

Aftermath: Three Stories

by

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Return

No matter how many times Erika comes home, it surprises her how flat and empty everything is in Prairie Hills.

Chicago, fenced in by Lake Michigan on one side and neat stubborn suburbs on the other three, expands upward and inward. It grows, and cranes criss-cross the sky, and piles of lumber crowd the alleyways. The city stretches upward or tunnels into itself for new spaces to fill. In Chicago, Erika hears people complaining and wants to tell them about Iowa. All this space, just a few hours west of the city. Entire houses to be had for the price of a one-bed in the Loop. It's as if people don't know about the land surrounding them.

But then Erika drives home, a few days before Christmas in her senior year of college, and remembers why this is. No snow has fallen yet, and everything is gray and brown, featureless except for an old silo, a billboard with the paper peeling off, a stunted tree. Where there are buildings, they're squat and sprawling and too far apart, each cocooned in vast expanses of parking lot. And in the winter, when the fields along the highway aren't blanketed by corn, it's easy to forget that they belong to someone. When she gets into Prairie Hills at two in the afternoon, the main road seems almost empty. She can only see other people through glass—the windows of the cars that pass every minute or so, the tinted glass of the fast-food restaurants and

office buildings they pass.

Most of the stops along the interstate are towns in only a nominal sense, existing solely to feed drivers on their way somewhere else. As far as Erika can tell, Prairie Hills has developed into something more mostly because of the soft rolling hills that appear briefly alongside the highway. A little topographical variation and there's two schools, a library, a rundown mall. The hills are crowned with rows of McMansions, neighborhoods in which the same architectural elements—brick doorways, dormer windows, pseudo-Grecian columns—repeat themselves on every house in different arrangements.

Erika's parents live in one of these. Erika did not notice the sameness until she came back from college for the first time, three years prior—how colorless the whole place seems to be, now. Last month she saw Chicago municipal workers hang Christmas lights on the trees in the park. Here, wreaths sold door-to-door by the Boy Scouts hang on people's front doors. And it is so quiet.

The house is empty when she gets home. She convinced her parents not to leave work early, and Caroline is presumably still on the road from Omaha. There's a house key taped to the underside of the birdbath in her mother's garden; she lets herself in and deposits her bags in the front hall.

Strange, she thinks, how you never realize your house has a smell until you return after a long time. She picks up bread, lemon soap, maybe even the spice-sweet of the holiday candles her mother sets out every December first. The Christmas tree has been erected, icicle lights strung through its branches, but no ornaments will be put on until all four of them are home.

There's little in the fridge, and Erika hasn't eaten since leaving Chicago in the morning. So she goes back out, drives to the superstore. It's a sprawling Wal-mart by the highway, open twenty-four hours a day. In high school, Erika and her friends would sometimes come here when they wanted to get out of their houses at night, just talk and wander the aisles for hours. Now the place bustles, the automatic doors hardly closing as people stream out, pushing carts full of Christmas food.

Erika stops to give a dollar to the Salvation Army worker ringing his bell by the entrance, an old man in a marshmallow coat and Santa hat. He's the first person she's spoken to since getting home.

Inside, it's crowded and noisy, processions of people and their carts clogging the aisles near the cash registers. Half the population, it seems, is here getting their gifts and cookies and decorations. Tinny pop carols pipe into the store from speakers overhead. The feeling she had driving in, of entering a ghost town, eases, and she finds she's smiling in spite of herself. Maybe she should bake a tray of cookies before everyone else gets home. She has the time.

It's strange to be here alone. Usually when she's home on breaks, she slips back into old roles, taking up her chores and letting her mother do the shopping and cooking. For a moment she wonders whether the people around her are thinking of her as a woman, a woman alone in the store, rather than a girl. But probably no one gives so much thought to things like that.

She's about to turn down the baking aisle when she catches a glimpse of familiar broad shoulders ahead of her, tousled brown hair beneath a baseball cap. She freezes. For a moment she considers ducking down the nearest aisle, fleeing that way. But no,

that would be silly. Embarrassing. There's no bad blood between her and Chase. No reason she shouldn't speak to him.

He notices her a second later, doing a double take. "Erika!" Grinning, he leaves his cart—he has to be the only boy in Prairie Hills willing to be seen pushing a grocery cart—and comes toward her, his arms open and only a glimmer of uncertainty in his eyes.

"Chase." Erika hugs him as well as she can with her basket on one arm. He's gotten taller, if it's possible. She can't see over his shoulder.

She pulls back, grateful that her capacity for blushing has diminished. "How's things?"

She hasn't seen him in two and a half years. The summer after their freshman year of college, she and Chase and Daniel Alvarez had gotten together a few times at their old haunts—the old diner by the interstate, the park behind the high school. She'd hoped that they could put the strangeness of the foregoing year behind them, be friends again the way they had when they were fifteen. Easy, uncomplicated. But she'd realized almost immediately that it wasn't to be. Something had fractured between them, though she couldn't pinpoint the exact moment it had happened.

Erika's main concern had been to see that Daniel was okay. When she saw that he was, the growing-apart didn't trouble Erika as much as she'd expected. Of the three of them, she suspected that the separation had wounded Chase the most. Guilt washes over her as she realizes it, there in the store. She's thought so little of him.

He doesn't look wounded, though, in his father's old bomber jacket and the baseball cap that he's had since he was fourteen. The uprightness that made him both

so charismatic and occasionally unbearable has mellowed since she's last seen him. He's no longer the golden boy whom Erika had dreamed about bringing down to earth, but he looks solid, happy. In another life, she thinks, without Daniel, she and Chase could have kept in touch even after their juvenile relationship had fizzled out. They could have been good friends.

They exchange pleasantries, stories of their senior year, future plans. Chase will join a missionary group to China in the summer. Privately, she wonders if anyone had ever succeeded in luring him into bed. She can't imagine having gotten this far in life without sex, and with a body like his, he can't be lacking opportunities. But then her mind is not like Chase's. He has always been remarkably able to want something, to acknowledge the want, and then set it aside and go on with his life. Erika's wants eat her up from within. They drove her from Chase to Daniel and later from Prairie Hills to Chicago. Possibly it's why she feels so at loose ends now. She's happy. She doesn't know what to do next.

She's still surprised, years later, at how fast everything fell apart between the three of them.

They had just graduated high school and Erika felt brave and frightened and discontented all at once. More every day she realized she wasn't in love with Chase. More every day she found herself stealing glances at Daniel, his slim frame and big dark eyes, and burning up with a small shameful thrill when he looked back.

One night she drove him home after an evening at Chase's house. He didn't get out immediately when she pulled into his driveway. He'd fiddled with the radio

dashboard, his hair falling over his face, manipulating the dials for bass and treble until the soft pop song playing suddenly made sense to Erika in a way it never had before. She didn't want to go home.

Somehow Daniel's hand found its way on top of hers. And she'd allowed it. Her heart was beating faster than she could ever remember. They sat there in the dark, engine on but headlights off, and soon Daniel pulled her in.

"Okay," he said after a long moment. "Just how bad should I feel about that?"

Erika didn't say anything. What was there to say? Daniel had kissed her, but she could have pulled away. She hadn't.

"Will you tell Chase?" Daniel's voice was carefully neutral. He glanced sideways at her, not quite meeting her eyes.

Erika looked away toward the house, with its dark windows, the moon casting shadows of elm trees over its walls. She could imagine Chase in his own room, in bed at midnight, it never having occurred to him that he couldn't trust his girlfriend and his best friend.

"I don't know," she said. "Not tonight."

She didn't tell him, but she broke up with him a week later, also in her car. Seemed her life's most important moments occurred in the dark, upholstery-scented interior of her station wagon, with the faint lights of the dashboard illuminating the face of whoever sat across from her.

Chase pressed her for reasons and she offered none. Maybe it was stupid, but she didn't want to be the one to sow chaos between him and Daniel. At the time, she

didn't want their little trio to shatter entirely.

After he'd gone inside, she pulled the car around the corner and sat idling there for half an hour until she was composed enough to drive home. She'd fully expected to cry, but no tears came. Instead, the memory of the kiss was taking root in her mind. She'd pushed it down for Chase's sake, along with a hundred other little wants and discontents. Selfishness and guilt chased each other inside her head.

Later that night, at home in her bed, she worked and reworked a text message to Daniel, telling him what she'd done, wondering where to go from there. She pressed *send* and waited, her heart in her throat. But he didn't answer. And didn't answer.

The news came in a text message from Daniel's mother, sent to her and Chase both. Suddenly Erika found her world rearranged.

Erika's mother heard what happened and called in sick to drive Erika to Mercy Hospital, forty minutes away on the other side of Des Moines. Always a sympathetic crier, she had to wipe her eyes at red lights, while Erika huddled and shook in the passenger seat, trying very hard not to feel that she was somehow at fault. Her mother's hand resting on her shoulder just made her feel worse.

She hadn't been to the hospital since she was eight years old and her grandfather was dying. It was as dull and menacing as she remembered, all brown brick and ninety-degree angles, with a steel cross hanging high over the entrance. Windows stared out, dark and uniform, and neatly trimmed hedges hugged the building.

Her mother led her through the doors into a carpeted lobby, where rows of seats

like the ones in airports lined the walls; the few people in them sat apart from each other, not speaking. The only sounds were the low drone of the air conditioning and the woman behind the desk on the other side of the room, talking fast and low into the telephone. Erika felt like she was seeing and hearing everything through a pane of glass—faces were blurred, voices buzzy and indistinct like the adults' *wah-wah* voices in a Charlie Brown cartoon. She stood back while her mother spoke to the receptionist, trying not to cry more, conscious of the people around them.

Someone led them down a series of fluorescent-lit hallways, weaving between harried-looking staff in scrubs pushing rattling carts. The walls were painted a light sea green that Erika supposed was meant to be comforting, but which just made her slightly nauseous. The cold air carried a faint chemical smell. Turn and turn again. The last long hall opened to a smaller alcove with a desk and a set of double doors.

The woman behind the desk took their names and Erika's mother's bag, stowing it on a shelf behind her with a smile that said *just procedure*. She pressed a button that made the doors open of their own accord, revealing another, narrower hall lined by doors, each of which was labeled with a handwritten notecard that Erika couldn't read through her blurred eyes. The aide that had brought them to the wing walked in ahead of them and knocked softly on the second door to the left. Erika, a few feet back, didn't hear the affirmation that must have come from inside, but he opened the door and Rob and Susan Alvarez stepped through.

Rob looked exhausted, his eyes pouched and jaw dark with stubble. Susan, though—Erika had only ever seen her, some kind of businesswoman, in low heels and impeccable blacks. She looked startlingly young and small now, in jeans and

scuffed gym shoes, her blond hair hanging limply around her face. She was shorter than Erika.

Hugs, soft words. Erika's mother hugged both of Daniel's parents. Somehow she knew exactly how to speak and act in every situation, kissing Susan's cheek and gripping Rob's shoulder. Distantly Erika wondered if the instinct would ever come to her, or if she would always be like this, thinking too much about everything—*move. Breathe. Tell them you're sorry. Sorry about what?* Nothing came naturally.

Rob had stepped through the door, standing back so the women could enter. Dread twisted Erika's stomach as she stepped in. The light in the room came from a window looking over the parking lot. On an armchair in the corner, a scarf with knitting needles still attached draped over the chair and trailed on the floor.

