

# A Partial Life

by

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On a balmy night in June, the mother dreamt that the town of Valencia evaporated in a cloud of pink mist. It began with the bed where she was sleeping, the iron bedposts, the neat duvet cover, the hand-stuffed pillows. The man beside her, faceless, crumpling into salmon-colored particles. From there the pine floor, the sticking door, the pipes and the radiators and the window panes, the new peach-and-cream kitchen linoleum, the toys scattered across the gray pilled living room carpet and the carpet beneath them. Then out into the night. The apple orchards rose to the sky like magnetic dust. The cows in the next field over, the houses, the logging trucks parked dormant in the lots, the white-washed town hall, the elementary school, the pavement flying up off of Main Street like a snow drift kicked by an invisible foot. Everything pink, everything swirling pink mist, and below it the untouched land, the river sheened muddy red by the mist above it, the forest balding umber with logged clearings, the empty dirt fields where the farmers had planted.

The mist swept the mother up, but she did not dissolve. It carried her to the riverbank and laid her down in the mud. Her nightgown was stained a reddish-pink as by watery blood. She took it off. Her babies were gone and her steel-jawed husband. Even the little one growing inside her had gone; her stomach was foreign and flat, like a beached jellyfish. She lay back on the bank with her feet in the water and felt relief.

When she woke in her dark bedroom the sheets were bloody and she was twisted in pain. She roused her husband. He swore and prayed (Fucking Christ, please Jesus) while he carried her to the car. All the way to the hospital she wondered if her

baby would die. She thought about the mist and the riverbank and the relief. Her husband shifted his eyes rapidly between her and the road, yelling,

Hold on. Just hold on.

He was still moving, her baby. She wanted to sleep, her eyes felt heavy as bowling balls, but her husband slapped her when she tried to close them. Hold on.

At the hospital they cut through her abdominal wall and pulled the baby out head-first, a screaming boy. She was asleep for this. They had given her anesthetic and her husband had to wait outside. The baby was red and blue but breathing, and he was handed to someone to be weighed and cleaned. They stitched her up with careful, small, pulling stitches, but the scar would be ugly. She could feel it through her sleep like a slice of white light across her numb brain.

While the mother slept the father smoked a cigarette in the waiting room, as fathers do. The two little girls, deposited by a neighbor who was on her way to work, sat together in a large vinyl chair. The younger was cradled in the elder's arms. The phantom of the third little girl, who would not be born for another four years, huddled between them, anxious not to be left out. The older girl whispered secrets in the younger girl's ear. She hoped that her father might ask her what she was saying, but he didn't.

After some time the father was told that he could go in. A nurse took the little girls to the cafeteria where the older one ate a cheese sandwich and the younger was fed canned peaches. The older girl told the nurse that she was four and very good at climbing trees and that soon she would have a little brother or another little sister to look after. She swung her legs so that her heels hit the bottom of the chair at every

other word. She wanted to see her Mommy, she said to the nurse. Where was her Mommy?

Alice is publishing her book about Mom. I got an advance copy in the mail a few days ago, with a note in her sprawling cursive: *To Memphis, For your reading pleasure. Love Al.* It is a slim, bendable paperback. The cover is typical Alice, a black-and-white photo of Mom sitting on the porch of the old Valencia house with her bare arms wrapped around her knees. Her hair is cut short, tucked behind her ears, and she frowns at the camera. The image has a Depression-era sadness—that's why Alice chose it—but I know it was taken in the fall of 1968, after I was born but before Alice and Fitz and Chris came along. I know this because I sent Alice the photo four months ago when we found out Mom had died. The date is written in pencil on the back along with her name.

Alice likes her grief romantic, sepia-toned, past. Present hurt—real hurt—she doesn't touch at all. After Mom left Alice didn't talk about her for twenty years until the day she announced she was going to write a biography. Then Mom was in all of her emails, all of her phone calls. What did we remember? What did we think of her?

How much did we know about the friend who died? Did we have any ideas about where she might have gone? I didn't want to have those conversations when Mom left, and I tried to make it clear that I don't want to have them now. When that didn't work I just stopped responding.

After I got the mail I went up the steps and into the house, the house in Portland where the four of us had lived with Dad, the house I moved into when Dad got stomach cancer and never left again. I threw the book on top of the precarious stack of bills on the kitchen counter. Alice may want to share Mom with the world, but no fucking way is she going to share her with me.

I always come back to the same day with Mom. It is November, probably 1976 or 1977, close to Thanksgiving. I'm nine or ten. I am home sick because I hate school and I love the reruns of Perry Mason that we watch on the little black-and-white TV in the corner of the living room. Our house is west coast old—my great-grandfather Lionel built it in the beginning of the century, back when pioneering young men still thought west was the right way to go. On the flat prairie land they had visions of snowy mountains and rigid pines, elements they could hurl their ambition against and emerge victorious, or not. In their minds they were conquerors. His initials are carved into the front doorframe: LWF. Lionel William Fitzhugh, product of Omaha milliners who struck west to plant apple orchards in the shadow of forested hills. The wood floors are hand-sanded and uneven. My great-grandfather's trees stretch thirty acres around the house.

Mom is folding laundry on a table behind the couch—I remember her

domestic, although she wasn't. She stayed in bed late most days reading with the big white pillows swollen around her head. My dad packed all our lunches for school before he went to work and gave us baths in the evenings. But on this day Mom is folding laundry, and I am watching Perry flirt with Della Street and trying to wish myself a high enough temperature to stay home again tomorrow.

Chris (who we still called Teeny) is playing with my old Barbie dolls on the knotted red rug by the fireplace. Alice and Fitz are at school like I should be—they are a year apart and inseparable. I always felt this was somehow wrong because Fitz and I are so similar: left-handed, dark-haired, introverted. Alice and Chris have our father's looks, an Anglo freckled beigeness that reads as open or honest. But Alice was radiant and bubbly, and Fitz always admired in others those qualities he couldn't find in himself. Maybe we both did. He translated his desire into a studied imitation of Alice, her mannerisms, her speech, which lasted until sixth grade punched it out of him. Then he became more like me.

Mom comes around the couch to turn off the TV when Perry is at the height of his cross-examination. ("And wasn't it you, Mr. Shaw, who parked the car in front of the victim's house that night?") I start to complain and she glances at me with nonchalant indifference. This passive face, this non-caring, is more terrible to me than any threat of violence. I shut up immediately. Mom nods and steps around Chris, who is gurgling and chewing on Barbie's leg, and sits on the couch beside me and begins to stroke my hair. Her nails are long and unpainted, beautifully shaped. They scrape dryly against my scalp, producing pockets of tingling in my neck and arms. "How are you feeling, Memphis?" she asks. She knows that I'm not sick; I am aware of this, but

I give a small cough. It hangs in the air too loudly, like the car engine turning over on a January morning. “I’m ok.” She tucks my hair behind my ear. “Ok enough to go for a little drive?” I am curious, and wary. If I accept, she will have a reason to send me to school tomorrow. Still, she rarely takes me anywhere with her, not even to the grocery store. If I answer no, she will go back to her laundry, and I will pretend to nap. I shrug. “I think so.” I make the words come out weak and reluctant. I don’t want to concede my sickness entirely.

We take the mint green Chevy flatbed that Dad uses for apple harvest in the fall. The season is over now and the branches are bulging and gnarled, spider veins against the gray sky. The rain has turned the fallen leaves to a spongy pulp that covers the grass and clumps by the side of the driveway. Chris sits in her car seat between us and wraps her hands around her bootie-covered toes. Some days she chatters but today she is quiet.

Mom taps her hand on the wheel while she drives. She is wearing jeans and one of Dad’s big flannel shirts. She doesn’t speak to me and I am torn between wanting to talk with her and maintaining my illness. I lean my head against the window, try to look resigned, and cough weakly every few minutes. When we get to the highway she says, “It’s a bit of a drive.”

We drive for an hour, past cabbage fields and into the forest with the Douglas firs and the low green shrubs. The trees lean over the road, dark green with moss. The smell of wet fills up the car. Mom begins to talk.

“I used to come here every year when I was a kid. Always on Thanksgiving. Dad would take me, and maybe my friend Teeny, and Mother would stay at home and

cook all day. She liked cooking by herself, she always said I got in her way, which I guess I did. When I was really young my dad came up here by himself, and I remember missing him all day. Mother told me he was off fishing, and so Teeny and I would go down to the creek behind the house and pretend we were fishing too. We tied rhododendron leaves to pieces of thread and called those fish. And then when I was six or seven Dad woke me up early and told me to get dressed and that I was coming with him. That year Teeny didn't come, it was just me and Dad. And we drove right up this road, this same way. I don't remember what we talked about. He has big hands, your Grandpa. They looked so big on the stick shift, I remember wondering how I could ever drive a truck, being so small. But I guess here I am."

She laughs a little. I ask her, "Are we going fishing?" and she says, "In a way I guess." And I say, "What do you mean, Mommy?" and she says, "Baby, just wait. I want it to be a surprise." I stop asking.

Chris starts to cry so I unhook her from her seat and bring her onto my lap and bounce her, and whisper to her, and cheer her up with kisses. Mom pulls on to a little road off the highway. "Almost there!" she says. She is cheerful, strangely so, and her cheeks are red. I hug Chris close to me and tickle her little fat feet.

We turn into a big gravel parking lot with a sign that says "Small Creek Spawning Grounds." Beyond the sign is a big stream with a wooden footbridge over it. Mom gets out of the car and breathes in the wet air. I strap Chris back in her car seat and follow Mom out. We go to stand on the footbridge and look down at the stream, sluggish and slow. Lying everywhere in the bed are salmon, two and three feet long, pushed forward and back again by the vague current. Their skin is coming

off of them in long strips. Some of them are dead. Some of them still struggle to move. The dark water makes their bodies look glazed and hard.

Mom breathes out. “Aren’t they beautiful?”

This alarms me. Cough forgotten, I yell, “But Mom, they’re dying!” She nods. “Of course, baby. They’ve come home to die. They lived long lives and now they’re tired. They want to rest. It’s the beautiful thing about nature, the way everything happens in its time.” She rests her elbows on the guardrail and puts her chin in the V of her hands. “And don’t they look noble?”

I look at the salmon. I don’t think they look noble. I think they look desperate, and dead. I look at my mother: luminous, beautiful, with a sweet smile I have never seen before. The smile outweighs my horror. I will come here every year with her, to see the salmon run and that smile, I decide. But we don’t go back.

## *Abigail*

Rebecca Fitzhugh was born February 3, 1945 in Valencia, a small logging town nestled in Oregon's dreary Coast Range. Her birth came ten months after her father, William Fitzhugh, had come home wounded from Europe and just two months after he had been sent, recovered, to the Pacific. Rebecca's mother, Abigail Fitzhugh, described the birth in a letter sent to her husband dated February 5:

*My darling Bill,*

*We have a beautiful little girl! She weighs 7 pounds and already I can see you in her dark hair and wise eyes. I named her Rebecca as you wanted, and Aurelia as I wanted—so you see, we have a compromise. I miss you as I imagine a sailor might miss the land when he is too far out to see it any longer—you are my everything, but sometimes the memory of your touch is dreamlike. But now I have my Rebecca Aurelia to prove that you are real. When she is stronger and I am on my feet again (they have kept me in the hospital, but don't worry, I am fine) we will drive out to our beach, our Little Apple, and I will point to you across the ocean. Your mother continues well...*

Mrs. Fitzhugh neglected to mention the trauma sustained by her uterus that meant she would never have another child. Like many women in her position, she had developed a strong belief that the only way to see her husband again was to create a perfect home for him to return to.

Bill and Abigail had been a mismatched pair from the beginning. He was a farmer's son, the inheritor of a thirty-acre apple orchard in an unknown town; she was

the cosmopolitan daughter of an English professor at Oregon State College (later Oregon State University) in Corvallis. They met in 1937, during Bill's junior year at Oregon State, at a mixer hosted by Bill's fraternity. He was twenty-one, she seventeen. Abby was charmed by Bill's quiet attentions, and they dated steadily through that spring. He visited her in Corvallis several times during the long summer between his junior and senior years. A leisurely courtship seemed assured, with a proposal upon Bill's graduation. Then, in October, Bill's father died unexpectedly of a heart attack. Bill returned home immediately, leaving Abigail behind. Three weeks after his father's death, he dropped out of the college to take over the orchard.

Bill tried to break things off with Abby, feeling unworthy of her affection and unwilling to ask her to leave her home behind. *You know I love you darling*, he wrote, *But there's no use for it. You must marry a College Man and move up, like you want to. Valencia's no place for you.* But Abby refused to be put off. *I love you and that's it*, she responded. *If you ask me I'll come.* Bill went to Corvallis and proposed the next week. They were married in the college chapel on December 12, 1938, in front of family and friends. After a two-week honeymoon at Manzanita, on the Oregon Coast, Abby and Bill came home to Valencia.

The first year of their marriage was a difficult one. Abby moved into the Fitzhugh family home where Bill's mother and four younger siblings still lived. They shared Bill's cramped childhood bedroom. During the winter, when the apple trees were bare, Bill drove logging trucks to make extra money. He was out of the house by five every morning and didn't come home until after dark. Abigail spent her days in the company of the older Mrs. Fitzhugh, who she disliked intensely. She missed her

family, friends, and the lively social life around the college. Although she joined the Valencia Women's Club at her husband's urging, she did not make friends easily, and gained a reputation for snobbishness.

As time passed, Abigail tried to adjust to her new life. In August she and Bill moved into a small cabin he had built on the other side of the property, away from the family. They settled into a routine of winters and summers, working together from May until November and apart from December until April. Abigail's letters home grew sunnier. Elsewhere war broke out, but in Valencia things continued much the same. Business at the mill was slow but steady. The letters began to mention plans for children. Bill and Abigail expanded their cabin together, fitting it with an electric stove and lighting.

In December 1941 Pearl Harbor was bombed, and the world changed.

The newspapers were full of the war. A January headline of the *Valencia Courant* proclaimed BRAVE MEN CALLED TO SERVE THEIR COUNTRY IN EUROPE. Lumber mill workers left for the steel mill in St. Helens to produce long strips of sheet metal that were bent into Jeep frames. In March 1942, along with thirty other young Valencia men, Bill enlisted in the army. He left for basic training in early April. For the next two years Abigail and Mrs. Fitzhugh managed the orchard together. Times passed slowly. Abigail knit socks and sweaters for the men overseas along with the other members of the Valencia Women's Club. She and her mother-in-law worked in the orchard all summer and budgeted and borrowed in the winter. When Bill came home with a shattered shin in 1944, he found his wife, ever the outsider, a firm member of the community.

Bill was on leave for seven months while he recovered. Unsure as to when he would be shipping out again, and whether he would return, the couple made procreation their first concern. Within a month, Abigail was pregnant. While his bones healed, her body swelled. In early December, Bill's orders came in. Abigail drove him to the train station in Portland, struggling to manage the wheel around her pregnant belly. Rebecca was born two months later.

