

Halley's Comet:

A Novel in Stories

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THESIS

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I. HALLEY'S COMET

Alice hasn't looked at her lover, Suzanne, since they climbed into bed. This seems to be acceptable since Alice is in shock. She should be trying to decide what kind of person she's going to be in the face of tragedy, but instead she's been thinking about Suzanne. Like how she still mentally refers to Suzanne as her lover. She knows this is no longer the proper nomenclature—lover. She should think of Suzanne as her partner. People are always talking about their partners these days. Even straight people. It makes Alice think of boardrooms and business lunches. Hello, yes, good to meet you. This is my partner, Suzanne. We're in bedroom real estate. No one has had a girlfriend, let alone a lover, in more than a decade. Suzanne does not seem to have these troubles. Alice has heard her use the word "partner" on numerous occasions. It doesn't bother her one bit. She is kinder than Alice in many ways, which makes it a good thing that it's Alice's parents who have been killed and not Suzanne's. There's that, at least.

If they had shared property, that would be something, Alice thinks. They really would be partners, in that case. But Suzanne owns the condo they live in, and though she's offered to put Alice's name on the deed, Alice has preferred not to. They've shared a Subaru and an automobile insurance policy since 2000, but that's mostly because Suzanne rarely drives, and they'd been getting killed on license fees and city stickers and individual premiums. They invested in a set of fancy-pants, copper-bottomed pots and pans when they moved in together. In a fit of consumerism, they'd also bought a set of stoneware dishes. How far is that supposed to get you, some pots and pans, a few plates, and a State Farm agent? Suzanne interrupts this line of inquiry by reaching out for Alice's hand. Her touch is so soft and familiar after all these years that it

opens up a hollow ache in Alice's chest. She knows she might not have thought to take Suzanne's hand so gently if it were Suzanne who had just suffered some terrible loss.

"Are you going to talk to me?" Suzanne asks. Alice lies motionless on her back. Suzanne draws Alice's knuckles to her lips.

"Do I have to?"

"Of course not," Suzanne says. Her lips are dry and cool against Alice's fingers.

"I don't think I've got anything to say." Alice works her hand free from Suzanne's grip and laces her fingers together across her chest. "I'm feeling all the wrong things."

"Tell me about it," Suzanne says. "Really, lay it on me."

"I think it's mundane and stupid that my parents flipped their big, dumb F150 on the interstate and died in some run of the mill traffic accident. How's that?"

"Okay. It's a start." Suzanne is like that—a goddamned active listener no matter what Alice says. She is a veritable rock. They'd been making dinner together earlier that evening when Alice's sister, Sara, called with the news that their parents had both been killed. When Alice blanched white and staggered, the phone pressed to the side of her head, Suzanne calmly took the knife from Alice's hand and placed a stool beneath her.

"Do you want to talk about it?" she asks.

"Are we talking already?" Alice asks.

"I think so. Yes."

Alice puts both hands over her face, only partly because the pressure feels good on her eyes. "I think if they were going to go together, if things were going to get as dramatic as all this, then it should have been some catastrophic farm accident—some conflagration—you know what I mean?"

“No.”

“Something terrible. Like my dad running my mom over with a tractor, and then the tractor bursting into flames. Wouldn’t that make more sense?”

“No, it wouldn’t,” Suzanne says.

“I know,” Alice says. “I mean, trucks roll over all the time. Especially when the driver is losing his sight, which he won’t admit, and when the wheels hit those god-awful ridges on the side of the interstate that are supposed to wake up the drunks, and then the driver over-corrects and yanks the whole half-ton pickup over on top of itself. That happens all the freaking time.”

Suzanne waits patiently for Alice to continue. In the silence between them a cop car speeds through the alley beneath their bedroom window. Alice turns toward Suzanne for the first time since they climbed into bed.

“I knew a guy who had his arms ripped off in a combine once,” she says.

Suzanne blinks.

“Now that should kill a man. He should have died, I’m sure. People weren’t designed to suffer the removal of their arms and just go on kicking. The problem is we’re all so ready for trauma. We’ve got the paramedics, the choppers, the airlifts, the 911. Hardly anyone dies anymore. One of these days we’re all going to quit. Apparently not my folks though, right?”

