logan couldn't put a name to it, but the blind made him feel strange and sad, as if he had forgotten the face of a family member. Logan walked forward and his body appeared. His boots first, black and heavy as before. Then his jeans to the knee, thigh, waist. He stopped and stared, frowning, his belt buckle smiling a metal smile to itself.

Logan crouched and inspected the blind. Behind him, Eloise stood, hands thrust in the pockets of her jacket. Or rather, Logan could see the bottom of her jeans and her feet, small, slightly pigeon-toed, in the mirror. He just imagined her hands were in her pockets. That was how she always stood—didn't want to get too cold. Around Eloise, leaves littered the ground. They appeared distorted. There was a warped, wet quality to the world in the mirror, like a lake.

Standing, Eloise wondered what kind of man she was in love with and why the world had to amaze him so. She was sure, of course, that he didn't think of the place as amazing. But he lived in awe. She envied him. The deer blind was, to her, a box with mirrored sides. They would hide behind it and, when a deer walked by, they would shoot it and it would die.

That wasn't quite right, though. No, there could not be a they in the shooting. It would have to be him, or her. She would do the kill. Logan would be hurt by it, if

he were the one. He wouldn't understand that they were putting the thing out of its misery. Logan would see the big, round eye and the tawny coat and think the deer was happy, or at least at peace. But life is cruel and to kill a dumb animal who can feel but not understand that truth, cannot act upon it, is not to harm but to help. People, of course, could make their choices. Eloise would not persuade them.

They set up. Eloise unloaded the blankets and the water—it would be a long wait, most likely. She unpacked, too, the thermos of fresh, hot coffee and the guns.

“Shit!”

“What?” Logan turned to her, anxious. “Are you all right?”

“I forgot the vests,” she said. “The orange vests. I completely forgot.” For the first time that day, she looked unsure. “I’m sorry,” she said. She looked like she might cry.

“It’s okay,” Logan said, meaning it. “They’re just a precaution, anyway.” He slung an arm around Ella and pulled her to him, burying her face in his chest. He massaged her hair with a hand and kissed the top of her head.

“No harm done.”

She sagged into him, whispering, “Okay.”

They set up in silence. Eloise kept her head down, wiping at her face. By the time she and Logan settled behind the blind Ella had brightened. She offered to crouch first; there wasn't room for both of them to sit. She smiled at Logan. She was all right.

They sat. They breathed and shifted. Once, after about an hour, Logan rose to a crouch and looked through the slit. Sunrise waited. The first rays had caught in the branches and hung, red and broken. Birds began to cheep, though cautiously, as if

feeling the snow, too, and fearing it. Logan narrowed his eyes for movement.

Nothing. He leaned against the tree and glanced at Eloise.

Logan shifted against the oak. Although the bark, ridged and gray and mottled like scales, hurt his back, Logan knew it was better to lean than to crouch. But Eloise seemed not to notice. She was alert. She sat low on her haunches, small, neat quads bulging in her jeans. Even her elfin-dainty ears seemed perked, like a hunting dog moments from a scent.

“How you doing?” Logan asked. She smiled.

“All right. Could use something warm, though. You?” she said. She laughed quietly. “You’ve got that look on you.”

“What look?”

“The one you where you chew your lip like you could gnaw through your problems. The one you get before you tell me off.” She leaned forward and flicked him in the chest. “Don’t worry. I left the bourbon back at the cabin.”

“I know,” he said. He had checked the bag before they left.

An hour passed. Birds hopped and skittered. Wind gusted through the clearing. But no snow. Not yet. Two squirrels chased each other up the oak’s trunk, tiny brown bodies disappearing into heights of leafless gray. Below, Logan readjusted. His back ached. The bark was insistent and cruel. It ran in ridges, and, turning to look again, he realized the texture was less like scales and more like lines of finger bones, thin and segmented.

Day came, clear and white. The cold abraded Logan’s cheeks. He sagged. The tree trunk hurt him, still, but numbly now, as if he had two backs and only the second one throbbed. Eloise shivered next to him. But she still squatted. Logan had switched

with her, once, but his height made the position awkward, and she offered to switch back almost immediately. He didn't understand her vigor. Normally, she languished. Her unhappiness sapped her energy. Drunk, she rose and bloomed, but only until the tipping point. Then she evaporated, it seemed, and some phantom being overcame Eloise, a snarling, tiny girl that scared Logan.

Eloise's cheeks were red, like ripening apples, to Logan. But to Eloise they hurt. She wanted to be warm and away from here. First, though, she wanted to shoot a deer. She did not believe in quitting. She would leave, eventually, when the time called for it. But never before. She was not a coward. A beetle, which Eloise resisted a hot, sporadic desire to crush, struggled over a dead leaf between her feet. The beetle reminded Eloise of a moment she rarely recalled.

Once, when she was a child, Eloise had gone to New York City. Her cousin Sarah had had two tickets to a Broadway show, a turning-two-digits present from her parents—Sarah's parents were the best in the world, Eloise had thought—and Sarah had chosen her, Eloise, to join. They wore dresses, Sarah blue and Eloise red, and slid earrings through their newly-pierced earlobes. Their seats were far back but the girls didn't care. Magic spun across the stage and wooed them. By the time the curtain fell, both girls swore they would be actresses, stars, even, like these women—tiny, from where they sat—onstage every night. They would receive flowers backstage. They would have admirers. Sarah told Eloise they must both move to New York the second they were old enough to live on their own—fifteen, most likely.

As they walked outside, chaperoned by Sarah's parents who, respectful of the children's fantasy, hovered slightly behind, Sarah shrieked. What? Eloise gasped. Look! Sarah pointed. A bug skittered across the sidewalk. As it flicked into a crack in

the concrete, a streetlight lit it up, and Eloise saw, too. The cockroach was glossy and rigid, huge with exoskeleton. It was a tiny dinosaur. Neither girl mentioned New York City again.

But now, Eloise thought of the vulgarity and tenacity of the thing, a vagrant of basement wet, thriving in the sewers, literally, in shit. She thought that maybe water bugs weren't so dumb after all. They scuttled and buzz-killed but they survived. Ugly and horrible, a cockroach could outlast nuclear winter. But you could crush them, too, in one moment, with a shoe. A shoe! One stomp through easy air.

Eloise looked back at the beetle, which had gotten halfway to the oak tree. Eloise wondered if she could reach. But, noticing her glance, Logan found the beetle and, laughing, eased it toward the tree where the bug began to climb. Logan looked pleased, even a little impressed with the thing, and followed the beetle's upward progress with his eyes. Something inside Eloise broke.

Thinking of Sarah, again, Eloise remembered how she had heard her cousin was pregnant and would probably drop out of Elkin High. But she had those good parents, and Eloise figured they'd look after her. Eloise envied Sarah, in a way. She had life and she had love and what did Eloise have but a warped version of both.

"Ella look," Logan whispered. He held a finger to his lips. Eloise frowned but craned to look.

A deer stood in the center of the clearing. The creature nodded its head, heavy with antlers like ten finger-splayed hands. Though dulled from red by the winter, the deer's fur had a sheen and a softness to it, like velvet or like suede, and Eloise wanted to run her hands over the haunches. Her face felt hot. Wind brushed through the clearing and the deer stiffened, nosing the air. It walked forward. The muscles slid

and bulged beneath the thick fur. Eloise needed to cough but resisted. She choked silently. After a moment Logan said, softly,

“Wow, huh?”

Eloise didn't respond.

They were still.

After several minutes, it seemed to them both, Eloise said,

“Hand me the gun.”

They had had her practice. And she was used to shooting bb's, a skill born of necessity more than interest, growing up among three brothers and a single mother. Still, Logan hesitated. He didn't like the thought of Ella taking aim. He didn't like the idea of the animal falling. He didn't like any of it. He wanted to leave. He wanted to be away from here and never think of death again.

“Logan,” Eloise said. She sounded anxious and focused.

Logan handed her the .22. He'd convinced her to buy it. It kicked less than a shotgun. But you had to shoot at close range. And you had to hit the animal, bigger than turkey, or squirrel, in the head or in the chest. Logan knew Eloise had the finesse, the steadiness. He didn't care. He hated it all.

Logan watched her kneel. Eloise lifted and pulled back the bolt. She slid it forward. She balanced the rifle. She aimed. Her small hands handled the gun as if they were tying shoe laces, deftly, blue nails shimmer and ticking with terrible clarity, and Logan wondered how she didn't shake. He was shaking. Or shivering, maybe.

“Ready.... Set....” Eloise whispered.

The rifle cracked. The deer wavered. It swayed and righted. It hung there, eyes open and narrow jaw slack, antlers cocked, still, as if the buck were listening to the wind. But it was leg-stuck and wrong. Logan swallowed. The deer fell.

“Go.” Eloise said, softly.

Logan stared at her. Eloise looked more alive than he had ever seen her. Hair and eyes blacker, skin paler: she set herself in relief. Eloise knelt, still holding the rifle. She radiated violence, flushed, and looking at her, Logan felt tender-skinned and sick as if he had the flu. He did not know this girl.

Finally, Eloise turned. They locked eyes. She smiled, almost apologetically, and said,

“So that’s that, huh?”

Logan nodded. That was that.

That night, in the cabin, Logan felt as though looking at Eloise their selves skewed and disconnected in space, buoyed apart like magnets. Cold air plated Devotion in a hard, black armor. Snow never fell. Just before bed, Eloise finished her puzzle. Filling in the last blue piece she smiled, slowly, as if satisfied and sad at the same time. She said, not to Logan, he knew, but rather to herself,

“And that’s heaven.”

The next summer, Eloise would drive in Elkin valley. They had stopped, she and Logan. They did not break up; each remained individually intact. They merely stopped looking at one another. Logan stopped calling. Eloise stopped driving, circuitously, past his house on her way home from the Food Lion. She drove the kudzu-lined highway, now.

Sometimes, as Eloise drove, she would allow the vine-green fields, hills, gullies to overwhelm her. She would wonder about Logan and hope he was all right. Then she would simply drive. Eloise would look and enjoy. She would not go home and steal her brother's hunting rifle. She would not write her mother a note, destroy it, rewrite it, and, finally, burn it all again. Eloise would not go to the back woods and, arms askew and awkward, but steady, shoot herself in the head.

She would look at the kudzu.

Kudzu blankets Elkin. The vine is rampant and lush and lends excess to every level of the eye. Up the mountain the air, deep and cold, paralyzes and kills but in the valley kudzu spreads like a beautiful green cancer. People hate the Japanese vine for strangling the native plants, extinguishing growth in its cruel, thick shade. But it lusts bloodily life. Kudzu survives.

If you stand in a quiet field at night, you can hear it growing.

Pecan Pie, Pecan Flowers

To Tom, his wife gave off emotional light, some bioluminescence suggesting she might glow in cold, salty water. Madeline was a chemical. She was a lightning bug.

Her lips were two lines, meant for drinking and speaking, not for sex. Madeline's face was not poetry. But when she looked at him, he felt it: a slight shimmer, alive and quick, the flick of silver when a coin disappears up the sleeve.

When she met Tom Hiatt in college he impressed her with his jazz scat rat-rat-rat talk and his slow laugh. Madeline found herself dating him and marrying him, too, and moving with him to his hometown: Sparta, North Carolina. Madeline taught piano at the public school. She loved the children and the music but she found few friends or allies among her coworkers, whereas Tom was popular in real estate. They moved once, twice, three times. Always upgrading. Madeline began to falter. She fatigued. Her fingers seemed to stiffen. She slept poorly, waking with the sun to stare at the ceiling while Tom snored. Madeline dimmed. By the time the Hiatts moved to River Bend Road, a nicer and quieter part of Sparta, Madeline had weakened, waned and nearly winked out.

It took two weeks for Madeline to notice her neighbors. The Glens lived next door, in a neat yellow porchless house with bright white shutters and a pool. But Madeline's friendliness had faded, and, until today, she hadn't thought of stopping by to introduce herself.

Madeline was outside checking her tulips. Last year, frost had murdered all her bulbs. She couldn't bear another loss. Rounding the house, Madeline heard the windchime shiver of breaking porcelain. She looked around and moved closer to the Glens' open window, feigning interest in the window box and its pale purple crocuses. She heard a man say,

"You all right?"

"I'm fine."

"What happened, Alice?"

"Don't you worry, I got it fine."

"Well, what'd you do?"

"Just dropped a dish, that's all." Madeline heard footsteps, now, sudden and heavy, as though the man were walking across the room. The woman said, "No, no, I got it. I've got it all right."

"Are you—"

"I told you." Sharp. "You just go over there and finish what you're doing, I got this fine."