After the birth, Abigail remained in the hospital for seven weeks. The elder Mrs. Fitzhugh visited weekly, but Abigail's most faithful visitor was Mrs. Eleanor Chalke. Mrs. Chalke was a fellow member of the Valencia Women's Club and a noted neighborhood philanthropist. At the time of Bill's redeployment, Eleanor's husband Leighton had been in a POW camp in the Philippines for eleven months. Unable to sleep, Eleanor began spending her nights baking. She wrote to her sister in October 1944, "That flour smell soothes my nerves—in the kitchen I could almost pretend I'm asleep and dreaming." When her pantry was full, Mrs. Chalke distributed the products of her efforts among the war widows and attendant wives of Valencia. She had two sons, Ben and Lee Jr., who dutifully sold her cookies to their classmates after school, but her sixteen-month-old daughter Christina was her main joy. Eleanor dressed her daughter daily in eyelet lace and ribbons and brought her along on all of her visits. The grieving women cooed appropriately, but many felt that Mrs. Chalke was flaunting her good fortune. She had three healthy kids, and a living husband who might well be exchanged for some Jap or another and sent home. What was a batch of maple-nut cookies (superb as they might be) to a live man?

Abigail was probably aware of this general sentiment, but she appreciated

Eleanor's visits, and the two women remained close friends until Abigail's death. A member of the hospital staff recalls seeing them often huddled on the bed, laughing, each with her daughter in her arms.

Eleanor stopped by the hospital on Abigail's final day before release. She brought an enormous cake iced with the words *Congratulations Abby and Little Becky!* One of the hospital staff photographed Mrs. Fitzhugh holding Rebecca with the cake on the table beside her. Mrs. Fitzhugh appears slim and dark, with a concavity of the chest and stomach that does not suggest a woman who has just given birth. Her eyes are squinted and she is smiling at the camera, while Rebecca stretches her arms toward someone just out of sight.

*September 12, 1988*

*Bad day today. Don't know how to write about it. Don't know if I want to.*

*I've been thinking about Mom. Or I was thinking about Mom this afternoon when I got home. Dad was sitting at the kitchen table, looking at paint samples. I came in and I know I looked awful, damp from the rain and fucking miserable, and he puts on his goofiest smile and says, "How was your day, Fitz?" Like willing me to say fine and go upstairs so he doesn't have to deal. And a part of me just wants to say, "It was fucking shit, Dad. Like every day I have to wake up and drag my ass to school and listen to punky assholes call me faggot while the fucking teacher looks uncomfortable and pretends not to hear. How was yours?" But of course I don't...I say "Fine" like he wants me to and walk through.*

*And I guess I was just thinking about Mom and would things be different? Like if she were here? Would she follow me upstairs and try to talk to me, or would she sit at the kitchen table with Dad and look at her nails while I walk by? Would she get it? Would I be able to tell her? The truth is I hardly remember her. Just little things, standing at the bus stop on my first day of first grade. A vague presence, a voice from upstairs or from the kitchen. Always in the next room.*

*Memphis remembers her best, but even when we were kids she had this enforced silence policy around Mom. Any time anyone brought her up she would walk out of the room, or pretend not to hear. It's fucked up. And since she moved to San Francisco, or before really, when she left for college, we don't talk. I see her at Christmas and it's like she's a stranger. And Alice doesn't remember Mom any better than I do, and Chris doesn't at all. So she's this big mystery. What would she think of*

*her son? I don't know.*

*One good thing. Met a kid today, someone actually cool. His name is Rob. It was after everything in class and I was out behind the science building where the stoners hang out. I was punching the wall which is good for times like this. It makes my knuckles bleed and burn but it's a good kind of burn. It reminds me that I'm real. I wasn't crying but I was making quiet yelling sounds and this kid comes up behind me without me hearing. He says, "You ok, man?" And I don't know what to say so I just say the truth which is "Not really." And he says, "Yeah." Then he pulls out this joint and says his name is Rob and would I like to get stoned? And we just sit and smoke together and I start to feel fuzzy and good. He doesn't ask me any questions like What's wrong with me and instead we just talk. He moved down here from Seattle a couple weeks ago with his mom and he doesn't know a lot of people. He likes the Talking Heads and the Beastie Boys. He doesn't think it's weird that I bleach my hair or have an earring. He made me feel actually ok for the first time in awhile. That ok feeling was gone by the time I got home though. I wish I wasn't so fucked. I wish I could just be ok.*

## *Lee*

In the fall of 1951, six-year-old Rebecca entered first grade at the local elementary school. Christina Chalke was then in second grade, and the two of them rode the bus together every morning. Mrs. Fitzhugh's undiagnosed bipolar disorder was beginning to manifest itself more strongly, sending her through phases of manic joy and extreme depression. During these times Rebecca would spend many afternoons at the Chalkes' house, waiting until her father could retrieve her on his way home.

Rebecca's teachers describe her as quiet, almost painfully shy, but a focused learner and a quick reader. Christina, on the other hand, was loud, disruptive, and constantly being disciplined for talking back to her teachers. Punishment ranged from a smack on the wrist with a ruler to a paddling in front of the class. Once Christina was paddled so heavily that she could not walk the next day. She had pinched another girl in her class for "telling a lie" about Christina's father. Christina's mother was outraged, writing in a letter to her sister, *I cannot bring myself to believe what they've done to little Teeny. Some discipline is needed, sure, but to beat a girl so hard she can't stand, just for one small pinch—which I am certain was provoked—is absurd.* She attempted to bring up the matter in a meeting of the Valencia District PTA, but was overruled. Christina returned to school after a day of bed rest, and paddling remained a common practice in Oregon until the late 1970s.

Christina's classmate may very well have told a lie about Mr. Chalke, but by the spring of 1952 his behavior had become increasingly erratic and members of the community began to feel concerned. After being released from the camp where he

was held prisoner for eighteen months, Leighton Chalke (Lee, to his friends) returned to Valencia and resumed his job as a floor manager at the sawmill. He was more withdrawn than he had been before the war, but given his experiences, no one was surprised. He began to drink more heavily. His wife reported to her sister that he shook and screamed during the night. Twice he had been found in the sawmill by the early shift with no memory of how he got there. On March 23, 1952, he was arrested outside a bar in St. Helens for “public lewdness and indecent exposure.” According to the co-worker he was with, Lee had removed his penis from his pants and pretended to machine gun the other patrons with it. The arresting officer reported afterwards that Chalke experienced a fit of hysterical laughter that did not stop for three hours, and he eventually had to be sedated. Still, he managed to go to work most days, and his wife made great efforts to keep him calm at home. Rebecca’s visits to the house ceased, while Christina spent more and more time with the Fitzhughs. Mrs. Fitzhugh, by comparison, seemed very reasonable.

August 9, 1952 marked a turning point. Eleanor was scheduled for a small surgery, one that would require her to stay overnight in Portland. She had arranged sleepovers for her two boys, but nothing for Christina—Rebecca and her family had driven to Corvallis to visit relatives and none of the other second grade mothers were willing to take Christina, even for a night. Somewhat reluctantly, she decided to leave Christina at home with Lee. He had been relatively calm in the summer months, with no arrests or public episodes and fewer night terrors. When Eleanor left them, her husband and her daughter were seated together on the couch, watching television. Christina had leaned her head against her father’s arm.

When Mrs. Chalke returned at six o'clock the next evening, the house was empty and the red Ford was gone from the driveway. She tried not to panic. They had probably gone to the drive-in, or to get ice cream, although it was Sunday. She picked up the boys, went home, made dinner. By nine, she was worried. She called Mike O'Leary at Shoffer's Pub on Main Street. Then Fred Johnston, who worked with her husband at the mill, and Lee's mother who lived an hour away in Scappoose. No one had seen Lee or Christina. At one thirty in the morning, she called the police and reported her husband and daughter missing.

The search lasted three days. The Fitzhughs returned from Corvallis early to help. Mr. Fitzhugh was one of the search party that found the truck pulled off the logging road, fender-deep in mud and covered in pine boughs. The branches had been slashed off of nearby trees with a pocketknife, leaving raw white scars in the bark.

Men from the town and Sherriff's officers with dogs searched the woods for another full day before they discovered Christina. She was alone in a hollow formed by the roots of a large oak tree. The cave had been expanded with a shovel and stocked with canned food and a .44 Winchester. A dirtied tarp was tacked to the oak roots as a cover.

Christina was dirty, exhausted, and starving—Lee Chalke had not left her anything to open the cans—but otherwise unhurt. She would not say where her father had gone. She told officers that he repeatedly said that they were escaping together, and that he loved her and would keep her safe. When he heard the dogs barking he had covered her with the tarp, told her to be quiet, and left.

After another four hours of searching, Sherriff's officers found Lee two miles

away in the undergrowth bordering Highway 47 with his wrists slit.

Christina lived on and off with the Fitzhughs for the next two months while her mother recovered. Rebecca started calling Christina her sister, and Christina began to look at the Fitzhughs as surrogate parents. Christina and Rebecca—Teeny and Becky, as they were known—spent their days together and slept in the same bed at night. When school started again that fall, Christina began a determined campaign—her teacher referred to her efforts as “insubordination” in her report—to flunk third grade so that she and Rebecca could be in the same class. By January, she was back in second grade and Rebecca and Christina were truly inseparable.

I've been waking up late these days. I set my alarm for seven thirty and pound the snooze button every nine minutes until ten. There's this guilt that creeps up in my esophagus but it's not strong enough to make me move. Jenny, who's my boss, has been cutting me slack. I told her that my mom died. I didn't tell her the rest. It seemed like maybe if I admitted I hadn't seen her since I was twelve, people might not care as much. They might not give me understanding hugs and say things like, "Our hearts are with you." They might not let me come to work three hours late every day. So I don't go in to detail.

When I get home Mutt and Chops are usually asleep on the couch, but they come stumbling out barking as soon as I turn the lock. Their names seemed cute when Jed and I picked them out at the pound. Mutt is an eighty-pound Shepherd, and Chops is some sort of Chihuahua mix. It's a miracle he hasn't been trampled yet, but somehow they get along. Jed tried to get Mutt in the settlement, but I fought him and my lawyer was better, so now they're both mine.

After I walk them around the block a few times, I cook something simple—  
tofu, vegetables—and watch TV with the dogs until I pass out. I always leave all the  
lights on and turn the volume up loud. When Dad died I didn't mind being alone in  
the house. I liked the silence, I liked the solitude. But now that Mom is dead, it feels  
haunted. Like they might both be here. I keep expecting her to appear in the mirror  
behind me or something, campy horror style. When she was alive I was comfortable  
with never seeing her again. Now it seems impossible that she's fully gone.

Some nights when I am feeling masochistic I look at old photos. Before Mom  
left, we had a big photo album that occupied a place of honor in the cabinet beneath  
the TV. It was red leather-bound and gold-embossed, a wedding present from some  
relative. In it she and Dad had combined their childhood photos: her shy-smiled on  
the porch of our house, maybe ten, with her arm around a grinning gap-toothed girl;  
him waving nervous from the driver's window of a massive logging rig; Grandpa Bill  
and Grandma Abby standing formally beneath a fruit-heavy apple tree. Then the  
photos of their shared life: a staged wedding photo in front of the shingled Episcopal  
Church; a casual shot of the two of them sitting in a truck bed laughing, my mother's  
ankles demurely crossed.

There are not many of these, the just-the-two-of-them photos, because I was  
born ten months after their wedding. The photos that follow are dominated by us.  
First me wrapped tightly in Mom's arms, then Alice and I in our endless sets of  
matching dresses, Fitz eventually showing up in corners with conductor's overalls  
and a serious face. The mid-seventies roll in and we become indistinguishable,  
turtlenecks and shag haircuts. My parents appear in these photos, of course, but

always in the background and never together: one of them is always holding the camera. My dad might be hunched over behind us, using one arm to keep Fitz from crawling out of the picture, or my mom might look up from a book or a mending project, big dark eyes tense. The odd photo of them together, taken by a neighbor or one of my grandfathers, looks posed and awkward.

After Chris's birth my mother appears in more pictures by default, holding Chris. There are many snapshots taken without her knowing, over a shoulder or from across the room. Her face is bent over Chris's, her shoulders rounded and protective. My father took these photos.

Sometime in the confusion that followed her leaving, the album disappeared. For years I assumed that she had taken it with her, a reminder of us. After Dad died, though, when I was sorting through the attic, I found it in a cardboard box labeled "Becky." The box also held her wedding dress, carefully folded and encased in saran wrap, and a few pencil sketches of my dad as a young man. I tried on the wedding dress. At twenty-one she had been skinner than I was at thirty-two and I couldn't get it zipped. This, more than anything else, made me start to cry.

I left the dress and the sketches but brought the album back downstairs to the room I'd occupied for two years as a teenager. We had come to Portland when I was sixteen, after a high school friend of Dad's offered him a job as co-manager of a paint store there. Dad had been looking for an excuse to get away from the house and the orchard since Mom left, so we moved. The half-rotten Victorian suited my adolescent Jane Eyre complex, with my dad serving as a mundane Mr. Rochester and my absent mother screaming from the attic. Chris, by then a precocious seven-year-old, was my

Adele. Alice and Fitz had their own world, their own fantasies, and I didn't involve them in mine.

Dad threw himself into restoring the house, bringing home paint from the store and spending all his free time grouting and wiring and insulating. He mostly ignored us, and I was fine with that. He worked better as a romantic, broken figure if we didn't actually speak.

For the first time in our lives, each of us had our own room. Mine was on the third floor, along with a room Dad called the study but was really just a glorified closet with a half-filled bookshelf, and a bathroom. Each of us was allowed to paint our bedroom whatever color we chose. I picked midnight blue, and bought a matching satin bedspread with my saved allowance.

When I came back to live with Dad after he was diagnosed, nothing about my room had changed. I felt like I was suffocating in a velvety cocoon every time I turned out the light, but there was never time to paint or buy new sheets, and it seemed wrong to sleep in someone else's room. By the end I was sleeping on a mattress on the floor near Dad, ready to change his diaper or sit with him through coughing fits that left the bedspread covered in bloody phlegm, so it didn't matter much any way. After he died I moved back upstairs. When I found the photo album I brought it down and put it on my high school bookshelf, between *Wide Sargasso Sea* and *Age of Innocence*. It's been four years and the album's still there. I haven't repainted.