“How did you know him?” Suzanne asks.

Alice is always impressed by her lover’s ability to roll with the punches. “He was the dad of the guy who took my friend Wendy to the prom. Senior year. Our junior year some other guy took her.”

“When?”

“I said our senior year,” Alice says.

“No, I mean the man’s arms. When did the thing happen with his arms?”

“Oh,” Alice says. “When Wendy and I were fifteen.”

Suzanne scoots herself up against Alice. Alice shifts onto her back so that Suzanne can put her cheek against the hard, flat surface of Alice’s sternum. Alice rests one hand on Suzanne’s head.

“He was harvesting beans. You know the combine I mean, Suz? The one with the rotating contraption up front? Not the flat kind with fingers for field corn.” Suzanne nods her head against Alice’s chest. “He was out in the field alone when the blades stopped turning. So this old guy, this knucklehead, shuts everything off, gets down from the combine, and decides to fix the son of a bitch himself. There’s a belt off or something’s jammed in there or something, because this genius shoves both arms into the front of this gigantic cutting machine—both arms, up to the shoulder sockets—and the next thing you know, those blades are turning and his arms get ripped off. Not sliced. They don’t get severed by the blades. He gets his hands caught up in the works and the combine just pulls his arms right off. He should have bled to death in the field all by himself in a minute. Maybe the torque twisted the arteries or something, I don’t know. But his wife, half a mile away at the house, saw the combine stop and drove out across the field to see what was up. She drives straight up to the combine and he’s standing there looking dazed with no arms on.”

Suzanne slips one hand beneath Alice’s shirt. She rests her fingers in the ridges of Alice’s ribs.

“That’s the part that fucking gets me,” Alice says. “This guy’s eyes are blown wide open with shock. He doesn’t even know his own name he’s so gone with pain, and his little housewife

can either faint dead at his feet or goddamn do something. And she does something. Can you imagine, Suz?”

“No, I can’t.”

“Can you imagine if something happened like that? What would you do if you found me with my arms ripped off?”

“I don’t know.”

“Would you save me?”

“I’d try,” Suzanne says.

“Would you save me?”

“Stop it,” Suzanne says.

“I kind of feel like I’d know how to feel if it had been terrible like that,” Alice says.

“It was terrible.”

“It was a car accident. It was quick. They went together. They never knew what hit them. Blah, blah, blah.”

“It was terrible,” Suzanne says.

“Will you come home with me?” Alice asks. “Will you do this? The coffins and the funeral parlor, and the ham-salad sandwiches the church ladies are going to try to stuff in our faces after the wake?”

“Yes, of course,” Suzanne says. “You don’t have to ask.”

But Alice does have to ask because Suzanne has never been home with her to her parents’ farm. In all the nine years they’ve been together, Alice has only ever mentioned Suzanne to her parents as a friend—and then as a roommate starting four years ago. That’s her story on brief trips home to the Hoosier state. She is a different person there, shucking sweet corn on the back

porch with her father, for god's sake. Mostly, her father talked about funny stories he'd read in *Reader's Digest* or what book of the Bible his Sunday school class was studying. He found most of them painfully dull. Her mother, with her broad, blank moon-face hardly ever asked Alice a personal question. By the time Alice was in her twenties, her mother had become bewildered and quiet around her oldest daughter. It has not been difficult for Alice to keep herself, her life, separate from that strange place where she grew up. In many ways, the subject of Suzanne just failed to come up. But on some nights at home, after her parents had clicked off the news and ambled off to bed, Alice would sit out on the back porch with a bottle of beer watching the moon appear and disappear behind high summer clouds. On some nights, Alice would want Suzanne there with her so bad that it hurt.

Thirty-five, Alice thinks, and closeted like a kid. How ridiculously dumb. She'd always thought she'd tell her folks about Suzanne when she knew that Suzanne was the one. But earlier that evening, before the phone rang, Alice had been considering quitting Suzanne. She had been wondering how it would feel to stop chopping arugula after nine years and just say, You know, Suzanne, I'm not sure I'm still in this. I think I might look for my own place.