There was silence. Madeline ran her fingers over the window box. The wood was smooth and gray, with dovetail joints, and the supports were sturdy but slim. The maker had cared about the job he was doing. For some reason, the thought made Madeline want to cry. She heard the man say, softly, right by the window,

“Hands shaking again?”

“Not much.”

“You sure?”

There was silence. Madeline held her breath.

“Well, just a little. But don’t fret about it.”

“I know. I just like to worry about you, that’s all.”

Quietly, Alice: “I know.”

Rustling noises drifted down, like fabric pressing fabric—they must be hugging.

They spoke like they loved each other. This was devotion. A feeling came upon Madeline, as she looked around the bright wet green yard, a daunting, visceral sense that the whole world was too huge and round and smooth to get a handhold anywhere. Madeline found herself peripheral. She floated in space, cold, weightless, alone. The globe spun on its thin vertical axis, too far and too fast to touch. The world she had thought she knew was unrelated and wholly cold to Madeline Hiatt.

Tom was having an affair.

She didn’t know how she knew it but she did.

Careful to be quiet, Madeline moved away from the window. She returned to her house. She went upstairs, crawled into her and Tom’s bed, and cried.

The next day, Madeline drove down the mountain and bought a sugar-free pecan pie—in case the Glens were diabetic—from the Food Lion bakery. She would bring it over as a housewarming gift. She needed to meet them. Checking out, Madeline waited behind a gauntly attractive man. He looked five, ten years her senior. His face was made of cheekbones and shadow, like a marathoner or like a

starvation victim. But it fit him. He didn't look weak. Madeline indulged in a fantasy as she waited.

“Back again?”

Madeline looked up. The cashier had spoken to the man. The girl was very pretty, but she, too, looked malnourished or tired.

“Don't be cruel, Eloise.” The man sighed. “You know I hate watermelons.” He was holding two. The melons bounced and rolled on the conveyor belt. The girl, Eloise, laughed.

“See you tonight, then?”

“You should really get a cell phone. I wouldn't have to buy all this crap.”

“I love watermelons.” Eloise lifted one—Madeline almost called out—the fruit looked too heavy for the girl, whose thin arms surely couldn't hold a paper clip—and placed it on the scale. She tossed the watermelon in a plastic bag and grabbed the second. “Anyway, how could you secretly dote on me if I had a cell phone? You'd have to admit you'd gone out and bought treats just for me.” She scanned a bottle of wine.

“Yes, yes. Very funny,” the man said. He lowered his voice. Madeline could almost feel her ears flex. “If I came in and didn't buy anything, what would your employers think?”

“They'd probably think, That man is much too old for her: good for him!”

The girl had spoken quietly, too, but she burst into a large, heavy laugh. The sound was saturated with bourbon. It caught Madeline by surprise, reminding her acutely of her father, who had died when she was ten. At his funeral, Madeline's mother sobbed over the coffin, which was closed to hide the sallow, yellow face, and

lamented her husband's untimely death by cancer. No one in the community contested it; Norfolk is full of gracious people.

The girl's laughter faded and she said, likely because the man was frowning, "Oh, come on, Logan. I'm just playing. I'll see you tonight, okay?" She added, in a whisper, "Like last night, except you do it to me."

Madeline was suddenly overwhelmed by the noises of people and machines, and the lights, which were bright and high and sterile.

Logan said,

"All right. Yeah, I'll see you tonight." He stared at her for a few seconds, eyes lazy, tongue against his teeth, before grabbing his grocery bag and walking out.

At home, Madeline slid the pie from its foil pan and arranged it in a thick glass dish. She went next door. She was excited, even elated, to meet the Glens. They had become something to her.

Nobody was home. She rung the doorbell once. Twice. Admitting defeat, Madeline placed the pie on the welcome mat, slipped a note under the glass, and went home. She would leave the rest to fate.

Madeline went inside and lay on the living room couch. Her body ached as if she had fallen the day before, although she hadn't. Madeline thought of the girl at the Food Lion. That boozy laugh. Madeline imagined the mean sweet burn of bourbon. She went to the liquor cabinet.

Although she didn't drink, Tom did. Not to excess—one thing Madeline could be grateful for—but he enjoyed a nightcap. When he had friends from work, too—although that happened less frequently now—lying is a precarious game—they liked a gin and tonic, a bourbon sour, a martini. Madeline stared at the bottles. From

somewhere deep, sandy, subterranean rose a memory of her mother and father drinking hot toddies. She remembered steam rising from two white mugs and her mother's harsh voice when Madeline, cold and curious, asked for a sip.

Madeline boiled water and then she sat and drank. She went to the piano. She lifted the polished oak hood. She played. Hours swam by. Madeline leaned into the keys and they supported her like ivory logs on a tossing sea. She played until, glancing down, she noticed blisters on her fingers. Madeline stared at her hands. She found herself laughing. She couldn't stop. She turned on Edith Piaf, who her mother had played when Madeline was a child, so loud the sound pressed against the window panes and threatened to shatter all the glass in the house, Piaf's ravaged voice drowning out the sound of Madeline's father shouting, her mother shrieking back. Now, Madeline played Piaf quietly. Silence backlit her voice. Madeline closed her eyes. The room slipped, turned, but the music steadied her and kept her afloat. She swam in the music. In that moment, Madeline was beautiful.

When Tom walked in, she was sitting at the table, toddies gone and mug washed, reading *Home & Garden*.

"Hey there," Madeline said. Her tongue felt numb and alien in her mouth.

"Hi." Tom walked to the fridge, opened it, looked inside. He shook his head.

"You buy regular coke again?"

"Yeah."

"Remember I told you to start buying diet? I'm watching my weight."

"Sorry. Next time I'll be sure to get diet." She flipped the page. "Why don't you write it on the list. Underline diet, too." She heard the pop and fizz of a can opening. Tom had never been very good at self-control.

“Yeah, I will.”

“Kay. Sounds good.”

Tom walked into the living room and turned on the TV.

When Madeline crawled into bed after two, Tom pretended to be asleep. She turned on her side, curled the blanket between her legs, and waited. Her head spun, a little. She'd made a nightcap. Sleep, dark and sucking, dragged Madeline down just as she wondered what time it was.

When she woke, Tom was gone. Good morning, blue Monday.

Days passed. Madeline waited for word from the Glens. Her insomnia returned. Sleep-tossing. Dream-riddled. She reverted to pills. Ambien forced her under in a furious baptism of cold limbs and blue lips. She awoke in fear. The sheets were twisted with sweat. Tom, facing the wall, snored and coughed and never woke, and Madeline would stare at the eggshell ceiling and count backward from one hundred and twenty. Self-hypnosis, she hoped. And still she woke at four, five, if she was lucky. She considered fixing toddies. But she had to drive to work and she taught children, which made being drunk seem perverse.

One of her piano students at the middle school, Sandra, with a round sweet face and the softest-looking skin, like a peach, who sang beautifully along with her music, asked Madeline if she was all right in their Wednesday lesson. Madeline looked at her reflection in the back of the music stand. She looked the same as always, she thought.

“I'm just fine, Sandra. Sweet of you to ask, though,” Madeline said.

Sandra shot her glances all lesson. As she ushered the girl outside after their half-hour, Madeline couldn't help but say,

“Why do you ask, sugar? If I’m all right, I mean.”

“I don’t know, I guess you don’t actually look different,” Sandra said. “But you seem so sad.”

Madeline smiled and shook her head.

“Nonsense, honey. I’m just tired. Great lesson, okay? I’ll see you in band tomorrow.”

As she shut the door Madeline began to cry. She slid to the floor and sobbed hard and silently, her face contorted. She cried herself into tired stillness. She slumped, chin wet and sticky and stiff, and blankly stared at the music stand and the piano and the flutes winking and shining in the afternoon light.

On Friday, Madeline went outside and found a note from Alice. It was taped to a box of what looked like Mrs. Field’s fudge, and written in a tight, cramped script. Dear Madeline, So sorry it’s taken this long to respond. We forgot. No, just kidding, Raymond and I have had a long week and just haven’t gotten a chance to thank you for the wonderful pie. Your note has been taped to our refrigerator since Sunday. I apologize if you’re not one for fudge, but our daughter, Ada, loves it even though she’s thirty-nine, and Raymond tells me you’re a good deal closer to her age than to ours. Please come by another time, if you get a chance, and we can officially meet. Sincerely, Alice and Raymond Glen. Madeline laughed, reading the note. Somehow though, she couldn’t imagine Alice, with that small soft voice, with handwriting like that. She tried the Glens several times that weekend, but the lights were always off and the windows were shut tight.

The first day of summer recess, Madeline went to the nursery to buy blueberry bushes. She bought mulch, soft and dark and pungent in its white bags, and fertilizer.

She bought a trowel, too, although she already had one. Madeline didn't want any sliver of the past ruining her project.

Later that week Madeline found the Glens home. Alice, however, was not available.

"She's asleep," the man, Raymond, said. He stood in the doorway. "I'm sorry. She's just real tired these days."

"Oh, that's fine." Madeline hovered on the porch. "I just thought I'd try and catch you, introduce myself in person. Madeline Hiatt." She held out her hand.

"Of course." Raymond smiled. "Raymond Glen. Good to finally meet you." He looked at Madeline. "I'm sure Alice will be sorry she missed you."

"Well, I can come back anytime." It was true. Madeline feared what she would do when her blueberries were planted.

"That would be just fine." Raymond gestured to the kitchen. "We have some sweet potato casserole right now, though, real good, if you want some."

"Oh!" Madeline was happy and surprised to be invited in. "I'd love some. Thank you."

Raymond served them both casserole, and they sat and talked. The room was decorated primarily with angels and photographs. Madeline liked that. She felt at home. As she and Raymond talked more, Madeline began to remember how she'd felt in college, luminous, interesting. Raymond attended her words and he watched her face as she spoke. Madeline remembered her father and her piano teacher at Catawba treating her this way, with respect and with interest and she didn't know what, and she unfurled under Raymond's gaze. She seemed to sweep from her fatigue. At one point, Raymond hesitated.

“You know, Alice, she’s real sick.”

“Oh, I’m sorry! The flu? Pneumonia?”

Raymond laughed, sort of.

“No. We talked to some doctors this weekend. They think she’s got Lou Gehrig’s disease.”

Madeline felt her insides weaken. It seemed no one was without sadness.

When she left, though, Raymond seemed more cheerful, and Madeline couldn’t help feeling happy, too.

“I’ll see you later, then!” she called, waving, from the Glens’ brick walk.

“Well sure,” Raymond said. His voice was loud and strong. “I know Alice’d just love to meet you.”

That night Madeline slept deeply. At first she fell into a doze, half awake but dreaming the world around her, hazy objects, moving figures. Tom, kissing her shoulder, Tom saying things, telling her he loved her, Raymond there, hugging her. But then sleep. Morning. Light dripping down the far wall. The shades glowing. The world pink and new and on fire.

But Madeline never met Alice. The sickness progressed quickly, and she was always sleeping when Madeline called. If Madeline was truly honest with herself, she could admit that she feared meeting Alice, in a way. Madeline wanted to retain an ideal of the Glens, and Alice’s kindness and purity was the key to that.

As June bloomed, Madeline and Raymond talked more days than not. They would sit and relax in Madeline’s kitchen or on her porch. When it was sunny and warm, Madeline swam in the Glens’ pool while Raymond lay on a slatted deck chair.

When she tired, or got cold in the water, Madeline would step out and settle next to Ray. They'd talk until Alice woke up from her nap.

Raymond talked about their daughter Ada, who had moved to Winston after college. The only good he could find in Alice's sickness was that he got to see Ada more. His granddaughter Anna, too, who went to college in New York City. She was growing up well. Favored her mom and her grandma. Raymond's nephew, Logan, he hadn't seen in a long time. Used to take him hunting. A quiet boy, who shied away from guns and blood but had a good mind. When Raymond described him in more detail, Madeline was surprised. She'd bet anything that that was the man in the grocery store. She said nothing, though, remembering what Eloise, half his age, had said: "Like last night, except you do it to me."

Normally, now, Madeline slept well, but one night in July, after Tom came home smelling like lavender—Madeline hated lavender, never wore it—she awoke to a room of deep hard blackness. She went downstairs. Appliances glowed and lit her way. Walking past the window, Madeline noticed a light on in the Glens' kitchen. Another neighbor awake. River Bend Road was blue and carless in the moonlight, but inside the houses, if you looked closely, you could catch people moving. The lateness felt conspiratorial—like sleepwalking in the same dream. Madeline crept to the window and pushed the curtain aside. Barely. With the lights off, she would be nothing but texture to anyone next door. But she slunk by instinct. She gazed through the lace.