October 15, 1988

*I didn't sleep last night...up reading Mom's journals. Dad gave them to me. Just dumped a huge box of them (journals) on my bed. Said I might like them. I was fucking shocked. I didn't even know Mom kept journals, let alone a whole fucking box of them. I asked Dad if he'd read them and he did a sort of half shrug and a nod. Of course he had, who wouldn't? I wonder if she left them especially for him. Did she think I would read them someday? Did she want that?*

*There's a part of me that wants to ask Dad about her, and a part that can't. So far Mom's been totally unfamiliar. I can tell Dad's been wanting to talk to me lately, but there's something about his nervous hands and dull asking eyes that makes me want to clam up. He's always busting into my room after work, sitting on my bed. He asks me about school and painting and shit but I don't have anything to say to him. I know it makes him sad. Maybe he misses Alice I don't know.*

*I miss Alice. She calls every Saturday but it isn't enough. Every time we talk she is breathless about something, what she is reading, a professor, anything. I don't know how to be breathless like that. I feel like I'm out of her world now. She asked me to come visit her in Eugene next week and I might.*

*I don't know if I should tell her about the diaries. I don't know what she'd think. Alice hates Mom, even if she doesn't say it. You can tell by the way she picks at her cuticles when someone mentions her, like she's trying to get them all out. Out by the roots.*

*I tried to start at the beginning, with Mom's journals. She's twelve and fucking boring. Like,*

May 20 1957. Woke up ten minutes late and had to rush. No breakfast!  
Teeny met me at the stop. Found a frog on the way which was very slimy,  
but Teeny thought it was cute and wanted to keep it in her pocket all day.  
Mrs. Jonasson took it away at lunch and gave Teeny eight raps on her  
knuckles with the sharp side of the ruler. Sat with Teeny while she cried,  
then played hopscotch till the end of lunch break. Class dull. Couldn't stay  
with Teeny after school because needed to start supper. Mother was too  
tired to come downstairs but Dad brought her a tray. Menstruation started  
after supper. Very tired and will sleep soon.

*This is crazy to me. I know, from Dad and from Grandpa Bill, that her mom is sick  
and going to die soon but she hardly even mentions it. "Mom was tired." Does she  
even realize? She just goes to school and comes home and goes to her friend Teeny's  
house (this is the Teeny that Chris is named after) or not. In June and July they go  
swimming every day. In August apple-picking season starts and she is busy. Grandma  
Abby dies in November but I'm not there yet. Mom hasn't mentioned hospital trips or  
doctor's visits.*

*It's bizarre to know that this house she writes about is the house where I grew  
up. Her room is the room I shared with Memphis and Alice until I was twelve, with  
the pink rose wallpaper that rippled around the window where the rain got in.  
Memphis slept in her bed. It was ornate brass covered in peeling white paint. Alice  
and I were in newer wooden bunkbeds that Grandpa Bill and Grandpa Wallace made  
together (they were both loggers, back in the fifties). I want to find Dad in here—how  
did they meet? When did they fall in love? I want to know what she's feeling. I want*

*to sense her, but she's just so damn flat.*

*Other things. Got drunk with Rob last night in the playground near school and smoked a little pot. Went back to his house where I stared at him until his face got wavy and then fell asleep on his couch. He talked—about politics I think, Bush and Dukakis and the election—I wasn't really listening. It's the way that he talks that's interesting, the way his mouth moves. He's kind of a stoner, but crazy smart. He gets good grades without doing anything at all. I kind of hate him for it, but at least he's fun to hang with, and he gets my art sort of. And when he's around I miss Alice less.*

*Falling asleep while I write this. Going to bed.*

## *Teeny*

The last weeks of April 1963 were darkened by heavy rains. The Nehalem River rose two feet and ran muddy through the lower end of Main Street. Rebecca and her father were among many families who filled sandbags and stacked them down by the river. Rebecca was still reeling from her ugly break-up with Samuel Walker and her fight with Teeny. Classmates who knew the girls had observed that for the first time in nearly ten years they were not sitting together in class or riding side by side on the bus to school. Rumors began to circulate about the reasons behind the fight. Many of the Valencia High School girls suspected Rebecca's decision to sleep with Sammy—a fact that he publicized loudly after she broke off the relationship—was the main cause.

Rebecca spent her afternoons in those weeks at home, reading in her room or painting. A watercolor of fallen apple blossoms rotting in the rain remains from that time, as does a landscape smothered by thick clouds with seashell curves. Her father was content to ignore her, as he had been since Abigail's death. Teeny, on the other hand, spent more and more of her time away from home and from school. A truancy report shows that she was absent from class thirteen days out of twenty-five in April and early May. Several times she went to visit her cousin Randall Scope, who was twenty-four and worked at Briar's Flour Mill in Scappoose. Randall had spent two years in Pendleton State Penitentiary for breaking and entering—he had tried to steal a twelve-inch Magnavox television set from an electronics shop in Portland for his girlfriend, a hotel maid named Sasha Morowitz. Although they were not close growing up, Teeny had become fascinated by Randall once he was incarcerated, and

she wrote to him often. In the summer of 1960, a few months before Randall was released, she wrote:

*Been having nightmares about the Pen again. I couldn't stand to be locked up like that, though sometimes Randy I think I might be already. This town feels like prison tho I know that sounds dramatic. The classrooms at the hi school are our cells. But Becky and I are going to bust out, you wait. We're going to ditch this little town for San Francisco or Los Angeles where the rain doesn't grime up your skin and soak into your soul. We're going to find SUN. I want you to meet her when you're out again, I think you'll like her. Went up to Portland and saw Sasha like you asked. She misses you...*

Teeny did bring Rebecca to Scappoose to meet her cousin a few times. After their fight she began to go more frequently and alone. It was Randall who gave Teeny the idea for a flour bomb. The times she came to see him at the mill, he warned her about lighting matches: the flour dust floating in the air could ignite and cause a large explosion. When Teeny asked Randall if flour bombs could be made on purpose, he wasn't concerned. Randall told Teeny that he had heard about a guy in prison who had covered his girlfriend's place with coal dust and thrown a firecracker through the window while she was sleeping. The explosion took out the whole apartment building, killed eighteen people, and shredded the guy's whole back even though he was thirty yards away and running.

Although Randall wasn't aware of the man's name, he was probably referring to Eugene Bellow, who killed the Klamath Falls woman he was seeing and ten of her

neighbors using a dust bomb in 1948. Bellow was sentenced to the electric chair and was executed in 1955, three years before Randall came to Pendleton.

Randall asserted that he had seen no reason to be suspicious of Teeny. “She was always asking crazy questions,” he told Sheriff’s officers afterwards. “She was a curious kid.”

The last time Teeny went to see Randall, she left with fifteen bags of flour. She told him that her mother was planning a bake sale to raise money for the folks who had suffered damage in the flooding. Randall gave her a good discount.

By mid-May the rains had stopped and the flooding had gone down. Each morning Mrs. Chalke walked Christina to the bus and waited until she saw her get on. Teeny was back in school more regularly after her mother discovered she had been stealing the truck for her trips to Scappoose. Rebecca waited with them despite the silence that still hung between her and Teeny—it seemed the girls did not want to involve Mrs. Chalke in their dispute.

No one witnessed the beginning of the altercation between Teeny and Sammy Walker, but almost everyone at Valencia High School saw the end. Teeny straddled Sammy’s chest, her gingham dress riding scandalously high, her copper hair falling loose, and punched the side of his head while he screamed something along the lines of “Get off me, you dyke bitch, get off!” Several teachers pulled her away; Sammy struggled up with his mouth bleeding and one of his eyes already swollen shut. “All this because I fucked her dykey girlfriend,” he reportedly said to friends who came to help him. Teeny got a week of suspension from school. Sammy got six stitches.

After that, Rebecca went to visit Teeny every afternoon and stayed until late

in the evening. Rebecca ignored Sammy entirely at school, although he continued to malign her to anyone who would listen.

It is unknown whether Teeny told Rebecca of her plan during this time. Certainly her preparations had already been made—the fifteen bags of flour were stored in the unused barn behind the Chalke house, and she had bought a key to the high school off the janitor, Mr. Orville. He was a near-toothless old man, wrinkle-faced, half-Klamath on his mother's side. Teeny had often helped him mop the halls during detention.

Teeny had set the time for midnight on May 30. It was Memorial Day, and the school would be empty. In the beginning, it seems Christina didn't intend for anyone to be hurt, perhaps not even herself. Nothing about her behavior indicated that she might be suicidal.

That Saturday, May 26, 1963, Teeny and Rebecca took Lee's old truck for a drive that lasted all day. They didn't tell anyone where they were going, but Bill Fitzhugh remembered that Rebecca was elated when she came home, a change for her. She baked a cherry rhubarb pie, Bill's favorite, and sat and chatted with her father for several hours. "She was as sweet as I'd seen her all spring," he remarked later. "It seemed we might have all that unpleasantness with that Sam boy behind us." Sunday, Monday, and Tuesday passed quietly. No one remarked any further changes in Rebecca or Christina's behavior, though according to her mother Teeny seemed to smile more than usual.

On the morning of May 31, Rebecca woke up to a new world. Half of Valencia High School was a smoking ruin, and Teeny Chalke was dead.

The boy and the girl who would become the father and the mother grew up in the same town, beautiful Valencia on the banks of the mighty Nehalem River. They knew each other in the way that all children in little towns know each other, but they were not friends. The girl had a best friend named Teeny Chalke and the boy had a best friend named Arty Frackett. They got older, he began to shave, she developed a slim waist but not really breasts.

Then Arty went to fight in Vietnam. The boy stayed behind. When he was twelve his father had taken him up the winding logger's road to watch the men log the trees. The world was alternating smears of black-green and creamy white. Sawdust clogged the slanting afternoon light like confetti. The boy was caught up in the roar of the buzz saws, louder than a hundred low-flying bumblebees or a purring lion, and he did not hear the yells to move. His father ran from ten feet away and grabbed his arm and pulled hard, but the tree smashed his right leg. The doctors put two long metal rods down either side of the leg and screwed the bones tight. He couldn't bend his knee; the men in Vietnam didn't want him. The boy got letters from Arty but they were muddy and confused and they seemed bloody even when they weren't and eventually the boy couldn't think of how to reply and so he didn't.

Around the same time Teeny Chalke died blowing up the high school and the girl who would become the mother stopped talking. It was summer, and the weather was warm and clear. A year of rains always left the grass green and not sickly brown like other places. Roses and pansies and tulips bloomed and wilted and then bloomed somewhere else. After Teeny died, the girl and her father lived in silence in the house

her mother's father had built. (Her mother was five years dead.) The girl wrote phrases she might need on little crumpled pieces of paper that she kept in her pockets, things like "Yes" and "No" and "Not hungry" and "Why?" If it was something more complicated, maybe "I'm sick of your questions" or "Did you remember to get milk?" she wrote it on the back of her hand or arm. In this way they managed through June.

The boy didn't really see the girl until the day of Teeny Chalke's funeral, though of course her photograph had been in the paper and he could picture her, vaguely, from brief passings in the school hallway or on Main Street. He could envision her hair (dark and wavy) and her shape (compact) but not her face. Even in the newspaper photo her features seemed blurred, though whether that was the result of the printing or his perception he couldn't say. Teeny Chalke he could conjure vividly—long gingery hair and brown eyes with eyelashes so pale they seemed invisible, small nose, stark collar bones. She wore knee-brushing dresses that bared her calves, which were long and lightly curved, like the rudders of the rocking chairs the boy's father sometimes carved and sold. Whenever he had seen her (and he saw her everywhere: at church, at the grocery store, behind the bleachers at football games, on the school bus, picking strawberries in the summer and apples in the fall. He always had the impression that she was alone, her tallness silhouetted against a gray sky. It wasn't until much later that he realized his girl had been beside her every time) her lips had been pressed together in a way that made him want to push them apart. He rarely saw her smile.

The newspapers said that Teeny's body had been shredded beyond recognition in the course of the explosion. The casket was closed at her funeral, but that didn't

stop most of the town from attempting to press into the one-room chapel on Fallow Street and see. There were reporters there from the Valencia paper (their headline the next day read LOCAL GIRL SUSPECTED IN BOMBING BURIED) and a few from the Portland papers (one proclaimed ‘HIGH SCHOOL HIROSHIMA’ BOMBER LAID TO REST; ENTIRE TOWN WATCHES). The boy and his family had arrived early and claimed seats in a middle row. The girl and her father sat in the front with Teeny’s family, a mother and two brothers. The pastor had agreed to speak even though many called Teeny’s death a suicide. Out of respect for her mother, the Sherriff’s department ruled it an accident—after all, she was dead, and her family couldn’t be blamed, and wasn’t it likely that the whole thing had been planned as some sort of stunt that went horribly awry and not, as some had claimed, a radical demonstration or political statement? Teeny had left no note. The girl, who all agreed was her closest friend, could give no reason.

After the pastor spoke his sermon, which was perhaps more colored with hellfire and damnation than usual, and Teeny Chalke’s mother sobbed behind the podium while the crowd squirmed, the girl had stood and walked to the front. The boy watched her from where he sat next to his own mother. She looked like a child in her long black dress with its white velvet collar. Her eyes, he saw, were dark and the skin around them was raw red. It was a face, he thought, that might be beautiful if someone loved it, in the way that in high school he had found himself helplessly drawn to the girls Arty drove around, girls with fat ankles and pockmarks, simply because of how Arty looked at them. The girl had a face devoid of love. He was struck, suddenly, by a desire to make her beautiful, to love her until her face shone

and other men wanted to steal her. He lusted for her, but not for her. The boy lusted to be the key that would turn in her and light her up.

Instead of delivering a speech, the girl held up a sign she had painted the evening before. It read: TEENY CHALKE ISN'T DEAD, THAT'S ALL, THANK YOU. Then she stepped down and sat once again quietly beside her father.

October 23, 1988

*I think I'm getting addicted to Mom's journals. I keep blowing off class to read them. She's meticulous—not like me, I just write whenever I feel like it. She writes every day and if I didn't know better I'd say she recorded everything, every stupid little detail.*

*There are gaping holes if you know where to look for them, Grandma's death being the biggest. It's like she's trying to erase the bad stuff by not writing about it. I guess I can get that. I told Rob about the journals, which also sort of by necessity meant telling him about Mom. His dad took off when he was really little, so he basically gets it. He's not curious about his dad, though. He said his dad was a fuckhead who deserved to die, and I believe him. I don't feel that way about Mom.*

*Sometimes I feel like I should. Hate her I mean. I have every right to. But for whatever reason, whenever I think of her I just feel sad for her. She must have been really miserable if she felt like she had to go, though I don't remember her and Dad fighting too much, and we were just normal little kids, not crazy or anything. I used to sometimes wonder if she knew, about me and what I was like, that she couldn't handle it, but I don't think that anymore.*

*What I remember about her is love. Sad love—I only remember her looking sad, and sometimes she didn't leave her bed for days. I would go in and sit with her on her big white comforter and she would say, "Not now, baby. I'm not Mom right now." And I would leave, knowing that in a few hours or the next day she would be Mom again. I guess that's sort of what happened when she left. She must have just said to herself, "I'm not Mom anymore," and that was that. I think that's pretty*

*fucked, but I can't get mad about it. She was never supposed to be a mom. Or at least not my mom.*

*Going to keep reading. Fucking school in the morning. It never fucking stops, does it?*

### *Mathers*

No one in Valencia was surprised when the police car turned up the dirt road that led to the Fitzhugh house the day after the explosion. Sally Arthur, Bill's youngest sister, had called that morning with the news. The recovered body had been horribly burned by the blast, but Lee Chalke's old truck had been found parked in the school lot, the bed coated in white flour. Mrs. Chalke confirmed that Teeny had not slept at home the night before. It seemed only a matter of time before the police identified the body as Teeny, and where Teeny went, Rebecca followed.