Susan went to the bed, touched Daniel's forehead lightly. Erika was sweating. She'd been steeling herself as she drove to the hospital, rehearsing her greetings and her reactions, preparing to swallow back tears or worse. But now, as she drew up to the bed, she realized she didn't have to. There was grief, there was horror somewhere—but it was almost abstract. Like she was viewing the record of some distant tragedy in a history museum.

Daniel was asleep. Someone had folded the scratchy blue hospital blanket up off his left leg, leaving it visible. His calf was encased in a cast, his knee crowned with an impressive bruise, purple in the middle. It was the kind of bruise a child got falling off a bike. It surprised her.

Well, better his knees than his neck, she thought. If something had to break.

It was at once better and worse than she'd expected. Daniel's face, asleep, was

pale but peaceful. His only visible injuries were his leg and a dark scab on his mouth, where it looked like he'd bitten his lip.

And yet. There was a tube in his nose, and another running out from beneath the blankets. The bones in his face stuck out more sharply than usual, and the fluorescent light made him look sallow. She could smell him, an acrid hint of old sweat in the disinfected hospital air.

"He's improving," Susan said, coming to stand beside her. "He looks much better than he did, if you can believe it."

Erika imagined what he looked like worse, and then wished she hadn't tried. She swallowed. "How long will he be here?"

"I'm not sure," Susan said after a moment of hesitation. She gazed down at her son, her expression unreadable. "A few days for sure. Maybe a week, two even."

Erika took a breath—her mouth was dry, her tongue heavy. "Has he woken up?"

"On and off. For a bit this morning."

What did he say? Erika wanted to ask, but wasn't sure if the question would be welcome. Looking at Daniel's face embarrassed her. She imagined herself blushing, imagined that it must be readable on her face what they had done together, then felt foolish for thinking it. As if an illicit kiss mattered at a moment like this.

Her gaze was drawn back to his knee, a knobby palette of blues and purples and yellows layered on his light brown skin. It seemed realer somehow than everything else about the scene. It brought the details she'd been trying to forget back to the surface of her mind, the things she'd heard whispered over the phone or floating around online in the past forty-eight hours. He'd gotten drunk; he'd tried to hang

himself from his ceiling fan. There was a wail rising inside Erika that she knew she'd never let out—*why, why didn't you say something?* She wanted to put her hand over his atop the covers. She wanted to run away. Her heart was starting to race, her stomach turn.

Someone suggested a prayer. Erika felt a tiny spike of disbelief. Prayers were for meals and Sunday services; did they really bring anyone comfort? But she joined hands with the others around the bed, taking her mother's hand and Rob's still-shaking one. Praying in church was one thing, when everyone's voice joined together in something like a current. But here, in this sickly green room under fluorescent lights, Erika had never felt more like they were talking at a void. She had to suppress the urge to laugh.

She'd forgotten to close her eyes. So she saw Rob's brow creasing, saw the tear that escaped down Susan's cheek, leaving a faint track in the powder. And she saw, just for a second, Daniel open his eyes.

The next time she went to the hospital, she was alone. Mrs. Alvarez's knitting was still piled in the chair by the window, the scarf longer now.

Daniel looked better, propped against the headboard with pillows, though he still wore the shapeless hospital gown. A book lay open in his lap, but he was gazing out the window at the parking lot.

He looked at her when she came in, and raised his eyebrows. "Hey."

Erika hovered awkwardly by the door, unsure whether to sit down or escape while she still could. "How are you feeling?"

He nodded toward the chair beside the bed. “Do you want to sit down?”

Erika didn't fail to notice how he dodged her question, but she went to the bedside anyway. There was a moment before she sat down when they looked at each other, both aware that this was the moment for a hug, if there was to be one. But he didn't move toward her. She sat down, perching on the edge of the chair, situating her bag in her lap to give her hands something to do.

Daniel didn't look any more comfortable. He crossed his arms and uncrossed them, drew his knees up to his chest beneath the blanket and wrapped his arms around them. “How are things?” he asked, not meeting her eyes.

A slightly strangled laugh escaped from her throat. “How do you think?”

“Does everyone know?” He was still looking out the window at nothing.

“Not everyone.” Twice since they had entered high school, someone had died. One senior girl, beautiful and well-liked, who'd drowned at her family's lake cabin one weekend their sophomore year. The funeral was open to the whole school, and the next day everyone wore pink—the girl's favorite color. With the collective grief came a strange rush of neighborly feeling, hugs with strangers, tears shed openly in the halls. People told their friends they loved them. Promised to be better to each other, since tomorrow wasn't guaranteed.

Later that year, a junior boy didn't show up to school. By the lack of detail in the principal's loudspeaker announcement a few days later, everyone knew it was suicide. The reaction was different that time, quieter. People avoided each other's eyes. A boating accident was a tragedy, but no one knew what to say about someone who had decided to die.

They hadn't said anything about Daniel. "Only our friends know," she said. "Jon sent a letter."

"Thank God."

Erika folded her arms across her chest and looked around the room, trying to find something she could plausibly look at instead of him. It was hard—the room was bare, its walls an ugly sea green. "So," she said, trying hard to keep her voice light. "How long will you stay here?"

"A few more days, maybe. Not long. I've heard the doctors talking—they think I'm okay to go home."

"Are you?" The words were out before Erika could stop them.

"I'm not going to try again, if that's what you mean," he said.

Erika breathed out. "If there's anything I can do—"

"Don't worry about it."

"I broke up with Chase," she said. "You know that, right?"

For the first time since she arrived, Daniel looked at her and held her gaze. "He told me."

"How, um—" Erika's voice caught in her throat. She looked sheepishly down at her hands. "How is he holding up?"

Daniel's mouth twitched. "Getting by."

Erika suddenly felt ashamed. She got to her feet. "Well, if you need anything—"

Daniel blinked. "There's one thing," he said. "I know my parents don't want me to be alone in the house, but they need to go back to work."

This didn't fit with what Erika knew of Rob and Susan. They would drop

everything, they would overturn their lives for Daniel. But she didn't argue with him. Thinking about it, she could understand why he might not want to be alone with them. This, at least, was something she could do.

At the appointed hour the next day, she crossed paths with Mr. Alvarez in the driveway as he left and she arrived. He rolled down the window of his Audi and gripped her hand.

“Thank you for coming,” he said. Every time Erika had seen him he'd looked tired, but he was unusually so now, sallow and stooped in the driver's seat. “Susan and I appreciate it, truly.”

The earnestness in his voice made Erika uncomfortable. Her heart beat fast at the thought of Daniel inside. “It's nothing,” she said, smiling as best she could. “Glad to do it.”

Mr. Alvarez thanked her again and backed out of the driveway as she made her way to the front door. Daniel opened it before she could knock. It was a relief to see him in his usual clothes, baggy jeans and a black sweater, though they looked a bit looser than they did before. But maybe she was imagining things. She couldn't push down the lightness in her heart, despite the gravity of everything, of her standing there.

Daniel stood back to let her in. Their impressive house was dim, the curtains drawn. There was a moment of quiet.

They fell into the kiss as if it has been planned in advance. Daniel grabbed her waist and drew her in, and bent his head to hers. Her lips opened automatically under

the pressure. His hands found hers. Pulled her toward a place she had never been.

She should call Daniel, Erika thinks now. She should see how he's doing.

She doesn't know anything about his life these days except for what she sees through the window of a computer screen, when his posts pop up on her feed. She never seeks out news about him. It's not that the reminders sting anymore; they don't—not like the first year, when a picture of him with his arm around a strange girl could jar her for days. Now avoiding these things is just habit, like she's finally learned to step over a crack in the sidewalk after she's fallen a dozen times.

In the first year, the thought of him had kept her up at night, even with the lights of Chicago around her, the noise of her classmates' parties in her ears, and car horns on the streets outside. It wasn't until she fell in love again that the raw spot around Daniel healed. She was embarrassed to acknowledge it—but it took meeting a boy from the West Coast, a boy who smelled like sandalwood and touched her like something precious, before she could plant both feet in her new life.

The things they did together had an entirely different quality than anything she'd done with Daniel in his dark warm cocoon of a basement. With Daniel there had been the strange sense that they were just passing the time, their activities only a half step above masturbation. She was more concerned with not doing anything wrong than chasing her own satisfaction, with the result that the whole thing seemed underwhelming when the endorphins faded. Not that Erika realized any of this at the time. Whatever Daniel's faults, she loved him. Part of her still does, though on most days he is as far from her mind as Prairie Hills itself.

One day, they were in his bed, lying side by side under the covers, and it was absurd but Erika couldn't help but think of summer Bible camp when she was younger. The way she and the other campers would turn in their beds, so their heads were near each other, and whisper. With these girls that you would probably never see again, it was safe to share secrets. There were games of Truth or Dare in which no one ever dared, because really, which was more frightening, more thrilling? She remembered lying there in the musty-smelling dark of the cabin, and the thrill in her skin as the girl in the bunk above her had described the kiss she'd had down by the lake, her matter-of-fact voice not quite disguising her breathlessness. Then, even a chaste kiss was a leap into the unknown.

Beyond the physical fact of the thing, she wasn't sure how she felt about what she'd done with Daniel. She wished he would ask her, then felt guilty for it. She could just see him in the dark, the light from the muted TV flickering over his face. His slight smile.

"If I ever do die," he said, "it's your job to talk shit about me at school, okay? Don't let them paint me like some sort of angel."

His voice was so light, like he was asking her for help with his math homework. *This is all so stupid*, he'd said to her the day before. *I was drunk and lonely. It won't happen again.*

Her throat was tight; it took her two tries to get the words out. "You know I can't do that," she said, as evenly as she could. "What could I say, Daniel?" *What could I say without implicating myself?*

He shrugged. They were touching along the length of their bodies, hips pressed together and ankles overlapping. “Just a thought.”

Those days with him stretched strangely in Erika’s memory. The strange, muggy weather, the latitude her parents gave her since her staying out late was ostensibly for Daniel’s well-being. The sex—it all made her feel as if she was living someone else’s life. It was a separate era within the confines of the summer.

In reality, the visits to his house, those afternoons spent together, lasted only a few weeks before things started to go downhill. Daniel could be snappish and moody. She asked him how he was every day, and he never asked the same question back. He was content to stay in the house, curtains blocking out the sun as the bright days flew by outside. He had flashes of anger—towards Erika, himself, his family, the world—that could explode like tiny grenades and then dissipate into nothing.

Sometimes it was hard to remember why she was there. But then he’d smile at her in that lopsided way he had, or laugh at one of her stupid jokes, and those moments made her forget everything else.

Then Chase showed up at the front door. Erika invited him in, though it felt strange, given that Chase had probably spent more time in the Alvarez house than she had in their respective lifetimes. She didn’t know if he’d seen Daniel since he’d had left the hospital, or if he knew about the original kiss in Daniel’s driveway. She didn’t think so. Still, Chase was trusting, not stupid. He could put two and two together as well as anyone.

“Well, this is a party,” Daniel said, seeing Chase in the doorway. He looked amused, not surprised. He’d been in an ugly mood that afternoon, and Erika found herself hoping he could put it under wraps while Chase is here. She wasn’t sure if the hope was for Daniel’s sake, or Chase’s, or her own.