Raymond's granddaughter, Anna, sat at the kitchen island holding a red mug. Madeline wondered what the girl was thinking. Anna was home from college and, recently, Madeline had seen her moving about the house like a slim shadow, turning

to Alice, who would point from her wheelchair. Alice could no longer amend herself the mistakes that Rosa, their cleaning lady, made. Her granddaughter would nod, turn, and put things in their place.

The hall light went on. Anna started, as did Madeline, her face shrouded by the lace. A door opened and Raymond entered the kitchen. He wore only white briefs. There was so much skin. Muscle lay flush on Raymond's leg bones—there was looseness but muscle, too, that was the thing. His torso looked knotted and twisted and strong, like a tree trunk. Raymond's veins twined his body in thick blue lines. His skin was ashen, and his eyes were red, ringed in broken blood vessels. Anna sat stiffly, her mouth closed. She stared at her grandfather. As Raymond stopped short, the muscles in his legs contorted. He put a hand to the doorframe to steady himself. Raymond said something—Madeline thought she read the words “sorry” and “commode”—and turned back into the bedroom. Anna sat for a moment. She looked stuck. Then she stood and ran the tap and put her mug in the sink. She flipped off the light. Madeline could just make out the girl's silhouette as it disappeared upstairs.

Madeline told no one what she had seen. Of course. But she looked now. She watched how Raymond moved in his clothes. Sometimes, she pictured the muscles pressing against the fabric of his clothes.

Later in July, Madeline was cleaning the backyard birdhouse when Raymond walked out to the pool. That Alice was still alive was a miracle. Raymond said her body was dehydrated and tiny, like a baby born premature. Giving Ray a moment, Madeline continued to dig crushed seed from the creased gray wood. The birdhouse smelled like suet and mold.

Outside it was sunny and claustrophobic with humidity, and, over the pool, the air hovered soft and yellow-white. The water tilted in its rectangle. Walking around the brick, Raymond waved.

“Come on over, young lady.”

“In a minute, sure!” Madeline smiled, still holding the rag.

“All right. I’ll be right here,” Raymond said.

Madeline balled the damp cloth and walked inside. She went upstairs to get her swimsuit. The bedroom burned with midday sun and shadows flickered over the bright white walls, here, there, cast by the linden tree outside. Madeline slipped out of her jeans and ribbed tank-top. She tugged off her socks, unsnapped her bra, shimmied out of her underwear. Madeline found herself waiting a moment, naked, not looking in a mirror but feeling the weight of herself in her body. She considered her center of gravity, the sturdiness of her feet, knees, legs, supporting her. Her stomach was flat as she ran her hands across it. Her arms, her breasts felt light, her whole body smooth and solid and small. She stepped into her one-piece and tugged it on.

Downstairs, Madeline made a mint julep and went outside.

“Hey there,” Madeline said, setting her drink next to Raymond’s chair.

“How you doing this morning?”

“It’s midday, Ray.” Madeline unwrapped the towel from her waist and dropped it on the brick. “And I feel suet-y, if you have to know.” She kicked off her sandals. “Watch out,” she called, and ran along the side of the pool.

She dove, praying hands slicing the water, and her body slipped into the blue. Her feet triggered a crystalline splash. Mist dappled the brick. Madeline kicked beneath the surface. The water chilled her skin and she wanted to gasp, but, soon, her

temperature became the same as the water and Madeline couldn't tell where her skin ended and liquid began. She stayed in awhile. She splashed. Blue tongued the brick. The ripples dissolved and were still.

Raymond watched, entertained by her form moving underwater; or else he closed his eyes and tilted his face to the sun.

Madeline emerged from the pool. She pulled herself up the metal ladder, suit clinging to her hips, the blue fabric shining and wet.

"Whew," she said, walking over to Raymond and grabbing her towel. "I feel way better."

"I'll bet," Raymond said.

She spread the towel over a chair and lay next to him. They slipped in and out of silence.

They got to talking about Madeline's parents. Thinking about it, she realized she'd probably talked more to her dad than her mom in the last few years. Once, Madeline admitted, she'd gone to a psychic, back in college in Salisbury. The woman hadn't been very helpful, all jangling necklaces and beaded curtains.

"But I liked the thought, silly as it was, of him knowing I'd tried to say Hello."

"Oh, sure," Raymond said. "Some people'll say that stuff ain't real. But it is." He spat into a Dixie cup. "Old house we used to live in was haunted. A girl had an accident there, driving home from school. Went right into the ravine by the driveway and died." He sighed, and put the cup on the brick. "When Alice and I lived there, you know, stuff would go missing. The girl liked us though, I reckon. Alice would go look for her little makeup brush, on her dresser table, and it'd be gone. She'd come

downstairs, complaining, and I'd say, That little girl's probably got it. You just go on and wait fifteen, twenty minutes and check again. Sure enough, Alice'd go upstairs, and the brush would be right back where she left it." He shook his head. "Another time, I redid them steps. Used to be big blocks of granite and I wanted cement. So I dug 'em up. You know what I found?"

"No," Madeline said. "What?"

"A girl's gold wristwatch. Figure it must've belonged to her."

"You keep it?"

Raymond laughed.

"Course we kept it. Had it hanging in the sewing room 'til we sold the place. New owners, though, I don't reckon she liked them much. House burnt to the ground a week after they bought it from us."

"No; I don't believe it."

"Sure did," Raymond said.

"That's crazy." Madeline was laughing.

"Well golly. It's true." Raymond laughed, then, too. The sound slid through the air, pale-bellied and poisonous and beautiful: the sound of mirth in the face of loss. It made Madeline's heart hurt.

The laughs died away. Pool noises resumed. Warm, chlorinated water lapped at the plastic. The pecan tree, which shaded the beach chairs, shivered with chiding whispers—shh-shh, shh-shh. Its green flowers hung in heavy dreadlocks. Pecan flowers are wind-pollinated—they need nothing but the weather to survive.

"You think," Madeline didn't look at him as she said it. "You think Alice will. I mean if—"

“When she goes, you mean?”

“Yeah,” Madeline said. “You think she’ll stick around?”

“You know, I don’t know. I been thinking about it, and I bet she’d go on down to Elkin, if she were going to stay at all. She’s wanted to move back down the mountain since the day we left.”

“You love this house, though, don’t you?”

“Oh yeah,” Ray said. “Yeah, I do. But you know, maybe Alice’ll just go straight on up. She loves angels. You’ve seen—house is full of them. Wouldn’t be room for us if I didn’t put my foot down now and then. No, I don’t think she’d miss the chance to finally be with her angels, once and for all.”

Raymond’s voice deepened then, softened, and he coughed. He spat again.

They sat, silent, until the sun reddened and melted and slipped behind the trees. The blue mountains looked full of forest fire. Even the mist.

That night, Anna and Ada stopped by to visit. When they were there Madeline always gave the family space. But she saw their red Toyota in the driveway. Madeline was sitting on the porch, rocking and drinking tea, when she heard a commotion through the Glen’s open window. Madeline felt uncomfortable snooping, now, knowing Ray as she did, but she was weak with curiosity. On the pretense of checking her hydrangeas, large and rife and blue, Madeline got closer to the sound.

Alice was crying. Her voice whined and sputtered from the open window. Little sobs broke up the sound. It just about killed Madeline to hear it. But she was transfixed.

Alice’s voice wailed: “No, it’s strangling me.” Her speech was slurred.

Ada said,

“Mom, you’ve got to eat. Just try it again.”

“I can’t.”

Raymond: “Please, Alice. Listen to her.”

Horrified and guilty, Madeline looked again at the hydrangeas. The flowers were light blue and clustered like little wings. Madeline thought of Alice’s angels.

“We’re not giving you enough to choke you,” Ada was saying.

“No. You can’t make me.”

“Mom.”

“I can’t! I’ll strangle!”

“Mom this isn’t a question of whether you want to or not. You have to.”

“You can’t make me.”

“Mom if you don’t drink this you’re going to die.”

“I want to die!” Alice wailed. Madeline had the horrible knowledge that she shouldn’t be here. Her legs rooted her. “I can’t bear it!” Alice cried. The noise slipped and floated out the window like smoke. “You spoon my food to me. My lips get dry and you wet them with a dropper. I’m like a baby animal, I’m like an orchid, except I’m horrible, and ugly, and you can hardly stand to look at me!”

The hydrangeas were ghostly in the moonlight. Madeline stood and walked inside.

A few minutes later, about to shut the curtains above the sink, Madeline caught a glimpse of the Glens’ kitchen. Ada and Anna were gone, now. Raymond knelt next to Alice’s wheelchair. He had one hand on the kitchen table, holding himself steady. The other held a sippy cup to his wife’s lips. Alice had her head bent as low as she could, and veins shone like thin, blue webbing beneath her skin. The

tendons in her neck bulged as she sucked—Madeline feared they would snap. When Alice swallowed, she closed her eyes as though it hurt her.

Madeline stood in her dark kitchen, unmoving, tears slipping in tiny rivers down her face. Alice would close her eyes, swallow, and open them, gasping and shaking her head as if she could not continue. Raymond would nod and nod, saying “That’s good, that’s good. One more, now. C’mon Myrtle.” Raymond called Alice Myrtle for an old cow they’d had—he’d told Madeline this, last week—and when Alice had been well Raymond would walk into the kitchen after work and say, How you doing, Myrtle? and Alice would moo as loud and long as she could. Raymond would kiss her on the cheek and go hang up his coat. Just like they were rehearsing for a play. Now, in the empty kitchen, Raymond held the cup to his wife’s cracked lips, not smiling, mouthing over and over, “C’mon Myrtle, just one more, now. Just one more.”

He was still holding Alice’s hand when Madeline let the curtains fall across the window.

She woke to the wail of sirens. Blue and red lights cartwheeled over the white walls. It was seven. The sun, what small part slunk in behind the violent fanfare, was cold and yellow and small. Rain hovered. Madeline could feel it. Moisture thickened and weighed the air. Her head throbbed. The sirens screamed and screamed. Red and blue, red and blue, revolving like a ceiling fan, dizzying and inhuman. She got up and went downstairs.

For once, Tom was home. The first Saturday in a month.

“Morning,” he said, looking up. He was drinking coffee and reading the Elkin Tribune. “How you doing?”

“Morning.” Madeline was surprised and off put, both by Tom’s friendliness and by his presence. He said,

“You hear the news?”

“You mean the sirens?”

“I mean our neighbors.”

Madeline felt wide awake.

“What? You mean the Glens? Are they all right?”

“Not really. Ambulance is here.”

“Alice?”

Tom looked up at her.

“Yeah, I guess. You know them? I’ve never met them.”

“Maybe that’s because you’re never here.”

Tom looked taken aback. Madeline was too, honestly. She never spoke back to Tom.

“Well, I mean, I work a lot. Someone’s got to make some money around here.”

“I have the summers off, Tom. That’s how it works. And if we didn’t live in the middle of nowhere maybe I could teach more, or I could get my MFA. I could do something with my life, anyway, instead of waiting around for you.”

Tom said nothing. He just stared at her.

Madeline blushed, and shook her head.

“What happened? What happened to our neighbors, Tom? What about Alice? About Raymond?”

“Why do you care? They’re locals. I thought you were too good for this town.”

“Tom! Just tell me.”

“She’s dead.”

“Alice?” Madeline sat down. Tom started to speak but she held up a hand. She knew Alice was going to die. But it didn’t matter. It was not surprise that hit her but shock. The first depends on timing. The second comes with all terrible things, the deaths that brush against us. Not when, or how. “Oh God.”

Tom waited a moment. He said,

“She was still alive when they called 911. In all the confusion someone hit the smoke alarm. That’s why the fire trucks showed up, too.”

“So there’s a chance she’s still alive, then!”

“No.”

“Why not?”

“The policeman outside told me. I went to see what the hell was going on. Right then they radioed and said she had died in the ambulance, on the way to the hospital. Her husband—Raymond—went in the van with her.”

“God.”

There was nothing else to say. Madeline went upstairs and crawled into bed. She cried quietly. It began to rain. Outside, the wind picked up. Leaves tore off their branches and whirled through the air. They flicked against the bedroom windows. Just as the last car drove away from the Glens’, lightning, eerie and silver, crippled the sky. Thunder boomed. The rumble throbbed under Madeline’s rib cage, pinching

her heart like an arrhythmia. She turned on her other side. Minutes came and went. Finally, automatically, Madeline collected herself and went downstairs.

Tom was still reading. He looked up but didn't speak when Madeline entered. A jagged, distant part of her appreciated his tact. Madeline boiled water. Out of habit, maybe, some muscle memory of months past, she offered Tom tea. Seeming surprised, he accepted. Madeline went to the liquor cabinet. She no longer cared if Tom saw.

"Since when do you drink?" Tom asked, looking up as she came back with the bourbon.