Fred Mathers, a deputy for the Columbia County Sherriff, was one of the officers assigned to the case. He was a short, handsome man who had recently transferred from the Sherriff's department in Klamath Falls. Unlike most of the other deputies, Mathers was not acquainted with the Fitzhughs, the Chalkes, or any other Valencia family, a quality that made him uniquely suited to the case.

When Mathers reached the Fitzhugh house that afternoon, it was Bill who answered the door. Rebecca was sitting in the living room staring straight ahead. Fred remembered her as a dark, pretty-ish girl with frizzy hair. She didn't say a word the entire time he was there, despite his repeated warnings that if she did not cooperate, the conversation would move "downtown." This was an ironic euphemism for the clapboard Sheriff's Office in St. Helens. After a futile hour of questioning, Fred escorted Rebecca to his cruiser and drove her away. Bill followed in his truck.

At the station, local legend has it, Rebecca refused to speak until finally, threatened with arrest, she answered questions via note. This story would not have been incongruous with Rebecca's behavior after Teeny's death; never gregarious, she

grew taciturn to the point of muteness. A former classmate remarked that she never heard Rebecca utter a syllable after Teeny died until she said her wedding vows. In point of fact, Fred Mathers conducted a short, successful interview in the office's cramped interrogation room. Her answers were mostly monosyllabic—Was she aware that Teeny was planning the bombing? No. Had Teeny talked to her about dissatisfaction with life at Valencia High? Yes.—but a few questions elicited longer responses. When Fred asked her if she thought Teeny was suicidal, Rebecca replied, “I didn't think—I don't know. We talked about getting away. She said she wanted to go. She was going to catch a bus after graduation...a bus to anywhere, right? But maybe. Maybe she thought she couldn't. I don't know why...I don't know.”

Bill drove Rebecca home after the interview, where she retreated immediately to her room, a place Bill never felt comfortable following. In the next few weeks she rarely emerged. No formal charges were ever raised. Four days after the event, once the body had been confirmed as Teeny's, the bombing was ruled an accident caused by a lone perpetrator. “No one talking to Becky could think she had anything to do with it,” Fred Mathers said later. “She didn't have the right air. Kids pull a thing like that, they're proud of what they've done. She wasn't.”

Though the law had found her innocent, Valencia was not so forgiving. The school was destroyed, Christina was dead, and the town needed somewhere to lay the blame. Had Rebecca been in any state to notice, she would have heard snide whispers when she walked by the diner or felt the curtness with which the grocer returned her change. As it was, she hardly left the house, and her trips into town were brief. When the Valencia seniors graduated in June (on the steps of Town Hall, since the gym was

lacking a roof) Rebecca wasn't among them. Her diploma is still in the new Valencia High administrative offices, waiting to be picked up.

I keep trying to talk about Mom, and I just end up talking about myself. But that's normal, right? I didn't know her. All I know is me. I'm the only place I know to look for her.

Here is something only about Mom. It has nothing to do with me, except for the reflected pieces of myself I find in it, but I can't help that. My Grandpa Bill told me this story when I was twelve, a month or so after my mom left. We hadn't quite given up on the hope that she might change her mind and come back. My dad was gone on one of what seemed like his hundred trips to Portland, talking to the FBI office there since it now seemed likely Mom had crossed state lines. They had found the truck abandoned at a Park-and-Ride in Salinas, and Dad had to go in and rehash everything he had already told them.

Grandpa Bill was babysitting. He was around a lot when I was growing up, since he lived so close and Mom was his only kid, but after she left he practically moved in. In a way I think he was more devastated than any of us. He sat at the

kitchen table he and Dad had built and pretended to read *The Oregonian* for hours, but he didn't turn the pages and sometimes I caught him crying. He and Mom had been through a lot, when you think about it—first Grandma Abby dying, then Mom's best friend Teeny. They lived alone together for eight years, and even when Mom married Dad they stayed close. But she left without a word, not to him, not to anyone. He died not knowing where she was. A heart attack. I was twenty-two and I couldn't afford to fly home for the funeral.

This particular night I was alone with Grandpa Bill. Chris, Fitz, and Alice were already up asleep in their rooms, but I had a later bedtime of which I was fiercely protective, so Grandpa Bill and I were playing rummy in the living room. There was a fire in the woodstove, and it was raining hard enough to make the roof rattle. He had just won a game, and we had fallen into a comfortable silence. I was starting to fall asleep in my chair when Grandpa Bill started laughing. I asked him if he was laughing at me and he said, "No, just something funny I remembered." I said, "What was it?" and this is what he told me:

"You've heard about your mom's friend Teeny. They were like sisters, those girls, even if it never quite made sense. Your mom was a real quiet little girl—we couldn't get her to say a word outside of the house until she was six, and even then she'd whisper so low you had to bend in to hear her. Teeny was loud, always wild, always running around, throwing fits if she didn't get her way. She had Becky wrapped around her little finger, that's for sure. Your mom worshipped that girl. Followed her everywhere. If Teeny wasn't eating at our place for dinner, you can bet Becky was talking about her all through the meal. It was a sad thing when she died.

She was a little crazy maybe, and it was her own damn fault, but she was too young, for sure. It was a hard blow on your mom. I still think sometimes what she mighta come to, if Teeny hadn't died.

“So this one time Teeny is at our house, playing with Becky. They're eleven or twelve, scrawny. Your mom looked a lot like you. I'm upstairs with your Grandma Abby, who was sick by then, and the girls are in the living room. When I left them they were reading—or your mom was reading to Teeny, she always liked to read aloud. So I've been sitting upstairs with your grandma about an hour, when there's this little knock on the door. I go, and I open it, and there's Teeny, without your mom. And she says, 'I hate to bother you, Mr. Fitzhugh, but I've got a problem.' Well I'm not too worried, I say, 'What's a matter, Teeny?' And she says, calm as you like, 'Becky's in the footlocker and I can't find no key.'

“I shoulda mentioned before, we had this big metal trunk right here in the living room, over in that corner where the couch is now. I'd used it in the army, but after I got home Abby used it to store extra blankets and quilts and things. I hadn't had a key for that thing since I got back from Okinawa, but it had never locked itself since then, so it wa'n't no problem. I said to Teeny, 'That thing don't lock,' and, God forgive me but I was thinking about Abby, I said, 'You just go try and lift that lid again. It'll come up if you push hard.' And off she went.

“About another fifteen minutes pass and there's another little knock and the door and Teeny calls through, 'Mr. Fitzhugh, I been trying to lift that lid but I don't think it's coming up.' So I get up, I'm a little bothered, and I say, 'Just how long has Becky been in that box?' and she tells me, 'I guess about an hour.' Well I jumped up

so fast I nearly knocked Abby off the bed. You've maybe never seen a trunk like this one, but they seal up airtight. That's why they're so good for storage. And here I am thinking maybe Becky was in there five, ten minutes, but she's been breathing the same air for a whole damn hour? So I run down and sure enough Teeny's right, that box has locked itself somehow. I run out back for a crowbar and when I come back in Teeny's kicking that box as hard as she can with her stocking feet and hollering. I tell her to shut up so's we can hear Becky inside. Teeny stops screaming and we both listen but the room is dead quiet. I get in there with my crowbar and it takes me a couple minutes but we get the lid off. And here's Becky, wide-awake and just fine. Teeny busts into tears right there and then, and I tell you, I didn't often see that girl cry. So I pull Becky out and I hug her close and I ask her what the hell did she think she was doing in that trunk? And she says to me, 'Teeny bet I wouldn't.' And there's this look on her face, so proud, like she's conquered the world or something. So I asked her, why didn't she say something when we were yelling? And she grins, yeah, just like that, just like you, and says, 'Weren't you scared?'

"I won't lie to you, both those girls were in big trouble after. But sometimes I just think about that face, so proud of herself—after a whole hour in a dark trunk, no less—and it just cracks me up. She was quiet, but she was tough. Your mom was tough."

Grandpa thought Mom was tough, and for a long time I believed it. But picturing that story now I don't see toughness. I see spite.

October 28, 1988

*Visiting Alice in Eugene for Halloween this weekend. I take the bus Friday after school. Dad offered to drive me down but I said no. I want Alice all to myself. I want to lie on her bed and just talk. I miss talking. She and I are different, but we talk well—we both know when to listen.*

*I remember once when we had driven out to Manzanita for a night, and we were sitting on the cold beach and the rain was horizontal so it pushed our hoods against our ears and we could only see lines of sideways rain...anyway I remember sitting there and it was so loud I was almost yelling to her, and she was nodding with her head cocked in just the right way. I don't even remember what I was saying—probably something stupid about beauty or rain or darkness—but I remember her face with her long blue eyes and her ugly wide mouth (the only ugly part of her) and thinking that as long as I had a face like that just to listen I could say anything. She told me after that she couldn't really hear me over the wind, but that's the point. I don't think it mattered.*

*Dad asked me this morning how I was getting on with Mom's journals. He said it so casually I could tell he'd been planning it for a while, cereal spoon in hand, looking at a catalogue of paint samples for the store (Dad is the manager of the big Miller's Paints on Sandy Boulevard). Just "How are you getting on with your mom's journals?" so flat and cool. I said fine, which is true I guess. It's also true that I'm not fine at all. Grandma's death came and went. I read the entry and I cried, but not because she was so sad, because she wasn't. I was sad for how not sad she was, if that makes sense. The entry went something like: "Mom died in hospital this morning.*

*Didn't go to school." And then the next day, business as usual.*

*I feel like she's lying to me, like she's intentionally leaving things out to fuck with me. I'm not going to tell Alice, I decided. I want to figure her out first. I feel selfish about her, like Alice knew her and I didn't and that seems unfair or something. I know it's irrational, and I know Alice probably doesn't remember her much better than I do, but that's how I feel.*

*She's been coming back to me as I read, little thing. She had hazel eyes and dark brown hair that usually touched her shoulders. She walked us to the bus stop on the first day of school every year, and that was special. She loved birthdays and Christmas and Halloween but got mad when they didn't turn out just right. There were times when she and my dad would dance together in the living room to Carole King records, shoeless, while dinner cooked. In my memory, the light is always firefly lamplight and it is raining quietly outside. This is still what I think of when I think the word love. She gave the best kisses, snuck from behind, with her hands clasped over my ears and her lips damp and firm on my cheek. I can't remember her laugh but I remember it was good.*

*None of that is in this journal really. Here she's just a scared sad kid who can't even say that she's scared and sad.*

*Last night I dreamed about Rob. A weird one this time. I was sitting in a chair in my bedroom and for whatever reason he was shaving my head. He was behind me and I couldn't see him, but I felt safe. Something in the buzz of the trimmer and his hand brushing the cut hair away. His palm solid against my scalp. And that was it, that's all I remember. I woke up feeling quiet. Sometimes when we're together I get*

*convinced he can read my mind and I have a hard time making my lungs work while I wait for him to dig through my brain and pick out the dreams and memories. There's an almost relief that happens. But then the moment passes, and of course he doesn't know. He doesn't know anything.*

## *Jack*

The night of the “Rebuild the School! Ball” went down in Valencia history as the beginning of one of the strangest courtships the town had ever seen. The event was hosted by the Valencia Women’s Club to raise money for much-needed repairs to the high school; Teeny’s bomb has rendered nearly half of the complex unusable. Eleanor Chalke spearheaded the effort. Her husband’s suicide had created gossip, but the Valencia women had mostly supported Eleanor—after all, Lee was another casualty of the war. Teeny’s death was another story. Around town people began to look at Eleanor Chalke with suspicion. One suicide in the family was bad luck, but two seemed like a sign of bad breeding. And so after two weeks in mourning, Eleanor reemerged determined to prove to everyone that she was a good woman and a good mother to her remaining children. The “Rebuild the School! Ball” was the centerpiece of her efforts.

Eleanor also severed ties with Rebecca Fitzhugh, the only other person in Valencia grieving as deeply as she. As a matter of course, the entire town was invited to the dance, but it was tacitly understood that certain people—namely, Rebecca—would not attend. Even if Rebecca had been the type to attend dances, the women of the Valencia Club assumed that good form and some modicum of decency would keep her away. It was therefore to general astonishment that she walked through the double doors of the Chamber of Commerce at 8 pm on the night of the dance sporting the same dress she had worn to Teeny’s funeral a month before.

Evamarie Borne, a Valencia High classmate, later remembered her entrance: “It was the strangest thing when she came in. The whole room went quiet, like in a

movie. She was alone and she didn't say a word, just walked over and sat down with her hands in her lap. No one could figure why she was there. And of course everyone thought she'd been in on the bombing, so it felt like spite, like she was making fun of the whole thing. Some of the older women were furious. I had always liked Becky. I kept looking at her, seeing how she was, you understand. She seemed so sad. I couldn't figure for the life of me why she had come. She must have known what people would think, and she had never gone to dances before. I almost went over to talk to her, but Jack got there first."

"Jack" was John Albert Carpenter, the lanky youngest son of the massive Carpenter logging clan. The room watched in shock as he separated himself from a tangle of friends, brothers, and cousins and made his way to the side of the dance floor where Rebecca was sitting by herself. He asked her to dance, and after some visible hesitation she stood and went with him. Even the more aggravated guests could agree they made a handsome couple: Rebecca, petite and dark, and Jack, with his long legs and sandy hair. Jack had a limp from a logging accident when he was twelve, and he was a little stilted on the dance floor, but he spun Rebecca around for four songs before a female cousin pulled him away. After he danced one with her Jack looked for Rebecca again, but, like a fairytale princess, she had gone.

It had been a shock to everyone when Jack Carpenter turned down a partial scholarship to the University of Oregon two years earlier. Unlike his four older brothers and many of the logging boys, Jack had gotten good grades in high school, and everyone expected him to move up and out. But after graduation Jack had gone to the sawmill like the rest of his family, where he operated a sanding machine. "I like it

here,” he was known to say when people pestered him about staying. He was only two years older than Rebecca, but they had never had occasion to interact; he was well-liked and popular, while she was quiet and absorbed in her friendship with Teeny. He later admitted he had never even heard Rebecca’s name until Teeny died. He saw her for the first time at Christina’s funeral, in the front row with Bill. She wasn’t the prettiest girl he had seen, but there was an attractive quality to her sadness that drew him in. He determined to meet her, and at the “Rebuild the School! Ball” he seized his chance.

Jack was soft-spoken, something of a closet romantic; after he met Rebecca at the dance he began sending her small gifts. The morning after their first meeting she found a bouquet of wild daisies pinned to her front door. Later trinkets included an acorn strung on a thin cord, an arrowhead, and a scribbled poem that read:

*Rebecca, Rebecca, I’m glad to have metcha,*

*You make me go weak in my knees.*

*Rebecca, just give me a chance and I’ll betcha*

*You’ll fall just as hard for me.*

Rebecca ignored these gifts and Jack’s cordial invitations to the drive-in for months, but Valencia took notice. By August, three months before Rebecca and Jack first kissed in the woods, the town had incredulously dubbed them an item.

