

Games Children Play

by

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Abstract

The four stories in *Games Children Play* introduce people who are seeking human connections. A Detroit community worker searches for something tangible in which believe; a teenager in Key West, on a night out with friends, tries to understand relationships that have eluded her; a college student uses her hospital job to cope with her parents' divorce; and a group of friends consider the past, present, and future intersections of their lives. Through various parties, games, and disguises, the stories explore misguided attempts at communication and the significance of small gestures, the ways people play with each other while they develop their own identities.

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Celebrations

It was mid-October, nine o'clock on a Saturday morning, and Chantelle Tubbs had not planned to go to work at all. The leaves had mostly changed and a white-blue mist hung over the grass, so that, from the middle of the long, empty field that served as a park for the residents of northeast Detroit, she couldn't see the street. Wind lashed at her skin, turning her cheeks, even her earlobes, cold and raw, but she tightened the belt of her leather jacket and trudged forward. Through the fog, a huddle of people waved at her; they were standing next to a patch of dirt that was, she assumed, the potato garden.

Before her boss at the Brightmoor Community Center called and insisted that she work—Linda had a family emergency, a kid with a bad case of the stomach flu, and Chantelle was the only person on staff without a spouse or children who needed her on weekends—before that early morning phone call, Chantelle had been planning to help set up for her niece, Cynthia's, sixth birthday party. She'd planned to bake a cake, chocolate with raspberry filling. Instead, she was stuck supervising volunteers while they harvested potatoes on a city lot.

A shortage of potatoes, she supposed, could be a serious issue. After all, there had been a famine in Ireland a century or two ago. "I'm changing the world," she'd told her sister when she called to say she might be late, "one potato at a time."

As she drew closer to the garden, Chantelle could see that the dirt had been turned over to make ridges, rows and rows of them. She didn't know any of the

volunteers. Most of them, like Chantelle, were black. There were four community members and a half dozen college kids, who were probably still idealistic about service. Chantelle had been that way, until recently. When she took the job three months ago, after having lived in Detroit for less than a year, her co-workers called her Minnie Mouse because she squeaked when she got excited.

She couldn't even tell her best friend, Monique, how much it scared her that her values, her ideals, no longer lined up with her feelings. She still liked the premises that lay behind community work, but the effects seemed miniscule. On her every-other-night phone calls with Monique, who was in Chicago, where Chantelle used to live, Chantelle claimed that she was just tired. She said her voice only croaked in the evening. "You need to find a prince to distract you," Monique said, but Chantelle replied that life as an old maid, a spinster, whatever you want to call it, might be her fate. "Don't be silly," Monique told her, and Chantelle said, "I'm being just the opposite."

A middle-aged man rushed toward her when she reached the group. "You must be the lady from the Brightmoor Center," he said. "Welcome, welcome." His beard was ragged, his hair still blond, and he wore heavy-duty gardening gloves that he didn't bother to take off before he pumped her hand up and down. "I'm Dr. Powell, but you can call me Alan." He was the only white person on the field, and she knew that he must be the potato scientist from the University of Michigan, the guy who'd spent his career studying potato seeds and genes and foods. "I can't tell you how happy I am that you could come work with us on such short notice."

She crossed her arms. "I didn't have much choice."

“Well, it’s going to be great,” he said, his voice still upbeat. “I’ve already told everyone else that we’ve got big plans to harvest half the crop today. It’s hard work, but I think we can do it; it’ll be great.”

He cupped a small potato in his palm like a coin. The potatoes would be donated to churches in the area and sold in fifty-pound bags for fundraisers, he told her. This was the first urban garden in which her community center had taken part, and she thought that Linda’s proposal, to get kids from middle schools to plant seeds next spring, was overly ambitious, but she knew better than to say what she felt aloud.

Monique, whose wedding had taken place a few weeks before Chantelle moved to Detroit, joked that the best part of marriage was her new home with a walk-in closet. She said she was organized now, and it made her feel prettier, the order of it all, that there was a sort of stability in color-coded blouses.

“So you’re saying that your clothes are a rainbow,” Chantelle said. “Why don’t you just go join Jesse Jackson’s coalition already?”

Chantelle didn’t bother anymore to take her clothes from the laundry basket and put them into her drawers. Since moving, she’d become more practical. She knew what was possible and what was a waste of time.

Each morning, she stood in front of her bathroom mirror and dabbed cover-up onto the thick scar on her temple. She still blamed her sister for that scar, still teased Tanya for pushing her off a slide at the park after a childhood argument. Their mother had always been terrified of scars—she said that on skin as dark as Chantelle’s they stood

out like “bleach on blue jeans”—but when she’d realized that the half-circle was there to stay, she claimed it looked like an “C” for Chantelle.

There had been only a handful of black kids in their elementary and middle schools, so Chantelle and Tanya, just ten months apart in age, had banded together. They sat together at lunch, joined the track team and went for runs along Lake Michigan, but when they got to high school, where there were more kids like them, Tanya had started dating boys. Chantelle suspected that Tanya had been embarrassed by the size of their house—with its old playroom, small greenhouse in the den, and wooden deck--and since Tanya rarely invited her new friends over, the girls drifted apart.

Tanya was the one who had convinced Chantelle to come to Detroit and rent a place on the East Riverfront. She’d moved there four years before, when her then-husband got a job in the music industry. Tanya said the change would be good for Chantelle, that she needed emotional vulnerability. Monique called the plan “splendid,” telling Chantelle that she should go on an adventure and return a stronger woman. Chantelle agreed, mostly because she was sick of the job as a librarian she’d had since college and because Tanya, after the divorce, seemed to need her help more than anyone else. She told herself that the move was only temporary.

She also told herself she wasn’t gaining weight but, now that it was autumn, she wore her jacket all the time. When she passed heavysset women on the street, she tightened the belt of her coat and smiled politely.

“You really should get one,” Monique said.

She thought about asking what Monique meant—a walk-in closet? a husband?—but all she said was, “I can dress myself, thank you.”

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At the potato garden, Alan recorded all of the volunteers' names in a small booklet. "I'll add you to my email list," he said. "I send out random potato facts in my lab's monthly newsletter." While they waited for him to distribute supplies, Chantelle dragged her toe over the ground, drawing a line across the dirt, as if she was at the beach and not in the middle of an urban garden.

The Brightmoor neighborhood was designed in the nineteen-twenties for Henry Ford's workers, and most of the houses were built in less than eight hours. Originally, there hadn't even been indoor plumbing. And then, in the eighties, trying to cut back on drug dealing and slums, black citizens, against the advice of the city, burned down many of the homes. Driving along the streets on her way to work, Chantelle saw abandoned houses with padlocks on the doors, lots littered by several lifetimes' accumulation of trash, prostitutes strutting down the sidewalks. This morning, after parking her car, she'd spotted a tiny red shoe abandoned inside an old tire. She'd thought about taking it home with her, starting a collection of people's lost belongings on her mantle, but somehow that seemed exploitive. Crumpled bits of leaves had gathered inside it, but the shoe still sparkled with sequins and the strap was buckled to the loosest setting.

At the Brightmoor Center, Chantelle worked as a program coordinator, which meant that she spent most of her time tutoring kids. A few months ago a girl said she was planning to be the first black female astronaut, and Chantelle didn't have the heart to tell her that feat had already been accomplished, so instead she explained that, to work for NASA, the girl would have to keep studying math and science. Just the other day, a boy

said that he had flown up onto the roof of his school. He'd turned a garbage barrel upside-down, filled it with shaken-up two-liter bottles of pop, and then his little brother unscrewed all the caps at once. The carbonation made a jet, he said, like a rocket, and he'd shot up to the top of the school and got stuck. "I did that once, but I was underwater," Chantelle said, and he'd smiled, clinging to her arm.

Chantelle felt guilty that she spent so much time with kids other than Cynthia. She liked to tell people that she was the wild aunt. "I've got it the best way," she told the women at work, who were all married with kids. "I take her to ice cream in our pajamas or we stay up past bedtime to make gingerbread houses. She thinks I'm so cool." But the truth was that, whenever Chantelle went to see Cynthia, she spent the entire time consoling Tanya and there weren't many opportunities to do all the wild things she'd imagined.

"First," the potato man was saying, "has anyone ever harvested anything before?"

The volunteers watched him as if he were a ringmaster in the circus. One man wore suspenders, a woman stood with her hands over her hips, and a college boy in athletic shorts seemed to have ignored the weather report that predicted cold winds and rain. The fourth volunteer wore a white collared t-shirt that rose at his waist so Chantelle could see a smooth strip of marmalade-colored skin.

"Are we talking just food here?" she asked. "Or can it be organs?"

Only the college students and the guy in the white t-shirt laughed at her joke. A pale birthmark drooped below his right eye. He had a sharply defined jaw that, if Chantelle could draw more than just stick figures, she would have liked to sketch.

The sky was so overcast that their bodies had no shadows. Dust blew into her eyes.

When he distributed work gloves, Alan beamed. “My family has just about had it with me talking about potatoes at dinner each night,” he said. “I’m thrilled you all want to get involved.” He handed everyone wire baskets with handles that creaked when they moved down the rows.

Chantelle had been planning to surprise her sister with the cake for Cynthia’s birthday. She knew that Tanya had settled on buying ice cream for the party—cakes were so damn expensive these days, Tanya said, especially with the divorce and having to pay for lawyers and the absurd costs of a private school kindergarten education, and besides she didn’t have time to bake.

Tanya was probably laying out paper plates with pictures of tigers and zebras for the safari theme, dressed in her plaid pajamas, listening to Billie Holiday while she made the house presentable.

Even eight months after the divorce, Chantelle still got crying phone calls from Tanya each night after Cynthia had gone to bed. Chantelle tried not to dwell on these conversations, how Tanya punctuated her sentences with sobs and Chantelle stammered out words of comfort, a comfort she never really knew how to give because she’d never been that intimate with anyone, not even her sister.

That’s what Chantelle liked about the kids she tutored—they were so ready to say, “Well, I don’t like you,” and the next moment, “I love you.” Sometimes she felt as if her relationships were all just one big knock-knock joke: “Banana, banana who, banana,

banana who, banana”—in which the punch line was delayed so long that the joke grew thin before it reached “Or-ange you glad I didn’t say banana.”

Chantelle had never liked Tanya’s husband, anyway. Harry had been so obsessive about his work as a music producer that he couldn’t ask questions about anyone else’s life. And Tanya didn’t tell Chantelle about all the problems—his relentless criticism, the late-night drinking, smoking cigarettes in front of Cynthia—until after he’d left her for the jazz singer. “I’ve always been tone deaf,” Tanya joked between sobs, “so it wasn’t even like I could compete.”

But now, every time Chantelle visited, Tanya would kiss her on both cheeks and say, “I can’t wait to talk,” and Chantelle would listen to her--so much listening-- as they chewed on black licorice or sipped the cheap, sweet wine that Tanya served. Tanya had always been an overprotective mother—she once phoned Cynthia’s teacher when she thought a fire safety lesson was too frightening--but it was getting worse. Over the course of these evenings, Tanya would peek into Cynthia’s room three or four times.

On the drive home, Chantelle would call Monique and say she didn’t know how much longer she could take it, this constant listening. “You wouldn’t be a good shrink,” Monique would say.

“I think I’m going to start to shrink, if she keeps going on like this,” Chantelle insisted. “I guess it’s not a bad thing if my body shrinks, but my mind is going to shrink and then we, Tanya and I, are both going to go crazy.”

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Once the harvesting started, the volunteers sifted through the garden as if they were pressed for time. A farm machine had, earlier that morning, loosened the dirt, and most of the potatoes rested at the top of the mounds. Chantelle was careful not to let her knees touch the ground and, already, her calves burned from her hunched posture. Next to her, the man with the birthmark picked up potatoes three at a time. The college boy in shorts counted aloud: "One potato, two potato, three potato, four." Chantelle felt like the slacker in an Easter egg hunt, uninspired by the promise of a golden egg.

Alan paced between the rows of potato plants. He was reciting trivia: thirty thousand potatoes had been buried beneath this acre, one of the varieties of potatoes was named Leonora after his daughter, and he was developing one for his son. He picked up the biggest potatoes, calling them elephants, and cradled them in his palm, his arm flexing with the weight.