Chase took a seat on one of the chairs opposite the couch, hesitation in all his movements. “You look better,” he said, looking at Daniel’s forehead rather than into his eyes.

A beat passed, two, three. “I’ll give you some privacy,” Erika said. The words came out a little sharp, though she hadn’t meant them that way.

She withdrew into the kitchen, running the tap and clanking plates together. She washed the dishes as noisily as she could, but she couldn’t not notice the silence from the living room. It was a physical thing, reaching around corners to poke at her in the kitchen. She imagined Daniel watching Chase, testing his newfound ability to make people uncomfortable just by holding their gaze.

At length, Chase spoke. “Are you angry with me?”

“Why would I be?” But Daniel sounded aggrieved.

“Because I haven’t been around,” she heard Chase say. “And because you haven’t spoken to me since before...before.”

“I’ve had other things on my mind,” Daniel said. “I have a therapist now. Doctor visits. And a girlfriend.”

Erika’s hand tightened on the mug she was washing, but Chase didn’t rise to the bait. His voice, when he spoke again, was calm, if halting.

“I just—I just wish you’d said something to me,” he said. “I could’ve done something, I could have—”

“Done *what?*” Daniel cut in harshly. “Talked me out of it? Told Jon, told my mom?”

“Maybe. I don’t know.”

Daniel made a derisive noise. “Then why not tell them when I was skipping school or had a handle in my car? Drinking, truancy, suicide. A sin is a sin is a sin.”

“I didn’t say that.” Chase’s voice was very low, the way Erika knew it got when he was upset. “Don’t put words in my mouth.”

“You wouldn’t have known what to do with me,” Daniel said. “You still don’t. Look at you. My best friend and you won’t even look at me.”

Silence, for a long moment, and then Chase spoke again: “Can you blame me?”

Daniel didn’t answer, and after an interminable moment, Erika heard Chase’s footsteps leaving the living room. His long shadow crossed the kitchen floor for a moment, making Erika freeze with her hands under the faucet, but he didn’t stop. Daniel was silent as the front door slammed.

Erika let the water run for long enough to make it seem like she hadn’t been listening, then shut it off. She went into the living room to find Daniel in exactly the same position she’d left him in, cross-legged in his father’s armchair with his hands resting on the arms like a monarch. His shoulders were rigid, his face stormy with anger and something she couldn’t identify. The whole encounter had lasted maybe two minutes.

“Asshole,” he said, eyes cutting to the door.

Erika didn't reply. The truth was that her heart was with Chase as they both listened to his car rumble away, that she'd pity anyone subjected to Daniel in his present state—much less Chase, who had only ever meant his friend well. Daniel seemed to sense this. He turned his eyes on Erika, and they hadn't softened.

She tried for a smile, though it felt false and unnatural. "Come downstairs with me?" she asked, as brightly as she can. She didn't want to stay here in the living room, with the echo of Chase still hanging in the room between them, the unforgiving sunlight all around. She half expected Daniel to protest, but he just nodded and got silently to his feet, padding behind her down the stairs.

In his bed, they leaned against the headboard, and Daniel put his arm around her. Erika could still feel the tension in him, his heart beating in his thin chest. She moved her hand in circles along his side, trying to soothe him, or to conjure up some pity in her own heart. But every second of silence between her and Daniel intensified the ache that had taken root somewhere in her chest. She didn't want to tear Chase down for Daniel's sake. She was tired of filling all these silences herself.

"Chase cares about you, you know," she said tentatively.

Daniel shifted beside her. "He didn't," he said flatly. "Maybe he did once, but not now."

"How—" Erika paused, swallowed. "What makes you say that?"

"He didn't want to be here," Daniel said. "He couldn't wait to leave. He was embarrassed to be around me."

Even in the low light of the bedroom, Erika could see the splotches of red that

appeared on his cheekbones as he spoke. He was looking straight ahead at the wall, not at her.

“Why would he be?” she asked carefully.

“The same reason everyone is,” Daniel said. “The same reason you are, even though you’re better at hiding it. I talked to some people in the hospital, some people where it wasn’t their first rodeo—” He bit back a choked laugh. “No one knows what to do with me, Erika. Chase, Jon, my parents. If I’d died they’d fall all over themselves to say how great of a person I was. But I didn’t die and now everyone thought—it was just—I don’t know.” He closed his eyes.

Erika took his hand, and when he didn’t react, let go again. “All those things that people would have said, they’re still true,” she said.

“Bull.” The single spat word makes Erika flinch. “Nobody’s looked me in the eye in weeks.”

“Don’t I count?”

Daniel rolled his eyes. “No. You love me.”

The word stung, not because it wasn’t true, but because it was, and for him to toss it off so casually—Erika let out a slow breath. “If it’s honesty you want,” she said, “you could be easier on people. Chase means well. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before.”

“Happened to him?” Daniel’s voice was cutting. “What about me?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“What did you mean, then?”

“You push people away,” Erika said, as evenly as she could. “You know you do.”

Daniel's shoulder next to hers began to tremble in earnest. Erika looked over, startled. His hands lay in fists on top of the bedspread, his knuckles white. His lips were pressed tightly together.

Suddenly, he was moving, surging to his knees. Before Erika could move or think, he had slammed his fist into the wall, once, twice, each time with a *crack* that could be drywall or bone. Flecks of blood appeared on the comforter.

She reached out instinctively, closing her fingers around his wrist before he could strike a third time, and he spun, wrenching his hand from her grasp. She started to say his name, but then his hand was flat on her chest, and he pushed her away, hard.

She wasn't expecting it, and the force sent her backwards off the edge of the bed. She twisted; and her elbow hit the floor, sending shock waves up her arm. The rest of her body followed, and all at once she was in a heap on the floor.

The moment stretched, utterly silent except for her own ragged breathing in her ears. She got slowly to her feet, more stunned than anything else. The place on her chest where Daniel's hand had gone didn't feel bruised—it felt on fire. She imagined looking under her shirt to find an angry red handprint.

Daniel was kneeling on the bed, facing her, expressionless.

Staring at him, she moved her lips, wants to say something, but nothing came out. *I can't believe this*, she thought. *I can't believe you*.

Daniel just stared back, beautiful and remorseless, breathing hard. Blood drips from his knuckles onto the bedspread.

"I've done nothing—" she said, and couldn't continue. She wanted to sound strong, but she couldn't quite manage it. She wasn't hurt, not physically anyway, but

she could feel tears rushing to her eyes. “Nothing but sit with you and support you and try to help you. For ages, Daniel.”

“I never asked for that,” Daniel said, as cold and clear as Erika ever wished she could be. “D’you think I want you here babysitting me every day? This was all you.”

You did ask. “Maybe I should go,” she said instead. Her voice trembled.

“Maybe you should.” Daniel lay back on the bed, looked up at the ceiling.

Erika stood there frozen for a moment, unable to think or move. Then she thought she felt something splinter in her chest, and the next moment she was filled with everything she had been fighting down: rage, frustration, exhaustion, pressing against the inside of her skin, so strong and tangible that she imagined if she opened her mouth it would pour out in a scream.

She turned on her heel and went out.

The farther she got from Daniel’s house, the harder she pressed down on the gas, as if by sheer speed she could convince herself not to turn back. It was late, the sky deep purple behind the cold white streetlights and neon glows from signs she passed, closed now but still lighting the highway. She turned on the radio, but after midnight the people staffing the Prairie Hills station went home, leaving a featureless lite-jazz mix playing through the night. She rolled down the window instead, letting in a tinny whistle of wind, trusting the night air to keep her alert. She could see the ribbon of the freeway in the distance, the lights of semi-trucks winding silently by.

She felt sick and shaky, her limbs watery and her eyes burning. The place on her chest where Daniel pushed her smarted. Which had to be in her imagination. He

wasn't strong enough to leave a mark—was he? Or was a bruise blooming beneath her skin even now?

The bleakness in his face when she'd walked out. The downturned slash of his mouth. He was alone, he was alone, and he was not supposed to be alone, especially in stressful situations. Suddenly, his house as she remembered it seemed a minefield, laden with threats. Every room with its knife or electric cord or vial of pills, all at hand to serve any impulse that crossed him. She saw again his dull skin and bruised knees the first time she visited him in the hospital. Then things she was never seen but could imagine well enough: his determination as he fixed a belt to dangle from the attic eaves, or blood in a bathtub drain. Her stomach heaved. She blew through a red light without even thinking of stopping.

When her hands were shaking too badly to keep steady on the wheel, she pulled sharply into the first exit that presented itself, tears cooling rapidly on her cheeks. She was in a strip mall parking lot, blessedly darker than the highway. She parked across two spaces and immediately folded in on herself. As she leaned forward against the wheel, the fears crashed over her in rapid succession, vivid behind her eyelids. She had gone maybe two miles.

She turned around.

Daniel wasn't dead. He wasn't bleeding. He sat cross-legged on the couch, a controller cradled in his lap and smoke from a joint curling around him, and didn't look up as the door fell closed behind her. Flickering light from the TV washed his face.

He bit his lip in concentration as a burst of onscreen gunfire rattled the window. Erika's knees went weak—actually went weak, like in books—and she had to grab the railing to keep from swaying.

Daniel finally looked over at her. His expression, or lack of it, didn't change. He mashed once at the buttons and paused the game. The gunfire and dramatic music cut out at once.

"I'm sorry," Erika heard herself say, in the sudden silence. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have left."

Daniel looked at her, his eyelids half lowered, and gestured at the couch. He seemed pale, but perhaps it was just the light from the television. As Erika sat down at the other end of the couch, he took his joint from where it was balanced on his knee and proffered it in her direction.

She shook her head. Her eyes were stinging again—from relief now, she thought, though it was hard to tell good feelings from bad any longer. She felt wrung out, dried out. No tears came.

"Are you okay?" she managed to ask with her sandpaper mouth.

Daniel was silent for a moment. Finally, he asked, "Are you?"

And of course there was no answering that, so she shrugged and pulled her knees up against her chest and wrapped her arms around her legs and looked at the TV screen. Behind the pause menu, a frozen alien standing atop a heap of rubble pointed a rifle at her, eyes bugging out in CGI fury. After all the heart-hammering dread and whirlwind movement of the last hour, the stillness was almost overwhelming.

"Look," Daniel said. "I'm really sorry about earlier. You could go if you want. I

promise I won't do anything stupid." His voice, to her surprise, had lost its flat dead quality. There was feeling there under the surface, though she couldn't name it. He was looking at his hands.

The space between them felt concrete to Erika, a metal cage both separating them and holding them in place. "I don't think I should," she said. "I don't think I could."

"Fine." It wasn't cold, wasn't snide, just a statement of acceptance. "Can I get you anything?"

Erika shook her head. She knew what was coming next, could feel it hanging in the air between them, and didn't want to prolong the tension. She glanced at Daniel to see him looking, for the first time, directly back at her.

"I don't think we should keep doing this." She was the one to say it, but her own voice sounded foreign to her. She saw his face change as if in slow motion: his lips parted, and he blinked once, twice. She watched as his eyes started to shine, as a drop of water ran along the line of his thick eyelashes.

But he nodded. "Yeah. I agree."

"I'm sorry."

He shook his head and leaned back into the couch, looking forward again. "Don't. I understand." A rueful smile curved his mouth. "My parents will be heartbroken."