This afternoon Chris called. I don't work on Sundays, and I slept till two. The dogs were waiting by the door when I finally made it downstairs. I guess I'm just lucky they didn't shit all over the carpet. My guilt took us on a longer walk than usual, up to the woodsy park on Mt. Tabor where we spent an hour getting lost on the trails. When we got back my cell was ringing from upstairs, an obnoxious tinny rendition of Für Elise that I can't be bothered to change. I managed to dig it out of the pocket of a crumpled pair of jeans just before it clicked into voicemail. Chris's voice was hoarse and hungover. "Hey, Graceland."

This made me smile, though I tried not to let it show in my voice. "Hey kid. Rough night last night?"

"I think I'm getting old. I can't drink like I used to."

"Call me in ten years, then we'll talk about old." Her congested laugh. "How are things?"

"Things are ok. Mark's been going to D.C. every other week for work, and I

get a little lonely.”

“Yeah, I get that. How are the kids?” Chris is a kindergarten teacher in Brooklyn, which doesn’t stop her from dropping acid on the weekends.

“Cute and irritating. The usual. Did you get Alice’s book?”

“Uh-huh.”

“Did you read it?”

“Not yet.”

“You should! I just started it, it’s good. Hard, but good.”

“I probably will.”

Silence, her waiting. Then, “So what’s been going on? How are things on the best coast?”

“Fine. Same old.” I scratched a thumbnail and hoped the waver in my voice wasn’t noticeable.

“Really?”

“Uh-huh. Nothing to report. How’s Brooklyn? You ever see Fitz?”

“Sometimes. We got drinks about a month ago. He’s such a flake, especially when he’s got a new boyfriend.” A pause. “Look, Memphis, I want you to come visit me. I can pay for your flight and everything, I’m finally out of debt and Mark just got a raise...”

“I don’t need you to pay for anything, Christina. I have a job. I’m doing fine.”

Disbelieving silence.

“But I don’t know if I can get off work. Things are pretty crazy right now...”

“Crazy at Barnes and Noble?”

“Wow, how do you really feel about it?”

“You know that’s not what I meant...I just think it would be good for you to get out of that house for awhile. I mean first Dad, and now finding out about Mom. It’s not good for you to be alone out there. I talked to Alice and she—”

“You’ve been talking to Alice about me?”

“Don’t freak out, Memphis, she’s your sister and she’s worried about you. And so am I, and Fitz would be too if either of you ever bothered to talk to each other. This is a big thing that just happened to all of us, and we should be together. Besides, I miss you...isn’t that enough reason to come see me?” Her voice, pleading.

“I miss you too. But things are pretty busy with work. Maybe I could come out near Christmas. I’ll have to check and see.”

“I just think—”

“Hey Chris, I’m sorry but I really have to go...I’m supposed to be meeting someone for coffee.”

“You’re such a liar.”

“I love you, I’ll call soon.” I hung up before she had a chance to say anything else. The flashing “CALL ENDED” on the screen seemed reproachful. I slouched back over to the couch and curled up next to Mutt, who was happily gnawing on a rawhide bone. Chris has been trying for months to get me to “process” Mom’s death, whatever that means. I hate that word. Like my emotions are some neat little factory where life events get molded and spray-painted and sent off for distribution. I don’t know even know what it would mean, to process this. I’m supposed to be moving but I can’t figure out where to. Maybe Chris is right. Maybe I should go somewhere else.

It's not like I've got much keeping me here, besides this house. But somehow I don't want to leave.

October 29, 1988

*Rob is coming to Eugene with me. I told him today at lunch that I was planning on going and he just asked if he could tag along. I didn't know how to say no so I said yes. I'm weirdly excited, and weirdly nervous. I'm worried that Alice will be angry I brought someone when we haven't really seen each other since summer. Rob's got a friend's couch to sleep on, he says, but it also seems like he wants to spend time with me when we're there. He said he wants to meet Alice. I helped Dad at the store after school today, mixing paints. It sounds artistic but it isn't. Just a bunch of chemicals in white glop and then you clamp it in the machine that shakes it all up. Dad was pretty busy the whole time, but we picked up Chris at piano lessons and the three of us got Chinese after. We talked, just about little things and family, Alice off at college and Memphis in San Francisco. He stole my egg roll and fed it to Chris like a baby bird, like he used to do when we were little. It felt easy and good and I was grateful because sometimes these days I feel like he's a million miles away, or maybe I am.*

*Dad's going to need my help more these days because Denise one of the desk girls is off on maternity leave. The nice thing about Dad managing the paint store is that I get to take home the mistakes, the colors that aren't quite right that people return. Like when Raspberry Rhapsody looks a little more like Winter Sunset I get to keep it. Sometimes I make a mistake on purpose, if it's a color I like. The paints don't work like acrylics or oils but I've been making some cool stuff with spattering and spray paint. I keep trying to get Dad to let me put Chris against a canvas and throw paint on her—I think it could be cool, like a chalk outline on a dead body. But he's*

*not into it. So for now I've been using Memphis's old Barbie dolls.*

*When Dad and I got home I flipped through Mom's journals until I found the one where she's sixteen, like me. The change is huge. All she talks about are feelings in this one...it's hard to figure out what's going on sometimes. She's dating some guy named Sammy (still no sign of Dad) and she's really torn up about it. I read this part of her July 13, 1962 entry probably five times:*

When we're apart I want him desperately. I walk home from the bus and Teeny has to poke and pinch me out of daydreams about him. I think about kissing him and I light up. I imagine him whispering to me, touching me and it gets me warm. It doesn't make sense. When we're together I have to keep reminding myself of all that. I see him and he's just like I imagine him but there's something off, there's something wrong. I just keep telling myself: This is Him, this is the guy you think about before you fall asleep. When he kisses me my mind just drifts away, no matter how much I try to convince it to stay.

*It's creepy familiar. This is how I always felt with Annie. She was so pretty and so sweet, but I always felt like I was convincing myself to want her. Even the couple times we had sex it was like I was pumping myself up in my head the whole time: you want this, she's so hot, you love her, you want her. I only came once, in Lisa Logan's little brother's room on top of a Star Wars comforter. I think that's why Annie dumped me in the end. She knew I was faking with her. At least I had Alice to talk to. Poor Mom can't even talk to her best friend—Teeny hates Sammy, she doesn't want to hear about any of it.*

*Teeny's possessive of Mom, I can tell, even though Mom doesn't say it. I get it—they've been friends forever, like Alice and me. It's hard because Alice is so much more outgoing than me...she had her girl friends and her boyfriends and I just had her. Even when Annie was my girlfriend I spent most of my time with Alice. And then she left. It's just luck that I found Rob, really.*

*I realized I've been talking a lot about Rob but I haven't actually described him or anything. I don't know who's ever going to read this but I'm reading Mom's journals now so you never know. And I want to know what Teeny looked like so someone might want to know about Rob. Anyway.*

*Rob:*

- *5'10"*
- *Curly brown hair, kind of long, that flops around under the Mariners cap he always wears*
- *Tan (for Portland at least)*
- *Big nose*
- *Kind of skinny*
- *Wears tight jeans and big bright sweatshirts*
- *Hums when he's thinking about something*
- *Has something called a familial tremor that makes his right leg bounce whenever he's just sitting and his hands shake when he's excited*

*Rob excitement takes him over completely: he uses his whole body to talk, shakes his hands, lifts his arms, leans forward, widens his eyes, open his mouth big. He makes it seem like the most important thing in the world. I want him to think that about me.*

After a year or two they got married. The boy not yet the father but who would soon become the husband brought her (the girl) to a special spot he knew by an old pine. There was nothing unusual about this pine tree except that it was in a field instead of in a forest, and the boy loved it for that. (Even after one fell on him the boy loved trees, even after he couldn't climb or cut them any more. He liked the smell of sap on his hands and the roughness of bark and the easy sway and rattle of branches in wind. He loved pine trees most of all, though when he and the girl were married he taught himself to care for apple. When the girl turned wife turned mother left him to become what she had not been—a woman—he walked out under the orchard trees and yelled and screamed and kicked their trunks with his splinted, straight leg, swinging it like a baseball bat. The two little girls no longer so little and the boy who almost died and the baby watched from the porch.) He drove the girl out in his truck to this pine tree and when they were parked beneath the branches he said to her, My love for you is as tall as this tree, as bending. See how the top whips in the wind? It won't break. It's alone in a field but it won't break. And her face, which was sometimes clear and sometimes blurred, like a newly printed photo smudged by a thumb, seemed to him beautiful.

She sewed a handkerchief dress out of sky blue cotton and the boy rented a house in town. She wove a wreath of pine twigs to wear in her hair. Her father walked her down the aisle. The boy kissed her and she was the wife, although it took her several minutes to believe.

In their rented house she made roast beef sandwiches in the mornings and Jell-O salads in the afternoon. She became obsessed with creating a perfect pineapple upside-down cake but was never successful. In the evenings the husband came home and she cooked dinner, rosemary lamb or fried chicken with mashed potatoes. Sometimes, in the margin of a recipe book or on the clean corner of the linoleum counter she would scribble TEENY ISN'T DEAD, but never very large. The husband didn't notice.

When they made love she floated over him like a moon over a lake. His stiff leg lay flat and useless on the bed.

Sometimes she thought about a fairy tale she used to like. It was about swans, or really, it was about a princess and her brothers. There was an evil stepmother and a curse, and the boys all turned into white swans. Wings flashing everywhere, white envelopes scattering in the wind. To save them the princess had to knit seven shirts of stinging nettles. And she could not speak. She sat in a cave and she crushed nettles and she knit. One day a prince arrived and fell in love with her. The princess couldn't say anything, and he took her back to his castle, away from her brothers. She couldn't say whether she was happy or sad. At night she snuck out to the graveyard to collect nettles. A man saw her and thought she was a witch and told the prince. She couldn't say that she was innocent, so they sent her to be hanged. She kept knitting. Just before they brought her to the gallows she finished the last of the seven shirts. Her hands were so swollen with nettle bites they looked like red balloons. At that moment the swans flew down from the sky and she threw the shirts over their heads and they became men again, except for one whose shirt had come a little unraveled at the

sleeve. He was left with a swan's wing in place of an arm. The brothers explained everything to the prince, and the princess was released. She married the prince and stayed in the castle.

When she was a young girl the wife had asked her father to repeat again and again the part about the one brother with the remaining swan wing. Did he want to stay a swan? she asked. Did he?

In August the wife was pregnant. The husband, teasing one night, told the wife she could name the baby if it was a girl, and he would name a boy. She walked up into the woods often, or to her father's house. She liked the way her belly looked in the bath, a cartoon island. When the baby was born in January the mother named her Memphis Belle, after a B-52 bomber her father had flown with in the war. The husband, now father himself, didn't mind. In the hospital bed her face looked clear and focused. He told them, the mother and the daughter in her arms, stories about the creatures that haunted tree stumps loggers left behind. His stories made them giggle.

Soon they moved into the old house where the girl-wife-mother grew up. The new father and father-in-law tended trees together. With a sturdy ladder he could reach the highest branches and feel tender new buds. Among the high branches he could catch the scent of a salt storm away on the coast. Inside the mother painted and cooked and rocked to sleep her Memphis Belle.

## *Letters*

Rebecca had met Audrey at the ill-fated grief retreat in Seattle early in 1965, but their correspondence didn't begin for another five and a half years. The first letter arrived in September 1970 in a plain white envelope postmarked Anaconda, MT. The return address was a post office box, with only that first name, "Audrey," printed neatly above it in the top left corner. Rebecca did not respond to the first letter for some months; she told Jack that she was "thinking." If he pressed her further about the contents of the letter or its writer, she brushed him off. It was a letter from an old friend who had decided to reach out. Nothing more.

Rebecca had other things to occupy her mind. Her marriage was an aging lava flow, cooling and settling. Memphis was three years old, Alice two months, and between the two of them they took up most of her waking and sleeping hours. Jack had taken on an extra shift at the mill to help cover the expense of a second child, and it was the height of picking season. Rebecca spent long days with her father in the trees collecting the ripe apples in large bushels while her daughters played in a wooden pen their father had built. When she had free time she painted, mostly watercolor sketches of her girls. In one, Memphis stares at her sister through the light oak bars of a crib. Another is a self-portrait with Alice breastfeeding. The paintings are lush and bright with broad visible strokes, a shift from the careful muted realism Rebecca had preferred in the past.

In October, bouts of terrible nausea sent Rebecca to the hospital, where the doctor informed her she was pregnant once again. Jack was resigned, but Rebecca was devastated. She was adjusting to being a mother of two; three seemed impossible.

The news sent Rebecca into her worst depression since Teeny's death seven years earlier. She hardly spoke, she ate only when Jack was there to watch her swallow her food. As before, she rarely left her bed.

All this meant that Rebecca did not respond to the letter until January, in the heart of the drab northwestern winter. Jack posted the letter for her on his way to work and asked no questions about it. A reply came the following month, and Rebecca responded immediately. An irregular correspondence began, letters arriving every month or two. Audrey was going through a tough time, Rebecca explained. She needed someone to talk to. She never said more about Audrey's problems, or why she had chosen to share them with a woman she had known for two days a half decade before.

Whatever the reason for the letters, they seemed to pull Rebecca out of her depression. She spent long hours at her desk rereading the letters and writing her responses. At the doctor's insistence, she began to take long walks in the woods. Sometimes she brought her father or her girls along, Alice wrapped against her chest with a long cloth. Jack was relieved to see her smiling again, and privately gave full credit to Audrey and her letters. "We were all so worried about her," remembered Sissy Scott, Jack's cousin. "But when that Audrey started writing, it was like the sun came out over her. She lit up. But of course we all wondered, especially after everything that happened." Rebecca kept all Audrey's letters in a shoebox under her bed. Jack admitted he was tempted to read them, but he never did. The letters were among the many mementos that disappeared with Rebecca. What did she say in those dozens of letters? Did she write about her depression? About her ambivalence

towards her children and her husband? Did she share memories of the loved ones she had lost, Teeny and Abigail? We may never know. The letters and their contents remain an unsolvable mystery.

There is a moment I knew I would never see Mom again. I had thought it before, many times, but there was always a little voice that told me I would bump into her some morning at a Starbucks, a little older, a little fatter probably, but indisputably her. I would catch myself staring at gray-haired women on BART or at the supermarket, wondering if one of them might turn her head just the right way to reveal her long nose or her self-conscious smile. I thought about what I would say to her in those moments. I would be forgiving, I had decided. I would hug her and tell her I missed her. She would say I had grown up into a beautiful young woman. The fantasies always ended there though, because I couldn't imagine a single thing she could say to explain why she had left us.

It was the summer of 1995, the summer that Jed and I were experimenting with self-sustainability and starting a life together. He had a big piece of land that his parents had gifted him outside San Jose, and I had thirteen years working in the orchard, which seemed like enough. We bought two goats, chickens, and a yurt that a

former-hippie friend was selling cheap. We lined the inside with soft rugs and Tibetan prayer flags and made a commitment to meditate at least three times a day. I buried my diaphragm behind the yurt and we had sex with the windows open to the night air. It felt liberating after six years in a cramped San Francisco apartment, like the right start.