"I want to feel your skin," Suzanne says. There is a brief tussle as Alice and Suzanne pull off their own t-shirts and settle back into their former position, Suzanne's cheek against Alice's chest. Alice can feel Suzanne's breath on her right breast. They lie quietly in the dark, both waiting for what Alice will do next, until Suzanne's breathing evens and shallows and Alice knows her lover is asleep.

In the morning, Suzanne makes all of the arrangements for leaving town. Alice sits at the kitchen counter in a t-shirt and her underwear while Suzanne talks with the head of the chemistry

department at the university where she works as a staff scientist. Suzanne also phones the MacArthur Foundation, where Alice works. Alice goes to lie down on the living room floor when Suzanne begins accepting condolences on her behalf. Suzanne packs a suitcase for the both of them. Suzanne drives the six hours between their home in Hyde Park and Alice's parents' house, and two days later, at the Earliwine Family Funeral Home, she smiles gracefully and introduces herself as Alice's roommate to the parade of family friends and acquaintances who file through. Suzanne looks stunning in her black crepe dress. Alice thinks it's inappropriate to be admiring the cut of her lover's dress there in the funeral parlor, a funeral parlor crawling with pale Protestants, but she does all the same. No one could deny that Suzanne has marvelous breasts, not even Protestants in a room crowded with reeking flowers and two closed caskets.

There is that to be thankful for, the crushing impact of the truck cab rolling over, which necessitated closed caskets. Sara had tried to insist that they could hire a special mortician, someone adept at major reconstruction, but Alice had put her foot down. What a morbid practice it all was in any case, pumping bodies full of chemicals and caking makeup on every inch of exposed flesh. Who were those morticians trying to fool? Is it not enough to stand in a hot room with the bodies in caskets? Why have the whole town traipsing through to peer down into their parents' dead, stitched-together and heavily made-up faces? Paul, Sara's husband, had not exactly agreed with Alice, but he had suggested to her sister that the expense was significant. Leave it to Paul to argue economics when the real issues at hand were decency and decorum, a simple refusal to take part in the whole gaudy, macabre business of pasting over the destruction of death.

Suzanne, returning from her trip to the kitchen to fill Alice's coffee cup, stops to speak with Paul. The two seem to have developed a quick camaraderie, even though they had not

previously met. When she speaks to Paul, Suzanne has to look up, and her soft, light hair falls back from her face. Sometimes, when she's nervous or when she's particularly captivated by something she's reading in the paper over breakfast, Suzanne gives in to the habit of tucking her hair behind her ears and holding it there. If she tugs so hard that her hair seems to strain against her scalp Alice says, Suzanne, and Suzanne lets go. Tonight, however, speaking with Paul, she tucks her hair behind her ears and drops her fingers back around the mug of coffee in her left hand. She nods and smiles and Paul laughs.

“Well, you're awfully chummy with Paul,” Alice says when Suzanne hands her the coffee cup.

“Paul is nice,” Suzanne says.

“He's a potato,” Alice says.

Alice tries to take a sip of coffee but it burns her lips.

“Shit, this is hot!”

“Yes,” Suzanne says. “It's coffee.”

Alice can feel herself starting to sweat. Her skin is prickly and clammy beneath her suit. When she runs a hand through her short, dark hair, she catches a whiff of her armpit.

“This place makes me itch,” Alice says. “It's the chemicals. The whole place is full of toxic chemicals.”

“You don't look well,” Suzann says, taking Alice by the elbow. “Come on. Come here. Let's sit.”

They cross the room and sit on a low couch. It is a brocade piece of squat furniture that Alice's grandmother would have called a divan. It occurs to Alice, for the first time, that she and Sara are the last. Her grandparents all died by the time she was in middle school. Her father's

brother died in his forties of a massive heart attack, leaving behind only his persimmon widow who faded from their lives. Her mother, too, had a single brother, but he drowned when Alice and Sara's mother was in high school.

"Are you okay?" Suzanne asks.

"No one's talking to me," Alice says. "This whole place is swarming with people and almost no one is talking to me. The entire time you were gone, I think three people came over to say they were sorry. That's what they're saying. Inane shit like that."

"That's what people say at funeral homes. Give them a break."