"Since when do you notice what I do?"

"Jesus, Madeline, I'm just asking."

"Since a few months ago." Madeline hesitated, and added, "An interesting few months it's been."

Tom looked at her, long and frowning, as if appraising her. His eyes got lazy, somehow, his tongue thrust against his teeth. He really looked. It made Madeline uncomfortable. Tom stared and stared and stared. Madeline fidgeted. Finally, his face cleared and he said,

"Well, things are going to be not-so-interesting from now on. From yesterday on, actually. Sorry to disappoint."

"Really?"

"Oh, yeah."

Madeline was silent. She could have laughed or cried, it would've been the same. After a moment she said, as if she were someone else,

"Want a toddy? They're good."

Tom hesitated.

“Yeah, all right.” He closed the paper. “Yeah, that’d be good.”

The way he looked at her now, head cocked and eyes alive, reminded Madeline of Raymond. Her heart broke.

For the rest of the morning they sat, read. They talked a little. Tom asked Madeline to go with him to a work party that weekend. She said she’d think about it.

Later, Madeline went outside. She put on rain boots and a coat. She didn’t bother with a hat. She liked her hair wet, like she was swimming. She needed to see the Glens,’ now, to know if it would feel different, to know if it would hurt. She went to the pool. The water was wavy and dark like an ocean. Next to the brick a thicket of trees shielded the Glen’s lawn—Raymond’s lawn—from the neighbors on the other side. Madeline stood, arms wrapped around herself in a hug, while the ash trees rocked and sung in the wind. Their keys—as a child, Madeline had called them helicopters, and she would snatch them to make wishes—kept popping off and spinning into the sky. As Madeline stood, one little whirligig hit her cheek. It stuck to her wet, warm skin. Madeline peeled the key from her face and flicked it away—they claimed if you broke a helicopter you wouldn’t get your wish, but Madeline was no longer seven, and, anyway, she hadn’t made one. Another helicopter adhered to her cheek. Madeline let it alone. Her eyes hurt from the whipping rain.

“I thought I might find you here.”

Madeline turned. Raymond was walking toward her. He looked like death itself. Madeline ran and threw her arms around him. She said Sorry, over and over and over again. As they stood holding each other, Madeline realized that, despite the

hours, days, months they had spent together, they had never hugged. Raymond didn't speak. Maybe he couldn't.

When they broke apart, they both turned and faced the pool. The water bucked and warped. Leaves twirled in the water like seaweed, or like hair. Around Madeline and Raymond spun an agony of careening daylight. The air was cool and wild and warm all at once. Ray coughed. He said,

“I don't think I'll ever be the same, you know.” Madeline understood.

They stayed, then, watching the pool as the hurricane rose and fell. Madeline imagined stripping off her coat and boots and diving in. She would slash through the surface to a white noise of wind and rushing water. Her ears would burn. Her eyes would open. Not now, but sometime.

After awhile, she and Raymond hugged one more time, hard and quick, and walked to their respective homes. That night the wind dashed itself against the glass like a bird, confused and wing-broken. Madeline cried herself to sleep. When she woke, the house was still and bright. Tom lay next to her, asleep. It was almost noon.

Early in the new year, Raymond died. No cancer. Just the body breaking down. Madeline and he had spoken over the months, warmly, always, but neither sought the other's time. Later that year, Madeline divorced Tom. She moved to Chapel Hill to get her Masters. Tom remained in Sparta. They spoke sometimes. Friendly. Madeline thought of children, of a girl, or a boy, it didn't matter so long as she could raise, teach, share a child with the world. In her graduate program she met a man two decades her senior. He found Madeline beautiful when she played piano, when she slept, deeply, when she merely was. He had no children of his own. When,

after promising to love each other in sickness and in health, they had their first child,
Madeline taught her to swim.

Kudzu Jesus

You can't spray Jesus with Roundup.
—Kent Hardison, Kinston, NC

When someone, sick of his mildewed fridge, drove to the dump and saw the bright green kudzu snaking up a telephone pole and along the humming black wires like a body and arms and a head, or like a crucifix, the town went crazy. For awhile, anyway. Strangers came. They stared and they prayed. They paid the little withered old woman who had set up a shack there money for pictures. People flocked, and we couldn't blame them. He was way better than the Virgin Mary in bacon grease. Our icon couldn't be stolen or moved or auctioned off. Kudzu Jesus was ours.

The town relocated the dump to a smaller site. The new location was less convenient, but free of holy icons. My parents, and Eva's, too, called it a craze. They refused to take us. We would've gone ourselves, but neither me nor Eva had been there in a long time and we didn't know the way. So, we never saw him. Interest died down, eventually. The town selectmen evicted the old lady. We stopped wondering. By last July, when we were thirteen, Eva and I had forgotten kudzu Jesus.

We couldn't stand church in the summer. The building, which was small and new and white, we liked. The wooden pews shone with a sweet dullness, and, when we sang hymns, our voices echoed and multiplied in the room. We even liked our new pastor. He was small and white, too, his face like a paper plate. As we sat, rapt

but irreverent, for his first sermon, Eva giggled and whispered that he must be anemic.

The problem was the heat. Our church didn't have stained glass. There was a fundraiser and a large white sign with a thermometer, marking our progress, but only a third was red. The sunlight, unobstructed, blazed through the clear panes and ignited the room. Our bare legs stuck and slid on the wooden pews. Flies buzzed. Once, the pastor had to take a break mid-sermon. He felt faint, he said, looking paler than ever.

One Saturday, when the air clung to the skin, shimmering, like saran wrap, we said enough is enough. We decided to skip service the next day. I told my parents I was with Eva, and she told hers she was with me. We slept, instead, in the horseless stables behind her house.

We bedded in the hayloft. We played cards by flashlight and we draped blankets over our shoulders. My favorite was an old Cherokee blanket, which, Eva said, was from her great grandmother, a full-blood Indian. The loft smelled like hay and dust and mold. It comforted me. We coughed when we laughed. We shifted and gossiped and then, tired and scared of the dark, Eva and I curled into our blankets and nestled together, sharing body heat and the comfort of one another.

We woke at dawn. Roosters crowed. The sound was sharp and pretty and strong, like Eva. We had slept beneath the skylight, glassless and huge, and sunlight doused us. The hay glowed. The whole place felt golden and warm. Dust motes danced. We were in a galaxy of particles and beams and, beyond, blue-white sky. We stirred slowly. I found myself tangled with Eva in a bramble of long, slender limbs. We unraveled. We sat up.

“Happy Sunday,” she said, opening her eyes.

“Happy Sunday,” I said.

We laughed and rubbed sleep from our eyes.

Ten minutes later we descended the ladder. We padded over the hay-strewn wooden floorboards and slipped out the side door. We crossed the fields. We did not speak. Her parents were asleep but we didn’t dare risk it. The heat slept, too. We thanked God, guiltily, for that.

Fields, yellow and wild, surrounded our part of Elkin. We moved through them. The wheat and goldenrod whipped our bare legs and, soon, red lines crisscrossed our thighs. My skin burned. I didn’t mind so much. We walked side by side but Eva led, you could tell, the way two dancers move together while the man dictates the steps. Asters slipped, soft and purple and wet, under my palms. Trees appeared. We slid into the woods. We broke into a run, slinging our arms around yew trees, ricocheting, rocketing into the deep flickering forest cool. Leaves crumpled beneath our bare feet. Eva shouted,

“This is so much better than church!”

I shouted back, breath rattling my ribs,

“I know! I’ll bet pastor Michaels passes out today and service is postponed a whole hour!” Eva laughed, which sounded like coughing, she was breathing hard, too, and I laughed back. We ran on. Shade hung and shifted around us. We blew through.

The forest flung us into bright hot yellow day.

We erupted onto a road and dizzied by the sudden sunlight we stumbled and collapsed. We sat panting. Though I hadn’t been here before, the road felt old. As my

hands spread shapes, like angels, or like turkeys, in the coarse yellow dirt, I imagined feet and wheels and tires packing the dirt down and yellowing it like old paper. But we saw no cars.

We started walking. The dirt cooled our bare feet, which surprised us.

“Isn’t yellow a warm color?” Eva asked. She kicked at the road. “‘Cause this is yellow and it’s cool and I don’t get it.”

I frowned against the sun.

“It’s red and orange and yellow, isn’t it? That’s what fire looks like, anyway.”

“Yeah, it definitely is. Ms. Reynolds taught us, remember?”

Ms. Reynolds was our art teacher. She made us call her Ms. because that was the equivalent of Mr., she said, and when Johnny Mason told her she wasn’t a Mr. or half a Mr., either, she sent him to the principle. We loved Ms. Reynolds.

“Of course I remember. Red and orange and yellow.”

It was strange, then, that the yellow dirt was cool, like the white line on a tar road. We weren’t complaining. Each summer, our soles began smooth and pink and creased, like baby’s skin. But a gravel path winds through my back garden and, come May, we would slip from our sandals, steel ourselves, and walk. The pebbles bit our feet. Our right of passage, Eva said, Wearing shoes in summer is sacrilege. Blisters bloomed on our toes and heels until, warm and wet, they burst. We limped. Calluses formed. Our feet toughened and became thick like leather. But heat could still hurt.

We walked for ages. Then, suddenly, Eva said,

“Train tracks!”

I looked and yes, she was right.

The tracks must have paralleled us for awhile but, here, they crisscrossed the road. An alien, if forced to land, would choose this spot. The trees were small and wild and leafy. They were like little green afros. They smelled different, too. Not wet or dry but quenching and springy, the way I imagined the inside of moss might smell. Flowers, too, burst with purple and yellow. Eva's eyes became two bluebells in this crazy silly world of colored crossroads. I hated my grey eyes. I blinked. I didn't want to stop looking but I hoped the world wasn't looking at me. Eva cocked her head.

"What's up?"

"Nothing," I said. "Let's go."

She laughed,

"Of course," she said.

We took to the tracks. Ahead, the rails wound into the woods like a spine. Eva picked her way around spikes and boards and chunks of iron. She navigated lightly. I hopped onto the left rail and tiptoed, foot and then foot and then foot, like a tightrope walker.

"Where d'you think we're headed?" I asked. I wobbled on the rail but righted.

"Does it matter?" Eva asked. She mimed hopscotch down the center of the tracks.

"No," I said, hurt. "Just curious."

"Curiosity killed the cat, Anna."

"I'm not a cat."

"Maybe you are. Have you tried dying? If you come back you probably are."

I dropped from the rail to the center of the tracks.

“Why d’you have to say things like that, Eva? It’s mean.” I said it without thinking. She stopped and I stopped, too. She turned to face me. Trees swayed and whispered around us. Behind her stretched the line of railroad. The mountains, vague and cold and blue, scarred the skyline. Eva blinked. Tan blue tan. Her eyelashes were so long I could see them from here. They were spider’s legs. I bit my lip.

“Sorry,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I said, quickly. It was okay. I didn’t know why I’d said it. She shrugged and I shrugged back: a shared secret agreement. We walked on.

It got hot. Really hot. Make breakfast on the sidewalk and take a bubble bath in the swimming pool hot. I imagined the church. The air would be thick and mean and sour, now, like turned milk. Choking. Unable to bear pantyhose, my mother would be barelegged. She would sit, ankle over thin ankle, rivers of sweat sliding down her legs and running in the troughs between calf muscle and bone. My father would be in a suit and tie. He does not sweat. He defies nature.

My parents are not so devout, though. My mother cursed, once, when she dropped a plate on the linoleum tile. The pretty clattering tinkle of breaking porcelain was followed by, Fuck. I giggled, but I knew better than to mention it. My father believes in friendships, community, and neighbors who will mow your lawn while you’re away. People who stop going to church enjoy none of that. My parents pretended I should care. I allowed them their silliness, and anyway, Eva and I had fun on Sundays. Now, though, with the heat and the bright sun and the crazy pretty trees, I was glad to be here.

We continued along the tracks. Sweat sewed pearls of itself on our foreheads. Air moved across my face. I blinked. A crow flew toward us, dipping for a moment,

darting, and then erupted to the sky. His black wings caught the light and winked at us.

“Look!” Eva called.

I thought she meant the bird. I said,

“I know, he’s beautiful, isn’t he?”

“What?” Eva glanced back at me. “I’m talking about the old locomotive up there!”

I followed her gesture. Ahead stood an abandoned train. Old and rusted and unmoving, the chain of cars sat, still but suggesting movement like the shed skin of a rattlesnake. We approached. Eva put a hand to the metal and pressed, producing a hollow snap like a plastic bottle blown back into shape, but deeper, louder. Words and letters and pictures in yellow, green, orange paint covered the cars. We walked around the train for a bit. We climbed up, jumped down, ducked between cars. We were in a parade.