Those first few weeks were idyllic. I planted green beans and squash and chard and tomatoes. Jed bought a few apple seedlings because he thought I might like to “revisit my roots.” He taught history at a local independent school, so after he wrapped up classes in June he had time to work with me. We bought some produce at the grocery store, and flour and baking soda for bread. I was still working on weekends at a friend’s coffee shop, but most of my time I gave to the garden, and to Jed. We ate eggs from the chickens and learned how to milk the goats and talked about investing in a few small beehives. I remember us happy.

We spent almost as much energy trying to get pregnant. We made love in productive positions, at optimal times of day with the sound of wind chimes soothing in the background. My body refused to cooperate. I was twenty-eight, too young to panic, but I felt hollow and barren. When I got my period for the fourth time, at the end of June, I curled up on the floor of the yurt and refused to move for seven hours. Jed got tired of bringing me tea, rubbing my back, and encouraging me to chant, so he left on his bike. Once he was gone finally I uncurled, found some fresh underwear in the pullout drawers beneath our bed and went out to milk the goats. Jed wanted to talk about it when he came home from his bike ride, but I didn’t, and so we left it.

The next day I made an appointment with Sanjee, an energy reader and

Chinese herbalist I had met during my brief stint at massage school. She was a tiny red-haired woman with freckles and a wise smile who operated out of a converted split-level in Willow Glen. Her voice on the phone was surprised—we hadn't seen each other in over a year—but warm, and she agreed to see me the next day. I drove in the multi-colored Volkswagon that Jed had retrofitted for bio-diesel. It sputtered and almost died twice, but I got there only twenty minutes late.

Sanjee answered the door dressed comfortably in a purple velvet skirt and a hemp tank top. She hugged me deeply, told me I looked well, and invited me inside. The room, one of many off a narrow, claustrophobic hallway, was painted a soothing shade of lavender. Classical music played softly from a boom box in one corner. Sanjee sat in an armchair and indicated towards a scuffed leather recliner.

“So tell me what’s going on, Memphis. What brings you today?”

I shifted in my seat. “Jed and I are trying to get pregnant.”

She nodded. “And you’re having some trouble?”

“Uh-huh. I’m not quite ready for doctors and injections yet, so I guess I thought I’d see if there was something else first.”

“I think that’s very wise. And there’s a lot we can do with your body—acupuncture for improved blood flow and I can recommend some dietary changes that are very helpful for reducing dampness in the body, which can create blockages and prevent pregnancy. But let me ask you first, how has your heart been feeling? Have you been stressed, or grieving? Powerful emotions can create blocks in the chi of the liver and lungs that are incredibly detrimental to fertility.”

I tried not to think about my breakdown the day before. “A little stressed, I

suppose. But mostly things are ok.”

Sanjee nodded. “Mmhmm. I think I’d like to try something with you, Memphis, if you’re interested. It’s a form of hypnosis, but I won’t suggest a new behavior for you. Instead, we’ll use it to take a closer look at your emotions around pregnancy. I’ve found it very helpful for fertility cases in the past.” She leaned forward in her seat, eyes wide and earnest.

I was skeptical, but I had come for help, and Sanjee had done energy work with me before, back when I was riding the wave of depression that almost ended Jed and I two years earlier. I nodded. “If you think it will help, sure.”

She told me to lean back and close my eyes. Then she began reciting words that had the practiced air of a script. She instructed me to breathe deeply, to feel my breath in my arms, my legs, my chest, my belly. She told me she would count backwards from ten, and when she reached one, I would find myself at the top of a staircase.

At one, behind my closed eyelids I was surprised to see that I was, in fact, standing at the top of a staircase, the stained, blue-carpeted stairway of Jed and my first apartment in San Jose. Sanjee’s voice told me to walk down the stairs, and I did. The bottom step led to the top of another set of stairs, this time the creaky steps down from my attic bedroom in the house in Portland. I walked these too, until I reached the top step of the dark pine staircase in the Valencia house. When I reached the bottom of these, I was not in the old living room as I expected, but standing beneath the apple trees outside. I was vaguely aware of Sanjee asking me to describe where I was, and I told her. It was fall, and the apples were thick on the trees. It was a rare

sunny September day, still warm, and leaves were just beginning to turn yellow against the blue sky. Sanjee's voice asked me how old I was, and I realized I was nine. I breathed in the clear air, damp even on this dry day. Her voice asked me why we were here, and I said with certainty that it was to see my mom. Where is she? the voice asked. By the stream, I answered. Should we go find her? Yes.

I picked my way over the lumpy roots and the grass springy from a recent rain. The windows on the house glinted in the midday sunshine. The stream was on the other side of the house, away from the road. Mom was wearing a white summer dress and lying on her back on the bank with her feet in the water. Her belly rose up high and curved. I remembered how much I'd loved to touch that belly, first full of my sister, then of my brother, and now of this unknown fourth baby. The kicks thrilled me, as did my mother's hand on my back when I pressed my ear against the stretched fabric of her dress. Now she didn't notice me as I came up behind her, her eyes closed against the bright sun.

What are you here to see? The voice asked me. I don't know, I said. Go closer. I did. As I approached I saw that there was something snaking out from beneath her dress. My mother's eyes opened and she seemed to pull against whatever it was, but it was stuck fast in the streambed. I got closer and saw that it was a reed, growing out of the stream and fixed between her legs. While she strained, the reed seemed to divide, and little shootlets twisted off of the main branch and began to curl up around her legs holding her fast. The more she pulled the more there were until she was almost completely bound. This isn't my fault, I told the voice or maybe my mother. What makes you think it is? the voice answered. I don't know. Think

Memphis. This isn't my fault. Why not? I didn't mean to. What didn't you mean? I couldn't answer. My body was convulsing, the nine-year-old body and the body I was dimly aware of in the leather recliner. My mother was crying and yelling as she pulled against the reeds.

I think it's time to stop, the voice said. Memphis, go inside. Walk away and go inside the house. Do you understand me? Without moving, I was in the old living room, alone. The faded quilts were spread across the couch. A fire was in the woodstove. I could still feel my body crying. The house smelled like winter. Sanjee's voice was sweet and soft. Walk up your stairs, Memphis. Walk up all the stairs.

Sanjee used a reverse process to bring me back, guiding me up the stairs, counting to ten. When I opened my eyes I wasn't upset, although there were tears still on my face. Sanjee handed me a tissue and said, "Well, that seems pretty clear."

We sat and talked for a little while longer. Sanjee prescribed me a combination of herbs and invited me back the next week for acupuncture. "I'm happy to do all this with you, Memphis. But I think you'll find you have a hard time conceiving until you work through this guilt. You didn't hold your mother back, and you're not the reason she left."

I pulled an awkward shrug. "I know that."

Sanjee put a hand on my knee. "Apparently you don't, Memphis. Your brain might, but your subconscious is another story. Today was a good start, but I would recommend continuing hypnosis."

"I'll think about it," I told her, but I knew I wouldn't.

As I drove home, I thought about my mother, tied down and pulling. Of

course she left as soon as she could. Of course she never came back. Why would she want to, if that's all we were to her? I didn't go back and see Sanjee and I stopped looking for Mom on buses. Jed and I kept trying and eventually we succeeded. For three beautiful months I was pregnant, but then there was the miscarriage, and we didn't try again.

October 30, 1988

*On the bus. Rob is passed out with his head bouncing against the window. He has a Walkman cradled in his lap and big foam headphones over his ears. The sound coming from them is like muffled screaming. We're a half hour away from Eugene on I-5 South. Outside of the city you realize that you're in a valley: flat plains on either side cupped by bluffy hills that lead up to mountains. Scenery like this could make you feel trapped or loved, protected. Today I'm feeling a little bit of both.*

*Mom's 1962 journal is open on my lap. They really are journals, not diaries. They don't look anything like the pink flowered things—lockable with a tiny, useless key—that my sisters always had. They don't even look like this one, a spiral notebook that blends in with my school binders. When people ask me what I'm writing, I can always say, "Homework."*

*Her journals are black leather with serious thin lined pages. She writes it all in a jumble, like I do. She doesn't make a new page for a new day, and sometimes the date is jotted in the margin, like she forgot to write it before she started. I like that. She's not so careful now. She's loosening.*

*I feel like I'm starting to get her more. She's so vulnerable. This Sammy guy sounds like a typical asshole, but she wants so much to like him. He wants her to have sex with him but she keeps putting him off. Did people even have sex in 1962?*

*I imagine her two ways—the way she was before she left, Mom, and the way she looks in her junior yearbook picture, black-and-white with a shy bare-lipped smile. Dad got rid of all the other pictures of her after she left. The journals are helping but I can't flesh-and-blood her into my head, not yet.*

*She and Teeny are a series of grainy video clips. These words she left me are a disembodied voice. Does that make sense? I guess these words, the ones I'm writing, will be a disembodied voice to somebody someday.*

*Rob is waking up.*

*Later. At Alice's, sitting on the living room couch. She is cooking pasta in the kitchen. I can smell onions and peppers and mushrooms frying. Rob is in there with her, and I've told them I'll be right back, but I want a minute. They are so good at talking, the two of them. My two listeners—put them together and they can't shut up.*

*I don't mean to sound bitter. Maybe I do. I guess I was just looking forward to some time with Alice, but the second we got off the bus she was all over Rob. She was standing there at the stop in a long flower-print dress and big Shearling coat. She got our Dad's height, and she looks good in anything. She gave me a big hug and told me I seemed tired. Then Rob got off the bus and you could just see her puff up. Her hand went straight to her hair and she was all, "Who's this, Fitz?" I should have thought about it. He's good-looking, and Alice is pretty and talkative and single. Plus she has that college appeal. Of course he's going to respond when she starts flirting with him. What normal guy wouldn't?*

*I hate feeling this way. Like a misanthrope. Not even. Like background music. No, that's not it either. Invisible maybe. I feel invisible, and Alice and Rob are supposed to be the ones who can see me. But put them together and all they can see is each other.*

*Okay, enough. I'm going to go in and help with dinner. I'm not going to sulk.*

*I'm the one who let Rob come, so if he's going to flirt with my sister the whole time we're here, that's my own damn fault.*

## *Christina*

In December of 1974, Rebecca discovered she was pregnant for the fourth time. The news was a shock to the family. After Fitz's traumatic birth by cesarean section, Dr. Richmond had cautioned the Carpenters against another pregnancy. He believed that Rebecca might not survive a second difficult labor. Rebecca had been taking an oral contraceptive since June 1971, after she brought Fitz back from the hospital.

Jack Carpenter was bewildered, and concerned. Abortion to protect the health of the mother had been legal in Oregon since 1968, and the outcome of *Roe v. Wade* the previous year made abortion a possibility even without the consent of Dr. Richmond. Jack begged Rebecca to consider this option. *We have three beautiful kids already*, he wrote in a note in early January. *I don't want you to die just so we can have a fourth*. But Rebecca was adamant. *I'm not giving up the baby Jack!* she replied. *It's not about right and wrong, you know I'm not about that, but she's my baby and I won't give her up. Don't you think there's something fated about all this?* The notes continued back and forth for over a week, until a visit to Dr. Richmond ended them. After examining Rebecca the doctor announced that she could continue her pregnancy if she agreed to a planned cesarean and weekly hospital visits to monitor her progress. Rebecca readily consented, and Jack found himself with no further voice in the argument.

Around this time Rebecca began writing Audrey more frequently. Jack knew that his wife was lonely; since Teeny Chalke's death Rebecca had made no new friends in Valencia. She spent her days at home, going out for groceries or

occasionally to pick up her children from piano lessons at Mrs. Schuler's house on Bridge Street. She produced hundreds of watercolors and read often. Her father, who still lived in the cabin he had built for Abby all those years before, came most afternoons to visit her. Still, Jack suspected Rebecca missed Teeny more than she admitted, and he was happy for his wife to have a friend to talk to.

The correspondence maintained its frequency through Rebecca's pregnancy. Along with her weekly visits to Dr. Richmond's office, Rebecca now wrote weekly letters to Audrey in Montana. She walked them out to the mailbox on Monday mornings (it was the only day of the week she left the house before noon) and received more sporadic replies, sometimes with weeks between them. Whether or not she received a reply, Rebecca wrote every week. "It was like a diary for her," said Sissy Scott later. "Sometimes I think it didn't matter who was on the other end."

In May, Rebecca asked Dr. Richmond for permission to take a vacation with her husband. The fetus was developing normally, her health was good, and the doctor granted permission. Bill Fitzhugh moved back into the main house for the week to take care of the children, and Rebecca and Jack left for Manzanita, two hours' drive southwest of Valencia. They rented a cottage just off the beach. Jack brought his new Kodak Instamatic and used four rolls of film to snap photos. The weather was not quite good. Rain clouds hovered over the whole trip, but it was a happy time for both Jack and Rebecca. Rebecca, who had been increasingly distant since Fitz's birth, was affectionate and warm. She smiles cornily at the camera in all the photos, always with one hand on her growing belly. A few times she picked up the camera herself, capturing Jack squint-eyed and smiling in front of the frothy gray surf, pretending to

pinch himself with a crab claw at a seafood restaurant, asleep and shirtless in the double bed at the cottage. They returned to Valencia the last week of May. Jack went back to his job at the mill, and Rebecca went back to her painting, her reading, and her letters.

Rebecca's cesarean was planned for Monday, August 18, thirty-nine weeks after conception. As the date drew nearer, Jack became more protective of Rebecca's health. She hardly left her bed, this time at Jack's insistence. Her children were only allowed to see her for regulated, twenty-minute visits, and any shouting or stress-causing behavior resulted in immediate expulsion from the bedroom. Bill came over almost every day to help make dinners or get the kids to bed. In the end, Jack's precautions seemed unnecessary; Rebecca woke on the morning of the procedure having had no complications or emergency doctor's visits. Bill stayed at the house to babysit while Jack drove Rebecca to the hospital in St. Helens. Because this cesarean was planned, unlike the first, Rebecca was awake during the operation, and Jack was allowed to stay in the room with her. They arrived at the hospital at 10:30 am. By 1:00 pm they had a healthy, if small, baby girl, and Rebecca was sewn up and sleeping. Jack drove home that night but came back every morning until mother and daughter were released three days later.

Although they had talked about what to name the baby, they had not reached a decision by the time she was born. Memphis Belle had been named in honor of Bill Fitzhugh and his military service, Alice after Jack's grandmother, and Fitz was officially John Junior. For their youngest daughter they had considered Abigail, Catherine, Margaret, and Fiona, but could not reach a decision. When he came to take

her home from the hospital, however, Rebecca informed Jack that she had decided. They would name their little girl Christina. Jack was surprised but could not refuse. He would always call his youngest daughter by her full name, but everyone else in the family and in town quickly picked up Rebecca's habit of calling her Teeny.