Erika couldn't bring herself to feel anything but vague guilt at this, and a faint irritation at Daniel's nonchalance. Driving, she'd been frozen with dread; now everything felt remote. Her feelings were separated from her by a wall of exhaustion. She didn't say anything.

Daniel brushed the back of his hand across his eyes, a quick, jerky, irritated

motion. His knuckles where he hit the wall had scabbed over, the dried blood black in the pale light from the TV.

Erika swallowed. “Will you be okay?”

Daniel blew out a breath, his eyes fixed on the frozen screen. “Yeah.” He twirled the joint in his fingers, sending its dying plume of smoke up in spirals. “You know, I’m not...” He trailed off, then took another breath and started again. “I mean, you don’t need to be afraid for me. I was mad about Chase today. But whatever—whatever made me do it, the first time—it isn’t there anymore.”

Relief filled Erika’s chest, a prickling, half-painful sensation akin to the one she got when she came inside after hours in the snow. A thawing. “Could I stay for a while?” she asked. “If it’s all the same to you.”

Daniel reached over with the video game controller in his hand, holding it out to her, and she understood that it was his version of an olive branch. She accepted it. Built for boys, it fit awkwardly in her hands, but she arranged her fingers over the buttons in the way Daniel had taught her. He settled on the couch again, a little closer now.

They didn’t speak after that, except for Daniel’s soft instructions as she played the game, guiding her as her avatar walked through the empty streets of a deserted planet. They sat together, close but not touching, long into the night.

She had always been able to find some object of worship in the people around her. There was the girl in choir who was picked for all the solos and sang so beautifully that no one minded, who floated around with an air of benevolent distraction like an

angel dropped somehow into a school classroom. She made Erika's voice shrink into a squeak if their eyes happened to meet. There was the young English teacher in middle school whose name, years later, Erika could never recall—but who she could remember pacing lion-like from chalkboard to whiteboard as he talked, running his hands through his hair, gesticulating wildly in an effort to impart his love of *The Outsiders* or *White Fang*. The handsome high-school actor who starred alongside Erika's sister in the high school production of *Fiddler on the Roof*, something in his voice or bearing rendering Tevye with his fake beard improbably sexy. In retrospect, all of these people were probably entirely ordinary—maybe just a bit more beautiful or charismatic or talented than the people that surrounded them. But even in Erika's adult mind, even after she'd forgotten their names, their memories carried a glamour like a slight dusting of gold.

It slowly stopped happening after Daniel. Even people she admired, even people she loved—a passing glance or a word or a movement from one of them would no stick in her mind for days. It felt like a loss at first—no more gold dust. She couldn't pinpoint the exact moment this had happened. She was afraid Daniel had taken something from her.

She was glad when Caroline came home from Iowa City for the Fourth of July weekend that summer. Her sister arrived on a Friday afternoon when their parents were still at work, lugging an overstuffed rolling suitcase into the entryway, humming to herself. She'd started straightening her hair, which left to its own devices spiraled out in all directions like Erika's own, and tucked the ends into her favorite knockoff-Burberry scarf. Aside from that, she looked the same as always, the same as ever, and

it was like a gust of warm air had blown into the house.

Erika went to help her with her luggage, and before Caroline had even relinquished her suitcase, she was off. “You wouldn’t believe the house today,” she told Erika, hugging her with her free arm. “All of us trying to get out at the same time, and in this heat. What a nightmare.” She dropped her luggage and made a beeline for the kitchen, talking as she went, not waiting to see if Erika would follow.

Erika did, smiling, feeling something warming inside her. Here was a role she knew—had been playing since she had been old enough to stand upright in their living room and babble the lines Caroline fed her. They’d staged plays of two for imaginary audiences, and even when Erika was old enough that she might have sought a starring role for once, she had an instinct for the supporting role—for narrating the action as Caroline twirled in one of their mother's old tutus, for playing the horse, the prince, the monster that needed defeating. A few times their parents, watching from the couch, insisted that the roles be reversed, that Erika—five, seven, nine--take the spotlight. On those occasions, the stories in her head, that poured out so easily on Caroline's prompting, seemed to freeze in her throat. She was happy to return to the sidelines.

In later years, the narrator or the steed became the admiring little sister, who listened, who ooh-ed and aah-ed at the right moments, and commiserated when it was called for. She’d squeal when Caroline told her about a boy who had filled her entire room with balloons one day, and cluck her tongue sympathetically when it was revealed that he had never called her back the next. Caroline’s fast talking comforted Erika. Everything was over-the-top with her and yet uncomplicated.

But she wasn't oblivious, and sooner than Erika would have liked, she suddenly quieted and looked up from the fridge she'd been rummaging through, turning her gaze on her sister. "You're quiet," she remarked.

Erika knew Caroline talked to their mother on the phone once a week or so, but not whether she knew anything about Daniel, his time in the hospital, their hazy relationship or its disintegration. She had last been home at the beginning of summer, when Erika was still with Chase. It seemed like decades ago. "It's been a weird couple of months," she said.

"I heard about you and your boy," Caroline said. She half turned to face Erika, the fridge still open behind her. "I'm sorry, sweetie. I liked Chase." She looked into the fridge. Took out a container of yogurt, considered it, and put it back. "And Daniel," she said, not looking at Erika. "How are you doing?"

Erika shrugged. "He's fine now." Her voice came out only a little higher than its usual pitch. "Scary, but he's fine now."

"What about you, though? Mom said it was hard on you." Caroline's tone was carefully casual.

Now they were in dangerous territory. For some reason Erika didn't want people to know what she and Daniel had really been to each other. It felt shameful for reasons she couldn't articulate. Not the sex; Caroline would understand about that. Something else. "It was just hard," she said. "Daniel's not the easiest person to get along with at the best of times."

Caroline shut the fridge without taking anything out. Padded across the kitchen and put an arm around Erika's shoulders. Erika could smell her shampoo, vanilla and

cedar.

“You know,” Caroline said, leaning back against the counter, “I dealt with something like that too. When I was a sophomore. Therapists, meds, the whole deal. It was a bad time.”

Erika blinked. “I didn’t know that.”

“Of course you didn’t.” Caroline reaches out and pinches her cheek, bright again, like an old great-aunt dispensing wisdom. “That was on a strictly need-to-know basis. And you didn’t need to know.”

In Chicago, the fall of that year, Erika would spend a few months sleeping with a placid and easygoing boy who would rest his head on her shoulder and say—*tell me something else about you*. Nobody had asked her such a thing before, and she never knew what to say. In Prairie Hills, because there was so rarely anyone new, there were never any introductions. She couldn’t remember the exact moment of meeting Chase, or Daniel; it seemed to her that they had simply always been there. You never had to introduce yourself to someone who’d grown up alongside you.

Now—twenty-two, and four days into the year in which she’ll launch her adult life—she is almost back in Chicago before she realizes that she never did call Daniel. It’s snowing, and the city skyline is engulfed at the top with a blanket of fog. Erika’s seized with a fierce love for her adopted city. In the past few months she’s started calling it *home*, and feeling a pull to it when she’s not there, like there’s a magnet embedded in her chest.

As she gets closer, the thought of Daniel slips from her head. In just a few

minutes, she'll be back in the little studio apartment she rents with Eli, with its miraculous view over the lake. And it's early yet, the sun still only peeking out from between the towers on the horizon. He might still be in bed, his hair pressed flat on one side like it always is in the mornings. She can slip in next to him; he'll unconsciously pull her close, and she can steal another hour or two of sleep.

Prairie Hills will always be there to go back to. Maybe someday she will call Daniel. And maybe not. Here, now, he seems like a half-remembered dream, slipping away in the morning.

Night Drive

On the night his son was born, Rob Alvarez drove aimlessly around Prairie Hills, always acutely aware of how far he was from the hospital. He wanted to be there and he didn't. He felt as if there was a thread tugging on his heart, the other end anchored inside Susan's hospital room.

Her water had broken just after she'd put a frozen pizza in the oven for their dinner. He'd driven her to the hospital, checked her in, and run back home to turn the oven off. Returned to the room and held her hands until he couldn't hide the tremors in his own. She had been the one to suggest a drive, when his breath started coming short at her bedside.

"Go drive," she said, smiling when she could, in between the winces. The hour had come and gone with her contractions still far between. "I don't want you passing out on me. I'll be okay."

So he drove through darkening residential neighborhoods and the brightly lit service roads that ran along the interstate, always staying within a mile or two of the hospital as if he really was tethered to the place. His phone was cradled on his lap; he'd go back the moment the text came. Until then, he would try to slow his breathing enough to be of some use to her.

He almost wanted to laugh. He was a surgeon and all manner of gruesome

maladies crossed his table every day. Cancerous lungs and brains, arteries rimmed with stinking plaque, bones shattered from gruesome highway accidents. But let Susan, Susan who he loved, suffer so much as a stubbed toe and he'd get dizzy. His patients were puzzles, tasks to complete. He could cover their faces, compartmentalize. When they woke, he could see them off with a smile and promptly forget their names. But when Susan, say, cut her hand slicing apples, he'd be the one forced to lie down after wrapping her up in gauze. The pain of someone you loved was something else entirely.

And now, and now—he could see her pain, even alone in the car, see her white face and narrowed mouth and clenched fists. Worst-case scenarios flashed through his head one after another.

His phone vibrated in his lap. He picked it up, not looking away from the road, and raised it to eye level. PARENTS COMING, Susan wrote.

Rob took a deep breath. The night air, cool and exhaust-laden, had done him some good. He checked the road for other cars before pulling a U-turn in the narrow street, dread and relief knotting together in his stomach. Four minutes and he was back at the hospital, climbing the stairs to her room.

The maternity wing seemed entirely different from the hospital that Rob occupied during the day. It was clean, but not in the sparkling way of his surgery. There was none of the calm, Zen-like focus of the operating room; things seemed haphazard—but perhaps that was only in his head. Moving down the halls, he could hear women and their babies screaming. Occasionally carts of equipment were left in the halls. Staff flitted from room to room or strode purposefully past him. One nurse walked by

with a still-damp infant in her arms. That baby, Rob thought, will have the same birthday as Daniel. The same birthday as my son.

When he'd left, Susan had been pacing in her little room, still wearing the jeans and t-shirt that she'd changed into after getting home from work that afternoon. Now she was in the bed, her belly a mound rising before her, thinly covered with some teddy-bear-printed cotton gown. A nurse washed her hands in the adjoining bathroom, and another sat in a chair by the window, jotting something down on her clipboard. She looked up when Rob entered, and gave him a smile of recognition, but he felt like he'd stepped onto an alien planet.

He went to Susan's side. She smiled, but he could see the tension around her eyes and mouth, the sweat beading her forehead.

He sat down and took her hand, folding her fingers in his.

Daniel was a discontented baby, crying even after Rob and Susan had run through their arsenal of remedies. He was fed; he was changed; he was cuddled and given his pacifier; and still he cried. One night Susan was curled in bed with one of her migraines and Rob could tell that every petulant scream was a knife in her ears (though she didn't complain, never complained). Rob wanted desperately to get out of the house on one of his drives, and something occurred to him. Daniel was his son, after all. He carried his little son outside in his carseat, walking quickly so his squalling wouldn't disturb the neighbors, and strapped them both in.