The other people piled potatoes in their baskets as if they didn't want to stop and think. The wind was picking up, the sky gray. Specks of dirt gathered on Chantelle's clothes like lint. Her work gloves slipped down her wrist. She could see the birthmark man, to her right, and he glanced back at her. She brushed her boots off with the back of her gloves, tracing smudged lines on the leather.

She knelt over the ground. There were so many potatoes, it seemed, that she saw no point in rushing. The night before, Monique had told her to spontaneously ask a man on a date; Monique offered advice like challenges, and clicked her tongue when Chantelle said she couldn't ever find smart, interesting men. Chantelle imagined that the plot, the entire garden, was the batter of a cake; she tried to sift and knead her hands through the dirt, which was soft and almost weightless, groping for potatoes hidden

beneath the surface. The potatoes felt heavy and smooth, and she clutched them between her fingers, tenderly, before putting them into the basket.

“It’s a different kind of work, isn’t it?” the man asked her.

“Different than what?” Chantelle yanked another potato out of the ground.

“Well, I work for the state representative,” the man said. He had a thick, husky voice. “It’s different than that.”

“You work for a state rep?” She didn’t try to hide her surprise. She wondered how he got the job. “What are you doing here?”

“You act like I’m not good enough for the state rep.” His birthmark glistened with sweat and she liked the way it spread over his skin, like a coffee stain. “Let me tell you, I want to be mayor someday. I’m here to reach out to the potato population.”

“Well, I’m glad one of us wants to be here,” she said. Clouds hung low over the sky.

“There are people I want to get to know,” he said, holding her gaze. It had been so long since a man had looked at her that way that she couldn’t help but smile.

“I’m Chantelle,” she said, and then, because she was holding a potato, she added, “I’d shake your hand but, well, the dirt.”

“Marcus,” he said, piling a potato in the basket and moving closer to her as he picked more. “So you don’t want to be here, with us. I see how it is. We’re a bunch of potato harvesting losers.”

“No, that’s not it.” Chantelle told him about Cynthia’s birthday, and how she wanted to surprise her with a cake. “They’ve been going through a lot, I just want to give them something in return.” It felt good to say it aloud.

“Well, that’s nice of you.” He grinned. “You like your family more than potatoes.”

“Marcus,” she said, lifting a handful of dirt and letting it seep through the fingers of her glove, “I like potato harvesting more than anything else in the world.”

Just then, Alan approached them, almost shouting, “It’s about to rain, folks, about to rain at any minute.” He pointed up, pulled his cap over his forehead.

Chantelle looked at the sky, which, streaked with gray, seemed to sag over the garden. Near the sun, light filtered through the clouds, thinning them like strands of egg whites.

“We’ve only just started,” Marcus said, dropping his basket.

Rain began soaking into the soil, and the volunteers rushed toward Alan’s pick-up truck, lugging the baskets of potatoes. “I’ll get in touch with you about rescheduling,” Alan said to Chantelle. His cheeks were speckled with dirt that bled into brown, jagged streaks.

Chantelle and Marcus hurried toward the parking lot together. “I was looking forward to talking with you,” he said and turned toward a pathway, hugging himself.

“You walking home?” Chantelle asked.

“Catching the bus.”

Chantelle fumbled in her pocket for her car keys. “Come with me.”

Tanya’s husband had bought her a triangular prism on their first Valentine’s Day. It came with a card that said something corny like, “This casts all the colors that you help me see,” and, even after the divorce, Tanya kept it on the windowsill of her kitchen so

that, as she cooked, it sent rainbows across the floor, the counters, and her body. One night, after Tanya had gone on and on about how scared she was of being a single mother—“not that I want that jerk in my life, just that I don’t want to decide her whole life on my own”—Chantelle led her sister into the backyard, handed her the prism, and told her to throw it against the garage. “And I mean *really* throw it,” she’d said, picking up a small rock and demonstrating with a quick snap of her wrist. Tanya closed her eyes and swung her arm forward. The prism shattered, and, with a sound like coins falling, particles of glass spread over the paved driveway. Chantelle left her sister alone in the backyard to sweep up the damage.

When they climbed into Chantelle’s car, Marcus said, “I’ve never seen anything like this. It’s an office on wheels.”

“That’s right.” She laughed. “I can marry people in my car.” She had all the forms—applications for marriage licenses, birth and death certificates, name changes—everything people needed to make their lives legitimate, stacked in boxes in the back, where most women her age would have a car seat or baby wipes or beach toys. “When I first came to Detroit, I worked for the Wayne County Clerk,” she said, but didn’t tell him how she’d flitted between neighborhoods with empty lots to ones where the houses seemed to take over the lawns. “Since I got the job with the Brightmoor Center, I’ve been so busy that I haven’t bothered to empty it all out.”

In the backseat, she also kept a pair of high heels, an economy-sized box of granola bars, and a series of pamphlets about urban farming in Detroit. Chantelle had stuck decorative pins to the sagging fabric of her car’s ceiling, marking a messy flow

chart of her life. Taped up beside the rearview mirror, there was a picture of a lopsided cartoon frog saying, “Kiss me, I don’t smoke,” memorializing when Chantelle threw out her last pack of cigarettes soon after moving to Detroit. The ceiling was bordered with pins, and their smiling faces—both human and cartoon--made her car seem to be filled with company, although her radio was broken and, usually, she drove alone.

Marcus reached up to touch a pin that had the outline of a saxophone player.

“This is wild.”

Chantelle turned on the car’s heating system and unbuttoned her coat, revealing her beige sweater. “Where do you live?”

“On Woodbridge. By the riverfront.” His shirt was damp from the rain and his forehead and short hair shone.

“That’s close to me.”

They didn’t talk much during the rest of the drive, but she didn’t mind the silence. They passed the one-story bungalows in Brightmoor; a scarecrow with a pumpkin for a head; two girls who were sharing a poncho, standing side by side, their heads poking through the collar, the hood tight over their hairlines. She considered telling him the joke about the Siamese twins who climbed trees, but that seemed a little too obscure.

When they came up to a small grocery shop, she clicked on her turn signal. “Do you mind if we stop?”

“Here?”

“Yes, I have to make a cake.”

“For your niece’s birthday, I know.” She was pleased that he remembered, and then he said, “We can stop only if I can help you make it.”

“Whatever.” She didn’t think he could possibly want to help make a cake. She pulled the car into the lot, told him to sit tight, she’d only be a moment, and dashed through the rain.

In the store, Chantelle got the last box of cake batter and a half-gallon of milk that hadn’t expired. When she was in line, ruffling through her pockets to find cash, listening to the cashier talk on the phone about a boy she had dated for “only a few hours, I think,” she suddenly drew in her breath. She had left a strange man in her car, the keys still in the ignition, in the middle of the city, and now she was probably stranded.

But when she returned to the parking lot, the car was still sitting there, and Marcus asked if she wanted to bake the cake at his place or hers. “Do you have cake tins?” she asked him, and he didn’t, so soon she was pulling up in front of her building, repeating one more time that cakes were boring to make, that he didn’t really have to join her, but he kept saying he had nothing better to do.

The elevator was out of order, so they had to climb five flights of stairs, up a narrow corridor. She hoped she didn’t have dirt stains on the back of her jeans from the garden. She could hear him breathing softly behind her as they climbed higher.

Her apartment was small, and she’d painted the whole place butternut yellow to give the impression there was more to it than there actually was. One wall of the living room, adjacent to her bedroom, was brick and she’d lined it with green plants to add color. She’d gotten her couch at a garage sale for fifty dollars. Pink and blue outlines of egrets, their wings raised as if in distress, covered the fabric. It was so hideous that she’d grown protective of it, and when they walked in the door, she said, “The ugliest couch you’ve ever seen, don’t you think?” so that Marcus wouldn’t feel she had poor taste.

In her kitchen, he sat on a stool. He had a rip in the knee of his pants and he ran his fingers over the worn fabric. She poured him a glass of orange juice because it was still only eleven in the morning.

She turned toward the cupboard, picked out a mixing bowl. Through the window, she could see the river, gray in the rain. “So, what do you do for the state rep?” She didn’t know whether she should ask him to get eggs from the fridge or to help measure the flour, so she preheated the oven and let him stay put.

“I run a program for ex-convicts, mentoring and that kind of stuff.” He toyed with her saltshaker, which was shaped like a smooth white egg. Grains of salt spilled onto the table.

“Really?” She already knew, from her experiences at the community center, something about ex-cons. She stood at the counter so she could turn her head to watch him while opening the cake mix. “It’s unbelievable,” she said. “One in three kids in my center have a parent who is, or has been, in prison.” She felt sure she was right about that statistic. “I’ve been thinking about developing programs, finding resources to help them along the way.”

“Resources?”

“You know, sometimes it helps to have a book you can turn to. I just feel so sorry for these kids, they have no hope.”

“A book?” He scratched his head. “It’s not really a book they need.”

“It helps.” She cracked the eggs, watching the yolk seep into the bowl.

“I guess. You really feel that?”

She smoothed her sweater down her sides. He seemed to be looking at her hips. She stared at the wooden floor, where stripes of wood alternated, light and dark, dark and light. “What does it matter how I feel? Anything helps, right?”

He shrugged. She didn’t have an electric mixer, so she stirred the batter with a rubber spatula, pushing her weight into it, slowing down when her arms became tired. He told her about some guy he mentored who wanted to be a carpenter, but he worked at a Citgo gas station and asked Marcus for advice on channeling emotions. “We talk about positive energy,” Marcus said, his eyes following her as she churned the batter. “You know, how you have to be aware, pay attention to details, let the positive energy come to the surface of your skin so it brushes away your dark emotions.”

She stared at him. “I’ve tried that stuff, yoga, meditation, but the only thing it brings to the surface of my skin is sweat.” She told him about the instructor, back in Chicago, who had acted as if everything in the ordinary world—light, water, even saliva—were really gems and all she had to do was breathe deeply and one-two-three exhale in order to feel contented. Marcus seemed to think that was funny, a sign of energy perhaps. His birthmark creased as he laughed, like a piece of folded cloth.

It had been harder to make new friends in Detroit than she’d expected. She’d started doing crossword puzzles. She’d bought cookbooks and told herself she’d make the recipes. At night, she’d watched free movies on cable. Most of the new ones had to do with vampires: children turned vampires, people who ran from vampires, and vampires with strange, infectious obsessions.

Her last relationship, back in Chicago, had been so casual she'd managed to end it without even a break-up conversation. She had decided it was over after a boring night of fireworks at Navy Pier when she found herself watching other men more than the boyfriend. She'd left her gloves at his house, but figured she'd have to cut her losses and start to look for something new.

Sometimes, now that she lived in Detroit, she joined Tanya and Cynthia for dinner and they'd play card games where no one ever won. Tanya was good about staying lighthearted in front of Cynthia, and Chantelle suspected that her sister only really cried to her. Cynthia was learning how to shuffle, but mostly that meant she rotated the cards in her hands until they fell over the carpet. The TV remained on while they played. "What do you believe in?" Tanya asked once after Cynthia had gone to bed. She knew that Chantelle went to church only when she visited their parents back in Chicago. "I used to tell myself I believed in the little things—running water, warm macaroni and cheese, smiles—but now, I don't know." Tanya's voice had sounded meek.

"I believe," Chantelle had said, without hesitating, "in compassion," but Tanya started giggling and said, "Sure you do," and Chantelle just stared at her and shrugged and said, "Well, I do."

Chantelle wrote emails to old friends with titles like, "Your wish is my command" or "How to live on tea and tea alone." The titles had nothing to do with the messages themselves. She'd describe the projects on which she was working—housing revitalizations, college prep classes—in ways that still seemed visionary. She put time into these emails, into each word. She tried not to feel offended if she didn't get a

response. Most people were busy and she knew, now more than ever, how hard it was to get things done.

“So, the community center, you like working there?” Marcus asked while they waited for the oven to finish pre-heating.

“I hate it,” Chantelle told him.

“You know what I’ve found?” He fiddled with the saltshaker again. “Tell me if you think this is true. Community workers are mostly self-involved. They want self-gratification.”

“Excuse me?” Chantelle rested her palms on the table. “Could you make a bigger generalization? That’s almost like saying that all black men are troublemakers.”

“No,” Marcus said. “Not at all. It’s saying they’re dissatisfied. They want power, they want to be understood, they want to make an impact.”

“You’re saying that I’m on a power trip?”