*Still the 30<sup>th</sup>*

*Late, drunk, high. Rob is asleep on the couch next to me. Alice is still out at a party. I'm still not sure what I think about tonight. We drank a few bottles of wine with dinner and after a couple glasses even I got talking, a little. It was fun. Everyone was getting drunk and pretty soon Alice and Rob were talking about sex. I didn't have a lot to contribute. They were telling crazy stories—Alice's high school boyfriend who would only eat her out after he came in her, Rob and some girl in Seattle who would only have sex in total darkness, the time Alice fell asleep and the guy she was with didn't notice. Then Alice told us this story about a guy she's been fucking who needs her to stick a finger up his ass in order to come. Rob laughed really hard but I just gulped some wine. Then Rob said, "I relate, man. Sometimes it just feels good."*

*Alice smiled at him. Her teeth were wine-red. "You like some finger action?" Like a challenge.*

*Rob shrugged and flipped the brim of his hat up. I could tell from his eyes he was close to plastered. "Sure. Fingers, cocks, tongues, whatever." He was looking straight at Alice and not at me.*

*I can't explain what happened when he said that. Cocks. Like a void opening up in my stomach and a tightening in my balls. Like my ears popping so hard I go deaf for a second. And all these thoughts rush in. Rob fucks guys. ROB FUCKS GUYS. And I had no fucking clue. All those times I'd dreamed about him, all those pushed-down thoughts, thinking he'd hate me if he knew, thinking he'd leave me. And all this time he never told me, never said, not until my stupid flirty sister asked.*

*I didn't say anything at all, but Alice jumped in. "Oh, so you're gay then?"*

*“No, bisexual.”*

*They went on talking—Alice was thrilled and curious—but I wasn’t really listening. I just kept drinking wine until I got dizzy. I was picturing Rob with some big faceless queer dude getting fucked in a bathroom stall, like in the gay porno Andy Richter forced me to watch when we were thirteen in his basement and the whole time he kept saying “Disgusting, dude, disgusting,” spitting through his scuzzy brown teeth. I knew that probably wasn’t how it was but it was the only thing I could think of. And I was jealous. I could feel it in the pit of my stomach, weird and burning. Suddenly everything about Rob was making me jealous, how easy it was for him, how he could just say “No, bisexual,” and go on laughing, go on smiling. I stared at him and felt sick and angry and I wanted him and I hated him a little too and my brain and guts were starting to slosh. I couldn’t move without spinning. Meanwhile Alice and Rob talked and every once in a while I threw a word in to prove I was still there. As we were washing dishes (they were giggling about something and I was trying to laugh along) I got horribly nauseous and went to the bathroom and puked purple water. Rob came in a few minutes later. He perched on the sink while I puked.*

*“Hey man, are you ok?” he asked when I was done.*

*I nodded. “Yeah, I’m sorry. Just drank too much.”*

*“Uh-huh.” He flipped his hat. “Man, I’m sorry I didn’t tell you. I got nervous I guess. You make me kind of nervous.”*

*“Uh-huh.” My body still felt like it was moving separate from my brain. His knee was bouncing and we both watched it for a silent minute. Then I felt like shit. Jesus, how must Rob feel? He just told me this big thing, this big thing I have never*

*fucking said, never fucking WRITTEN, still can't fucking write, and I was acting like a total prick.*

*I stood up and tried a smile. "You know it's cool. No big deal."*

*"Cool." He looked at me. I realized I must look awful, sick pale face and puffy eyes. "I guess I thought—"*

*"What?" Would he say it? Would he ask me?*

*"Nothing. No big deal."*

*We went back out to the kitchen where Alice was drying the last of the dishes. "You okay, Fitzy?" she asked. She looked genuinely concerned, in her open-faced Alice sort of way.*

*I told her I was. She was headed out to a party on campus, but I said I wasn't feeling up for it. She made a big deal out of offering to stay and take care of me, but in the end we both knew she would go. Rob decided to stay with me though. When Alice left we smoked some of the weed that Rob had brought and my nausea went away. We drank more wine and talked, lightly. We both tried hard to make our conversation just like one that we would have had before tonight. He self-consciously told me he thought Alice was hot and I tried to feel relieved—it's better that way. If Rob wanted it, he would have said something. He's not like me, not twisted, not shy. Eventually Rob fell asleep.*

*I've been sitting here writing for an hour. Every time I look at him asleep this idea comes into my head, this idea that I could kiss him. I could kiss him and maybe he would kiss me back. No, fuck, he doesn't want that. This is crazy. I'm going to go sleep in Alice's bed.*

### *Memorial Day*

By May 1978, the Carpenters' marriage was visibly collapsing. Screaming matches about money and the children had finally given way to Rebecca's preferred silence. Jack consulted a lawyer in St. Helens about divorce, probably without Rebecca's knowledge, but he never went back for a second appointment. Communication had almost entirely broken down; they had even given up the old practice of sticking angry notes to the fridge. The brief renewal of closeness that they had experienced after their youngest daughter's birth had long since faded.

In the meantime, Rebecca's correspondence with Audrey had reached a feverish rapidity. She wrote and sent letters almost daily while Jack looked on with envy. He and his wife hardly spoke and were never intimate. Town gossip said that Jack spent many of his evenings with Mary Ellen Swift, a plump middle-aged widow and Valencia's only prostitute. If Rebecca had a lover, no one knew him.

The thirtieth of May was always an important day for both Carpenters. For Jack it was a day to honor the three friends and the brother who had died in Vietnam. For Rebecca, of course, it was the anniversary of Teeny's death. Every year they asked Bill to stay home with the kids, who had a holiday from school, and drove together to the cemetery behind St. Matthews. Jack visited his memorials (none of the bodies had been sent home) and Rebecca visited hers (Christina's body, decimated by the blast, had been cremated and her mother had buried an empty coffin). They spent an hour or so in silent reflection before having lunch together at Mac's, then going for a walk in the woods or by the river. It was a strange but significant ritual for both of them, and at the end of their marriage it was more regularly celebrated than their

wedding anniversary.

May 30, 1978 was the last such day they would spend together. Jack remembered wondering if Rebecca would even come that morning, but when he got back to the house from fertilizing the trees Rebecca was waiting for him. They drove together in their habitual silence. As he pulled into the parking lot, Jack remembered Rebecca asking if he loved her. He was taken entirely aback. "Of course I love you," he had said. Then she began to cry, and he held her, and they spent the rest of the day close to one another, hand in hand. They visited all five memorials. The Vietnam memorials are identical, simple black granite headstones with the names and dates carved in gothic letters. Teeny's is in a far corner of the graveyard, away from the church. It is a small rectangle of white stone. The epitaph reads: *God will rock her to sleep.*

Years later, Jack would look back at this day as the first definite sign of her leaving. "She let me see her vulnerable," he said. "She never would have let me see that if she was going to stay."

*October 31, 1987*

*Early. Woke up hungover. Alice was curled in the fetal position next to me, her makeup smeared over her cheeks and temples. I could hear Rob snoring in the living room but I didn't want to bug him. Lay in bed till I got bored, then crawled to the foot of the bed and pulled Mom's journal out and read months and months, into 1962. On March 24 Mom loses her virginity to Sammy.*

I'm devastated. First Sammy, then Teeny. We drove up into the woods...I knew what was coming. I let him do it. He was drunk. He pawed at me in the front seat and then whispered in my ear that we should go to the truck bed. I went. I didn't have a reason not to. I thought...I don't know...I thought maybe if we did it all those things I thought about him when he wasn't there would crystalize into him and I would love him. He ripped my dress trying to get the buttons undone. I took off my underthings to spare them. He didn't get undressed, he just pulled down his pants...he pushed me onto my back and all I could feel was the patches of rust on the metal scraping my skin. When he finally pushed into me I thought, This is it, this is the moment. I watched him grunt on top of me and I felt sick. Everything was numb...down there. It was fast at least. I wanted to throw up. When I stood up I could feel his semen dripping down my leg, cold and sticky. He kissed me and I let him and then I asked him to take me home. I put my dress back on but put my underwear in my purse so it wouldn't get stained. By the time he dropped me off I was sobbing, but quietly and it was dark so I don't think he could see. When I got out of the

truck I ran, just ran to Teeny's, fast as I could, I don't think I've ever run so fast. I climbed up the big magnolia outside her window and into her bed and just sobbed and sobbed. And she held me and told me it would be all right. Her hands in my hair. Then she asked me what had happened. I told her and she got stiff. She pushed me away and told me to go. When I wouldn't leave she started screaming "Get out, get out, get out!" and throwing pillows and books at me. I was worried her mother would wake up. I asked her to be quiet. I asked her what was wrong. She wouldn't tell me, and she wouldn't stop screaming. Things like, "Leave, you stupid slut, just leave, just leave me alone!" So I left. I don't know what's happened. I can't understand why Teeny feels this way. I know I shouldn't have slept with Sammy, but I thought she would understand. I thought she would.

Why is she doing this?

*I started to cry copying that out. Poor Mom. I remember coming home from the first time with Annie, the awkward fumbling, her horrible pain sounds, willing myself to stay hard. When I got home I was exhausted and defeated and I went straight to Alice, Alice who made me feel at least ok. But Mom didn't even get that. Teeny just abandoned her, and she didn't know why. She didn't, but I think I do. Teeny loved her. Like loved her. And Mom had no idea.*

This is how my mom died. She was bouncing between homeless shelters in Bozeman, Montana and living on the street when it was warm enough. The people who met her said she had some sort of dementia—most of the time she didn't know who she was, or if she did she didn't know who the people around her were. No one knew where she had been before. A shelter worker who had seen her come in a few times over the past few years noticed she was looking sick. Often she didn't know how to eat by herself. The shelter worker took her to the hospital and with the help of an ER doctor and some not-very-legal paperwork, got Mom in on her insurance. Mom was admitted to the psych ward where they got her strength back up with IVs. She didn't remember her name, although the shelter worker had gotten it earlier—Rebecca Fitzhugh. She didn't know where she was. The shelter worker, whose name was Mandy, made it sort of her mission to find Mom's family. She talked to other people living and eating at the shelter, and people at other shelters, and eventually she found out that Rebecca had been married to a man named Jack Carpenter and that she

had lived in Valencia, about an hour west of Portland. Mandy called Town Hall in Valencia and asked if there were any Fitzhughs or Carpenters living there. The secretary who answered the phone told Mandy the whole story. She had been a classmate of my mother's. She said she knew Jack had moved to Portland with his kids, but she didn't know anything beyond that.

Meanwhile, at the hospital, Mom was getting worse. The doctors had diagnosed her with early-onset dementia, but it was very advanced and there was nothing they could do for her but make her comfortable. She had a lung infection brought on by aspiration of food, and her kidneys were failing. She had a few days left at most. In her off hours, Mandy had been calling every Carpenter in the Portland area. There are a lot of us. Mom died three days before Mandy got a hold of me, of a stroke. Her body was so weak there was no way she could have survived it. Mandy wasn't sure she would ever find Mom's family, so when they asked her, she requested to have Mom cremated. She offered to ship me the ashes, but I told her I would drive up. I wanted to thank her in person.

We had a brief, awkward meeting. She was a round-faced woman in her early fifties, not much younger than Mom had been. Her carpets reeked of cat piss but she was kind and made me tea. She pressed my hand and told me she had felt a connection with my mother. I wanted to tell her that was more than I had ever felt. She gave me the ashes and I left.

So what can I say about Mom? She was born, she got married, she popped out four kids, she disappeared, and after all that she died alone in a hospital in Bozeman. That's it. That's everything. And there will never be anything else.

*November 1, 1988*

*Really early. Like four a.m. Can't sleep so I think I need to write, write all of it, before it goes away or I get too scared and I don't or whatever. I am in Alice's bed. Rob is asleep next to me. He is naked. I am naked. His hair is over his eyes and his hand is curled around the pillow like a seashell. His face looks different now that I've been so close to it. My stomach is pounding and I feel kind of light all over. We didn't have sex. I'll get to that.*

*Alice woke up and she and I had breakfast. Rob woke up enough to say hi and put on some clothes before he went out to meet his friend who goes to U of O. After we ate Alice and I flopped on the couch and watched TV. She is in a creative writing class and she read me one of her pieces. It was about us, about a time I don't remember, when we still lived in the house in Valencia and she was supposed to walk me home from the bus one day and didn't. She was mad at me for cutting the hair off one of her dolls. The story is entirely unfamiliar to me but the way she described it made it real: the April mud and the churned up grass under the apple trees between the road and the house. It wasn't far, just a few hundred yards, but this was right after Mom left and Dad made us go everywhere together. We couldn't leave the house without a buddy, and since Alice and I were both in elementary school she was mine. We got off the bus and she pushed me to the ground and took off running to the house. Mud flew up everywhere and her socks were soaked through by the time she made the porch. She could hear me behind her crying. Apparently I told Dad what happened later, and he hit her. It was the only time he has ever hit any of us, that I know of. It*

*stayed with her, and I completely forgot it. I wonder what else she remembers I don't, or the other way around.*

*But that's not important. I'm getting distracted. Rob. We sat on the couch until he got back around five. His friend was a guy who had been a few years ahead of him at school in Seattle. I wondered if this guy was gay but didn't ask. Rob had a couple rubber monster masks he'd bought since he and I didn't have Halloween costumes. We had dinner. It was better than the night before, more relaxed, not drunk. I tried not to look at Rob too much but probably did. I was noticing everything about him, but more: the way his smile curved more on the right, the way he cleared his throat before he laughed, freckles around the corners of his eyes I had never seen. Every couple minutes I thought, Rob's kissed guys. The thought was a little shock of lightning.*

*After dinner we went to a bar. I was nervous but no one asked for my ID. Inside was boring—a dark room with a dirty floor, TVs above the red-lit bar. Everywhere drunk girls in mini-skirts masquerading as costumes, fake blood, face paint. My latex monster mask was suffocating but Alice insisted I put it back on every time I lifted it for air. Rob found a long straw and drank a whiskey soda through the gap between the rubbery bloody fangs. Alice knew everyone: the tall mulleted bartender, a series of bearded, sweater-wearing college guys, a few of the mini-skirted girls. Alice wasn't much better in a pair of coat-hanger fairy wings over white ass-hugging jeans and a sequined shirt.*

*One of the sweater guys grabbed Alice's arm and pulled her away, so Rob and I snuck off to the bar for some beers. We both pulled off our masks. His face was*

*red, his hair sweat-flattened. There were beads of sweat on his neck that I wanted to lick but I chased that thought away fast. We clinked glasses and Rob said something like thanks for letting him come and I said something like I'm really glad you did, and he said something like, I really like hanging out with you, and I was drunk and I said, I really like you, and leaned a little closer so my shoulder was touching his shoulder and my face was close to his but not too close. And Rob looked at me for a really long minute, and his eyes were wide and sort of understanding and sort of shy and he smiled and said, Yeah, I really like you too.*

*I found Alice making out with sweater guy near the bathrooms and told her Rob and I were bored and going home. It took a minute to get her full attention and her keys, but I did it. We walked home spinny and tipsy. There were vampires and Frankensteins and Raggedy Anns wandering down the street around us. Trees covered in toilet paper. I had so much nervous energy when we were about halfway home I just started running, sprinting, fast as I could, and Rob ran after me. I got back to the door breathing hard and fumbling with the key. Rob hit me from behind, hard, and put his arms hard around my waist. I turned around and his face was so close to mine and he kissed me.*