Prairie Hills was silent at night. Often Rob could drive for half an hour without ever seeing another pair of headlights. He cracked the windows as he and Daniel

wound through the maze of broad dark streets, taking turns he'd never taken, turning around when he reached cul-de-sacs and tracing back over his own path. And Daniel's outraged wailing quieted to a whimper, then disappeared altogether, and then he slept.

He kept sleeping as Rob drove home, extracted him from the car-seat as carefully as he could. He slept as Rob tiptoed inside, easing doors shut behind him, and laid him carefully in the bassinet. It was nothing short of a miracle. And so night drives became a fixture in Rob's life as Daniel grew.

They'd drive along the same roads Rob drove the night Daniel was born, the narrow roads running alongside the interstate, which seemed to vibrate slightly when eighteen-wheelers passed. Rob talked to Daniel aloud long before he had any expectation of being understood, wondering what they were carrying. When cars passed, headlights too bright to see anything inside, he asked aloud where they were going. He made up stories about them and told them to Daniel. His son, pink-cheeked and yawning, didn't seem to mind that his stories were meandering, without any real conclusions.

Daniel's first word was *truck*. They were on one of these drives just before his first birthday, and Rob had pulled into the drive-through of a McDonald's for a coffee. A semi was backed up to the entrance ahead of them, and a man carried crates of frozen food inside. Rob turned around to see Daniel pointing from his carseat, big eyes sparkling.

Several times he found himself, almost as if out of habit, driving toward the ramp

onto I-35 South. He had to turn around in the fluorescent-lit Shell station just off the interstate. It had been years since he'd had a reason to go south, but the way was still ingrained in his muscle memory.

In his most delirious moments, he felt he could do it, if he just drove fast enough. In the dark like this, you could see the interstate lit up for miles and miles, glowing like a tunnel through space. He could drive through the fields of Iowa and Kansas and also be passing backward in time. He could drive across the panhandle of Oklahoma as the sun rose, through the flat brown of north Texas and the hill country. The states could go by quickly under your tires once you got going. He could get to the little town outside of Houston where his mother lived in time for a late lunch. He'd see the little blue house she was so proud of and the pecan tree blooming in the front yard, smell the baking tortillas from the open kitchen window.

Look, he imagined telling her, glancing at the sleeping child in the rearview mirror. Daniel looked just like Rob had in the faded baby pictures that had survived his mother's trip from Guanajuato, dark-eyed and chubby-cheeked with a surprising amount of curly black hair. *It's your grandson.*

The last time he had seen his mother, five years ago, she had been so shrunken and sick, so unlike the fierce-faced woman who had raised him. It wasn't hard to believe that she still lived somewhere, divided from him by some epic misunderstanding, and that the events of that year were merely an elaborate, protracted nightmare: the persistent cough in the height of summer, her assurances that it was nothing as he prepared to drive back to Missouri, the kernel of worry that had taken root somewhere beneath the sleep-deprived frenzy of medical school.

Then the call. Her voice had been almost as cheerful as ever, but she told him to come home, if he could. That was enough to raise the dread in him. She would not ask him to come home, to put his school on hold, unless it was serious.

She received him in the blue house. Smiling, standing, but a little thinner, a little paler.

Cancer. She gestured to her chest. They'd caught it too late to do much of anything. *I didn't want to worry you. You're working so hard.*

He took a leave of absence from school. He slept again in his childhood bed with its springs poking into his back, in his room still papered over with posters of superheroes, faded and curling at the corners. He drove his mother to and from her doctor's visits, and then to the hospital. At some point, he started coming home alone. It was around that time his hands started to shake.

After she died, there was a brief, simple ceremony at Our Lady of Guadalupe, which she had attended weekly for as long as Rob could remember. He himself had been under those eaves every Sunday without exception, as far back as he could remember, and now he went back alone. He met with Father Antonio, who had always terrified him as a child, with his voice so deep that you felt the vibrations in your chest during invocations. But one-on-one the priest was a godsend, pulling together the details of the service that his mother had already planned, making phone calls when Rob could no longer speak.

All that was left for Rob was to show up, and then to tie up a few loose ends.

Transferring the deed for the little blue house to the church, as she'd wanted. Phone calls to relatives in Mexico he barely remembered. Packing her things, swaddling her fragile trinkets in bubble wrap, and packing it all into the back of his dilapidated station wagon. It didn't take long. And suddenly, there was nothing left to keep him there.

When it was over, he drove back to St. Louis, put his mother's things in a storage unit, took his exams.

He passed with flying colors and moved up to Iowa as a surgeon's assistant. Something in the depersonalized hyper-calm of the operating room appealed to him.

He met a nurse, Susan, light-eyed and quick to smile. And eventually his life became bearable again. He was on the path; he had only to see where it led. To Prairie Hills, apparently, and these broad quiet streets lit up at night, with his sleeping son in the backseat.

It was a calm life, mundane even, but Rob had never been one to chase excitement. Maybe it was that he had his share of suspense in the operating room, though he rarely felt anything but calm and collected in that over-lit space. Maybe he'd had gotten it in the womb, his mother's blood pumping into him the adrenaline that had, years later, still colored her voice when she told the stories: wading across a shallow bend of the Rio Grande, sleeping on the rotted-out wood floor of a safe house, living on the kindness of strangers all the way to Houston. All her considerable ambition had been bent toward peace and safety; now it was in Rob's blood to seek quiet. His greatest pleasure was pulling into his driveway in the evenings and seeing

his wife or son illuminated in the yellow square of the kitchen window.

His mother would be proud of the life he'd created, he knew. She would love Prairie Hills, for all its flatness and uniformity—would pick out the charm in one neighbor's rose garden, or another's Christmas lights still up in April. She'd complain good-naturedly about the winters. She would love the house. Love Susan, and love Daniel.

He knew Susan didn't quite understand the sweet sharp triumph he felt at the little things—seeing Daniel off on his first day of kindergarten, the bus stopping at the end of the driveway; buying him a child-sized suit for church on Easter Sunday, pinning a crayon drawing up on the shiny steel fridge. These were victories. His mother would have understood.

Sometimes he would imagine the events of Daniel's childhood like a roll of microfilm unspooling in his head, looking for snags. It wasn't as if everything was perfect in their household. Rob kept surgeon's hours, sometimes staying at the hospital until the early hours of the morning. When Daniel was small and asked why Daddy came home so late, she had told him: "Sometimes, there are people who need him more than we do."

Daniel had nodded, his little face serious, and Rob had thought with pride that he understood. In the moment it never really seemed like a choice: a night spent at home, or a patient dying or suffering. But maybe it was a choice, and maybe Rob had chosen wrong. Maybe there had been some crucial threshold when Daniel had crossed into restlessness and discontent, and he had failed to notice.

There had been moments—small moments to which Rob had assigned no importance, but which in retrospect seemed significant. One day Rob had offered to teach Daniel how to shave. He didn't really need it; he was thirteen, and looked younger. But weekend nights when they were both home were so rare. And Rob remembered being around that age, slicing his face in an attempt to eradicate his own then-nonexistent beard. Some things you didn't ask your mother for help with, even when there was no one else.

Rob ran the water in the sink until it was warm, arranged the supplies on the counter—two electric razors, shaving cream, clean towels. He summoned his son, and Daniel had watched quietly as Rob demonstrated. Everyone said that Daniel looked like him. There was a little of Susan in his narrow shoulders and his mouth that turned naturally down at the corners. But his coloring was all Rob's—his curly hair—his eyes. Rob sometimes wondered if it was hard for him, being brown-skinned in a town like this, but Daniel had never complained.

He didn't complain about much. A good kid, if a little quiet, if a little mysterious to his father. Rob knew that Daniel was doing well in school, that his best friend was Chase Abernathy, that he spent his Wednesday nights at youth group in the basement of Christ Lutheran with Chase and little Erika Fisher, his afternoons reading worn fantasy novels he picked up at the library opposite the high school.

An exemplary kid, really. And had there truly been a spark of interest in his eyes when he picked up the razor? Or was Rob just imagining it as he sat in the hospital years later, sifting through his recollections for some sign, some explanation?

So many night they'd left Daniel alone, both he and Susan, gone all day and

coming home at nine or ten to a dark house, the only light a blue flickering screen in Daniel's window. Rob would walk up to his room, call a greeting, exchange a few minutes of conversation through the door if Daniel didn't open it. That was teenagers for you, he'd thought. Looking back, it seemed so dysfunctional, though it had never troubled him at the time.

A year or so before it happened, a kid had appeared on the operating table. A girl, Daniel's age or a bit younger, with a slim figure and the tiniest hands he'd ever seen—and a bullet lodged in her skull. The nurses gossiped around him, their words like the buzzing of flies as he worked: she had a history of depression and a much older boyfriend; the two had been found in his car, in the Wal-mart parking lot. They'd sat with their temples touching, with one bullet for the both of them. The boyfriend had been dead when some poor employee found them, and her hot on his heels.

The girl would survive, but blind, her optical nerve shredded. She was the first patient in years to disturb Rob's sleep, and more than once he sent med students down to the recovery wing to ask after her. That night, picking Daniel up from Chase's house, Rob had told him about the girl. Words came with difficulty.

"If you ever...find yourself getting to that point...please talk to me," he'd said, looking ahead at the road and willing his eyes not to well up. "It's never worth it."

It was too dark in the car to tell, but he had been sure Daniel was rolling his eyes. What did death mean to a healthy teenager, even the death of the young? But he said, "Yeah, Dad. I will."

Relief had washed through him then, and pride—pride in this boy he'd raised, all

the little luxuries his work had bought, that he'd built a life for Daniel of safety and plenty and independence. This was his son, fifteen, handsome and independent, sarcastic, smart, growing up.

He'd felt so lucky then.

He'd been the one to find Daniel. Of course he had.

Susan was at an expo in New York, and he'd stayed late at the hospital working on a stroke case. The blue light of Daniel's computer was glowing in the window when he pulled into the driveway.

He'd barely walked through the door when the crash came from upstairs. No answer when he called, but that was normal enough. Daniel was constantly piping his thrash metal into his ears via huge headphones; Rob worried he'd be deaf by forty. It wasn't until he tried the door and found it locked that alarm pricked at him.

He could hear music playing inside, coming at a low volume from Daniel's speakers. A second knock produced no answer. A dread like he'd never felt, separate from himself, tangible as a drop in temperature, began to close in around his heart.

He picked the lock with a paper clip from his briefcase. A skill he'd used many times in his old life, to unstick the cheap locks in the prefabricated house that they'd rented for a few years. It didn't fail him now, even though his hands were starting to shake. The door gave way.

Inside: his son crumpled on the floor, the apparatus of the ceiling fan lying behind him and a jagged-edged hole in the ceiling. A belt. A spot of blood on the carpet.

Rob didn't feel himself moving. The room seemed to rush around him in disconnected bursts—he was in the doorway, he was in the room; he was on his knees. Turning Daniel over, loosening the belt to check the pulse.

Still there. But no breath that Rob could see.

He called 911 and then started chest compressions. These movements had lived dormant in his muscles for decades, an antiquity of medical school that had always seemed suspect to him. It was so involved, so violent and *messy*, in a world where there were defibrillators and latex gloves, where people were saved by procedure and clean metal, not his own imperfect hands. He felt like a child, just a scared and overgrown child, and how could pushing down on someone's chest until their ribs cracked be the right thing to do?