“I didn’t say that.” He scooted his chair closer to hers. “I’m just theorizing. I didn’t say it applied to you. You’re a hard worker, aren’t you?”

“I guess so,” she said.

“So am I.” He tilted his head away from her. “But I got into trouble when I was young.”

“And now you have a job with the state rep.”

“I started as a secretary,” he said. “I worked my ass off to move up. You know how that is.”

She didn't want to ask him what he did to get in trouble, so she just sat still, resting her elbows on the kitchen table, and remained silent.

"I can tell you're an independent woman," he said.

"Independent woman? You can tell? What makes you think you know anything about me?"

"I don't. But I want to, what's so bad about that?"

She stood up and started rinsing the egg-stained dishes. "You just told me I was a self-involved snob," she said. "You think that's flattering?"

"I like it that you're feisty," he said. "My ex wouldn't argue with me like this."

"So is that what this is about? Your ex?"

"What's your pet peeve?" he asked. Up close, she could see a short hair growing from his birthmark.

"My pet peeve?" She stood in the center of the kitchen, her hands on her hips.

"Are you going to tell me it makes me more vulnerable or something?"

"No, I'm just curious. Humor me."

"People who are fake. I hate people who are fake."

"I think we're going to get along," he said, standing up to pass her the fork she'd left on the table.

Marcus told her about his ex-girlfriend, who'd broken up with him for her dissertation adviser, and his own father, who still worked in the automobile factories, and how, during the summers, Marcus had joined him there, placing heavy equipment on conveyor belts. "You take too long, and they don't give you a lunch break," he said. Chantelle nodded. "I guess I've never been able to fit in," he finally admitted. She

couldn't believe that he would share so many personal things with a stranger. She had enough trouble hearing out her sister's confessions. By the time the cake was in the oven, she wanted to take a shower before the party started at one o'clock. "I need to get ready," she told Marcus.

He nodded. "It's been so great to talk."

"Thanks for your help with the cake." She turned to the sink to wash her hands. She couldn't remember if she had washed them earlier, and she knew Tanya would be disgusted by the possibility that she could be spreading germs from the potato garden to all the party guests. She put the water on as hot as possible so that her skin burned.

He moved next to her at the sink. He sighed. "Think we could see each other again tonight?" he asked. Through the water, he reached out to touch her hand, and, his fingers, slick but tight, gripped her wrist.

She batted his hand away, turned off the water. The room was silent except for the thudding of rain on the window.

"I'm just being friendly, you know."

"You don't know me," she told him.

"But I want to know you," he said, leaning against the counter.

"I don't think we're looking for the same thing," she said.

This was how it was, Chantelle thought. She looked at her life and couldn't tell what she wanted from it. There was a tight feeling in her chest. He towered over the table, waiting for her to say or do something. She turned and pressed her temples, her old raised scar, but that just made her head throb. To steady herself, she put her hands on the kitchen table, which was still covered in salt. The crystals stuck to her damp skin.

“I think you should leave now,” she said. She cleared her throat. “It’s only a few blocks. You can walk.”

He lowered his eyebrows, stepped forward. In the dim light, his birthmark shone. “I’d like to see you again,” he insisted. “I think you’re just scared to open up.” He ran his fingers over the edge of the counter and stared at her, right in her eyes.

She cleared her throat again. “I’ll show you to the door.”

After Marcus had gone, his boots banging down the stairs, she returned to the kitchen. The scent of cake filled the room. She began to wash the dishes. All it had been was a touch, she told herself, a simple gesture, fingertips on skin, but she felt jolted. Her breath wavered. She poured gobs of detergent over the mixing bowl and measuring cups, far more than necessary, so that tiny bubbles began to drift above the sink. Into her window, from across the river and through the fog, the lights of the casino in Windsor flickered like constellations.

As she drove along Michigan Avenue to the party, Chantelle called Monique on her cell phone and said that the sight of the deserted train station made her want to cry.

From her car, Chantelle could see how the building was webbed with stained columns that rose into three triangular peaks. The towers, with strips of dark and empty rooms, loomed over the station itself. Most of the windows in the main archway were broken, and the remaining glass outlined the empty spaces. From a distance, the holes looked so small they might have been pecked by birds.

“The train station?” Monique said. When she’d helped Chantelle move to Detroit, they’d taken a driving tour of the city. “It’s just a train station. A failure of a building.”

“A majestic failure,” Chantelle explained, built by the same people as Grand Central Station in New York. “It’s like spoilt milk,” she tried. “Someone should’ve caught it before it went bad. It makes me want to cry.”

“You never cry,” Monique reminded her. “Not even at the right times.”

“But I want to,” she said. “There’s a difference.”

At the birthday party, five kids played on the carpet with Lincoln logs, Legos, and dolls, and their parents stood along the walls, chatting. “I made it!” Chantelle called out when she entered, but no one greeted her and Tanya wasn’t around to accept the cake.

Each kid wore a party hat with a different animal printed on it, and they seemed to have taken the roles seriously. One boy growled like a tiger, a girl beat her chest like a gorilla, and Cynthia, in her pink lacy dress, crouched on her hands and feet, ribbiting.

Chantelle touched Cynthia on the back, but her niece was preoccupied with the animal game and just shouted, “Hi,” over her shoulder. Chantelle joined the parents, racking her memory for their names, trying to find some way to contribute to their talk about the condition of the school system; finally, she went to the kitchen to find her sister.

Tanya was alone, scooping ice cream into plastic bowls. Her eyebrows looked over-plucked. “You shouldn’t have,” she said when Chantelle showed her the cake, but Chantelle shrugged and put it on the counter. “It’s the least I can do.”

“How were the potatoes?”

“Uneventful. I didn’t even get to taste them.”

“Oh. Do you think you can start a game?” Tanya asked. She wore stilettos and a blue knit sweater that was a bit too tight around the waist. “I’m just worried that there’s not enough for the kids to do.”

“Honey,” Chantelle said, rummaging through the cupboard for a cooking pot, “that’s what I do for a living—plan programs.”

“A professional make-believer.” Tanya laughed.

“I just try to make do,” Chantelle said. “Leave the believing up to the kids.”

Before entering the living room, Chantelle began banging on the pot with a metal spoon. A little girl shrieked when she heard the clanging and covered her eyes.

Chantelle beat the pot harder, one two three, one two three, bobbing her head with each thump. “Time for the birthday parade,” she shouted, matching her voice to the rhythm. “Everybody grab an instrument.”

Cynthia was the first to dash to the kitchen, and she returned with a pot on her head. Another girl had two wooden spoons that made a soft pat when she clapped them together. Soon the kids all had spoons and cookie sheets and even a can opener that grinded with each turn.

“Hey, hey, hey,” she chanted, projecting her voice so that it rose above the all of their noise. “Hey, hey, hey.” The kids began to chant with her, giggling between each verse.

The parents stood on the outside of the circle, clapping to the rhythm. Tanya joined them, chewing on her lower lip, and Chantelle could see tears welling in her eyes.

With each beat, the spoon quivered in Chantelle’s hand.

The children kept moving in a circle, raising their knees high with each step, shouting “hey, hey, hey,” the clatter of the kitchen utensils filling the room until the people around them spun and diminished and there was nothing left to do but keep on going.

Street Performance

My mom drops me off at Mallory Square early, as the sunset celebration is just beginning, and I'm first in line at the popcorn stand. The vendor is a short, fragile, middle-aged woman. Her popcorn cart has a family of pigeons pecking at its base. "Go away," she tells the birds. When she gives me the box of popcorn, she says, "Cover it with your hand or they'll get you."

As I pass her money, the pigeons creep closer. The vendor sighs and squirts them with water from a handheld toy gun. "You all alone?" she asks me.

"No," I say, backing away, wondering if she assumes I'm a tourist. "I'm meeting my friends."

I scan the square, but I still don't see Tammy and Ruth. Tammy has a plan for us. "We're going to have a grand adventure," she says, but I don't really know what that means. I haven't told them that I'm hoping to see the mime, Jeremiah, a boy who used to live with my family.

Tourists always flock to the sunset celebration, the nightly party with a half-dozen street performances, and though it's been years since I've gone—my parents would rather kayak through the mangroves—I act like I know everything. But the truth is I'm anxious about seeing Jeremiah because he doesn't visit anymore and he rarely calls.

I go to the bridge where Tammy and Ruth and I have agreed to meet. It overlooks the square, removed from the street performers setting up their acts, and is so plain and

level you forget there's water beneath until you glance over the rail. The ocean is on one side, and an outdoor aquarium on the other. Already, the sun hovers on the horizon, casting the bridge in the gloom of dusk, but Tammy and Ruth are not here.

The people passing me are mostly tourists who carry stuffed flamingos and ice cream cones, sunglasses tilted on their foreheads. A homeless man hovers nearby, repeating, "Happy Friday, happy Friday." On the bench across from me, three college guys with cell phones exposed on their belts smoke cigarettes. I glance at my watch so it's clear I won't be by myself long. I wonder if those guys can tell I'm only fifteen, or if my outfit—black pants and a layered v-neck shirt—makes me look older and more mature. I'm careful not to touch my clothes. My hands are slick with butter from the popcorn.

I wish I could see into the aquarium below, the nurse sharks wide awake at the bottom of the pool, resting on their pectoral fins to create a false shelter for the animals they will later eat. My parents let me go scuba diving with them sometimes when they gather data for their coral reef research. We communicate through slow-motion gestures that float across the haze of sea particles. I know that some of the sharks must be clustered together, in constant company with each other, while they sleep. The sea turtles are dragging themselves through the water. It is close to five o'clock; my popcorn is almost gone, and I hope Tammy and Ruth will arrive soon. I'm not sure I can face Jeremiah by myself.

He is a year out of high school, like my sister, Susan; two years ago, he lived with us for four months after Hurricane Wilma wiped out his father's souvenir shop and his

family's apartment above it. We've heard that Jeremiah has taken a temporary job, replacing the mime, Otto, whose back was broken when a car hit his three-wheeled bike. I knew that Jeremiah had become Otto's friend and helper in recent years. It doesn't surprise me that he'd be a good mime. He always had the lead in school plays.

Jeremiah rarely comes to our house anymore. My parents have heard that he is happy and working at his parents' shop. When Jeremiah calls, only on occasions like birthdays and never when my sister is in town, I'm always surprised to hear his mild voice. Once, before she went off to college, Susan told me to lie and say she wasn't home. "He can be so demanding," she explained. "Sometimes he just asks too much of me."

I always like to see Jeremiah because he wants to talk about marine biology and when he asks, "How are you?" he expects more than a one-word answer. As far as I know, nobody in my family has gone to Mallory Square to see him perform.

I've never actually been included in Tammy's plans for grand adventures, but I've heard of them. One time, she tried to sneak onto a cruise ship with some other girls, but they ended up meeting a cute crew member and talked to him instead. Another time she wanted to tell ghost stories in the graveyard. I've heard, but not from her, that she once got into a bar on Duval Street and danced with a marine. She's the kind of person who always has new ideas about how to have fun. All day, at school, I've been hoping that our adventure will be tame, chill, and silly, a bonding experience.

We met this fall on the basketball team. Tammy and Ruth are the girls who walk during sprints when the coach isn't watching. If things go wrong—someone comes late

to practice or we gossip on the court or lose a game because of stupid mistakes—he makes us run up and down the gymnasium stairs, one-hundred-fifty steps in less than four minutes, or we start all over. Miss a practice and you don't play in that week's game. Not that I get to play much anyway. I spend most of my time on the sidelines, stretching and re-stretching, reminding myself that being on the team is a social opportunity. I talk to the other girls more than I touch the basketball. Tammy will heave herself onto the bench and groan, "That girl over there, the one who looks like a horse? She's throwing elbows all over the place and the refs aren't calling it."

To Tammy, I'll say, "What a bitch," and she'll nod over her water bottle, her face discolored by sweat.

When Tammy and Ruth finally show up, prancing down the street in heels and tank tops whose straps barely stay on their shoulders, it is close to five o'clock and my popcorn is gone. From fifteen feet away, Tammy hollers, "Here we go—a night on the town."