"I'm bereaved," Alice says. "They should be giving me a break. Am I that terrible, that people I knew as a kid can't come over and say one decent thing to me?"

"You are ferocious," Suzanne says. "You look terrifying. If I didn't know you, I'd be scared to death."

They are sitting too close to each other on the couch. Suzanne looks at Alice as if at any moment she could raise her fingertips to Alice's cheek.

"Don't touch me," Alice says.

"I wouldn't." Suzanne leans back and crosses her legs.

"I just mean you shouldn't. Not with everyone looking. That's the last thing I need."

"I said I wouldn't," Suzanne says.

Alice blows on her coffee. Across the room, Paul has guided Sara to a matching loveseat, and for one peculiar moment both couples catch each other's eyes. Sara has been quietly weeping on and off for the past three days. Her face is swollen and puffy with grief.

"She's doing it better than me," Alice says.

"What?"

“Mourning. I don’t think I’m mourning yet.”

“Yes you are,” Suzanne says.

On the other side of the room, a small man wearing wire spectacles and a blue suit approaches Sara and Paul. Paul stands and shakes the man’s hand. He’s missing a thumb. His pink scalp shows through his thin white hair.

“That guy was our Sunday school teacher,” Alice says.

“He looks nice,” Suzanne says.

“He was. He had a tendency to digress from the Bible, though. Back when Ryan White was dying of AIDS, he taught a whole Sunday school lesson on how we shouldn’t sit on the toilet seats at school. Just in case the school had been infiltrated by gays. He was really worried about government plots and cover-ups. He thought the government was corrupt with closet cases.”

“Good grief,” Suzanne says.

“Yeah, but he was nice anyway, though.” Alice knows Suzanne is reading her for sarcasm, but she’s serious. “His wife almost died of polio.”

“You’re kidding.”

“No.”

“What happened to his hand?” Suzanne asks.

“He got it caught in a grain dryer a couple of years ago,” Alice says.

“I’m not sure I believe you sometimes,” Suzanne says.

“Oh, do. Extremities get lopped off left and right around here.”

“We should go be with your sister,” Suzanne says.

“I don’t want to.”

“It doesn’t always matter what you want. Sometimes you should do things just because.”

She stands, drawing Alice up along with her. “Come on, I’ll go with you.”

Alice’s legs feel weak. There seems to be ten miles of pink carpet between her and her sister, but Suzanne puts a calm, steady hand in the small of her back.

A week later, Sara and Alice sit together on the floor of their parents’ home office. They have emptied out the last of the filing cabinets and shelves. Tax returns dating back decades, deeds and titles, various licenses, bank statements, and folders full of insurance information are strewn across the floor. Evidence of family life—snapshots, letters, art projects made by the girls when they were in school—is mixed in among the legal documents. Both women sit within arm’s reach of a wastebasket.

“Do you want this?” Sara asks, a file folder in her outstretched hand.

Alice takes the folder and thumbs through half a dozen book reports and a number of term papers she wrote in high school English classes.

“My god,” she says. “I had no idea they kept them.” She dumps the file folder and all of its contents into the recycling box.

“They kept everything,” Sara says. “Here, have a look.”

She turns a large manila envelope upside-down, and a handful of flattened construction paper hand-puppets tumble out.

“Do you remember Queen Bee Alice and her Circus Friends?” Sara asks.

The girls had spent hours and hours cutting, pasting, and coloring puppets when they were in elementary school. At the height of their Queen Bee Alice episode, there had been a cast of characters of a dozen or more. Now, laughing, Sara unfolds Loony Linda the Lion Tamer.

“Whatever happened to Loony Linda?” Alice asks.

“She got eaten by one of her lions there toward the end. You wouldn’t let me play her after that.”

“I’d forgotten all about these.”

“Would you like them?” Sara asks.

Alice dumps the puppets in the wastebasket.

“Don’t throw them out,” Sara says. “I’ll keep them if you don’t want them. Give them here.”

Alice retrieves the puppets and hands them back to Sara. Sara smooths the construction paper and returns the puppets to their envelope. The sisters work together quietly for many minutes. Occasionally, one holds up a document or a folder for the other’s appraisal, and with a silent gesture the piece is either exchanged or discarded as they both see fit. It is like imagining their parents naked, Alice thinks, to be pawing through their private things. But there is no one else, and the property will be auctioned tomorrow, so they must.