The EMTs came. Rob heard and saw everything indistinctly, as if from underwater. The medics recognized him, let him sit in the back of the ambulance as they went—the same route that Rob took to work every day, but blurred with speed and sirens. He called Susan, and for the first time in his life he forgot to close out the conversation with *I love you*. She would come home on the first red-eye she could catch, and arrive at the hospital just as the sun rose.

A young nurse found Rob where he was pacing the halls and took him aside. Daniel was alive and—physically at least—fine. It was hard to say for sure, but she guessed that Daniel had fallen as soon as he kicked his chair away. The houses in this city were new and cheaply built, and the ceiling fan had given way, raining drywall

dust down on him. It hit his head on the way down. He had a concussion, a bruised trachea.

“But you understand that we don’t just want to send him home.” Her voice was edged with anxiety, and Rob imagined how he must look, roaming the hallways like a zombie.

His voice came out croaking. “How long will he be in the ward?”

Relief crossed her face. She didn’t have to explain. “The protocol is three days. After that, we’ll evaluate things, see where we are. Some patients can go home almost right away, of course with some supervision.”

Rob wished he weren’t so trained in the art of the bedside manner. He wanted to scream or rage or cry. He wished Susan were here.

“Thank you,” he said. “Is Daniel awake?”

Two days later, while Daniel was still in the ward, he and Susan drove to Christ Lutheran to delegate the task of notifying Daniel’s friends and seek whatever support the church might offer. Rob had never been as involved as Susan or Daniel. He’d been brought up old-fashioned Catholic, complete with confessions, reproachful Latin invocations, and the Stations of the Cross. With Lutheranism he had the vague feeling that they were all being let too easily off the hook.

But he liked Jon, the youth pastor, a kind young black man who had the sort of instantly comforting presence doctors envied. And he didn’t relish the idea of contacting a handful of teenagers he barely knew and telling them what had almost happened.

Sometime after they'd entered Jon's office, Rob's hands began to tremble. Susan laid her hand on his knee, a signal they'd used many times before. Her touch was permission to go and to do whatever he needed to breathe normally again. So he excused himself, muttering something about the restroom, and slipped from the office.

The church was nearly deserted—*makes sense*, he thought, for a Tuesday morning, although on second thought he couldn't be sure that it was Tuesday at all. Time for him and Susan had taken on a strange, stretching quality, punctuated by fast-food meals and moments when they could only hold each other, unable to do anything else; by texts from his contacts at the hospital and by brief, unsatisfying sleeps. But the church was clean and empty and bright with summer sunshine. Rob walked down a corridor that smelled of lemon carpet detergent, and reached an unlabeled door of dark polished wood.

He opened it and found himself in the threshold of a side door to the sanctuary, behind the pulpit. It was chilly—at least ten degrees colder than in the hall, and almost entirely dark; the only light came from the stained glass windows, casting patterns of rich color down onto the stone floor. The sound of the door closing echoed back to him, amplified. The eaves above vanished into shadow.

He took a step forward, forgetting for a moment where he was and why. He wanted to stand in the pool of light beneath the windows, feel the warmth on his skin and see the stories carved in the glass. He didn't recognize as many of them as he once would have. There was an army marching around Jericho. John baptizing Jesus in the river Jordan. The prophet unharmed in the lion's den.

There in the multicolored light it was easy to imagine someone listening. *Forgive me, Father, for I have sinned.* How many times had he said those words, back in the sweltering clapboard church in Houston, dripping sweat onto the shabby confessional seat? *Father.* For the longest time he hadn't realized that *father* meant the priest behind the screen; he'd thought he was speaking directly to God. What were fathers worth, down here in the world? *Somehow I've let my family down.*

Susan was waiting for him in the hall. He'd left the door cracked, or maybe she'd just been guided by that sense she seemed to have sometimes which allowed her to appear by his side when he needed her most. She looked at him and wiped tears off his cheeks that he hadn't realized were there.

Years later, apropos of nothing, Daniel will apologize for it all.

He is twenty-one, and Rob almost fifty. Rob has taken a day off work to move Daniel into an off-campus house where he'll live for the year with a few friends. Daniel has gotten taller than his father, though he's rail-thin still. Sometimes his hair still falls in front of his eyes.

The house is a big, ramshackle place, with beautiful wood floors now scratched and stained from years of use. Rob likes it. It's hard in Iowa to find a place with any kind of history, when there is so much open land to be developed; you can drive for hours without seeing anything really old. Daniel's room faces the scrubby backyard and its hardy-looking apple tree, and campus rises in the distance

Rob stands inside, directing Daniel backwards through the door as he and his friend haul in a bed frame. They're nice kids Daniel is living with, all of them.

They've introduced themselves to Rob this morning, shaken his hand. Two, Jason and Miguel, are Latino, and this gratifies Rob more than he expected.

As Miguel and Daniel set the bed frame down, someone's phone chirps from a pocket. Miguel pulls it out and his eyes light up.

He turns to Daniel. "Listen, Emily's just got back. Mind if I..."

Daniel squints with mock hurt. "Fine," he says. "Go see her. I can get the rest of your shit out of the van."

"Thanks, brother," Miguel says. He salutes to Rob and speeds from the room with almost comical speed.

Rob laughs as he hears the front door slam. "New girlfriend?"

"Not new," Daniel says. His expression has clouded over a little. "It's fine. He owes me a pizza later."

Rob tilts a mattress onto the bed frame, trying to steal a glance at his son in the process. He doesn't hear much about Daniel's personal life these days, but Susan did mention last month that he and his latest, a pretty girl from Wisconsin named Ava, are off again, probably for good this time. "The girls will be lining up for you," he says. "A senior, handsome, and an econ major."

Daniel shrugs and the cloud seems to lift. He smiles at Rob and helped him with the mattress. He has become better at these things in recent years—at realizing when people are concerned for him and showing, with a grin, that it was nothing to lose sleep over. He knows Rob worries still.

After Daniel's suicide attempt, Rob spent months reading about depression. He knows that there isn't a cure, not as such; the orange vial of pills on the desk among

empty Coke cans and new textbooks is testament to that fact. But they managed, Daniel is managing, which is really, Rob thinks, as much as anyone can do.

Daniel has seen where Rob's eyes went, and he steps away from the bed now.

"Listen," he says. Earlier that morning, they were about to get on the road when a condom fell conspicuously out of Daniel's wallet. Daniel looks just as embarrassed now. "I wanted to, uh, say something."

"Shoot," Rob says cautiously.

A pause, then— "I'm sorry for what happened when...when I was seventeen," Daniel says, his hands going to his pockets. "I know it must've been hell on—on Mom and you. I'm sorry I put you through that." His shoulders are stiff. It sounds like he'd rehearsed this.

"You're not in Alcoholics Anonymous, are you?" Rob says, as lightly as he could, since something has lodged suddenly in his throat. "Not making your restitutions, or whatever it is they're called?" It is true that Daniel's gotten more conscientious as he aged. But it has never been, and never will be, in his nature to make apologies.

Daniel crosses and uncrosses his arms, glances out the window. "Miguel made me think about it," he says. "A friend of his, y'know, offed himself this summer. You can't tell by looking at him, but he's pretty broken up about it."

Rob wants to be careful. It's true that Daniel had wounded them; Rob cares more about Susan than himself in that regard. He loves his son's pride, especially since it has been late in coming. And mostly he's just glad that Daniel is alive. "As long as you were okay," he says. His voice cracked a little. "As long as you are okay. Don't worry about it."

“Thanks.” Daniel looks relieved.

Perhaps Rob is just imagining it, but he thinks there is something different about Daniel a few minutes later, when they hug goodbye. Daniel seems looser-limbed, and is looking out the window every few seconds, a half-smile crossing his face when he does. Rob doesn’t know what it means, but it makes his heart lift a little again.

Outside, he glances back up at the house as he turns the key in the ignition. He can see Daniel behind his window, bobbing his head to the music he undoubtedly put on as soon as Rob closed the door behind him. He looks—and who can know if it is real, but Rob has been paying attention lately—he looks happy.

It’s true, Rob thinks. He’s going to be okay.

Little Stranger

For a moment, all that Mary could see was the dirt between the bathroom tiles.

The bathroom had the same rustic charm as the rest of the apartment that she and Brian shared. Antique-looking moldings ran along the floor and ceiling, and the bathtub next to Mary had claw feet like something out of a Victorian novel. The small window let in a spill of afternoon sun. If Mary could stand, she would see the spread of green that was Loring Park in the summer, and beyond that the old basilica and the Minneapolis skyline.

Suddenly it all seemed tiny, slightly squalid. The tiles off-white, the sink and tub stained with rust. The floor was slightly slanted under her bare feet. Pipes gargled in the walls as some neighbor started their shower. What kind of place was this for a grown, married woman to live? For a family? She looked again at the thing in her hand. A white plastic rod, two bright red lines making her breathing come fast.

She wrapped it in tissue and dropped it into the trash, making sure it was concealed by a pile of used Kleenex. She washed her hands, concentrating on her breathing. In the mirror she could see that a flush had crept up her chest and was reaching up her throat. She was thirty-three; she felt as furtive and scared as she imagined a thirteen-year-old might.

In the kitchen, she boiled water for tea and looked at the newspaper Brian had left

on the counter, letting her eyes slide over the headlines, not remembering a word. Something in her gut was twisting. Even though she knew it was impossible—anything growing inside her would be amoebic, barely a centimeter long—she imagined a small, perfectly formed child curled in its nest of blood, writhing and kicking spitefully.

From the space she and Brian called the office—they'd separated it from the master bedroom with a system of bookshelves and curtains—she could hear him typing, chipping slowly and steadily away at a grant proposal, unperturbed by the anxiety his wife was breathing in. She should tell him. She knew she should tell him. But she couldn't bring herself to move from her spot at the counter. Later, she told herself. After he's done working.

How had this happened? She was on the pill, had been since she turned eighteen and could get it without a signature from a parent. Every month there was a few days of dread as she convinced herself that she was late. But her period always showed up, she went to the pharmacy, and the cycle repeated itself. Until now.

She sat there for she didn't know how long, allowing her mug of tea to grow cold and over-steeped in her hands. Eventually, she heard the typing slow and stop, heard the chair creak and the joints in Brian's back pop as he stretched. He took ten-minute breaks on the hour, every hour. His reliability, his uncanny ability to meet deadlines, was slightly maddening—it made her feel obscurely ashamed, sometimes. Envious of his ability to be a functioning adult without even seeming to try. But Mary was grateful for him. It had been hard, absurdly hard, just to find someone who understood her—her need for time alone every day, her anxiety around crowds and

loud children and the elderly, her need to be surrounded by books, even if she would never read them. Sometimes it seemed impossible that she had found someone to love her in spite of all these things. She stood, her heart pounding as if she were about to take a high dive.

In the office, Brian was leaning back in his chair, his head tilted back and his eyes closed. He'd taken his glasses off, and Mary could see the red mark on the bridge of his nose where they had rested.

He sighed dramatically and ran a hand through his hair. He reached out for her, and she crossed the room to put her hands on his shoulders and drop a kiss on the top of his head. The grant blinked on the screen before them, tidy paragraphs blurring in front of her eyes.