We actually have only two hours to hang out at the square before Ruth's mother comes to drive us home, but I don't bother to correct Tammy. "You both look so cute," I call to my friends, waving my hand even though they're in front of me. We've dressed up because we decided this would be a special occasion. Tammy wears a jean skirt, frayed at the edges, just short enough that I can see a divot in her thigh when her muscle flexes. Ruth has tan-colored pants that my mom would say are too tight in the back, but which make her look curvy. "Maya, where have you been all my life?" Ruth calls and I giggle loudly and shrug.

The three college guys, who still linger on the bench with cigarettes, watch as Ruth and Tammy walk toward me. They carry themselves—shoulders back, sashaying down the street, each step deliberate, fluid, and gliding—in ways that invite people to stare. Neither of my friends seems to know whether or not to return the guys’ gazes, and they shift their eyes from me to each other and, for a half-second, to the boys.

Tammy smiles when they reach me and she drapes her arm around my shoulder in a half-hug. “Maya,” she says. “We made it, finally.”

“We got stuck behind the Conch train,” Ruth explains, her voice soft as always. “It was like they were making the tour extra long so we’d be late.”

Their faces are coated in make-up, but I wear only the strawberry scented lip gloss I took from Susan’s bedroom. Although her hair is darker, we have the same complexion and bone structure and we both tuck our lips in when we smile. Sometimes, people mistake us for each other. This afternoon, when she called from her college in New York, she thought it was funny that I wanted to dress nicely to go to Mallory Square. She didn’t mention Jeremiah.

My family evacuated the Keys during Hurricane Wilma two years ago. When we returned from what my father called “a pleasant vacation” in Miami, after hours and hours of traffic on Highway 1, the front windows of our house were shattered. The roof was still intact except for some shingles sticking up like loose hairs, but our living room had flooded. For weeks, the house smelled like sewage mixed with Indian curry. School was cancelled and so was Halloween.

Jeremiah slept on the couch for a few nights before my parents told me he'd be living with us for a while. "Give him space," my mother said. "He's going through a lot."

His parents refused to move in with us. "We have to be near our shop," his father said, and that was true—people often burglarized the buildings damaged by hurricanes. Jeremiah's parents slept on a mattress in their store while they completed repairs, but they wanted his lifestyle to be stable during the final months of high school.

Jeremiah and Susan would sit up late in the kitchen, at our checkered, fold-up table, doing homework and drinking herbal tea. He ate his cereal dry and had carrots and ranch dip every day after school. He watched TV when he did his math homework until my mother told him not to. He used our shampoo. Sometimes, if I woke up in the middle of the night to go to the bathroom, I'd glance at him on the couch, curled inside his sleeping bag. He almost always slept on his left side. One night, I stood over him, and he woke with a start, looking bleary-eyed and angry. I scurried off. Neither of us mentioned it in the morning.

On the square, the sun is slipping toward the horizon, and the celebration is beginning to pulse, the street performers encircled by spectators like planets with spherical rings. I can't see Jeremiah, but I know he must be nearby. "We're ready," Tammy says, "to get this party started." She takes long strides, with Ruth beside her, and I rush to keep up.

The minute we stroll down the bridge and onto the plaza, past the college boys, Tammy latches her arms onto me and Ruth and whispers, "Those guys? I'd do them."

My friends aren't afraid to discuss, describe, and imagine guys. But, like I tried to explain to Brianna, who has been my best friend since kindergarten, it doesn't mean that their actions match their words--unless they're on an adventure. But Brianna is so shy she'd never be invited to come along. On adventures, I'm not really sure how they act.

"You would? Them?" Ruth says. When she speaks, she draws out her words as if testing how her voice sounds. "You know, there's a lot more guys to check out at the celebration, and I bet some of them will be hotter."

She's right. The men in the square, young, old, alone or with women, are all different. One man has a fresh shadow of facial hair just starting to show and he looks me in the eye. "Hoody-hoo," Tammy says, but if any guys hear her, they don't respond.

Close to the street performers, the crowd grows dense and we have to brush against people to find our way. Tammy raises her eyebrows suggestively. She still hasn't described the plan, and I don't know whether I'm supposed to ask about it. Instead, I keep scanning the crowd for Jeremiah.

"Hey, Ruth," Tammy says, leaning close to us. She motions at a guy with a sharp jaw line and a plain blue baseball cap. "You should tell him to meet you at the harbor tonight."

"Right." Ruth strokes her hair, nibbling at her nails. "Tammy," she says. "Tell us. Tell us your plan. What's the challenge for tonight?"

We saunter past an artist selling pastel drawings of egrets, past the popcorn vendor, past a jeweler who shapes new earrings between sales, past a fortune teller

wearing a long, black, witch-like costume, and the whole time Tammy wears a sly, thin-lipped smile. “He’s cute, don’t you think?” she says finally, motioning toward a guy with a buzz cut and blond eyebrows.

“I know,” Ruth says. We watch a little boy dance while his mother sits on a bench. He claps, even though there’s no music. His mother throws her head back with laughter when the boy moves his hips in a circle. “I know your plan. You want to have a dance party, right here, right now.”

I have a vague memory of my mother taking me to a ballet class when I was little. It’s one of those memories that exists only because other people have retold it so many times—apparently, I sat down in the middle of class, arms crossed, fed up with it all. I would never have been like that little boy, dancing to some rhythm only he can hear.

“No,” Tammy says. “My idea is good, really good.” Her voice takes on the edge it gets when she is actually being serious, a kind of deepness that reduces any trace of whining and demands attention. “Let’s get ourselves in a performance. We can do it.”

When he lived with us, Jeremiah was in a school play, and he let Susan help him practice his lines. They sat in lawn chairs on the gravel lot behind our house. Sometimes she would drape her legs across his lap. My mother made me bring them snacks, but Jeremiah would stop rehearsing when I approached. “Thank you very much, my dear,” he would say in a fake French accent. Once, close to opening night, he said, “Maya, could you just give us a moment?”

I saw how he looked at my sister, like the way tourists stare at the linens in Fast Buck Freddie’s department store on Duvall Street. As if they can’t believe how close

they are to something so nice. Maybe he didn't know that my sister talked to other boys on the phone.

I don't even think she paid close attention while he recited his lines. She's a daydreamer. But even at dinners, when my father told jokes about sea urchins and Susan stared out the window, Jeremiah seemed willing to put up with us all.

Tammy and Ruth are good at creating challenges. At the basketball team sleepover, Tammy had the other girls make prank calls. Tammy phoned Mrs. MacGregor, the crazy librarian at middle school, and asked if her refrigerator was running. "You better go get it," Tammy urged before the woman could respond. Tammy was on speakerphone so the whole team could hear Mrs. MacGregor say, "Oh, dear." The girls also called Ellen Powell, one of our classmates, and pretended they were doing an anonymous survey for *Seventeen Magazine*, asking about her love life, her bra size, and whether or not she considered herself popular. "I have lots of friends," she said, and Ruth thanked her, hung up, and rolled on the carpet, giggling. I didn't speak until Tammy, thumbing through the school phone directory, her emerald-colored pajama pants rolled to the knee, read aloud Brianna's number.

"No," I said, my voice hoarse and edgy. The other girls glared at me without turning their heads and all I could think of was seahorses and their 360-degree vision, the way they eye predators without even moving their bodies.

"Maybe," I stammered, "we should try to call someone else, someone more interesting."

"Fine," Tammy said. "But it's your turn, Maya, to prank someone."

I could think of a million reasons why I should never make a prank call—I giggle too easily, I can't disguise my voice, I don't talk well under pressure. Mostly, I couldn't be that cruel. Those calls were the ones that, late at night, I feared receiving.

"I can't," I said.

But I found myself holding the phone, dialing a number that Ruth read aloud. Over the speaker, the ring sounded flat. It rang only once. I heard the sounds of a TV in the background, static mixed with laughter, and then a little boy's voice, high-pitched, saying, "Hello?"

"May I please speak to Virginia?" I asked. The other girls were quiet, watching, leaning towards me.

"Virginia!" The boy shouted into the phone, running the syllables together.
"Virginia!"

Virginia Baker used to come to my house in second grade and tell me lies. She said she went on vacations to places like Tanzania and the Czech Republic, places I knew about only because their names were so strange. She said that she pierced her own ears and her mother still didn't know. Even in high school, Virginia told people that she was convinced her father was in the mafia.

When she answered, I fumbled with the phone cord, searching for words. "We know," I finally said. "Virginia, we know."

"Sorry?" she asked. Her voice was carefree, oblivious to the nasty nature of the call. "What'd you say?"

I glanced up and Tammy was motioning her hands like a director scolding actors who were reading from a script without emotion. "We know what you feel and think," I

stammered. “We know. We know that you lie.”

“I see,” Virginia said. “You’re a psychic?”

Then the phone went dead and the girls laughed quietly. They made eye contact with each other, but not with me. “I did it,” I said, but they didn’t congratulate me.

Another girl, a point guard whose father has been told to be quiet at the games—he’d yelled insults at another team—said to me, “What is it that you are good at?”

To be honest, I think I’m someone whom other people confide in. One day when Tammy was sick, I sat with Ruth at lunch and she told me she liked to make homemade jam with her mother. It was a long process; they’d preserve it during the winter, and it tasted better than any candy she’d ever had. “Don’t tell anyone that,” she’d warned me, as though jam making was the same as having a sixth toe.

Later that week, Tammy told me she had a nightmare in which it literally rained cats and dogs. The streets had flooded like they did in the hurricane and the cats and dogs drifted past the cars, drenched and helpless, sweeping down the lanes and back streets, through the Key West cemetery, over all the graves that are built above ground. She said it was eerie, “All those bodies,” and I reminded her, “That’s just a dream, don’t think too much of it.”

Soon after the real hurricane, Jeremiah told me he was scared. We were rinsing dishes and he accidentally dropped a China plate and then stopped, gazing at me over the broken glass, and said it terrified him to think of what his family had lost--the roof of their apartment, nearly all of their belongings, their photos, their hope. He said that

without us watching over him, without Susan to keep him sane at school, it would have been a real disaster.

“But if you think about it,” I said, “disasters are when we feel most alive.”

He looked me in the eye and then I gave him a hug and held on. When I clutched his arms, he stayed still for a moment but then pulled away and left the room. I’ve never told anybody about that.

At Mallory Square, Tammy dismisses the acts with sword swallowers, dogs jumping through hoops, and tightrope walkers before she points at the performance she wants us to join. It takes me a moment to recognize Jeremiah. He is entirely covered in silver—a silver vest made of material like crosshatched wires, silver leather pants, a silver cap pulled over his hair. The paint glazed over his face and neck is thick like an extra layer of skin. Tammy pulls us closer, steering us in and out of the people who stand around him in a circle.

Last fall, Jeremiah moved out of our house little by little. One day he’d sleep on our couch, the next on a mattress at his family’s newly repaired apartment, and then he’d be back again, on the couch. Susan began coming home earlier from school, usually without him. My mother cornered him one day and asked, “What’s up, Jeremiah?” and he said, “Not too much.” She said, “You don’t seem to be around anymore,” and he replied, “Well, people change, you know. You can’t expect them to stay in one place forever.” Eventually, my mom stopped setting a place for him at dinner and buying extra bagels at the store.

Dressed as the tin man, Jeremiah rarely smiles. His mouth stays fixed in a thin line. He moves only when people give him money. Then he raises his hand to his chin, as though deep in thought, or shields his eyes or stretches an arm in the air in a salute. Each gesture he makes is deliberate, one limb at a time. He collects tips in a silver-painted box. It's hard for me to believe that, two years ago, I couldn't wait to see him after school.

I want to tell him I'm not resentful. But I need to know why he left our family behind, why he never visits, and whether or not he blames me for Susan's mistakes.

Children try to trick Jeremiah into speaking. A couple, maybe on their honeymoon, sandwich him in a hug while someone else takes a photograph. He stands still, without cracking an expression. I wonder if they'll find, later tonight, walking along the harbor, that their clothes are sprinkled in silver.

I've imagined that Jeremiah left after he asked for something Susan was unwilling to give. Or maybe it was the other way around. Or was it something I did, or didn't do?

"Do you think he ever talks?" Ruth asks.

Jeremiah still hasn't spotted me in the crowd.

"I see him in town sometimes," Tammy says, and that's when I realize that she and Ruth have no idea who he is. "In normal clothes. He eats at my dad's restaurant."

"Is the tin man missing a heart," I wonder aloud, "or is it a brain?"

"I think," Ruth says, "that he's my favorite performer."