“Awesome,” Eva said, grinning.

“Crazy,” I said.

“How old d’you think it is?”

“Older than us, I bet.”

“Bet you’re right,” she said.

We walked on. They say if you follow a river you will always hit a town; we hoped this metal monster would lead us to adventure. We trotted along the train. The undergrowth, which had sprouted wild and bright before, began to thin. The gravel got bigger. In places it showed signs of disturbance. A feeling came upon me, then,

cool and swift and clear. This place felt familiar. The thought didn't sneak up on me. Neither striking nor crushing. It simply wasn't, one moment, and then it was.

"Eva," I said. She turned.

"What's up?"

"Have we?" I coughed, said, "Have we ever been here before?"

"I don't know," she said. We slowed. I looked around again, and the feeling took shape. We struggled over heaps of white rocks, too big for gravel and too small for stones. I knew, then. We had stumbled through this crazy rocky terrain before. I said,

"Isn't this the old dump?"

"You know," Eva squinted. "I think you're right! I think it is."

We emerged in a clearing. Sunlight baked our faces. Abandoned trailers lay on their sides in a white concrete lot. Grass grew into the edges of it, ruining the clean outline. Mounds surrounded us. They were irregular and green. Kudzu. The vine entombed everything, old tires and chair legs and baby dolls. My favorite stuffed animal, too: I would've bet anything he was there. Buried, somewhere. A black bear with black eyes, I had named him Raymond, after my grandfather, who, I hoped, was flattered rather than offended. Raymond was the first thing I ever bought with my own money. Now, I resisted a sudden queer urge to kneel in the kudzu and dig.

"Anna, look," Eva said.

"What?"

"There." Eva pointed.

Power lines hung beyond the concrete. They hummed. Their posts, tall and wooden, were falling. The kudzu lapped at them. One post, though, the vine had

managed to climb. Creepers wound up the wood and spread along the live cables, creating a green trunk and two green arms and, at the top, a green bulge like a head.

“Kudzu Jesus,” Eva said.

“No freaking way,” I said.

“Crazy.”

“Insane.”

We burst into laughter. We stood and stared at kudzu Jesus. I leaned down and rubbed my foot, the sole throbbing from the long stony walk. I craned to look up. Eva shook her head. I said,

“After all this we find it!”

“Aw man, my dad will be so mad.” She grinned. “He says this is the dumbest thing that’s ever happened to our town. The whole obsession.”

“Didn’t he help the selectman’s board kick that old lady out?”

Eva laughed.

“Yeah, he totally did.”

“That woman gave me the creeps.” I stood straight again. We stepped around patches of green, winding toward kudzu Jesus. “Her face was all brown and folded and sagging, and she had those little withered legs.”

Eva made a face.

“Yeah! I always thought she looked like a rotting apple.”

I laughed.

“Totally.”

Closer now, we stopped and stared again at kudzu Jesus. His head was slumped. His arms sagged. He was huge and green and alone. He reminded me of a

sea captain, who, after the mutiny, is lashed to the mast. When the storm comes and huge violent waves wash the crew off deck, the captain drowns, too. But he remains, held aloft, until the ship itself sinks. He gave me the creeps.

“A lot of people used to buy her talk, though,” Eva said.

“You mean that he was a sign from God?”

“Yeah. And that we were blessed.”

She bent down and fingered a thick green leaf.

“My dad said it was crap,” I said.

“Yeah, mine too.”

For a moment the day, dying now, cooler and whiter and softer, hung. We were silent. We were still. You could’ve balanced an egg on the air. I don’t know what made me do it, I swear, whether the crazy queer hilarity of kudzu Jesus got to me, or whether, maybe, I just thought it’d be fun.

I plunged into the kudzu like an ocean, the vine fighting my ankles, tangling and tripping me. I laughed and kicked and struggled forward until I reached the figure. I tore at a chunk of vine wrapping the pole. The stem resisted, but ripped away when I yanked. I ripped more, really trying, now. I tugged, left hand and right hand, and tugged, and more kudzu relinquished its grip on the wood. Eventually, I had stripped all the vegetation I could, balling the mangled vine in my hand and chucking it away like a baseball.

I had paused to breathe, unsure, when I saw the iron staples. I grabbed hold and climbed. The metal rubbed rust into my bare feet. With one hand I clung while, with the other, I ripped and yanked and chucked the leaves into the green sea below. I switched hands and climbed up and up, tearing my way.

At the top, I stopped. The power lines hummed. The breath thumped in my chest and my throat burned. Carefully, now, I peeled away layers of the vine. I was diligent. I avoided the cables. The trunk gone, the arms were rootless and dangling. They fell. The green spun and dwindled and disappeared into an ocean of itself. Finally, I confronted the head. I hesitated. Turning, one arm slung around the pole, fingers looped in a rung, I surveyed the ground.

Hills rolled in every direction. The lot was a wide and white and flat island. Trailers and hunks of iron looked like fallen giants, heaped without plan, remnants of a bulky and graceless world. We were strangers. Only the locomotive belonged. The trees creaked. In the concrete center, Eva was tiny and she was laughing, I thought, but from that far it could've been tears, too. Then I heard giggles, bursting in the still, hot air like bubbles. I waved and she waved back. A breeze lifted her hair into a soft blonde halo.

I looked back at kudzu Jesus. The lopsided green head was all that remained. Adrenaline seeping from my limbs, I realized, maybe, that I'd done something wrong. I bit my lip. I left his head intact and climbed to the ground.

Walking to Eva, I wiped rust off my hands. She gave me a look like, You idiot, but she giggled. We were silent. I stood next to her and both of us faced the post. The wood looked like nothing, now. No more kudzu Jesus. Just a pole and hissing black power lines, the patch of green at the top simply kudzu.

I scanned the green landscape, which was bordered by the white and brown and silver of the railroad, on one side, and by woods on the other. I noticed a shack at the far edge of the lot.

“Eva, look,” I said.

Eva turned and her hair caught the light. She tucked a strand behind her ear.

“I can’t believe it’s still here,” she said. “I thought they would’ve torn it down.”

“Let’s check it out,” I said, as Eva started forward. Chalky dust burrowed between our toes. We stopped, frightened and excited, at the shack’s entrance. Rusting hinges hung askew on the left side and the door was nowhere. The wood walls were yellow and knotted and falling down, from what we saw, but kudzu covered nearly every inch. Vines hung from the roof like tangled green hair.

Eva parted the kudzu and ducked through the open door. I followed. Inside, light fell strangely, the rays angled and multiple and jutting. Shadow collected in the corners like pooling water. We coughed when dust rose and circled our ankles. Webs netted the ceiling. There was one window, but dust clotted the glass and the light tinted everything dull yellow, like an old photograph.

The shack was one room. A rickety chair, the legs thin and white and bowed like bones, stood in the corner. A table sat next to it. Decomposing pieces of paper covered the top. I walked over and picked one up, turning the page, which was brittle and thin and beige like dried skin, over in my hands. It was a photograph, but I wasn’t sure of what. Dust sifted into my nose and throat. I put the photo back.

“Anna, look at this,” Eva said. Her voice, usually strong and rich, rang like aluminum. She traced a finger over a sign, written by hand on whitewashed wood and nailed to the wall. “Watch over us when no one else will,” Eva read. Below the sign hung two photographs, each of a child. The pictures, posed, with a bland blue backdrop, looked like the school photos Eva and I sat for each year. We always frowned or stuck out our tongues twice before the photographer exploded. On the

third try we would sit, hands folded in our laps, and smile primly. You could still tell we were smirking, my mother said. But she always stuck our photos on the fridge. The children in the photographs, though, had red hair and freckles and pinched smiles, as if they'd just sucked something sour. They were clearly twins. Their clothes, although clean, hung from both pairs of bony shoulders. The fabric was faded. Beneath each photo was a name and date. The last name—Randall—seemed familiar. Everything today rustled with the same eerie gray familiarity.

“They’re the old lady’s grandchildren,” Eva said.

“That’s it.” I said. “Randall.”

I walked back to the table and picked up the photo I had seen before. I squinted, holding my breath against the dust. There were three figures. The tallest, and definitely the roundest, stood in the center with her arms around two smaller figures. The little old lady and the twins, I thought. All three smiled, not tightly but wide and sweet and soft like in a fairytale. Behind them, towering and brightly green, stood kudzu Jesus. On the bottom of the photograph someone had scribbled a date—July, several summers past. Underneath, was written, Thank You, Lord for watching over our children.

The shack seemed to shrink, dusty webbed walls pressing on us from all sides. My cheeks heated. I felt guilty and sad.

Eva had turned from the wall and was gazing at the entrance, gnawing her lip. The doorway was a rectangle of landscape. Sky, pale blue and smudged with clouds, seemed to float on the kudzu like an iceberg. I wondered if the sky looked that way to everyone. For a moment, I felt as though my stomach had grown a hole, and acid and

all the stuff in there leaked out, slowly, and I was shrinking like a stuck balloon. Eva looked at me. I expected blue but in here her irises were black.

“I feel,” Eva began. She looked at me and made a face. “I feel kinda bad,” she said.

“Yeah,” I said, squirming. “Me, too.”

We shrugged, again in agreement, and turned to the door.

Car sounds cracked the cool still silence.

I spun toward Eva. She spun toward me. We hesitated.

We lunged through the doorway and scrambled to the train tracks. We waded and kicked through kudzu and struggled over the gravel. Eva tripped and caught herself on her hands and one knee, like a sprinter at the start. I grabbed her arm. We launched forward and ducked behind a freight car. We leaned, panting, against the metal.

“Jesus,” I said to Eva, then frowned awkwardly at the word. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah,” she said. She laughed. “You’re not kidding.”

We peeked. A blue chrome truck pulled into the lot and parked, engine idling. An arm dangled from the driver’s window, and the hand, which was tan and big-knuckled and thick, flopped lazily. Eva and I heaved big sloppy breaths. As we watched, the hand retracted into the car like a turtle’s head and a man jumped out. He slammed the door. Eva and I started off again. We ducked, dodging from car to car.

Boots clapped the concrete and the rhythm accelerated as, I was sure, the man saw ruined kudzu Jesus and hurried toward him. We kept running. Back along the railroad tracks. We stumbled and the rocks cut under our toenails and our toes, tiny-

boned and defenseless, stubbed. We bit our lips against bursts of sharp pain. The gravel avalanched beneath us, behind us. We could no longer tightrope walk or hopscotch. We simply ran. The sound of sliding gravel echoed in the rocky world. But kudzu muffles all sounds. Soon we ran in silence. Our breaths tattooed the ending day, which was warm and golden and slow, rather than steaming. We began to laugh between ragged breaths. We ran on.

We reached the road.

We reached the woods.

We reached the field.

We reached the stable. Heaving and red-faced, we climbed the ladder. We didn't speak. We couldn't. We burrowed into the blankets and the mounds of hay. Even though it was daytime, we couldn't stay awake a moment longer. We curled together. I said,

"I'm sorry."

"We didn't know," Eva said.

The hay jabbed our bare legs. Our skin itched. I shut my eyes.

"She doesn't live there anymore, anyway."

"Yeah," Eva said, sleepy and muffled in the hay. "That's true."

She shrugged against me, bony and small, and I sighed.

Just before sleep, Eva said,

"It's all right, right?"

"Yeah," I said, nestling deeper in the blanket. "We didn't know."

Our parents found us asleep and shivering. Their voices spiraled to the hayloft like smoke and woke us. Night had draped herself over the barn, the house, the fields

and the skylight was a big black square above us. When we opened our eyes we were disoriented and itchy and cold, but we welcomed the familiar sounds and smells. The hay. The smoky staleness of the Cherokee blankets. Eva and I pushed ourselves up, slipped from our blankets, and descended. Both pairs of parents postured starkly and stern like silhouettes, as disobeyed parents do, but, really, they seemed more relieved than mad. We could feel it. They radiated heat and light.

Later, having been chastised and forgiven, Eva and I went to sleep. Separately, now. But we shared the night sky and the crickets and the faint guilt. I knelt and prayed, not knowing what for, exactly, but I held the crazy withered old woman and the shack and the twin redheaded children in my thoughts. I pleaded with God to not let her know what we—I—had done. I wasn't sure I knew what I had done, either, but I felt something: a metallic slither in my guts, like the time I drank moonshine and was too embarrassed to spit it out. I asked God, pretty pretty pretty please, not to hate me.

The next morning, pink light baptized my bedroom. I woke nervous and stayed so all morning, but the sun sank and set and rose again without a word. The mornings kept coming, then, and coming, and nothing happened. Finally, a week passed. No dreadful incriminating knocks on my bedroom door. Eva, too: nothing.