“What should we do about all these pictures?” Sara asks, opening a box of water-damaged photographs. “It seems a shame to throw away pictures, even if they aren’t any good.”

“We’ve got pictures coming out of our ears,” Alice says. “If you don’t want them, we should throw them away.”

“What about the old ones?”

“I don’t know who half these people are,” Alice says. She flips through a stack of old snap-shots.

“We could find out,” Sara says.

“How? Who are we going to ask?”

“Alice,” Sara says.

“What? It’s true. If you don’t know and I don’t know, we’re shit out of luck.”

“Would you not swear?”

“Sara,” Alice says.

“Alice,” Sara says.

“I’m going outside for a cigarette.” When Alice stands, her knees throb from the way she’s been sitting with her legs tucked under her.

“I thought you quit smoking,” Sara says.

“I did. Ten years ago.”

“How long did that last?”

“Ten years,” Alice says.

Out on the wide back porch, she digs a pack of Camels out of her jacket’s breast pocket. Still unaccustomed to nicotine, her head swims at the first drag.

“I thought you quit smoking,” Alice says, exhaling.

She last smoked regularly the year before she met Suzanne, but she bought a pack at the first gas station they stopped at when they began the drive from Chicago to her home state. Suzanne had said, Oh, you’re going to smoke. Yes, Alice had said. I’m going to smoke.

Alice puts her feet up on the railing. The southern breeze is chilly but smells of wet dirt and growing things. She and Sara have agreed to spend their last two nights alone together in their parents’ house. Suzanne has taken a hotel room in the nearest town, and Paul has driven the hour back to Louisville where he and Sara live. Sara and Alice have less than twenty-four hours to sort through the paperwork in the office, to ferret out the last remnants of value from that jumbled mess. They spent last evening reading magazines in separate rooms of the house. When

Alice went to the kitchen for a glass of water, she didn't bother turning on a light. She stood in the dark looking out the window over the sink, trying not to be frightened by the once familiar sound of floorboards and foundation settling. Sara had been startled when she found her sister in the kitchen. "Why are you standing here in the dark?" she'd asked. "I was just thinking," Alice said. "You know," Sara had said, "sometimes you give me the creeps."

This whole damn place gives Alice the creeps. The fields stretch out, half-bare, under the chilly, gray, too-early spring sky. The trouble with farming is all the dirt, Alice thinks. Somebody knocked down all the trees about a hundred and fifty years ago, and ever since people have been stripping the land down to naked dirt at least once a year. In the first place, it's bleak. In the second, it lets the rain wash all the topsoil into the rivers every spring. Someday someone will scrape the dirt down to the bedrock, down to the veritable bone, and that will be the end of that. She began haranguing her father about going no-till after she took a college ecology course called "Deforestation: Cross-Hemisphere Hypocrisy." But Alice can see that no-till is no better, not with the beleaguered remains of last year's corn crop clinging to the ground. Better for the soil, true, but no improvement on the bleak-front.

Alice is stubbing out her cigarette when Sara comes out on the porch, the cordless phone held out like an offering.

"It's Suzanne," she says.

"Tell her I'll call back."

Alice doesn't take her eyes from the southern sky, but without looking she knows her sister hasn't moved. She knows Sara is just standing there, holding the screen door open.

"Fine," Alice says, "give it here."

Sara crosses the porch and puts the phone in Alice's hand. Then she pulls up a deck chair and settles in next to Alice.

"Hey Suz," Alice says. "No, no, I'm not busy. I'm just out on the porch for a smoke. I'll call you later, okay?"

Alice listens for a moment longer and then clicks off the phone without saying anything else.

"How's Suzanne?" Sara asks.

"Fine."

"Is she coming out for the auction tomorrow?"

"No," Alice says. "I asked her not to. I just want to get all of this over with."

"It wouldn't kill you to be nice," Sara says.

"How am I not nice to you?"

"To Suzanne. She's worried about you. She just wants to hear your voice."

"Thanks," Alice says. "I'll take that into account."