"He used to be mine," I say, watching Jeremiah's slow, halting pantomime.

"Ruth, I know what you can do," Tammy says. "You need to kiss the tin man. He's your favorite, you need to kiss him!"

Ruth takes a step back. She withdraws into her shoulders. “No, I don’t think so,” she says.

“Just do it. It’s not that big of a deal. Kiss the tin man, and people will think it’s funny.”

Ruth shifts back and forth, as though weighing the decision. The college boys we saw on the bridge lean against a palm tree nearby, watching us. “I don’t think I want to,” she stammers.

“I’d do it,” Tammy says. She smooths her skirt and pulls it farther down her thighs. “Then I could tell everyone at school.”

“Would *you* do it, Maya?” Ruth asks, nudging me as though I might be the voice of reason.

“I’ve never done anything like that,” I say, shrugging, and Ruth turns to Tammy, triumphant.

“Maya, you can be so damn lame,” Tammy says. She expects me to back down.

I glance at Tammy, shaking her head; at Ruth, smirking; then at Jeremiah, posing for a photo. His silver shoelaces are untied, like a small boy’s. No one looks at me, not even when I begin to step toward the center of the crowd.

My vision is foggy. I can’t make out the crowd, the dimming sunset, or the girls behind me. My shoulders feel twisted, my arms too long, my feet too big for walking, but now that I’m on the move, I can’t stop myself. I stumble toward Jeremiah.

He doesn’t flinch when I drape one arm around his shoulder. He is taller than me, and a pocket of air hangs suspended between our bodies. We look like an improbable

couple at a dance who, waiting for music to start, try to embrace without acknowledging each other.

His eyes finally make contact with mine. The irises are so dark they're indistinguishable from his pupils.

Without thinking, I kiss him, a sharp peck on the lips. The silver paint leaves a residue on my lips. It tastes salty with sweat.

Around me, I hear laughter. A hoot from the crowd. A male voice shouting, "Me next!"

Jeremiah lets his hand slump over my shoulder and his fingertips graze the back of my neck. Through the layers of makeup, I see tracks of acne eroding his forehead. Maybe it's my imagination, but I think his lower lip quivers. I whisper, soft, "Why?"

The silver paint is cracked along his hairline.

I stand on my tiptoes. I'm sure no one else can hear.

His face stays rigid, his cheekbones flat, angled like slash marks down a page.

I shake my head and dart back to my friends. They regard me with surprise, but I feel glassed off from the world, breathing my own air, partitioned in a separate aquarium for strangers to see. My hands are smudged silver from the embrace. All I want to do is take a hot shower and let the water drill onto my head until my memory is smoothed over, polished like a fossil, and I can forget it all.

"I can't wait to tell everyone," Tammy says, giggling as she and Ruth link arms with me. They skip through the plaza, gliding so fast I can barely glance back at Jeremiah. Arms crossed, gazing towards the sunset, he has shifted into a new pose. His

mouth is stretched into a mock-smile, willing people to approach, but his eyes are as blank and forbidding as a stranger's.

Baby Love

Eileen Cooper sat alone in the maternity ward's waiting room. Her sleek blond hair rose with static electricity, and she smoothed down the strands with her palm. The waiting room was empty. She smiled at all the passing nurses, but no one stopped to greet her. The receptionist had said that Nurse Bellamy would only be a minute, but it had already been twenty. Soon, Eileen hoped, the hospital would be like her second home. The entire room, even the windowsills, was painted robin's egg blue. On the wall, there was a photograph of hot air balloons, dozens of them, rising into the sky. One balloon was shaped like an elephant, with flaps of pink fabric for the ears and the trunk. She wondered what the decorations were like in the rooms where the mothers and infants slept.

Nurse Bellamy, when she finally showed up, was a middle-aged black woman, short and stocky. She carried a steaming mug and rested her weight on one hip, her knee jutting to the side. "I hope you're prepared to work your ass off," she said.

"Don't worry." Eileen followed her into an office behind the receptionist's desk. "I'm ready."

"That right?" Nurse Bellamy turned and squinted at Eileen. Then she reached into a closet and handed Eileen pink scrubs, like the ones she was wearing.

"I mean, I've been looking forward to this job," Eileen said. "I've done a lot of reading about pre- and post-natal care. I feel ready."

“A lot of reading? Where’d you go to school?”

“I attend Colgate, in upstate New York.” Eileen ran her hands over the scrubs; the fabric felt thin and soft like a tissue.

“Colgate. You go there? Still? How old are you?”

Eileen explained that she was nineteen, pre-med, and a biology and women’s studies major. Her professor’s brother was on the board of the hospital and he had recommended her for the job. While Eileen talked, Nurse Bellamy drummed her fingers on the table, nails clicking against wood.

“I plan to spend my life working with babies.” Eileen brushed her hair from her eyes.

“How about that! Another future doctor!” Nurse Bellamy’s mouth stretched into a grin. “So, do you think the doctors run this place?”

Eileen’s hands fell to her sides.

“Well, I can tell you something right now: you aren’t going to get close to the babies all summer.”

Eileen sighed. “Won’t I at least get to bathe them?” she asked. She followed Nurse Bellamy to the desk in the reception area. A thin piece of glass lay across the desktop. There was a calendar, a note pad, and a round container with hospital-issued pens.

“No, you won’t,” Nurse Bellamy said. “Our regular receptionist is on maternity leave. She’s twenty-six. She’ll be back mid-July, but we’ll make do until then. I’ve had the calls routed to my office so you’ll just have to deal with people who come to the desk.” She straightened a page of the calendar. “You’re going to sit right here, getting

the work done that needs doing. You'll be lucky if you even get to hold a baby." Nurse Bellamy brought her mug down like a gavel and some coffee splashed onto the desk.

When Eileen got home that night, it was almost dinnertime, but her mother was half-asleep on the couch. Her head rested on a pillow and she'd aimed a fan at her face. Eileen had returned to Evanston two weeks before, and discovered that her mother lounged in the living room every evening, with a glass of wine in her hand, watching movies with subtitles. Eileen's father had moved to New York following the divorce in December.

"How was the first day?" her mother asked loudly. "How are the babies?"

"It was good." Eileen told her about the pink scrubs and said she was going to be in charge of the nurses' schedules. "Twenty-seven nurses and I've got to keep track of all of them." It wasn't true, but she wanted to cheer her mother up.

"My little girl," her mother said, "all grown up." Since it was summer, Eileen's mother worked only three days a week, teaching art to third graders, and today she was still in her plaid pajama pants. Lately, Eileen had caught her drinking a lot, crying, talking to herself. Now she smiled. "I knew you could do it, I knew you were the right person for the job."

"Mom," Eileen said, "please."

"Did you see the babies? Are they cute?" Her mother's eyes were glassy, streaked with red.

"I'm still in training, Mom." Eileen sat on the armrest. Her back ached from the cheap desk chair.

“But do still they wear those little pink caps?” Her mother leaned forward, as though sharing a secret. “We have your cap. I kept it somewhere.”

“Sure they do. Pink caps and pink blankets. Blue for the boys.” She didn’t feel like telling her mother that she hadn’t seen any babies yet.

“I remember when you were born, the coldest day of the year. I was glad to be stuck inside.” Her mother fiddled with the zipper of her sweatshirt, sliding it up and down. “And the colic, oh the colic. People kept asking me how I did it, how I slept so little. Do you know how?”

“No, Mom, I don’t.”

“With a baby, sleep doesn’t matter,” her mother half-shouted. “Nothing does. You become supernatural, almost. But you’ll learn that, I’m sure, after working at the hospital.”

“Mom, don’t worry,” Eileen said. “I’m not becoming a mother anytime soon.”

“But you get to be with the babies, honey. I’m so proud of you.” Her mother sat up and kissed her on the elbow.

“Yes, babies,” Eileen said. “Lots and lots of babies.” She carried a plate to the kitchen and rinsed it in the sink. Approaching from behind, her mother touched Eileen lightly on the hair, letting her fingertips trail over her shoulder blades, the way she had when Eileen was young and she’d comb out all the tangles.

The next morning, Nurse Bellamy took Eileen on a tour of the floor. “Your job doesn’t involve this,” she said, “but I’ll show it to you anyway.” They walked through the

double doors in the waiting room and down a long corridor. Eileen had to speed walk in order to keep up.

“Are we going to see the delivery room?” she asked.

Nurse Bellamy stopped in her tracks. “No way. It’s on the second floor. The mothers and newborns come up that elevator there.” She gestured down a hallway leading to big steel doors. “The only time you’ll see them is when they’re leaving the hospital.”

She gripped Eileen by the elbow and pulled her in the other direction, down a curving hallway. “My floor is about care and recovery. The rooms are arranged in a circle,” she said. “But you don’t need to know that; you’re not going into any rooms.”

Some of the doors were open, and Eileen could hear the voices of new mothers and fathers. “He has my grandfather’s eyes, my mother’s feet,” one mother exclaimed. “And—I can just tell—my sensibility.” Outside each room there was a whiteboard, which listed the baby’s name, its birth weight, and the name of the doctor.

At a bend in the hallway, there were windows lining the wall and, behind them, in rectangular incubators, their bodies wrapped in blankets, lay babies in the neonatal intensive-care unit. Machines crowded the room and tubes sprouted from the babies.

“I’m going in.” Nurse Bellamy snapped rubber gloves over her hands. “You’re not. Stay here.”

“Can’t I just go with you, just for a moment?” Eileen asked. She imagined what her mother would say if she told her about the nursery, about the smells and sounds and the cute pictures of zoo animals on the walls. “I’ll stand in the corner.”

“In the corner of the NICU?” Nurse Bellamy said. “No way. You stay right where you are.”

Eileen stood at the window and watched. Each infant was bundled in a pink or blue blanket like a caterpillar. Their bodies were hidden; all she could really see were scrunched faces, pebble-sized noses, cheeks marked with veins. As her mother had said, each baby wore a small cap, matching the blanket, pulled over its head and ears, like the top of a light bulb. Most of the babies appeared to be asleep, but some of their mouths were open, crying. Eileen leaned against the window, her lips almost skimming it, and, as she watched Nurse Bellamy hover over an infant, her breath left a cloud on the glass.

Nurse Bellamy was talking to the baby with her head close to the incubator; then she reached in and touched his arm. The way he screamed, fixing his gaze on the wall, relaxed Eileen. She wished she could help him grow. He was so tiny. When Nurse Bellamy moved away from the incubator, she glanced up and scowled at Eileen.

That night, Eileen didn't think about how much wine her mother drank at dinner until they sat down to watch the ten o'clock news. Her mother wouldn't stop talking. Her sister, Jane, complained that the beaches were closed because of high levels of bacteria and their mother muttered, “Shit happens.” With their father gone, she often swore and then covered her mouth as if she should have known better.

“How were the babies today?” her mother asked during a commercial break.

“Great,” Eileen said.

Her mother took another sip of wine and smacked her lips. “Well, Eileen, tell us about them,” she said.

“I helped the nurses prepare the induction meds,” Eileen said. The lie seemed innocent enough. “We counted out different dosages.”

“You did?” her mother said. “How cool. Was it complicated?”

“You think they’d have her do something complicated?” Jane teased.

“No,” Eileen said. She had heard Nurse Bellamy talking about this process with another nurse. “They explained to me exactly what I needed to do. The drugs reduce the mothers’ pain.”

As they watched TV, her mother imitated the newscasters and said, “Dum dum dum,” every time they announced a new story. “You should learn more lullabies, Eileen, to sing to the babies,” she said. A map of Chicago was illuminated on the screen, projecting hot weather for the last week of June and into July.

The summer before, Eileen had walked into the kitchen when her parents were fighting. She felt that she was interrupting something much more private. Her father tried to smile, her mother asked how she was doing, and they both stared at the pale wooden floor until she said, “I’m just getting a glass of milk,” as though they were playing a game that forbade them from moving until she spoke.

Eileen’s parents had never told her why they’d separated, and she didn’t want to ask, but she felt it was more than just dissolved love. Not that either of them had cheated, not exactly. But as her father grew more distant—at family dinners he stopped asking the girls questions and would criticize their mother, her habits, her cooking—her mother seemed to think it was a possibility. “I can’t keep trying,” she shouted, when she thought the girls were asleep, “if you’re not going to be honest with me.” Her suspicion hung

over them all like smoke. When it finally happened, the break-up was overdue, Eileen realized, but she couldn't help feeling that she should have done something to please her parents, to draw them back together.