*Everything about it felt right and good. The softness of his mouth and his stubble, his arms tight around me, his hands on my back, his hard-on pressing against me through his jeans. Different than I'd imagined it, though now I can't even remember how I thought it would be before. Just thinking about it now is turning me on again. His tongue in my mouth. My hand on his neck, the feel of his hair. Just...right.*

*We stopped kissing and snuck upstairs, but I was on him as soon as we got through Alice's door. We made out against the wall, on the couch, Alice's bed. He took off his shirt, my shirt, and I started to get nervous. He must have noticed because he stopped and said, "You ok, Fitz?" And I said, "I think so," and he said, "What's going on?" and I just went. I told him he was the first guy I'd ever kissed, the first guy I'd ever fully admitted to myself I wanted even though I'm pretty sure I fell in love with Harrison Ford after I saw Star Wars when I was ten and I liked him and I wanted to fuck him but I was too drunk and kind of scared and honestly I never thought he was gay or bi or whatever and even after he told me I was sure he'd never go for someone like me and I just hadn't mentally prepared myself or whatever and could we just kiss? At least for now? And he kissed me and said that was fine.*

*That's basically it. We made out some more and got more naked and he touched my dick and I touched his dick and neither of us came. I thought he might be mad or want more but he didn't push it. After a while we stopped kissing and I asked him the things I had been wanting to ask him, how long he had known he was into guys, how many guys he'd been with, what it was like, did his mom know?*

*He said he had always known, since he was a little kid and he had seen his uncle naked in the showers at the gym. He told his mom later that he wanted to marry Uncle David and she had freaked out. He didn't know why she was so upset. When he was older all his friends were into Princess Leia and Farah Fawcett and pussy and tits. "They talked about poon so much I think it just caught on," is what he said. He dated some girls and fucked two of them, but he was still thinking about guys. So he stayed out late, alone, on Capitol Hill a couple nights in a row, and the second night*

*a guy picked him up and they fucked in his car. His name was Calvin, he was forty-four and married, and he and Rob had sex regularly for a few months. Then Rob went back to cruising, and eventually got into the Seattle scene, and met other guys. I asked him if he'd loved any of them and he said he didn't want to talk about it. We were both drunk and tired, and after awhile Rob stopped answering my questions and passed out. I tried to sleep but couldn't so I started writing. I don't know how I feel. Happy, and excited, but nervous too. What if Rob regrets this in the morning? What if he thinks I'm a pussy for not going further? But mostly just happy. Rob likes me. He kissed me. He's sleeping next to me. I can still feel his hands all over.*

*I should try to sleep. Early bus home in the morning.*

One morning the wife decided to run away. There was a storm coming, she could feel—the flapping of swans’ wings sending gusts of wet air to chill her skin and push her on. The husband wasn’t cruel and loved her, her babies were sweet each in their way. She would miss them, but not enough. The wind was stronger. She packed a knapsack with the essential things: lavender soap, watercolor paper, wool socks, letters in white envelopes. Her housedresses she left behind, as well as her diaries. She thought about walking, as in fairytales, but looking down the long stretch of driveway made her reconsider. She took the husband’s truck. She did not leave a note.

First she drove south, along a coastal highway with views of gray cliffs and shyly crashing waves. In a town of shingled cottages she slept in a cheap motel. The siding was pockmarked with green ferny protrusions, like a budding potato. Tucked into her underwear she kept five hundred dollars cash that she had withdrawn from the joint savings account before she left. She forked over seventeen to a sleepy beach bro for the room, one fifty for runny eggs and coffee, and eight for gas. The next night she slept on the beach under a lightning sky.

She wandered for many years. On the California coast she fell in with a group of Deadheads, but found she didn’t like the music. In northern Arizona she met a mystic who lived alone in a canyon wall and kept pet coyotes. She fell in love with a woman who played guitar on the streets of El Paso, and with a man in New York City who loved heroin more than her. Behind her, over her, there was always the wet air and dark sky. The storm picked her up and carried her North. She stayed for a long

time in Minneapolis with a writer who threatened suicide every time she tried to leave. When she finally went she left a note that said, “Go ahead and jump.”

She fueled helicopters in Alaska and filed college applications in Cambridge. In Wyoming she learned to ride horses. On Bourbon Street she cleaned up vomit and empty beer bottles, but not for long before the storm pushed her on. She had many names but she was always just who she wanted to be, the woman.

When she was unhappy she moved on. Nothing and no one held her faster than she wanted to be held.

There were words that whispered through her dreams, through the wind, and sometimes onto the page when she was writing a grocery list or a goodbye note.

TEENY ISN'T DEAD. No matter where she went the words followed her or led her on, hidden in the dark clouds and the flecks of rain. It had been many years since Teeny had exploded herself and the woman had long since given up hope of seeing her again. But the words would not leave her alone, and they were still murmuring when she arrived in California.

There, the woman found her way to a magical Rainbow City where the sun shone all year except for the summer. Streamers decorated every corner and flowers lined the streets. Everyone was young and beautiful and gay. She rented a small room with a bay window and began to paint and to settle. She made friends among the handsome men who were her neighbors and tried to put down her roots and ignore the wind rattling her window.

Soon though, a terrible plague struck the city. The woman's friends began to thin like skeletons and die. She sat with them in sickly hospital rooms and grieved

them and grieved them until there were too many and grief itself was routine. And it was during this time, in a hospital hallway that was too familiar by far, that the woman saw Teeny again.

She was older, her hair was short, and she wore glasses, but there was no mistaking the brown penny eyes, the long calves. Teeny recognized the woman, too, and they stood staring for a long time.

That night Teeny came back to the bay-windowed room with the woman, and the night after that, and every night after. The woman knew better than to ask how Teeny was alive lest, like Eurydice, she crumble with disbelief. Besides, the woman had always known. Holding Teeny's long white body in her arms that first night, the woman allowed herself one secret smile. She had heard it whispered in the apple trees, in the prairie grass, in the city streets, everywhere she went, the world had told her. Teeny isn't dead.

Outside, the storm tapped the window.

I think I need to leave. I woke up this morning buried in my sheets from a dream that I was choking. I called in sick to work, and Jenny told me if I didn't come today I should damn well expect to never come again. I said ok and hung up. Who needs a job, right? Just a bunch of whiny pseudo-literatis who care more about the Starbucks in the back corner than the books in the aisles. People whose eyes I can't even meet anymore. Stocking shelves with self-help books and inspirational memoirs for minimum wage. It's not worth it. Nothing's worth it.

The magnolias in the front yard were just starting to bloom under a sweet pale gray sky. I loaded the dogs up into my little Camry. Without really thinking about it I grabbed Alice's book on my way out and tossed it next to me on the passenger seat. Then I started driving west. I didn't have a good idea of where I was going until I cleared Beaverton on the Sunset Highway. I hadn't been back to Valencia since Grandma Celia, Dad's mom, passed eight years ago. A drizzly rain started as we got into the rolling farms past the suburbs. Chops crawled into my lap, as he likes to do

when I drive, and Mutt whined, jealous. “Shut up, dog,” I said, not with any real malice. He lay down and sighed.

The drive was shorter than I remembered it. First the exit for Valencia, an inauspicious right turn across the highway from a fruit stand and a Dairy Queen. Then into the woods, down Main Street and past the new high school (they built it after bad floods last year), and up the unmarked road to the orchard.

The trees emerged first, gloomy in the drizzle, then the house. The gutters were mossy and a few of the windows broken. Strange thing is I own this house. Grandpa Bill willed it to Dad when he died, and Dad couldn’t sell it, so he left it to me. He leased the orchard to a family who lives in town—I get rent checks once a month—but the house has been empty for years. In December there’s not much to do with apples, so I wasn’t worried about running into anyone.

I let the dogs out of the car and they took off among the trees, chasing after each other. The air was chilly and wet. I stuffed my hands in my pockets and walked slowly up to the house.

My key worked, though the lock was rusty. The kitchen door swung open and I felt like I was walking into a dream. All the furniture was gone, of course. I tried the switch but no one had paid an electric bill out here in ten years, so I went forward in the gray underwater gloom.

The kitchen counters were covered in a thick layer of dust and there were cobwebs in all the corners. The living room was more eerie, with the pot-bellied woodstove standing alone among the clutter of a quick cleaning out: newspapers, wood scraps, packing peanuts. In one corner I found a piece of paper with Grandpa

Bill's shaky handwriting on it: *Peaches, Beans, Bread, Buttermilk*. I walked up the stairs and almost tripped in the near dark. Upstairs, the long hallway leading to the bedrooms and the bathroom we all shared. Our bedroom still had its big oak bunk bed—it'd been too heavy to move. The mattresses had been stripped and tipped onto the floor. Someone had left the window open and the all wood was damp and rotting. One of the beds collapsed under my touch and I had to jump backwards so I didn't get crushed. I left the room breathless, closing the door on the wreckage.

Mom and Dad's bedroom, which had been Grandpa and Grandma's before them, was in better shape. The floor still bore marks from the four corners of the heavy iron bed, and the wallpaper was a little scuffed where the dresser had been. Grandma Abby died in that bed, and almost Fitz when Mom went into labor early. I wonder where it is now. I was feeling claustrophobic so I went to the window and pushed it open. This room has the best view, set on the corner so you can see the trees on one side and the stream and the fields on the other. Some days if you squint you can see the Chalke house, where Mom's friend Teeny lived. In the rain it was just a brown smudge against the gray field. I heard the dogs barking outside, and a little farther away the roar of the Sunset Highway, just a couple miles south. The air was heavy and wet and cold. A breeze threw the rain onto my face and hands.

I sat in the middle of the room and closed my eyes. I'm still here, I haven't moved. The sun is starting to set. The rain has stopped. I don't know what I am waiting for. I don't know why I'm here, what I expect. My siblings have moved and moved on. Mom is dead. Dad is dead. Grandpa Bill is dead, and Grandpa Wallace and Grandma Sissy. Jed is gone. My baby is gone. But I'm still here. Still.

## *Audrey*

January of 1979 was a time of changes for the entire Carpenter family. Jack became manager at the mill and began sleeping out in the cabin. Bill kindly made up a bed for him in the small sitting room. With Jack's move, Rebecca became feverishly attached to her children, waking early to prepare them elaborate lunches and doing their homework for them in the evenings. Memphis knew enough to be as wary of this cheerful behavior as of her mother's habitual depression, but Alice and Fitz were thrilled to have Rebecca's attention for once. Even more than her older children, Rebecca doted on her youngest daughter. She spent money they could not spare on frilled jumpers and insisted on carrying three-year-old Teeny everywhere on her hip. After dinner she sat on the couch and wrote letters while the kids watched TV.

On a Saturday in February, Rebecca drove with Alice to Portland for her quarterly blood draw, a treatment for Alice's hemochromatosis. The day was crisp and sunny, unusual for Willamette Valley in the winter. After the appointment, Rebecca took Alice to a Baskin-Robbins for an ice cream. It was there that the two of them met Audrey. She was a tall, broad-shouldered woman with long brown hair and a cowboy hat. She had clearly been waiting for them, for she stood awkwardly when Rebecca walked through the door.

Audrey and Rebecca embraced, and Rebecca introduced her daughter. Alice knew that Audrey was her mother's friend, but nothing more. Alice greeted Audrey with the same flirtatiousness with which she greeted all adults who might give her a candy or a compliment. Audrey called her "a little grown-up," which satisfied Alice.

After the introductions had been made, Rebecca sent her daughter to the display to sample ice cream flavors while the two women talked.

The rendezvous was brief; in less than an hour Rebecca and Alice were in the car driving back to Valencia. Rebecca made Alice swear not to tell anyone about the meeting, a promise she kept. Even as an adult, she hesitated to break faith with her mother's last request.

Over the next month Rebecca's furious attention to her children faded. She became more distant and resumed her habitual quietness, but she let Jack back into their bedroom. Her father and husband both felt a measure of relief: a sad Rebecca was at least Rebecca they understood. Jack wrote to his cousin Sissy, since moved to Olympia with her husband, "I am beginning to feel hopeful for the first time in years. She is speaking again, she is painting again. I may have her back."

On the morning of March 24, 1979, Rebecca stayed in bed while Jack got the kids ready for school and walked them to the bus. Sometime between 8:30 am and 3:30 pm—when Memphis, Alice, and Fitz came home to an empty house and a screaming Teeny—Rebecca slipped away. She took with her some paintings, some cash, and all of Audrey's letters.

Nov 2, 1988

*Got home late last night, haven't had a chance to write. School's in about an hour, just waiting for Chris to finish breakfast. I'm too nervous to eat. Rob and I woke up hungover and late so we had to run to our bus. Alice knows, has to know—we were naked in her bed when she got home—but she didn't say anything about it, just kissed us both goodbye at the bus stop and told me we would talk soon.*

*Rob and I sat really close together on the bus. The ride went too fast. When we were sitting down he took my hand in his and traced little patterns on it. We didn't talk about anything real, just boring stuff, but everything felt coded, important. My heart was beating so loud anyone could hear it.*

*Dad was waiting at the bus stop so we couldn't really say goodbye. I just waved. And we haven't talked since then. I'm so excited I can hardly write.*

*I've been thinking a lot about Mom, and about Teeny. I couldn't sleep when I got home, and Dad went right to bed, so I stayed up and finished her journal. It ends kind of abruptly—I guess she stopped writing after Teeny died. They make up a few weeks after their fight, and something about Mom changes. I know I said that Mom didn't know about Teeny being a lesbian, but I'm not so sure now. I think Mom might have loved her too. And maybe that's just me, but I'm not sure. This is her very last entry, May 29 1963:*

Had a beautiful day with Teeny. Our dreams are too big to be contained, glorious and spreading like clouds at sunset. Together in the city, a cozy apartment, working in an office, eating out at restaurants. Glamor for Teeny, simplicity for me. I want to tell our families, but Teeny insists on

leaving her mark and vanishing. She is dramatic, and has more anger in her than I do. This is a disagreement between us but I don't think I can change her mind. But there was no fighting today. We walked down to the stream and lay in the high grass on the bank, eating strawberries and blueberries I brought from the yard. She was cheerful and sweet, threw blueberries for me to catch and splashed me with water from the stream when I wasn't looking. We walked into town and drank sodas at Mac's. We did not see Sammy, which I am grateful for. I do not know how the company of one person can make me so happy, but Teeny is my other half, a wild light to my darkness. We kissed goodbye early and Teeny went home to sleep. She will sneak over later, as she usually does. I find now that I can't sleep without her warmth behind me. I think I will put on my nightgown and read a little before she comes.

*That night Teeny set up her bomb in Valencia High School and died igniting it. Mom doesn't write anymore, but this is love. This is my mom in love.*

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This book is dedicated to three people.

To John Carpenter, who died before this project was finished—I love you Dad. All of this is for you.

To the beautiful Teeny Chalke—you made it out. We won't forget.

And to Rebecca Fitzhugh, mother, muse, heroine—

ALICE FITZHUGH CARPENTER

*New York, March 2004*

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