Word spread that kudzu Jesus was gone but no one seemed to care. Some old people tried to raise a witch hunt, my father said, but no one listened. The old woman was nowhere. Rumor circulated, of course, of who had done it, but mostly just who, how, when. Questions of intrigue not accusation. The man at the old dump had seen movement, we heard, but no people. Eva and I were safe.

From the town, anyway.

It began a week-and-a-half later. As I walked down the street, a car drove by. There couldn't have been a puddle anywhere in Elkin, it was warm and sunny and dry out, but, as the car passed, its cruel black tires splashed me terribly. My new shirt and shorts clung. I wiped dirty water from my face, arms, legs and walked stiffly to Eva's.

"Are you sure?" She asked.

"That it's the universe punishing us?"

"Yeah."

"Pretty darn sure."

"Maybe," Eva said. "I don't know, though. It's probably just coincidence."

"Look outside." I pointed to the window where the sun glowed, yellow and huge, like an egg yolk. "Does it look wet out there today?" Eva shook her head. I pointed at myself, then. "Now look at me. I'm completely soaked." For emphasis, and also because I was dripping on the pink carpet, I wrung my shirt out the open window. The water dwindled and disappeared in a thin stream of gray.

"Okay." Eva said. "I see your point." She frowned. "Jeez."

The next day, Eva ducked through a pruning ladder on the sidewalk and tripped over a tree root. We knew that root. It had buckled the concrete in a big gray bulge for years. And yet this time she fell. Eva's left knee oozed red and raw, soaking band-aid after band-aid. She said it throbbed. Cringing, Eva applied a new bandage and gave me a look like, Dear God what have we done? Or maybe it was closer to, We should donate all our money to charity right this second so a meteor doesn't crush us, shouldn't we? After that, we were careful. We opened and held doors for people. We picked up trash. We didn't jaywalk.

The old woman never resurfaced, though, and eventually, the town re-relocated the dump. Everyone laughed that they had moved it in the first place, Just because some invasive aberrant vine looked the tiniest bit like our Lord and Savior, as my mother said. People readjusted quickly. The town is like a rubber band, strong and flexible, snapping into place as soon as the problems and the politics and the crazies disappear. I realized that if they knew it was me who killed kudzu Jesus, the town would thank me. Secretly, maybe. But I didn't want their thanks.

They tore down the shack, too, and threw the rotting wood into the kudzu like bits of wrecked ship into an ocean. Eva and I avoided the dump. When my mom went to toss an old mattress, she invited me for the ride: the breeze and the sunshine and the rush of the car bumping through the yellow and blue fielded countryside. I said No, thank you. But I visited the dump in my mind. The train tracks and the concrete lot and the kudzu. I thought of my bear Raymond and the photographs and the pieces of shack, mine and everyone's trash. The vines of kudzu Jesus' head, now rootless, would wither and relinquish their grip on the wood. The tendrils would twirl and fall, dwindling into the green mass.

Kudzu Jesus was simply kudzu now.

All the People You've Never Met

“Careful, Lee. Don’t lean.” Jason is kneeling in the back of the canoe he shares with his stepson, Lee. The boy is standing in the bow and Jason worries he will fall or capsize them. He says, “Sit down, son.” Lee, who is nine and old enough to assert himself but young enough to respect his stepfather’s command, drops to his knees. He hoists his paddle and plunges it into the water. The wood slices the dark green surface. Jason relaxes.

In the boat ahead, Anna has tensed. She is twenty years old, and in college: she knows that no one will indulge her brooding. But her father has called Lee “son” and the sound wounds her. Lee is his stepson, not his son. Anna is his real daughter. The difference deserves to be acknowledged.

“Just shake it off,” Eva says, looking over her shoulder. She paddles in front while Anna steers in back. Their canoe is bright red and long and built of lacquered wood. Eva is Anna’s best friend. She knows where Anna bruises easily. “It’s only a word,” Eva says. She speaks softly so only Anna can hear. “Like hate. Remember, freshman year, when you told me you hated me and hung up the phone?” She glances ahead for obstacles, tree roots or rocks or sand bars, and turns back to Anna. “And then you called back one minute later and said, when I wouldn’t talk, It’s just a word, Eva, like the way guys say love all the time and sometimes it means something and

sometimes it doesn't. And I said okay, so you don't hate me? And you said, No, I do hate you, right now at least, but I still love you, too."

Anna laughs and Eva raises her eyebrows as if to say, See? It's not so bad. Anna dips her paddle into the water and pulls it toward the boat, muscles twisting and awrith in her forearms. The canoe is tugged to the left. They slide around a cypress stump. Eva turns back to the front. Anna says, more to herself than to Eva,

"I know. You're right." They glide under a canopy of Spanish moss, which dangles like hair from a low branch. Both girls, the same age and the same height, duck. "Pass me a sandwich, will you?"

"Hey, you all!" Beth shouts like a sonic boom from behind. A pretty if sinewy woman, her voice and her breasts are enormous. Anna and Eva have noticed this. "Slow down, will you? We're not all Girl and Eagle Scouts." She and Emma, her daughter, share the last canoe, which is smaller and green. They are lagging. Fifty yards separate their canoe from Jason, who is fifteen behind Anna and Eva. That is a safe distance, and intentional on Jason's part.

"Sorry, babe," Jason shouts back. "Hey, Lee," he says. Lee turns, his face eager and sun burnt and round. "Remember what I showed you, about slowing the canoe down?" Lee nods. "Okay. Let's go." Jason holds his paddle steady and perpendicular to the current, and Lee mimics him on the opposite side. The canoe slows.

"Hey you two," Jason calls to Anna. "Hold up some." Paddle in one hand, he gestures at the banks with the other. "This isn't a race, right? We're on vacation. Enjoy the scenery and the fresh air or something. Soak up some rays."

“What rays, Dad?” Anna asks. She points at the thick green leaves, which canopy the river and filter the light like a sieve sluicing gold. Jason frowns, and shrugs. Guiltily, Anna says, “All right, all right. Sorry.” She stops paddling. “We’ll be good.”

“You’re always good, Anna,” Jason says. He means it. His daughter is the only one here he truly understands. This is why he both forgives and hates her for leaving North Carolina for college and for the summers, too. Jason paddles once, twice, on each side. His canoe swings alongside Anna’s and he grabs the side, locking them stern to stern. The boats buck and wobble.

“Hey,” he says. The boats rebound but Eva, always quick, lunges for the men’s canoe and keeps them together. “I don’t mean to be harsh,” Jason says. “It’s just, when we get to the rapids,” he shrugs at Anna, and looks back to his wife and stepdaughter, who grow larger on the horizon of slow dark water. Both faces—one thin and tanned and creased near the eyes, like leather or like jerky, the other similar in features but opposite in skin and expression—are red and sweaty. “We have to stick together, in the rough sections. Can’t leave anyone behind,” he says. “You understand.”

“Yeah,” Anna says. She takes a deep breath, and smiles. “It’ll be fine, Dad. Okay?”

“Thanks, honey.” Jason is relieved. This is not easy for him.

They paddle on, all three canoes in line, now, though Anna and Eva still lead. The trip was Jason’s idea. A chance for the stepfamily to bond in the sunshine as they slide and sweat down the Lumber River. And nature is neutral territory. Jason married Beth after Anna left for college, two years ago, and Anna barely knows the

kids. In his more honest and introspective moments, Jason admits that he barely knows them, either, or at least Emma. Part of him thinks this may have to do with Beth, but he never pursues these thoughts far enough to do damage. Anna, unsure and uncomfortable about a trip with her stepfamily, three people she necessarily resents despite a faithful attempt to be rational and forgiving, sees nonetheless that it means the world to her father. She agreed, with the caveat that Eva come, too. Jason was secretly relieved. Eva calms Anna. And this way, they would not have to fight over canoes. Six people, three boats. It's perfect.

They break, finally, for dinner and sleep. The canoes, red and green and blue, are lashed to cypress trees whose trunks are white and naked like legs. The current bumps the boats. Thunks echo and multiply and are muffled in the swamp, but, sitting by the fire, Eva and Anna can hear the sound, like boots walking overhead. The girls drink hot chocolate. While Jason and Lee were collecting firewood, Lee stomping and thrashing in the undergrowth like a wounded bear, and Beth was pitching the tents with Emma, who is ten and, incidentally, a decorated Girl Scout, the older girls snuck into the woods and spiked their cups with whiskey. They are warm now, and sip happily, even though the fire spits and gutters in the low wind.

"Jason," Lee says. "When are we going to get to the rapids?" He pokes his marshmallow stick, which Jason found for him and whittled down with his Leatherman, closer to the fire. "I'm sick of this easy water."

"We'll hit not-so-easy water tomorrow," Jason says. "Don't you worry." He sips a beer. "Remember though, no standing."

"I know," Lee says. His marshmallow ignites and inflates rapidly, hissing. He rattles the stick until it goes out.

“Mom, can I have another marshmallow?” Emma asks.

“No Emma.” Beth waves away a mosquito. The bug hums toward Anna, who is sitting on Emma’s other side. “You’ve already had three.”

“I’ve had three, too,” Anna says. She claps her hands and feels a squish. Turning her palm over, Anna flicks the crumpled red mosquito into the darkness. “And Eva’s had four.” She nudges her friend.

“Shut up,” Eva laughs. But she is uncomfortable. Anna says, “Here.” She plucks two marshmallows from the bag, jabs one onto her roasting stick, and hands the other to Emma. “Now we’re all even.”

The little girl hesitates, then takes the marshmallow without looking at her mother. Beth says nothing but slaps at another mosquito. Licking stickiness off his fingers, Lee asks Jason,

“Are there a lot of rapids? Are they fast?”

“No, there are only five or six, I think,” Jason says. He looks at Beth but she has bent to fix her sandal strap. “Not too fast.” Seeing Lee’s fallen face he adds, “Not too slow though, either. Fun!”

Lee cheers. While Beth is looking at Jason, Emma slides the marshmallow onto her stick and turns it over the fire. She usually roasts carefully, but the marshmallow catches like Lee’s and Emma drops the whole stick in the flames. The wood singes and blackens and, by the time they go to bed, is ash like everything else.

There are two tents, pitched side by side on a grassy rise, well above the river. Lee wants to sleep under the stars, he says, although the leaves and branches obscure most sky, but Beth scolds him, reminding them all about snakes.

“Water moccasin bites you, you’re dead, you hear?”

“Don’t overreact, honey,” Jason says. He rolls his eyes and heaves a bucketful of water over the fire. The flames hiss. “They’re not that poisonous.”

“Out here they are.” Beth stands with her arms folded. “How d’you think we’re going to get to first aid so quick?”

She makes a good point. Jason and Beth will share a tent with Lee. The three girls are together.

In the tent, Anna cannot sleep. She can hear through the nylon, which is thin and snaps in the breeze. Water laps at the banks. It sounds like licking. The thunk of the canoes blends with the cicadas’ buzz, like distant lawnmowers, and the throaty burping of frogs injures the night. A bat keens. Whenever Anna’s body tingles and goes soft, as if before sleep, a root pokes her spine and wakes her. She has grown used to the screams of traffic in the city. She sleeps soundly, there. Anna hates her body, for a moment, for betraying her history and her home, but she supposes it happens to all of us. She can readjust, given time.

“Eva,” she whispers. Emma is asleep and curled on Anna’s other side, farthest from the entrance. When the older girls went to pee before bed, they came back to find Emma changed and tucked into her sleeping bag like a pig in a blanket. They murmured Goodnight to her, and to each other, and Emma smiled shyly and said Goodnight, too. That was an hour ago. “Eva.”

Eva turns.

“Can’t sleep?” She asks. She wears her hair in a bumpy yellow topknot and her face, frameless, is white and clean like a piece of paper floating in a pond. She looks awake. “Me neither.”

They stalk down to the water. Eva trains a flashlight on their feet, which, not wanting to tempt the snakes, they have clad in sneakers. They sink on the spongy ground. Stepping from rock to rock, Anna reaches the first canoe, their own, a raw red in the moonlight, and alights in the center.

“Here,” she reaches to Eva for the flashlight and, turning back, checks the canoe. It is snakeless and rocks gently. They lay a sleeping bag in the center and sit, cross-legged, backs against opposite sides and opposite knees touching. Anna can see the river they have not yet paddled. The water twists to the left and narrows, accelerates. Eva, facing back, can see a sand bar lunar and orange under the stars. Both girls smell wisteria. They are happy. The bugs and birds and bats are louder, now, but somehow muted in the confluence, like one massive mural of sound. The girls are comforted. Having sunk with their combined weight the canoe makes them feel as if they are underwater. They are messages in a bottle. They bob. Eva pulls a flask and two singles of coke from her coat pocket.