She worked eight-hour shifts, but they seemed longer. Her job consisted of stocking pamphlets, updating the online scheduling system, and sorting mail. She took down email messages for staff, drawing tiny circles to dot the i's on the memos she wrote. Except for Nurse Bellamy, the nurses said very little to her and the doctors swept by without speaking.

The main thing she had to do was respond to visitors' inquiries. Their questions were usually pretty basic: Where is the cafeteria? What's the address for flower deliveries? If Eileen stumbled, Nurse Bellamy would show up and answer them herself. When she thought that no one was around, Eileen stared at the double-doors to her right and imagined the babies in the nursery, with those little hats and hands and toes, babies letting out young, crisp cries.

Once, as if reading her mind, Nurse Bellamy came up and said, "What makes you want around babies?"

Before Eileen could find an answer, Nurse Bellamy went on, "It's not for everyone, you know. When you work in NICU, you have to be ready for the worst. It's hard. The parents are all terrified and you have to stay calm. Calm and hopeful."

"I try to be friendly," Eileen said.

"Friendly isn't enough." Nurse Bellamy crossed her arms. "You have to be outstanding."

One baby was born in a cab, on the way to the hospital. The driver came inside, wanting to check in on the mother, but Eileen told him that only family members were allowed to see the patients. Nurse Bellamy stepped in and said to him, “But don’t worry, sir, you did everything right.”

That same day, a woman came to the desk and complained that her daughter’s baby hadn’t been named after her late husband, Edward. “Soon she’s going to forget his name,” she said. She had long fake fingernails with sunsets painted on the tips, and she tapped them on the counter. She signed out as a visitor. “Next thing you know, she’ll forget to visit me.”

“I’m sorry, but there’s not much I can do for you,” Eileen said, but after the woman left, Nurse Bellamy said that the appropriate response should have been, “Congratulations on becoming a grandmother.”

Eileen told her mother that she’d held a baby, and it had squeezed her finger, like one of those bamboo toys that tightens around your knuckles, and her mother sighed. A few nights later, Eileen said that she’d coached new mothers through their contractions, sitting in their rooms, counting aloud their breaths, her voice a rhythmic and constant presence in the room.

When she sat at the receptionists’ desk alone, she read magazines about infants and child care and hid them beneath her chair when the nurses passed. One day, a man whose baby was being kept in the NICU came to the desk and asked for help on the

crossword puzzle. “First chimpanzee to learn American Sign Language,” he said. “Six letters, starts with W.”

He pushed the crossword puzzle across the counter, toward Eileen. His handwriting was small and slanted. He looked as if he hadn't shaved since his baby's birth the week before.

“I know this,” she said, and his eyebrows rose in surprise. “From my psych class. Washoe, that's the name of the first chimpanzee to sign. Washoe.”

He scribbled on the paper. “Thanks,” he said.

“It was nothing,” Eileen said, stretching her feet beneath the table.

In her dormitory at college, Eileen often helped other students with their homework. She always worked ahead on problem sets, and she'd map out the reductive couplings of building blocks, the carbon hydrogen bonds, and explain them to anyone who was stuck. She was glad to help, but didn't understand why they couldn't do it themselves. She felt that, in order to get into medical school, organic chemistry needed to become second nature to her. She never let herself give up on a problem.

“All my daughter wants is a baby of her own,” Nurse Bellamy was saying one morning when Eileen entered the back office. Eileen didn't mean to eavesdrop—she'd just wanted to retreat from the desk, to be alone for a moment—but once she opened the door, she couldn't turn around. Nurse Bellamy sat at the table across from Nurse Hanner, a woman with a receding chin and pale blond hair who usually didn't speak to Eileen. Eileen crossed the room to get a cup of coffee. “I didn't mean to interrupt.”

The women ignored her. “The doctor didn’t completely rule out the possibility, did he?” Nurse Hanner asked.

Nurse Bellamy held a stapler and kept clicking it. A pile of staples, folded inward, rose from the table.

“He didn’t rule it in, either,” Nurse Bellamy said.

“Oh,” Nurse Hanner said.

“All I ever wanted was grandchildren.” Nurse Bellamy’s voice cracked. She looked mournful.

“I’m sorry,” Eileen said. The cup of coffee warmed her hands. “I didn’t mean to eavesdrop, but there are other ways, aren’t there? Couldn’t your daughter have in vitro?”

“Who asked you?” Nurse Bellamy said, without raising her head. Nurse Hanner stared at the carpet.

Eileen bit her lip. “Sorry, I didn’t mean to offend.”

“You think you know so much, don’t you, Colgate? In vitro’s not the same as having your own baby, but you wouldn’t know anything about that, would you? I’ll bet they don’t teach that in biology and women’s studies, do they, Colgate?”

Nurse Bellamy’s words, enunciated carefully, sounded like pigeon wails. Nurse Hanner picked at her fingernails.

“I’m just trying to help, that’s all, you don’t need to hate me for it,” Eileen said, and before Nurse Bellamy could respond, she lowered her head and retreated to the desk, where the man with the crossword puzzle was waiting for her.

“Where is the tulip festival held?” he asked. “Eight letters?”

Eileen didn't know the answer. She sat down and began checking the maternity ward's email server for messages. Her neck was sore. She shook her head and tried to relax by thinking about the babies, down the hall, in the nursery. She wished she could go in the double doors and gaze through the window until she was invited inside. She imagined the nurses measuring the babies' vitals and checking their circulation, the brisk procedural fluidity of it all. Nurses wheeling the babies down the hall, the carts safe and stable and quiet. And the new parents, in sterile rooms with light bleeding through the windows, the way they stared at those little fingers, at their very own babies, thinking that the world was a whole new place now, that they could reinvent themselves, and while Eileen sat filling in crossword puzzles, they readjusted their babies' pink and blue caps and traced the bridges of their noses, and she was kept at a distance.

"I delivered a baby today," she told her mother at dinner. They were eating hot-and-sour soup, and she let a mushroom slide over her tongue. The dining room table was stained with a small, uneven circle of ink from a pen that had exploded long ago.

"What?" her mother asked. Her eyes skated over Eileen's face. "You did what?"

"I said, I delivered a baby today," Eileen repeated.

"Sure you did," Jane said. "And I went to the moon and back."

"No, really," Eileen said. "I didn't deliver it myself, but I got to help the doctor."

"A baby?" her mother asked.

"Yes, a baby."

"Who would want *you* delivering their baby?" Jane sipped water, swishing it around in her mouth.

“They’re understaffed these days,” Eileen tried. “You know, the economy. And they say I’m doing such a great job, although I don’t really believe it.”

“Well, sweetie, you have been working long hours,” her mother said. “We never see you anymore.”

“Yeah, that’s what they said. The doctors. That the hard work is showing.”

“Whose baby is it?” Jane asked. “Are they crazy?”

“No, they loved what I did,” Eileen insisted. “The baby stuff, it comes so naturally to me. How to talk to them, hold them, calm them when they cry. I don’t even have to think, it just happens.”

“Well, shit,” Jane said.

“Jane, your language,” their mother said. She squinted at Eileen through her glasses, but then she grinned. “Eileen, that’s just great. I never imag—I thought you’d run kicking and screa—but, Eileen, that’s just great.”

“Yeah,” Eileen said. “My hands were shaking the entire time. I helped sponge down the baby. It was, like, hypnotic.”

“Well, cheers to that,” her mother said. She raised her glass in the air, and droplets of red wine swished over the edge. “We need to celebrate. Have you told anyone else yet?” Her mother sipped her drink. “Why don’t you call your father?”

Eileen used the phone in the study. Her father’s boxes lined the shelves, filled with old books on art history. The walls were bare, but the nails that had his paintings still jutted out. He’d always said he wanted an original Toulouse-Lautrec someday. There were lots of things he said he wanted that he never got.

When her father answered, his voice was husky. “Hi,” she said and there was a beat before he recognized her voice. “It’s been a while, Eileen, how are you?”

She still hadn’t visited his new apartment in Manhattan, even though it was just four hours from Colgate. They’d never been able to find a date that worked for both of them. He frequently emailed YouTube links of old silent movies that she enlarged on her computer screen until the images grew blurry and out of focus.

“I’m fine,” she said. “Busy.” She told him that she had to wake up early in the mornings, that she was too tired at night to call, and he told her he was going on a private tour of the Met—“my new colleague has great connections”—and he was thinking about getting a dog.

“I’ve always wanted a dog,” she said, but they both knew that her mother was highly allergic and it had never been a possibility.

“How are things at the hospital?” he asked.

“Dad.” She paused.

“What is it, Eileen?”

Across the room from her, the alarm clock blinked the wrong time. The fuse must have gone out in the night. “This job,” she whispered. “I hate it.”

“You hate it?”

“Yes. It’s all busy work, nothing important.”

“But what do you expect?” he said. “You’re young, new, and still an undergraduate.”

“Dad, they treat me like I’m nothing.” She could hear the television in the next room, with a woman’s voice speaking in French.

“You’re still young,” he repeated.

“They don’t know how much I’ve wanted this.” She touched her fingers to her forehead. “If anyone deserves to work with babies, I do.”

“They just don’t realize your full potential,” he said, but it sounded as though he were reading from a script and she hung up the phone and sat on the carpet, trembling, until she’d grown calm again.

Eileen’s mother bought her flowers to celebrate what she called a promotion. Eileen told herself that the lie was just an exaggeration. There wasn’t much difference between working near babies and delivering them, anyway. The work she did, she did well. And no one at the hospital knew about the lie, or would really care.

In the next few days, when her mother asked about her work, Eileen elaborated. She said she saw twins born. “Within two minutes of each other,” she said, “it all happened so fast.” She said that she was the first person to hand one of the babies to the mother, “like making an introduction.”

Jane was more interested in the stories than the facts. “I want gossip,” she said when the two sisters went to hear a concert at Ravinia. They sat on the grass, away from the stage, eating fruit salad, turkey sandwiches, and guacamole they’d brought from Whole Foods. They’d never heard of the band before, but it was salsa music, and Jane pretended to play the congos.

“You first,” Eileen said, nudging her. “You got any gossip?”

“My friends want to sneak out some night,” Jane said. “We’re going to watch the sun rise over the beach. Don’t tell Mom.”

“Oh,” Eileen said. She was always surprised by how easily Jane took risks. “Just be safe.”

“Whatever.”

“The undertow can be strong.” Eileen thought of the beach parties she’d gone to in high school, where she’d always wished she could shrink away from the crowd. “I’m just saying, it can pull you down.”

Jane shook her head. “Tell me about the hospital,” she said again, clapping her hands. “There’s got to be gossip. No misplaced babies? No women who go crazy during birth? Nothing?”

Nearby, older couples danced, arms outstretched, holding hands, feet moving in showy, memorized steps. “A lot of gossip,” Eileen said slowly, “is confidential.”

On the Fourth of July, Eileen arrived at the hospital at six a.m., prepared for another eight hours of sitting at the desk, but Nurse Bellamy told her to help the photographers who took pictures of the newborns; their assistant had the day off. Nurse Bellamy seemed more subdued than usual. “Tell the mothers they’re coming,” she ordered, “but don’t interrupt anything. Be careful!”

She gave Eileen a list of patients who had requested the service. Eileen felt like Paul Revere, knocking on each door, shouting, “They’re coming,” and then moving on to the next room. “Wear colored shirts because they provide more contrast,” she’d say. “It’s nice to have the mother’s hands somewhere in the image.” She imagined these pictures on mantelpieces, or passed down in yellowed family albums.

Eileen was supposed to meet her mother and sister at the parade at two o'clock. It was a family tradition to watch the floats creep down the street, and Eileen knew that she needed to spend this time with her mother. In the past, her father would have brought his sketchbook and marked streaks of color down the page.

The hospital rooms smelled like mint mixed with cleaning solution. One patient had the radio turned on so loudly that Eileen had to knock three times. Another had her right breast exposed and didn't bother to cover up. In the next room, Eileen talked to a husband and he gazed past her, repeating her words verbatim to his wife.

There were flowers on the tables and blankets with pink-and-blue patterns. If they were staying a few days, some fathers had suitcases with folded clothes; others had piles of shirts or pants, the fabric still holding the shape of their bodies. The walls, though undecorated, were painted the colors of pastels—pale blues and greens and oranges—as if the rooms themselves were pieces of art.