"How goes the work?" he asked, referring to a report on patient satisfaction she was supposed to be preparing. She hadn't given it the barest thought since she'd gone out yesterday to buy a pregnancy test.

"Fine." She squeezed his shoulders, trying to think of a way to say the thing stuck in her throat. "What about yours?"

Brian shrugged, raising his head and squinting at the screen, frowning as he scanned the text. "Not there yet." Suddenly, he seemed to notice something—her stiffness, a slight tremor in her hands?—and turned to face her, an inquiry in his eyes.

No point putting it off. "I'm pregnant," she said. She heard the words like they were coming from someone else, foreign and high-pitched.

Brian blinked, once and then again. He rose stiffly from his chair and pulled Mary to him, his brow furrowed. "Really?"

“I guess so.” The test Mary had just thrown away was the last of a three-count value pack from CVS. One she could discount as a fluke, the fault of a cheap product. Two maybe. Not three.

Something passed across Brian’s face, too fast for her to tell what it was. They hadn’t talked about this as much as they should, the two of them. A few lighthearted remarks during their engagement and in the early years of marriage, mostly jokes along the lines of—together they were too neurotic to reproduce. Mary had told him she’d always been ambivalent about children as a species, and especially about the idea of her own, and she didn’t think ambivalence—the fear of missing out—was sufficient reason to create a person. He hadn’t objected.

It was only in the last few years that she’d begun to doubt he felt the same. Not that he ever said anything—it was small things, his wistful look after a school bus as it trundled past their window in the morning, the way he’d picked up and held a toddler-sized baseball mitt for a moment in the store. She hadn’t thought much of it until now, until he hesitated.

He pressed his lips to her forehead, wrapping his arms around her. “What do you want to do?” he asked, his breath stirring her hair.

“I don’t know.” She felt small in his arms, her cheek pressed to the ridge of his collarbone. “I haven’t decided.”

He didn’t reply for a long moment. “Well,” he said finally. “You know that I’m behind you. Think about it.”

“What do you think?” She knew him so well and yet she couldn’t read his voice.

“I don’t know either.”

They pulled back to look at each other, and Mary didn't miss the flicker of gaze down to her abdomen and back up. "It's just brand new," she said. "I should go to the doctor and get a second opinion, probably."

"I'll call Park Nicollet," he said. "See if they can get us in tomorrow." He hugged her again, briefly, and squeezed her in a way that was probably meant to be reassuring. "We'll figure it out."

We'll figure it out. It wasn't a phrase Mary had much taste for. Putting things off, as if a solution would present itself out of the air. She had never heard a woman use it. But then, it wasn't as if she had a better idea.

"Okay," she said. "We'll figure it out."

Later, she lay in her bed, trying to picture herself with a child. She couldn't visualize it—every time she tried, she ended up with some Platonic ideal of a baby, a chubby-cheeked boy with a head of blonde curls, nothing like herself or Brian. She tried to picture herself holding him and her mind went blank. She imagined breastfeeding, pushing a stroller, strapping a baby into a back-facing car-seat. It felt remote, like watching a home movie of someone else's life, a life she wasn't particularly interested in.

But. It was true that lately some sort of restlessness had taken up residence within her. What was the plan, now? She supposed it was spending another couple of decades in this apartment and then moving out to a house in the suburbs because that's what one did, not because they needed the space. A series of incremental steps upward in her career, leading toward she didn't know what. She and Brian together

made plenty of money. Nothing to strive for there. They weren't travelers; a day out in Minneapolis was enough to make them both want to retreat into their bed and watch bad TV under the covers. What was she working for, except for more of the mundane things she already had?

She was fine now; she was content. But she knew herself well enough to know that the sameness would someday start to wear her down. There was something attractive in the unknown. If this was the way to go about it.

She went off the pill, turned off the alarm on her phone that had chirped at 7:30 AM every day for as long as she could remember. Privately, she found herself making a series of half-panicked, ungrammatical Internet searches, less to find answers than to reassure herself that others had had these questions too.

Pregnancy side effects

Mn abortion time window

Childbirth feels like

Signs of bad mother

Nothing she found satisfied her. So she kept searching, furtively and compulsively, sometimes at work when she couldn't help herself. She read widely, as if any of the half-literate posters on any obscure message board could have the answer for her. Brian would ask her how she was feeling, looking at her almost shyly. Mary smiled as best she could and replied: *still thinking*.

At some point she decided to spend some time in Iowa, see her mother and Susan.

Not to seek advice; if Mary was foolish enough to ask her mother what she thought, she knew what the answer would be. She'd extracted a number of concessions from her parents over the years, small and large: they'd come around to her short haircut, her communications major, her questionable apartments. Later, her busy schedule, her politics, even her girlfriends. She joked with Brian—it was a testament to their gratitude she'd married a man, that they'd overlook the fact that said man was an agnostic Jew. She'd even convinced them to vote Democratic once or twice—she knew because they'd told her, in endearingly proud phone messages the day after Election Day. But she'd never talked with them about abortion, even when she'd had a summer job at the Planned Parenthood office in St. Paul. She'd told them she was working at the student center, had never even considered sharing the truth. Once—after a conversation on marijuana legalization or some such thing—her mother had sighed theatrically and said *at least you're pro-life*, her tone casual, without the trace of a question.

Mary, who was twenty-three then and capable of appreciating the leaps her mother had already made, found that she didn't mind. There was space enough in their lives for a secret or two.

No. She wouldn't ask her mother, who had only in the last couple of years stopped asking when Mary was going to give her a second grandchild, what to do. Mary didn't want to resurrect her hope without being sure of herself. But—maybe it was some sort of cavewoman instinct, an urge to seek the shelter and counsel of the other women in the tribe—she still wanted to go, sleep in her parent's guest room with its threadbare quilt and pastel portrait of Jesus over the bed.

She called her mother. She and Brian took Friday off work and drove south, Brian driving and she stared out the window, less out of any interest in the landscape than to calm her stomach. She was almost certain that the churning in her gut was just anxiety—morning sickness didn't start this early on, surely?—but she couldn't be certain.

When they pulled into her parent's driveway in Prairie Hills, Mary could see her mother in the kitchen, her back to the window as she prepared something on the counter.

True to form, in her mother's kitchen, an almost-finished lunch was spread on the counter, ham and turkey sandwiches and fruit salad and Jello. Mary had hardly realized until she went to college that pastel-colored, Protestant potluck-style foods didn't comprise the mainstays of everyone's diet. She turned her eyes away from the Jello, the wobbling of which was making her stomach turn.

"It's so lovely of you to come down," her mother said as she dried her hands on a red-checkered towel. She was wearing a long gray maxi-dress under one of Mary's father's knit cardigans. Her hugs were fragrant, overheated, rib-crushing things. "It's been so long! We've made so many changes around this place."

Mary couldn't see anything different. A different backsplash wallpaper, maybe? Looking closely, there was a pattern of fruit instead of a pattern of flowers. "It's gorgeous."

Her mother hugged Brian and kissed his cheeks, then hugged Mary again. "You look wonderful, both of you," she said, as if it had been a year since she'd seen them

and not a month. “Dad’s helping the Lundgrens put up a new garage. He should be home any time now. Come on in, sit down.”

Here, Mary thought, was equal parts entrapment and contentment. She wished Susan and her family was visiting too, to absorb some of the attention. But that night, when she and Brian were alone under the quilt, a very blond Jesus staring at them balefully as they caught their breath after a little quiet lovemaking, it occurred to her in her sleepiness that she was lucky to have a place to go back to.

Something about the cheerful domesticity of her parents’ home, and Prairie Hills’s mundane rhythms beyond that, affected her. Without realizing it, she found herself frequently resting her hands on her stomach, imagining that she could feel microscopic stirrings within. In the city, the concept of pregnancy had seemed ludicrous. Among the gleaming buildings and shiny cars that surrounded them there, the closest thing she saw to a baby most days was the round-cheeked college intern in an ill-fitting suit at her office, whose name she could never remember. The idea—that completely without her knowledge a cell could take hold inside her that would grow into an infant. It seemed like some sort of freak accident, like she’d contracted some exotic disease that you read about in the paper. *Minneapolis woman comes down with child.*

Here, away from her sharp-shouldered suits and sensible shoes, her computer and her backup computer and the sun-starved potted cacti she kept on the windowsill in her office, it was different. When she drove to the grocery store to pick up milk and chicken and flowers for the dining room table, she saw women who were younger

and more pregnant than herself. She looked in their faces for the glow that people talked about, and could find none. But maybe it was just the fluorescent lights of the superstore washing them all out. At home, she half expected every day to find that she'd been the victim of some good-natured cosmic joke, that the punchline would come in the form of her period, appearing like a bashful guest half an hour before the end of the party. Here she no longer expected that. It seemed just as likely that the clean air and wholesome food and overall virtuosity of Prairie Hills would somehow accelerate the growth inside her, that in a matter of days she might be as round and slow-moving as the woman in front of her in the line for the cash register.

She tried to think of questions she could ask her mother, to get advice without giving away her condition. (*Her condition*, she thought wryly, like she was the cautionary tale in a Victorian morality novel. Still, it seemed appropriate.) She asked after Susan and Rob and Daniel. Susan, she knew from her own weekly phone conversations with her sister, had been losing sleep lately over Daniel's disinterest in the college search. Lately it seemed like motherhood was the focal point of every conversation, the lens through which Susan viewed even unrelated topics. Thinking about it made the pendulum inside Mary swing from cautious optimism back towards anxiety. It was tiresome—though she'd never admit it to anyone, not even Brian—tiresome to listen to her whip-smart sister fret endlessly about SAT scores, or the virtues of the scholarship packages offered by University of Iowa versus Iowa State. Mary had gotten used to it over the years. But she didn't want to become the same way.

They had been in Prairie Hills for twenty-four hours when the call came.

Truthfully Mary had never been able to summon much of any kind of feeling towards Daniel. She had been just eighteen when he was born, starting college and harboring a teenager's deep horror towards any kind of domesticity. Home in Iowa for Christmas, she'd dutifully accompanied her parents to the hospital, but the sight of her older sister in a hospital gown, doctors talking about her to each other like their hands weren't buried in between her legs, made Mary want to vomit. She excused herself—Susan was well attended, with their mother and Rob stationed on either side of the bed—and joined their father in the hospital courtyard, where threadbare bushes and one stunted apple tree waved in the night wind. Her father was standing by the door, smoking a cigarette. It was the first time Erika had seen him smoke, and it unnerved her.

Daniel's was a difficult birth, her mother would tell people later, when it didn't matter. When Susan was safely ensconced in a warm living room at a family get-together, it was easy to say how hard the night had been. The other mothers in the room, aunts and cousins and grandmothers, nodded knowingly—no details necessary. Susan had been initiated into something, become part of this order. With Daniel at her breast beneath a modest blue blanket, demurring glasses of wine—*I've lost my taste for it*—Susan seemed distant, like she'd crossed some border and left Mary behind. Twenty-five and suddenly grown. It was Mary who wanted to have the horrors of the thing acknowledged. Blood and screaming and incapacity; was it possible that in the twenty-first century women still sign up for this?—but why should she, when Susan herself seemed content to sit and accept praise, cradling her son in one arm and

holding her husband's hand?