“Remember how Eloise used to do this?” She asks, unscrewing her coke and taking a sip.

“Yeah,” Anna says, thinking of their friend from high school. Eloise drove a big broken-down truck and drank more than the guys did. Anna watches Eva pour bourbon. “We learned it from her, didn’t we?”

“We kind of learned everything from her,” Eva laughs. She drinks.

Anna looks up. The cypresses jut into the sky like skyscrapers. The stars are many and low-hanging. Anna is thinking of how Eloise would drive them into the woods and they would all get drunk, Eloise most of all, but she never started until

they had parked. Her brother had lost his license and a leg in a drunk driving accident. That's how Eloise got the truck.

"Know what she's up to, now?" Anna asks. "I haven't seen her since we graduated." She asks because while she was away, at college and doing summer research in New York City, Eva was working on the Elkin Downtown Art Project. She redid Main Street and painted murals on municipal buildings. She sent Anna some photos; the paintings are beautiful.

"Yeah," Eva says. "I hear she quit the Food Lion and got a full scholarship to Appalachian." She does not mention that Eloise dated Anna's thirty-six-year-old cousin Logan. They have broken up and Eloise was always older, in her way, and why mention it now that they're reminiscing.

"Shit, that's great." The canoe twists and hits a tree, lightly, like a caress, and the girls readjust their backs. "Sounds like her."

"Yeah," Eva laughs. She pours in more bourbon. "I always envied Eloise, a little. She seemed so effortless. She looked good even when she looked like shit. You know?"

"Heroine chic," Anna says. "That's what we call it at school." Eva laughs. Anna tongues the plastic rim of her bottle, saying, "I think I wanted to be her when I grew up." She laughs, and makes quotation marks with her fingers. "Grew up. Eloise was only three years older than us."

"Yeah," Eva says. "But she seemed older." She turns to the bank. "Wait, do you see that?"

"Yeah." Anna puts a finger to her lips. "Shh."

A small round light bounces down the slope to the river. Footsteps, small and round and light, too, rustle. Emma appears, holding a flashlight and shivering in pink shorts and a pink tank top.

“Emma!” Anna whispers. She looks at Eva, who hides the whiskey, and says, “You okay?”

“I got scared,” Emma says. She stands, slipping in her plastic flip-flops, at the edge of the black water. She rocks slightly. She tries to hold the flashlight steady but the light jumps and scatters in the river like darting fish. “I woke up and y’all were gone. I’m sorry.”

She is embarrassed. Anna and Eva scare her, not because they mean to, Emma knows that, but Anna is supposed to be her big sister. Emma has never had a big sister and she doesn’t know how a little sister acts, what she says or does. She fears if she asks too many questions Anna won’t want her. The girls are both so tall and thin and beautiful, and they move like cats, smooth and independent, stalking from place to place and laughing as if they are the only two people in the world who know the joke. How could Anna ever want Emma, who is chubby by anyone’s definition, though especially her mother’s, and doesn’t know how not to be shy? The thought paralyzes Emma. She stands, flashlight in hand, pale and silent like a doll.

“Hey,” Eva says to Emma. She looks at Anna, as if to say, I’ll start, you jump in. “Emma, would you like us to go back to the tent with you?”

Emma shakes her head.

“I don’t want to bother y’all. I’m sorry. I’ll go on back now.” She turns.

“Hey, wait a second, honey,” Eva says. “You’re not bothering us.”

“You sure?” Emma’s voice is small and tinny. She fingers the ruffled edge of her shirt.

“Very sure.”

“You’re not bothering us at all, Emma,” Anna says. She looks at her stepsister. Freckles confetti Emma’s cheeks and nose, even in the distance and the dark. Emma is chubby and shy and adorable, and Anna wishes she were better with children. She wants to comfort Emma but she fears she’ll overstep her bounds, or under step them, maybe. She is better with people her own age. She has never had a little sister.

“Emma,” Anna says. She stands, bracing against a tree trunk. “Do you want to come sit with us?” Maybe it is a horrible idea, but Eva nods, and Anna adds, “We’re watching the moon and the stars. You can see them better from here.”

Emma hesitates, but doesn’t turn back to the tents. The river tongues the bank.

“And we’re tied real tight,” Anna says. She points to the lashings. “What do you say?”

“Okay.” Emma says quickly. She moves to the water and reaches, awkwardly, to Anna, who steps to one of the rocks between the boat and the land. Anna leans and hoists Emma, whose body is soft and warm and heavy. The little girl clings while she is shifted into the canoe. Steadying herself on a cypress trunk, Emma peers at the dark shuddering river. She looks back at Anna, whose face is pale and round like the moon, and who smiles.

“Good view, right?”

“It’s so pretty.” Emma bites her lip. “Can we lay down?”

They lie on their backs in the center of the canoe, Emma wedged between the older girls. The night, cool and clear, now, makes them grateful for the body heat. Water laps the top of the canoe, which has sunk deeper with three bodies. The sound soothes Anna. She thinks of the white noise machine her mother, Ada, listens to to sleep, which plays ocean waves or tropical birds or crickets flickering in the night. When Anna was little she suffered from night terrors. She would wake the house with her sobbing. Her mother started playing the noise machine, Anna thought, to provide her daughter privacy. The gesture was kind or it was cruel. Maybe it was both. Ada stills plays the machine, though, and Anna is not sure whether this is habit or reminiscence.

“Look,” Eva says. Anna focuses her eyes. The trees and sky lull her. “I think that’s Pegasus.” Eva is pointing through the trees to a square of stars.

“Where?” Emma asks. Anna picks out Pegasus’s head and legs, and wonders where his wings are. She says,

“There’s a square of stars, up to the right. Can you see?”

Emma cannot see, but she says,

“Oh, over there?” She points vaguely.

“Here,” Anna says. She is fairly certain both that Emma is pretending and that, if she were Emma’s age, she would pretend, too. Anna reaches over Emma’s head and drapes her arm around the little girl’s shoulders like a blanket. She scrunches close to Emma so their heads are side by side and takes one of Emma’s hands. Catching on, Emma points a finger at nothing. “The box, which is his body, is....” Anna inscribes a circle with Emma’s finger and jabs the center of it. “There.”

Emma squints. She grins.

“I see it!”

Still pressed close to Emma, Anna releases the girl’s hand and raises her own. She traces two crooked rows of stars jutting from the square. “Those are the legs, see? Upside down?” Emma nods. “And that row right above....” She points. “That’s his neck and head.”

“He looks like he’s moving,” Emma says. The legs are bent and the neck arched as if Pegasus is galloping through the air.

“Yeah,” Anna says. “You’re right.” She has never thought of that before. She and Eva stargazed all the time in high school. They would lie drunk on their backs in the grass, ignoring their families and their problems. Not every time was beautiful but they have grown nostalgic.

The three girls continue to pick out constellations. They point to the brightest stars and hazard guesses at planets, too. Emma knows the Big Dipper, and Anna shows her how to find the Little one from its older brother. Or its older sister, Emma says, and a spark flashes under Anna’s ribs, hot and bright, which she felt most recently when her father said he would not take this trip without her. It is something like pride. Anna is embarrassed and thrilled at the thought that, maybe, she looks to Emma as Eloise once did to her.

“I love the stars,” Emma says. She peers through the cypress branches, which look like celery, but gray, and stares at the stars that aren’t in a constellation. She likes Pegasus and the other pictures but the lonely stars are the most beautiful. They aren’t scared. They wink and shine and she thinks they may be laughing. Emma tries to say this, but somehow it comes out different. “They’re like all the people you’ve never met,” she says.

Anna and Eva suddenly and acutely fall in love with this little girl.

They slip into silence. They lie and murmur and let the water lull them. Sleep steals through the trees and the girls nestle, dreaming of stars. Beyond the sand bar an alligator rests, half-submerged, in the muddy shallows. He grunts. Spikes armor his thick gray back like a mountain range. His inner eyelid, which is filmy and clear, shields his rounded agate eye from the water. The girls will never encounter him. But Emma, when she thinks back to this trip, this night, will feel as if she were protected in a way she cannot name, a defense impossible without lurking danger. The alligator pitches on his belly. The disturbance slides across the water and rocks the canoe, lightly, like a cradle.

The light wakes them. Anna first. She stretches, still sleeping, and is suddenly awake. The cypresses glow. She searches for the sun but the horizon is higher.

“Eva,” she whispers. She shakes her best friend lightly. “Wake up.”

Eva turns to Anna and blinks.

“Shit,” she says.

“I know.”

“We’ve got to get back to the tent.”

“How do we wake Emma up?” Anna fears startling the little girl, who is tucked between them, still, small and soft and bunched like a pink pillow. Red lines from the slats indent Emma’s cheek. Anna puts a hand on her arm. She stirs.

“Hey Emma,” she says. “It’s time to wake up.” Emma scrunches into a tighter ball. Anna adds, “We have to get back to the tent before,” she searches for the word, “the parents, find us in here.” She hates the idea of her father discovering them, with

Emma, in the canoe. She fears he will think her irresponsible. Emma opens her eyes.

“C’mon,” Anna says.

“Is it morning?”

“Kind of.”

Eva laughs softly. Anna adds,

“We’ve got to sneak back in.”

They creep up the slope and duck into the tent. Within minutes all three are asleep. When they wake two hours later, it is to the voices of the others, which infiltrate the tent like heat. The three girls get dressed together, Emma wriggling in her sleeping bag, but not waiting for Anna and Eva to leave, this time. They duck through the flap and into the bright hot morning.

“Rapids today,” Lee says. The family has been paddling for two hours. The sun floats high and yellow on the horizon. The water is warm, which Jason knows, because Lee likes to lean over the canoe and splash water at his stepfather. He is itching to splash Emma, too, but she and Beth hang too far back and Lee won’t dare risk soaking Anna or Eva instead. Jason watches the boy calculate, a childish cost-benefit analysis, and come to his sound conclusion. Lee impresses Jason. The boy is young but bright, or shrewd, maybe, and Jason hopes that someday he will follow in his stepfather’s footsteps and own Jason’s construction company. Now, Lee glances behind him and repeats: “Right, Jason? Rapids today?”

“That’s right,” Jason says. His skin is beginning to burn and the back of his neck is red and taut like a salami. “We should hit them in an hour.”

“All right!” Lee paddles vigorously for a few moments before subsiding into his usual fitful strokes.

“How long is the stretch, Dad?” Anna is conscious of how the word sounds bold and undeniable in her mouth. She glances back at Jason, to see if he notices this, and if he noticed, too, that Lee calls him by his given name. Jason smiles at his daughter, who he is proud of and who he misses dearly. Her face is pale compared to when she was younger, still living in North Carolina, but olive and smooth as always. Jason sees his ex-wife in her face, and he remembers why he married Ada, why he stayed with her through disillusionment and fogs, why he filed for divorce only four years ago. He still loves Ada, a little, the way we all love those we have known intimately but poorly. Like the moon, with its dark side and its day side, so are Ada and Anna. Now, Jason calls to his daughter,

“Half mile, maybe more. You excited?”

“Heck yeah,” Anna says. Jason appreciates her care for language. He has never worried about cursing, much, but Beth is stricter about these things and Lee and Emma are young. Lee is like a sponge. For some things, although he seems impervious to Jason’s caution against leaning. But little boys are little boys. Jason doesn’t worry.

The green boat still lags, but by less, now. Emma is thinking about tonight. She hopes her aunt Gina, who will pick them up in South Carolina, has made her amazing sweet potato pie. There are marshmallows in it. When they stopped for lunch, Emma told Anna about this and Anna said she would plead for her and Emma and Eva to all get two slices rather than one—but only if Beth says Okay. Emma has noticed that Anna is more respectful of Beth today. This makes Emma happy and

confused. She stops paddling to reach for a dangling vine, which is green and knotted like a garland, but her hand is too low.

“Emma, honey, will you please paddle?”

“Sorry, Mom,” Emma says. She dips her paddle into the water. In places, red and blue and yellow paint smudges the rocks like graffiti.

“What are those?” Emma asks, pointing to the colors. Anna turns,

“It’s paint from people’s canoes.” She sees Emma’s face and adds, “It’s pretty, right?”

“Yeah,” Emma says, looking again. She hadn’t thought of it that way. “But is it safe?”

“Sure, sugar,” Beth says. “It’s just a little paint.”

Emma looks unconvinced but continues to paddle.

Beth wishes, in part, that this trip were her and Jason only. She does not say this, of course. She would never. But Lee worries her, always leaning and splashing, and Emma slows them down. Everyone can see that. Anna and Eva keep to themselves, mostly, although when they stopped for lunch today Emma sat next to Anna and they shared the last diet Sprite, which Beth does not understand and feels suddenly and oddly jealous of.