In the second-to-last room, a husband peeled an orange for his wife. He sat on a chair next to her and kept the peel in one strand so that the pieces curled over each other into a spiral. At first, Eileen couldn't see his face, because his shoulders were hunched over. The crown of his head was just beginning to bald, the hair so thin it looked translucent.

When she started reading the photographer's instructions, the man stood, and moved beside her, almost peering over her shoulder. "This is too much," he cried. "Eileen, I knew you worked here, but I didn't think we'd actually see you."

She stared back at him. Freckles clustered around his nose. Above his left eyebrow, there was a scar as thin as a paper cut. "Principal Kinney," she said.

Her mother's boss. They'd gone over to his house, near the lake, for annual dinner parties. Sometimes she babysat for his three kids. They liked to play with balloons, trying to keep them from falling, and there was a pet rabbit they would always let out of the cage to pee on the dining room carpet. Eileen's mother had told her that the Kinneys were having another baby, but she hadn't expected to see them in the hospital so soon.

"Congratulations on the new addition to your family," she said, and the couple smiled back at her. She glanced at the baby, who slept in a cart near the window. "Boy or girl?"

"Boy." Principal Kinney put the orange peel on the table, still intact, and handed Mrs. Kinney a slice. "Now tell me, were you in the delivery room when he was born? You could have said hello."

"Well." She glanced behind her. No one was in the hallway. "I wasn't there. Not for this birth."

"You know, your mother is so proud of you. Every day she talks about your job, and what an opportunity—for a student, I mean—to deliver babies."

She ran her tongue over her lips. "I just help. I do what I can."

"That's all that's necessary. Let me tell you, to be successful, it takes persistence and hard work. But you already know that." He brushed Mrs. Kinney's hair out of her eyes, his fingers lingering on her face.

Eileen clung to the clipboard, trying not to stare. A nurse entered the room, checked the baby's temperature. When he started to cry, she passed him to Mrs. Kinney and said, "Here's your little prince." She left without acknowledging Eileen.

“How’s your family doing?” Mrs. Kinney asked, holding the baby in her arms. His head was turned to one side. His face was red, but calm.

“Your father going to watch the Cubs with me during next month’s party?” Principal Kinney gently touched the baby’s head.

Eileen assumed her mother had told people at work about the divorce. That, as she prepared classes, she talked to other teachers about the arguments, the broken plates, the way she cried as she swept the floor. She was convinced that her mother moped in the teachers’ lounge, let her voice squeak in front of students, and designed art projects with teardrops of dark paint. She knew, of course, that grief could be hidden, like a tattoo covered by a shirtsleeve, but she hadn’t realized that her mother was capable of such secrecy.

“I don’t know.” Eileen flushed. “But how’s your baby doing? You must be thrilled about having another child around the house.”

“Well, as you can see, he’s small,” Principal Kinney said. “Born two weeks sooner than we’d expected. The doctors say that we might be able to take him home by Friday.”

Eileen watched Mrs. Kinney rocking the baby in her arms. “Could I hold him?” she asked. “Just for a moment?”

“Certainly,” Mrs. Kinney said, motioning for Eileen to stand by her side. “Be careful with his head. But you know that.”

Eileen scooped up the baby and cradled him in her arms. He clenched his tiny fists, his fingers curled like dried leaves. She placed her hand beneath his fine hair. His

head was light and he nestled against her chest. She could feel his breath on her skin, like a whisper.

Mrs. Kinney sighed, and her husband said, “Eileen, it’s so great to see you. You were always so good with the kids.”

Just then Nurse Bellamy walked in. She gasped when she saw Eileen with the baby, and rushed toward the bedside, her arms extended.

“My mom’s boss,” Eileen explained quickly, and handed the baby back to Mrs. Kinney.

“Now, don’t you dilly-dally,” Nurse Bellamy said, smoothing down her scrubs, and although her tone seemed light, Eileen heard her resentment.

“Nurse Bellamy,” Principal Kinney said, “it’s so nice that you have this fellowship.”

“Gets the hard part of the job done.” Nurse Bellamy shrugged.

“Well, but that she can help in the delivery rooms,” Principal Kinney said. “What an opportunity.”

Nurse Bellamy stared at Eileen. The nurse bit her lip, opened her mouth, then bit it again. The baby began to wail, his mouth open and dripping, his cries filling the room. Nurse Bellamy kept her gaze trained on Eileen.

“Oh, not really,” Eileen waved her hand. “You know mothers, how they get carried away.”

“Oh, yeah, that’s confusing,” Principal Kinney said.

“You’re telling me.” Eileen shrugged, forcing her lips into a smile. She crept toward the door. “Back to work,” she called, and as she walked down the hallway, she

could hear the baby crying and Nurse Bellamy, talking out loud. “Your baby is beautiful, just beautiful, a beautiful baby boy,” she said, drawing out the words. The baby still cried. Then Nurse Bellamy spoke in gibberish, her voice brisk and soft, and the baby grew quiet.

Perhaps the most soothing words, Eileen thought, were the ones you couldn’t understand.

Before she got off work, Nurse Bellamy said, “I’ll deal with you tomorrow, Colgate,” and she replied, her voice hoarse, “My name is Eileen.” There was still time before the parade, so she walked down Central Street, where people sat in lawn chairs, waiting. She hadn’t bothered to change out of her hospital scrubs. If someone suddenly fell and shouted for a doctor, she assumed that onlookers would turn to her. Nurse or not, she would try to help. She tried not to think about the confession she would have to make to her mother.

She met her mother and Jane at the convenience store on Ewing Street, and her mother bought them smoothies. By the time they found places to sit on the curb, the parade had already begun. As the youth sports teams and religious groups tossed candy into the street, Jane scrambled for lollipops alongside all the kids. Their mother was so excited that she couldn’t stop talking, and Eileen couldn’t get a word in. When Eileen scowled, her mother said, “Today’s one of the days when you have an excuse to eat free candy.”

The parade hadn't changed much since Eileen was a kid. There was the fire truck, the marching bands, the mayor waving from a convertible. Girl scouts carried streamers that left strands of red, white, and blue on the street. "Did I ever tell you about the time I rode a float for the elementary school?" Eileen's mother asked, and the sisters both groaned. Their mother ignored them. "They didn't tell me I was supposed to be Cinderella, so there I was, wearing a t-shirt and shorts, pretending I was on the way to a ball."

A hip-hop team stopped to perform a dance in front of them. The music was so loud Eileen could feel it throbbing through the ground. She had trouble focusing on the parade. When she didn't applaud, her mother said, "You must be tired from your job. What'd you do this morning?"

"The usual," Eileen said, watching the dancers strut farther down the street. "You know, baby stuff."

"The usual," her mother echoed.

"Actually, I saw Principal Kinney there." Eileen took a breath. "He has a baby boy."

Then the junior cheerleading squad skipped past and Eileen's mother called out, "Woo-hoo!" When she turned back to Eileen, she said, "Principal Kinney? That's so nice, I'm pleased for them. Their house will be even more lively now."

Just two blocks away, the hospital loomed above the other buildings. Eileen couldn't help but glance at the red brick, the boxy towers, and the blank windows.

"Mom, work was hard today," Eileen began.

Her mother touched her on the shoulder. "Every job has its hard days," she said.

“That’s not it,” Eileen said, but her mother nudged her and said, “Oh, now look at that,” when a group of tumblers unrolled their mats and flipped over each other many times. They were followed by The Wheelmen, who rode nineteenth-century bicycles, the front wheels so tall they rose over everyone else. Eileen’s mother tuned to her and said, “That takes talent.”

When the parade was almost over, Eileen’s mother said, as if she’d been thinking about it all along, “Imagine. All the babies you delivered this summer are celebrating their first Fourth of July.”

“Yes,” she told her mother. “You could say that.” The sticky residue from the smoothies had attracted bees, which climbed in and out of Eileen’s cup. The humidity clung to her clothes.

“I’m sure the babies are really excited,” Jane teased, and Eileen was grateful. “Their first Fourth of July. They’ve been waiting a whole day to hear the fireworks.”

“But it *is* something,” Eileen’s mom said. “Isn’t it? I’m so proud of you, Eileen.”

Eileen nearly set her hand on top of one of the bees, but noticed it just in time. Sweat gathered on her temple, on the back of her neck. All she needed to say was no. No, I don’t deliver. No, I just help the family members. All she needed to say was that there had been a misunderstanding.

Instead, she found herself saying, “Let’s go,” and they steered through the crowds, squinting in the sunlight. Her scrubs were so sweaty they felt pasted to her skin.

A few blocks away, Eileen’s mother spotted their neighbor, Nancy Gallagher, who exclaimed, “Wasn’t the parade great? Let’s walk together.” Nancy owned a boutique and was known for greeting people personably. She and her husband organized

the block party each year, and they would always convince Eileen's father to coordinate the children's games. "How are you doing, Susan?" she asked Eileen's mother. "It's hard," Eileen's mother said. "We're going through a lot."

"That's really a shame," Nancy said. "What are you girls up to this summer? You must be working at the hospital, Eileen?"

Before Eileen could answer, her mother cut in. "That's right. Eileen helps out in OB-GYN with deliveries."

Nancy turned to her, grinning too broadly. "Eileen, that's great," she said. "Which doctor are you working with?"

"Actually --" Eileen said, then paused. Her mother turned toward her, cheeks flushed from the heat. Her eyes were expectant, almost pleading.

"I'm friends with Dr. Wallace," Nancy continued. "She's just great. She delivered both of my children. Do you work for her?"

"No," Eileen said. She tried to think of an honest explanation. She stared at the pavement. With chalk, someone had drawn red and blue lines down the entire block. The stripes were so simple, so easy to overlook.

"Is it Dr. Carson then?" Nancy asked, waving her hand in the direction of the hospital.

Eileen shook her head. She glanced at her mother, whose lips were drawn thin, her cheeks slack.

"Eileen, dear, stop keeping it a mystery," her mother said at last. "You should be proud." She turned to Nancy. "Eileen works for Dr. Peabody. In the delivery room every day, every day of the summer." Her mother described the controlled chaos of the

delivery rooms, how Eileen handed the surgeons scalpels during C-sections, how she tied the umbilical cords in tight knots.

“Mom,” Eileen said, but her mother glared at her, still talking, as though she didn’t know how to stop.

Eileen let out a deep breath and, for a moment, held her mother’s gaze.

The four of them kept strolling down the street, Nancy ooing and aahing as if impressed with the stories about Eileen’s job, and Eileen’s mother, staring at the sky, quiet for the first time that day. Eileen tried to reach for her hand, but her mother flinched and hid it from view, shielded by Jane’s body, and Eileen had no choice but to keep moving.

As Always

This is springtime, the first week after finals, and five students are having a barbeque. They sit on the wrap-around porch of a powder-blue house and wait for their food. On the grill, the charcoals are warming. The sounds of Ann Arbor are familiar: cars accelerating between stoplights, a woodpecker reaming a hole into a tree, and the announcer at a nearby soccer game calling out scores and substitutions. The five friends sit together on the porch and watch the charcoals. They don't all live here, but they live in the same neighborhood. This is a goodbye party for Janet, who is graduating early, a year before the rest of them, but Janet has not yet arrived.

The yard has patches of bare spots. Near the walkway, a triangle of grass fades into dirt: the imprint of a wooden plank that was left out too long. Beer cans and bits of paper rise from the lawn like buttons.

Milo sits on the railing of the porch and rests his bare feet on Cathleen's chair. They are clean feet; he has just showered. Although it is warm, he wears corduroy pants. Milo is a classics major; his thesis will be on the arcane stories, about humans and animals, in Herodotus. He checks his watch. Because he is the oldest in his family, and because he can hear, he has always been the responsible one. His parents are both deaf. They have been deaf since they were children, his father, the result of a car accident; his mother, a genetic disorder. He checks his watch and rests his feet on Cathleen's chair, running his hand over the bristles of his newly shaved scalp.

Cathleen swats his feet from her chair. She crosses her ankles. She wears a fitted white t-shirt that is dribbled with red lines like a Jackson Pollack painting. Her nose is pierced. Her mother has always supported healthy rebellions; rebellions encourage free will, her mother claims. When Cathleen was only seventeen, her mother allowed her to get a tattoo, a Celtic triple swirl, on her lower back. Cathleen will, at the height of this evening, follow Milo onto the roof in rebellion against her better judgment.