Maybe she wasn't old enough to be a good aunt. She didn't see Daniel much, busy as she was at college, then taking a stab at grad school, then in a series of vaguely-titled jobs in publicity or communications. When she did see her nephew, she felt slightly unnerved, as she did around all children, at how that big-eyed sweetness could turn in a second to malice or a tantrum. Then he was older, growing less quickly, and Susan's phone calls inviting her to make the drive down to Prairie Hills became less frequent. There were a few years when her only interaction with Daniel was the cards with twenty-dollar bills tucked inside that she sent him on birthdays and holidays, and the thank-you notes duly sent in return. She knew little about him except what Susan told her over the phone—her sister's palpable joy sometimes, like when he brought home flowers on Mother's day, or her muted disappointment on other days, when all Mary could extract by way of explanation was a sigh. *He's just such a boy.*

So when the call came, Mary's first fear was for her sister. She was sitting in her parents' living room, feet tucked under her on the tartan couch, listen to her father tell her and Brian about his latest commission. In the kitchen, her mother was making dinner, some sort of casserole.

Mary heard the phone rattle against the granite countertop, heard her mother's cheery greeting. *Oh, hi, dear! Susan, slow down.*

What—why?

Oh.

Oh.

Her father and Brian were talking about internal wiring for heated bathroom floors. They didn't notice the way her mother's voice in the kitchen had died, how the rhythmic noise of the knife on the chopping board had slowed and stopped. For a moment Mary marveled at them. What must it be like to be a man and to be unbothered by the little changes in others' voices, even your own wife. If she were her father, if it was Brian on the phone, she would be in the kitchen already.

An hour later, they were two-thirds of the way to the hospital. Mary's father drove, his jaw set; her mother cried silently in the passenger seat. Mary and Brian sat in the backseat like children.

In her shock and numbness she wanted to apologize to him. She had always been self-conscious about bringing Brian home, of confining her long-limbed, angular husband in hot, cramped kitchens and wallpapered bedrooms with over-perfumed sheets. And now this—speeding through fields in the gathering dark to join Susan and Rob in the hospital where Daniel had landed himself.

I know this isn't what you signed up for, she wanted to say. The world was strange enough, they had enough to think about, without bizarre interruptions like this, rushing to the bedside of a depressed nephew who was really quite a stranger. At least to Brian, who didn't hear about Daniel over the phone the way Mary did.

Hours later, she and Brian left the hospital before her parents, volunteering to pick up fast-food dinner for everyone and bring it back.

Mary couldn't put a name to the feeling brewing inside her until they were alone.

Back in the car, surrounded by quiet, she rested her hands on the wheel for a moment before turning the car on, catching her breath. She was angry, she realized. Or resentful. Something was making her stomach coil tightly, like she'd been denied something.

She recognized the flatness in Daniel's eyes, the slump in his shoulders. Of course she did. She had felt like that once too. For years the idea of death had been with her most of the time—she imagined it as an animal at the edge of the woods in the backyard, big and shadowy, frightening yet fascinating. Something that you never looked at directly, in case you should find it staring back.

But the thought had welled up at odd moments—in the hall between classes at school, lying in bed on a Saturday morning, in the shower. Often in the shower. Her mother had dropped hints about wasting water. God knew what she thought Mary was doing in there. But at that time it hadn't mattered much what anyone thought of her.

It had lasted for months. She could remember the moment when the switch had been thrown, when the fog started to dissipate. It had taken a series of minor miracles. First, her parents agreed to let her drive alone to Minneapolis for the college search. She was to stay in a dorm room with a girl who'd graduated the year above her at Prairie Hills High, who was doing some summer class at the University of Minnesota. The second miracle was her old classmate's roommate, Gabby.

Years later, long after the girl's face had blurred in her mind, Mary could remember her short hair and disaffected manner, the swallow tattoo visible on her shoulder blades as she lounged around the room in a bra and basketball shorts. How sophisticated she had seemed—and to Mary's surprise, she took up the slack when

Mary and her classmate had run out of things to talk about. Mary had planned to spend the next day sitting in on classes, but then came Gabby's offhanded comment.

A bunch of us are going to the Pride parade tomorrow; wanna come?

It would take years for Mary to acknowledge her bisexuality, to realize that what she felt for girls like Gabby was more than admiration. But maybe the older girl had seen something in her before she had seen it in herself. The next morning Mary found herself standing on the curb of Hennepin Avenue, pressed in a knot of strangers, tall slender boys with pierced ears and girls with spiky haircuts that would have made Mary's mother shake her head. June heat radiated from the concrete, and she had to stand on her tiptoes to see the parade over the others' shoulders. Skin pressed in on hers from all directions, but she didn't mind. Summers in Iowa wore Mary down, but this felt different. It was city heat, not flat plains baking brown under the sun. It filled her up in a way she didn't quite understand. Rainbow flags hung out of windows along the boulevard as Mary watched tiny drops of sweat roll down Gabby's bare shoulders. She bought a rainbow-colored woven bracelet from a seller on the street corner, and tucked it deep inside her suitcase that night.

It wasn't that the moment had made everything perfect. But even a decade later, Mary would remember it—the city new to her and shimmering with summer heat, the casual press of others' bodies around her, the idea that you could exult in difference—she would see it as the first step towards some kind of balance. Then in her late twenties Mary would live briefly in Boston, working and drinking with disaffected, worldly types. Most of them, it seemed, had undergone some dark years too, but managed them with regimes of medicine or therapy. Mary didn't know

anyone in Iowa who had ever been in therapy—or if she did, they kept it to themselves, not like these easterners who, in their accounts of their days, rattled off meetings with psychiatrists as easily as a trip to the grocery store, filling Mary with a strange mix of admiration and shame.

The point was, she thought, she knew something about Daniel—at least knew what it was to be sixteen and discontented in Iowa, to be angry despite your perfectly acceptable life, though it had never been so bad with her that she'd thought about doing what he did. At sixteen she'd thought there was something wrong with her, that she should have everything she wanted and still be corroded by unhappiness. If she thought about death, she thought of her parents and Susan and pushed the idea away before it could take full form. She would have never tried to kill herself—not because she wasn't all that unhappy; she'd sniffled herself to sleep every night back then, muffling the noise in her covers so as not to disturb Susan through the thin wall that separated their rooms. In the fog that surrounded her, she could at least see that she would leave a hole in her family. It was enough to stay her hand, from doing anything more than idly dreaming of nonexistence.

Because they didn't know what else to do, she and Brian drove home on Wednesday, only a few days after they had planned to. Susan deferred again and again offers for them to stay while Rob and Susan kept their vigil at the hospital, and Mary saw their presence there was crowding the small spaces of her parent's house and the hospital lobby.

So they went. There were tearful solemn goodbyes. There were promises to do

whatever they could, and to keep Daniel in their prayers.

Mary was only just able to catch Susan alone. It was difficult, with the constant to-and-fro from their parents' home and Susan's and the hospital, with Rob always at Susan's side. But on the third day Mary followed Susan to the restroom. Susan wasn't using the toilet—just standing at the sink and running water over her hands, water that was starting to steam. Mary could feel the heat of it when she got close.

"I'll stay," she told Susan. "You know I will. I can take some time off from work. I can cook, drive, whatever you need."

Susan patted a little water on her face. Her motions were slow, hesitant, like an old woman's. She was frighteningly pallid in the mirror, her clothes wrinkled, her eyes sunken.

"Thank you for offering," she said. "I've already talked to my boss about taking some leave, and Mom and Dad are around too." She met Mary's eyes in the mirror, then looked down again. Her hands were bright red under the water. "They tell me we can take him home soon, and that we should try to keep a routine." She touched Mary's waist. "I promise I'll call the minute I need help, but until then don't put your life on hold on our account."

Mary felt like a little girl at a funeral, alone in a forest of black-clad legs, knowing that something was grieving the adults terribly but unable to help. How could she understand something like this? The concerns she had had last week seemed trivial, looking at her sister's wet face under the too-bright bathroom lights. "Is there anything I can do?" she said. "Please tell me, Susie."

The corners of Susan's mouth twitched at the nickname. She let Mary wrap an

arm around her shoulders, and Mary felt that she was trembling slightly beneath her sweater. “I just—” Susan swallowed, started again. “Don’t know what I would do without him.”

“I know,” Mary said, rubbing circles on her sister’s back. *I know.*

Two weeks have gone before she gives any more thought to her pregnancy—enough time for symptoms to announce themselves. The muscles in her abdomen coil and cramp. Waves of exhaustion hit her reliably after lunch at work, enough to make her want to crawl beneath her desk and curl up in the dark space there. Brian makes a joke about her filling up her bra, and then stops, looking uncertain. Can they joke at a time like this? Mary doesn’t know, but she laughs anyway.

Her afternoons are taken up with phone calls to her parents and Susan, racking up her thrifty phone bill to twice its usual amount. The news from Prairie Hills grows more and more encouraging—Daniel is in therapy, one of the medicines seems to be working well, he’s taken up with a girl from his high school who seems to distract him a little. As the fear slowly dissipates from their conversations, Mary’s own news gets more and more heavy on her tongue.

She goes to her doctor with Brian and learns she’s six weeks pregnant. Learns that the thing inside her had arms and legs, the beginnings of a nervous system. Blood different than her own.

She only half-hears the technician going on about diet and exercise, choosing instead to watch Brian’s face as he listens. She’s still unsure about what she wants, but she knows what he does. She can see his eyes widen slightly, see him twist his

hands the way he always does when he's thinking hard.

He will leave the choice to her, of course, the way they've always planned, it being after all her body that will be distorted and bitten and hormone-ravaged if they keep it. But he wants the child. And for herself—well, at some point the date that always floats behind her eyes has changed. At first she was acutely aware that she had three months before the first trimester had elapsed, and there would be more paperwork and disapproval should she decide on an abortion. Now she catches herself counting months beyond that, making calculations without even fully admitting it to herself. A conception around the end of July. Nine months on was April. The snow would be melting, the world muddy but green.

As the weeks pass and the leaves in Loring Park start to burn up with color, Mary feels herself propelled by the same drive that led her to Minneapolis in the first place, to the Pride parade fifteen years ago, to the tiny ill-designed apartments that she loved so much, into the arms of a soft-spoken sharp-edged man with dark eyes. Sameness had always been stagnation for her. Forward motion is what kept the fog at bay all those years ago. She's begun to address her baby in her mind—chastising it for a bout of nausea it had subjected her to, or apologizing for the cortisol that must be rushing through her veins after a stressful day at work, or pointing out a dog in the streets or the burnished blue of the sky. She imagines the thoughts and images transmitted as if her veins are telephone wires, little particles of light sweeping along in her blood. If this isn't a sign, she doesn't know what is.

Brian wants to know as little as possible about what he's started to call "the kid"—wants to be surprised. And at first Mary agreed. But curiosity starts to take

hold. So she goes back to the ultrasound technician, confiding that she's here secretly.

The woman just grins. "We get that all the time," she says, then leans in conspiratorially. "I figure, you're the one to push her out, you should know if you want to."

Mary's heart has picked up. "Her?"

The technician moves the wand; a flickering image appears on the screen above her head. A little creature curled in a dark cave. She nods.

Mary calls Brian on her way home.

She tells him: get ready for our daughter.