They reach rapids in the late afternoon. Water surges and tumbles. The rocks are a rainbow of paint. There is no time to plan and Anna and Eva go first, excited and alarmed by the writhing beauty of the river. Their boat bobs forward and is suddenly jetting toward a mossy boulder. Anna steers, pulling, prying, and the canoe dips and rears and skirts the rocks. Pride and exhilaration suffuse the girls. They grin into the sunlight. They bask. The red canoe defies the whirlpools. Jason and Lee

come next. They chop through, too. Lee cheers and paddles while Jason guides them to safety. Soon the red and the blue canoe are hovering at the next bend, bumping together, and Eva and Anna and Jason smile and laugh as Lee rehashes the five seconds of furious glory. Only the green canoe is left.

Beth digs into the water. Her arms tighten and pump. Emma is silent. She holds her paddle stiff and perpendicular to the current, fighting the moment when she must touch white water. Feeling the inertia, Beth paddles hard. This makes the boat wobble and skip in little jumps, and they graze a rock. The boat groans. They rebound into another rock. Beth paddles desperately and they shoot forward and avoid a wide green shelf by inches. But the canoe balances. They emerge, banged up but uncapsized. They bob toward the red and blue boats and everyone relaxes.

The canoes traverse five more patches of rapids. Lee cheers and Emma flinches each time wood cracks against rock, but both children begin to adjust, Lee calmer and Emma accepting. The blue canoe goes first, the red second, the green third. Anna wonders why the green canoe is not yellow, since then they would have the primary colors, but paddling pushes these junk thoughts from her mind. Sunlight bakes her face. Anna dips a hand in the water and her skin dries brown and quickly, like clay.

Gliding through the tea-colored water, which is calm now, Lee says,

“Is that it?” He looks at Jason. “What a rip-off.”

“No,” Jason says. He is tired. Steering against Lee’s whirlwind paddling has fatigued him. He wants a sandwich and maybe a beer, but he knows he must wait. He feels firmly man of the family, now. It’s this trip. Everyone fills a role. Looking to Lee, Jason says, “We have at least one patch left.”

“Okay.” Lee is skeptical but he will make his stepfather happy by being hopeful. He shrugs and paddles again.

They soon see Jason was right. The water gains momentum and noise and froth. They round a bend. Sticks lodge and flounder. What were rocks are now boulders. A small waterfall careens and commits itself to the water on the right, while the left is rocky and narrow. Branches overhang the water. Moisture mists the air. Even Lee is impressed.

“All right!” He says. Jason smiles tiredly.

“Here,” he says, turning to the other two canoes. “Why don’t you girls go first.” He nods at Anna and Eva. “Test the water out. Find a good path. Beth and Emma can go and you all can wait on the other side in the calm water, while we come along.”

Emma looks unsure, but Beth says,

“Great. Okay.” She looks at Anna and Eva, grudging but admiring. They are talented canoers and adapt quickly, like two rubber bands, they stretch and hold in all situations. Eva shrugs and looks to Anna, who says,

“Yeah, sure. That sounds good.” She has told herself to be accommodating today. And Jason is right to have Emma go in the middle. This will diminish the cruel bobbing wait of going last. “See you on the other side,” she says, looking at Emma. The girl smiles, slightly, but is silent.

Anna and Eva churn forward. They navigate the white water, pitching and paddling while the rapids try to ruin and flounder them, eddies swarming like hornets. Water splashes their faces. Anna licks water from her lips. They shoot out the other

side. Anna steers the boat into a small inlet on the right, where the river calms, quiets, and Eva grabs a tree branch to anchor. The canoe bobs.

“Good run,” Jason shouts across the spray and rushing water. Anna waves. She yells something he cannot hear. Jason turns to Beth.

“Now you two.” He looks at Emma. “You ready?”

“Of course we are,” Beth says. “Okay, Emma. Let’s go.”

Beth slams her paddle into the water and shoves the canoe forward. Through the misted air like tissue paper and the rushing water, which seems to obstruct vision, too, although she knows it is just an illusion, Anna watches the green canoe. The boat appears to hang. Emma is stiff and small. Behind her Beth is silhouetted, arms arced in a ferocious downward paddle. The rocks are like heads on either side and the water writhes.

The canoe’s nose erupts from the wall of white. Wood bottom smacks water, thickly. Emma is the only thing Anna sees. The little girl is frozen-faced and trembling. She paddles with sporadic jerking jabs, staring at the water, neck stiff, as if beating fire from the hem of her pants. The boat shimmies and nearly capsizes.

“You’ve got it, Emma,” Anna calls, and Eva shouts,

“Smooth sailing from here, honey, just keep paddling.”

Emma blinks and shakes her head. The canoe wobbles dangerously. Anna yells,

“Come on, Emma, I know you can do it!”

And Emma is paddling like her mother, strong and swift and clean. The canoe slides from the froth and bumps into the red canoe and Eva grabs them to dock. The older girls cheer. Beth, too.

“Nice job, Emma honey,” she says. Emma’s face stretches into a smile. The expression feels unfamiliar and wonderful on her face.

“Now for the boys,” Eva says.

Jason calls to Lee, who is excited and focused, to be careful. Lee knows. He is sick of being yelled at and told to not do this and not do that. But he respects his stepfather. He nods. The canoe noses into the eddy. Jason pulls and pries and shifts the canoe like a video game and they dip safely past the biggest rock. They buck through the frothing water to the next set of shelves and boulders.

Emma, who is serene now and sits indifferent in her canoe, notices movement on the other bank. At first she thinks the mist is playing tricks on her, winking and shimmering like stars. She is finding constellations everywhere. But then she sees a long brown body and shifting ripples.

“Alligator!” Emma cries.

“What, where?”

“There,” Emma points.

“No way!” Lee says, shooting to his feet. “Where? I want to see!” He leans to where Emma is pointing. The boat wobbles. Jason shouts,

“Lee, get down.” But Lee is already tipping. His body angles toward the water. “Lee!” Jason and Beth both yell.

“Mom!”

Lee spills from the canoe and drops through the water. His body disappears like a rock. His head bobs—“Mom! Help!”—and goes underwater. Just as Lee’s head breaks the water he sees Jason. He yells his stepfather’s name once, twice, and goes under. “Jason!”

Jason feels pride and then wild fear. All he sees are arms flailing and spray. He flings the canoe sideways. He fears Lee will be bludgeoned by the bow. Jason lunges to the front. He steadies himself and leans over. He reaches toward where Lee went in, trying to see, but the mist and the splashing water blind him. The world swims. His mouth is wet. Adrenaline burns his limbs and his muscles contract. The rushing noise which was overwhelming is suddenly muted to a dull hum. Jason scans.

Anna and Eva yell. Their voices ricochet off the rocks and die in the swampy foliage, and Beth struggles, useless but terrified, rocking the green canoe. She doesn't notice her daughter who, as it happens, is the only person not moving at all.

A queer horror has stolen over Emma. She is looking not at her brother but at the place where she saw movement. A brown log pitches, caught against a rock. The wood is ridged like scales. In the current the log looks alive. Tears leak down Emma's face. Her body dissolves with an embarrassment and guilt she can only remember feeling once before, when she first went to school, and, terrified to raise her hand in class, she peed her pants. She knows these are different things. But the embarrassment is so huge she can barely feel the guilt.

"Lee!" Jason shouts again. The boy erupts from the froth. He clings to a rock. His knuckles are bleeding. Hand-paddling the canoe, Jason reaches into the water and grabs his son's hand. He reels Lee into the boat and the boy flops into the bottom, limp and heaving like a fish.

It is only after everyone has calmed and convened in the bobbing inlet that Jason notices Lee's eyes are unfocused.

"Lee," Jason says now. "Are you all right? Can you say something?"

Lee blinks and coughs. His eyes slide in and out of focus.

“My head hurts.”

“Where, son?” Jason asks. Beth hovers in the next canoe.

“Here.” Lee pushes himself up to sitting, elbows shaking, and turns his head. Congealed blood mats his hair. The gash is raw and red and messy. “See?” Lee slumps against the wooden slats. His eyes close.

“Coffee.” Eva hands her friend a styrofoam cup.

“You are an angel,” Anna says. They sit side by side on the hospital bench. “I mean it. Cherub. Seraphim. You’re it.”

“The coffee isn’t that good.”

“It’s been a long day.”

Eva won’t argue with that. Beth and Emma have gone to the cafeteria to find food for Lee who bounces on the hospital bed and refuses to stop rehashing his adventure, even as the doctors disinfect, stitch and bandage his skull. Jason watches while listening to the blunt-faced nurse explain the recovery process. Lee has a concussion. He is dizzy and his ears ring, he says. They have medicated him for the pain. But he’ll be okay. Jason is relieved and horribly tired. He thanks God for cell phones and the relative development of the lower Lumber River.

In the cafeteria, Emma seems to float over the tile floor. No one cared that there was no alligator. No one noticed. What was embarrassment has become guilt.

Her mother hands her an apple and a water. But seeing Emma’s eyes, which are glassy and huge, Beth says to her daughter,

“And pick out a treat for yourself, okay?”

Emma wanders toward the dessert bar, where, behind glass, there is ice cream and raw cookie dough in little balls and a hundred types of pie. She walks down the line and imagines eating each dessert, but none taste good to her. Her mouth is dry. She is so tired. Anna walks into the cafeteria and makes a beeline for Emma.

“How you doing, Em.” Anna has never called Emma this before, but the word feels accurately affectionate, and she hopes it will soothe rather than jar the little girl.

“I’m okay.” Emma faces the dessert bar again. “My mom said I could get a dessert but they all taste wrong.” Anna cocks her head and Emma says, “I mean, the thought of them isn’t nice. I don’t think I want any.” She turns away.

Anna walks to Emma and, with the pretense of getting a closer look at the lower rack of cakes, kneels next to her.

“It’s not your fault, you know.”

Emma shakes her head.

“It could have happened at any point. He could have seen a bird or a pretty row of colors on the rocks or just gotten excited.” She risks a glance at Emma. The little girl is expressionless but she pays attention. “It was just a bad set of circumstances. Do you realize that? Lee is curious and young, and he isn’t careful. Things just came together. You canoed beautifully, you know.”

“See something you like?” Beth walks toward them. “What about you, Anna?”

Anna stands. She takes Emma’s hand as subtly as she can and gives the soft moist warm palm a squeeze. Thinking of what Emma said at lunch about her aunt’s pie, and knowing that Gina won’t have time to bake now that she’s getting them at the hospital, earlier and farther north, Anna says,

“You know, I was thinking sweet potato pie.”

“I want that,” Emma says. Anna thinks she feels pressure from Emma’s fingers.

“You sure?” Beth asks.

“I’m sure.”

Anna and Emma and Eva sit together on the hospital bench. Eva drinks her coffee while the sisters eat sweet potato pie. Anna gives Eva several forkfuls, too, and all three agree it’s delicious. Beth and Jason sit next to them.

Lee walks into the hallway and everyone stands, except Emma and Anna who have plates on their laps. They wave, mouths full, and Emma wilts slightly, but Anna wraps an arm around her and the little girl takes another tentative bite. Looking at Lee, Jason and Beth hold hands. They share a protective and furious instinct that is, more than anything, the reason they will remain married until Beth dies, of skin cancer, when they are in their sixties, and why Jason will refuse to remarry. They will raise Lee as their child, not a stepson, and Lee will settle easily into the role. Emma will come to love Jason, too, though it will take until her sophomore year of high school. A boy at a party will try to force Emma to have sex and she will hide in the bathroom and call Jason. He will leave work without a word and get in his truck and take her home. He will not yell but rather hug her, wordless and tight, and she will know, suddenly and acutely, that he is her father.

The medication has made Lee loopy and happy, now, and he babbles about the blood and the bandages and being sewn back together while everyone else finishes their food. Finally, they leave the wing.

“I’m tired,” Emma says, scuffing her pink sandals on the tile.

“Here.” Anna reaches to pick Emma up but so does Beth. Anna looks at her stepmother, whose face is thin and tan and wrinkled, and who seems frustrated. Anna drops her arms. “I think your mom’s got it,” she says. She bends and kisses Emma on the cheek. “I’ll carry you next time.”

Emma understands that her sister has done something kind, here, and she loves Anna for this.

That night they reach Elkin. The canoes, red and green and blue, are unloaded and stowed in the garage. The girls go upstairs. They fall asleep immediately, Anna and Emma in one twin, Eva in the other. They fall asleep to different thoughts. But water will wash through all three dreamscapes and somewhere, maybe in Emma’s mind or maybe in Anna’s, an alligator, gray-scaled and oddly beautiful, will slide into the water and swim until they wake.