Nobody knows why Janet is missing. She isn't picking up her phone. The charcoals are getting warmer. Usually, she is on time.

But the fact is that Janet has gone for one last jog through Ann Arbor and lost track of the time. She is circling the football stadium, arms pumping, heels rocking with each step, but she is a slow runner. Her feet slap on the pavement as if pounding out anger. This is the last time I will see this, and this, and this, she keeps telling herself. She knows she should think about how to say goodbye to her friends, how to say goodbye to Milo. It's been seven months since she broke up with him. When they part, later tonight, after everyone else has gone to bed, they'll stand in his living room, lit by the green glow of a giant fish tank, their knees touching, and he'll whisper, Please stay.

Janet has told her friends that she is graduating early because she is ready. I want to be a real person, she says. But she hasn't told them the truth: that her parents, both bakers, cannot afford another year's tuition. She will return to their home and, for the next year, spend her mornings making cinnamon rolls, folding loaves into tight swirls, fold upon fold, touching the floured dough more than she touches other people. But that will come later. For now, as she runs, she plods along the sidewalk, iPod in hand, on the

way to her own party, where she will say hi and then dash over to her apartment to shower.

Back at the powder-blue house, the charcoals are starting to turn gray. Someone has left lighter fluid uncapped, close to the flames, but none of the friends notice. They tell jokes to pass the time. A skeleton walks into a bar, someone says. The friends nod; this a joke, anything can happen. The joke-teller, one of Milo's housemates, giggles and has to start over. A skeleton walks into a bar, he repeats, and asks for a beer and a mop.

There is a woodchuck beneath the porch—the friends can hear him burrowing in the dirt, but they've stopped looking for him. They see only a flash of fur before he goes back into hiding. One day, not too long from now, Milo will back his car out of the driveway and, with a loud crunch, run over the woodchuck. They will all stand over the body, staring at the small tail, debating how to clean up the mess, and finally Cathleen will call animal control to take care of it.

That does not matter now. What matters is that Cathleen tells a story about her part-time job as a telemarketer for a local radio station. I called a dead man today, she says. She tells them about the conversation she had with the dead man's widow, how the woman refused to give money, and Cathleen, following her job's protocol, suggested that she could donate in her husband's name—wouldn't that be a nice way to remember him?—and the woman sighed. She told Cathleen she was making cabbage soup and that all of her doors were locked and she had no interest, none whatsoever, in donating money to crooks.

The friends laugh uncomfortably. Cathleen is, to some extent, a small crook. She rises to get more salsa—I can eat more than anyone else in the world, she says—and

trails her fingertips over Milo's shoulders. The first time she stole anything was four years ago, after her mother grew sick with breast cancer, and Cathleen took a plaid swimsuit from Macy's. She tiptoes to a table near the grill and uncaps the salsa jar. Her mother is in remission now, but shoplifting has become a nervous habit to which Cathleen will, for the rest of her life, occasionally succumb. Just today, when she was buying food for Janet's goodbye barbecue, Cathleen slipped a pack of bubblegum into her purse, under the assumption that bubblegum is insignificant in the scheme of things.

Milo and Cathleen will, in the next few weeks, start dating. Last weekend, after a night of drinking and bowling, Milo kissed Cathleen and next weekend they will kiss again, on the porch of this powder-blue house, where anyone might see, and both of them will pretend not to think of Janet.

Sitting next to Cathleen, Milo stares into the distance. An ambulance swerves onto State Street. It halts for two pedestrians, then charges down the street, lights flashing, as all action around it freezes. When Janet broke up with Milo, he told her that she was jumping to conclusions. Perhaps Milo feels that anything and everything can be revised, improved. He taught her fragments of sign language so that, when she met his parents last summer, she had something to say. When she broke up with him, he yelled, shouting in a public park, until she turned and left.

Milo's anger has often gotten him in trouble. Last week, he threw a clay flowerpot at his own mother. He'd been home for his grandfather's ninety-fifth birthday and his mother, a botany teacher at Gallaudet University, the school for the deaf, asked him to go to the greenhouse with her. They'd been arguing all morning. He said she didn't appreciate that he'd come home, that she was taking too long picking out bulbs,

and when she turned to him and signed, You need to think about other people for once in your life, he pitched the flowerpot toward her and it shattered at her feet, breaking into pieces like shells.

But now, Milo's phone vibrates. He reaches into his pocket. Cathleen watches him read the text message, hopes it's not from some other girl.

Somewhere, less than a mile away, Janet is still running. Her skin is sleek with sweat. Her shoelace is becoming untied. She won't have to say goodbye to Cathleen, who is her closest friend, because Cathleen has already bought plane tickets to visit California in August. Janet will have a list of places to see—she is a list-maker—and she'll show Cathleen the redwoods, and the seals, and she'll take her to tide pools where they'll peel starfish off rocks. Cathleen will never tell Janet about her new relationship with Milo. This is a fundamental problem among close friends: whether anything should be kept secret in order to spare feelings.

On the porch, the charcoal is ready, white nuggets of steaming heat. Milo's housemate begins setting the burger patties onto the grill, one by one.

Milo reads the message on his phone twice before he responds. His father needs to talk. OK. Milo hasn't communicated with his family all week. After he hurled the flowerpot at his mother's toe, she went to the car and sat with her hands in her lap until he paid for the fifteen-dollar pot and her seventy-six dollars worth of bulbs and soil. He could not tell if she was limping. On the ride home, his mother would not make eye contact with him, so he wasn't able to apologize until later that night. Now, he goes inside his house without saying anything. He passes the giant fish tank, filled with guppies, on his way to his bedroom.

A half-continent away, Milo's father waits for his son's name to appear on the computer screen. He keeps pressing refresh. He takes peppermints from a jar on his desk and bites into them, the candy splintering beneath his teeth like glass.

Outside, Cathleen, rising to get more salsa, notices the opened bottle of lighter fluid and moves it away from the grill. She picks up a lighter, returns to her seat, and plays with the flame, flicking it on and off, feeling the grooves gain friction against her thumb.

The floorboards of the porch are streaked with dirt and ketchup.

On Milo's computer screen, his father seems older. He has become almost pear-shaped: even though he is sitting, Milo can see how his shoulders curve downwards and his stomach swells. His bone structure is disappearing beneath the shape of his body. Milo waves and his father fidgets with a pen; Milo can see the pen-cap, chewed and distorted.

He asks his father what's wrong and his father keeps chewing. Light splays like an hourglass across the striped wallpaper in his father's office. It's your sister, his father tells him, but she's safe. Milo's father shapes a box with his arms and pantomimes that he is placing something inside: safe.

Downstairs, Cathleen decides to check on Milo; they need to talk. She has to make sure that he will not tell Janet about their kiss. The occasion today is to celebrate Janet's departure and nothing, especially not a brief kiss, should ruin that for Janet. Cathleen flicks the lighter one last time, tucks it in her pocket, and goes inside.

Milo's father tells him that when his sister was filling up her gas tank in Southeast D.C. this evening, a man held a gun to her head. To describe the mugging, he shapes a

gun with his right hand, quickly, as though the signs are being consumed by the meanings of the words. Lips quivering, he raises his hand, still shaped like a gun, and taps his temple and the side of his jaw. He looks as if he might choke.

Milo pinches the nape of his own neck, where the skin is thick and the hair thin, a tight pinch that makes his eyes water.

Milo stares at his father through a computer screen and asks more questions. How much money? Was she alone? Sign language often comes easier than words.

By the time Cathleen knocks on his bedroom door, Milo knows that his sister lost her money and cell phone and a silver necklace with a locket, but nothing else. Without his father having to say more, Milo knows that the worst did not happen. He cannot know that it will be seven months until, on the way back from a camping trip, his sister fully realizes the danger she faced and then she'll suffer two sleepless months, listening for noises their parents cannot hear, until she admits that she needs to see a therapist.

His father watches the girl enter his son's room, the red marbled pattern of her t-shirt, the bangs that slant over her eyebrows, and has no idea who she is. People can lead separate lives beneath the ones they share with you and you'll never know. Somewhere his wife is driving back from the police station, following their daughter in her car, probably watching everything move past. His son seems surprised to see the girl, but he doesn't ask her to leave. Her hair is folded in a bun at the back of her neck. Milo says something to her, but he is not explaining what happened: she looks confused, not alarmed.

As Cathleen sits on Milo's bed, beside his desk, facing him, his father is thinking about his son and daughter as babies. He would clap his hands next to their ears. It was

reassuring to watch them flinch, to feel the force of the claps vibrating through his hands and to know that feeling meant something else for the kids. As he rocked them to sleep, he would trace their earlobes with his fingertips.

Where is she now? Milo asks about his sister, and his father says, With your mother. His father moves his fingers back and forth as though weaving a spider web. I'm scared, he says.

You can't be scared, Milo tells his father. She wasn't hurt. He reaches out and touches the worn denim covering Cathleen's knee. Nodding at her, he tells his father he needs to go. She places her hand over his, then withdraws it. We'll talk later, Milo promises his father.

His father stares at him. The computer screen makes him look robotic.

Cathleen watches Milo. She brushes her hair behind ear, keeping her free hand in her lap.

Outside, Janet decides to walk the last six blocks to the party. She tries not to step on cracks in the sidewalk, like the game she played as a child. Ten years from now, when they are both lawyers in New York, and she is engaged to a sculptor who will eventually divorce her because she can't have babies, Janet and Milo will see each other at a wedding and, blushing, they will dance. As they sway, they will hold their champagne glasses between them like a partition, and she won't remember their break-up, or how she learned about his relationship with Cathleen months after it ended. She'll remember how they used to walk along the Huron River, to the docks where the crew team launched its boats, jumping in the cold dirty water, lying on their backs and floating.

In his bedroom, with Cathleen sitting near him, Milo turns off his computer and opens the window. The sheets on his bed, piled against the wall, shift in the sudden breeze. His fan is unplugged but it spins in the wind, the blades alternately speeding and slowing like a Ferris wheel stopping to load and unload passengers.

Cathleen watches him climb out of the window. Then she decides to follow him. She has to sit on the windowsill before she can touch her feet to the roof, which is still damp from this morning's rain. Some of the shingles are loose and chipped. Ahead of her, Milo lies on his back like a child making a snow angel.

Cathleen crawls down the roof and sits next to him, tucking her legs against her chest. Milo, she says, but he shakes his head. She places a hand on his bicep. Milo, what's wrong?

He doesn't tell Cathleen about his sister's mugging. He doesn't tell her about his father's fear. He tells her about Herodotus and his accounts of the giant, gold-digging ants in Ethiopia. Scholars thought Herodotus was inventing history until they realized that marmot means mountain ant. You see, Milo explains, Herodotus was right when he described the bushy sweeping tails and sharp teeth and how the marmots burrowed in the ground at noon, when it was so hot the natives had to soak themselves in water.

But Herodotus didn't record the legend about the golden marmots in the Himalayas, where two brothers disputed the inheritance of their father's farmland. Cathleen doesn't know if Milo has read it somewhere or if he is making it up. He motions slowly with his hands, describing how the brothers argued for months before agreeing to ask the land itself to settle the dispute. One of the brothers sneaked his son

out to the disputed area and hid him in a hole. When he asked the land if he owned it, his son cried out, Yes, but remained silent when the other brother asked the same question.

Milo asks Cathleen if he should keep going and she nods. Later that day, Milo goes on, the new landowner went to retrieve his son, but the child was gone. There was only a marmot hole. The sand was dotted with flecks of gold. The man dug into the ground with his fingers, but the hole reached deeper and deeper, endless, unforgiving. Just imagine, Milo says, staring at Cathleen, imagine him covered in dust, falling backwards with grief, the whistles of marmots pulsing in his ears.

As Milo finishes telling the story, Janet returns from her jog. She walks on the sidewalk below them. If she looked up, Janet would see her friends lying together on the roof, holding hands, their heads touching. But she doesn't look up and they don't call down to her.

The sun hovers on the edge of the horizon, making stretch marks in the sky. The friends on the porch below laugh at a joke about evolution. The joke doesn't matter; it only seems funny now, at this time in their young lives, when they assume they know who they are. The moon is faint in the sky like a fingerprint.