Beyond the porch and a stretch of grass, the barn sits with its wide door yawning open. Their father must have been in the middle of many things. Two grain wagons have been pulled out of the barn, their red paint blistered by rust. They've been shoved up against the west-facing side of the barn. Alice thinks they must have been in the way of something her father was after. The wagons won't be needed until harvest.

"What are those doing out?" Alice asks.

Sara seems to consider the grain wagons for nearly a minute before she furrows her brow and says, "I don't know."

When Alice was in high school, some small boy climbed into a grain wagon full of field corn and got killed in his own backyard. One of the Weston boys, Alice thinks, though she couldn't say for sure. No one knew why the child had climbed into the wagon—he had certainly been warned not to—but when the grain shifted, he must have struggled his way to the bottom. It was like drowning without water. Or perhaps the boy had been crushed before he could suffocate. Either way, it took his parents hours of searching before they thought to look where they found him, a flood of harvested corn spilled out around them on the ground.

“Was it one of the Weston boys who got killed in a grain wagon?” Alice asks.

“Yes,” Sara says. “Tyler. What on earth made you think of that?”

“I’ve been thinking about accidents,” Alice says. “I’ve been telling Suzanne.”

“That’s morbid.”

“Well. These seem like morbid times.” Alice picks up her pack of cigarettes and lights another. She thinks that if she smokes long enough, her sister will have to go inside.

“How long have you and Suzanne been together?” Sara asks.

Alice nearly chokes. When she looks at her sister, Sara’s head is turned, her gaze cast out past the barn to the east.

“I didn’t know we were going to talk about all that,” Alice says.

“It seems sort of stupid not to, don’t you think?”

Alice leans back in her deck chair and closes her eyes. If she hunches her shoulders she can block most of her body from the chilly breeze.

“Nearly nine years,” she says.

“Oh,” Sara says. “My gosh, Alice. I didn’t know. That’s almost as long as Paul and I have been married.”

“Yeah, I know,” Alice says.

“Was she your first?” Sara asks. Her face is flushed but her expression is carefully neutral.

“Oh, for god’s sake. Do we have to muck through all of this?”

“I’m just asking,” Sara says. “I’d like to know.”

“Not by a long shot,” Alice says. She suddenly feels sick on nicotine and stubs her cigarette in the ashtray. The wind tosses the ash.

“When did you know?” Sara asks. “Did you know all the way back when we were kids, or in high school, or what?”

“I don’t know, Sara,” Alice says. “I don’t think I knew anything back then. I don’t think I was me all those years ago. I hardly remember high school.” They sit in silence for a few moments before Alice asks, “Is that it? Are we finished?”

“Sure,” Sara says, but she doesn’t get up.

“When did that accident happen with Tyler?” Alice asks after a moment. “I was still in high school. Either junior or senior year, I think.”

Sara chews on her fingernail as she thinks.

“Your junior year? It was the fall before Halley’s Comet came around.”

“I’d forgotten,” Alice says.

“About the comet?”

“About both, I guess.”

“I couldn’t” Sara says. “I mean Halley’s Comet. Or Tyler either. But seeing Halley’s Comet really felt historic, you know? Like something was happening. We were really seeing something.”

They had been driving home together from the mall late one night when Sara had suggested they stop the pickup and look for the comet. It was a hard, cold night in February and Alice had pulled the truck over into the frozen weeds at the side of a county road and shut off the engine and the lights. The sky was moonless, just a wash of stars across a sea of black. Alice had felt dizzy standing in the middle of a deserted road with her head thrown back, the truck’s engine ticking as it cooled in the ditch. The sky is beautiful when it’s just the sky, but it’s terrible when it feels like the lid of the world has been lifted off and there’s nothing between you and the staggering silence of outer space.

“It was just a fuzzy star,” Alice says now.

“That’s just like you, Alice.”

“What’s that mean?”

Sara stands up and stretches. She unbuttons her jacket and drops it in Alice’s lap.

“Call Suzanne,” she says. “If I were her and you were Paul I’d be worried about you.”

“Thanks, Mom,” Alice says.

“Mom’s dead,” Sara says and goes back inside the house.

Alice puts on her sister’s coat, but she doesn’t call Suzanne. She imagines her lover sitting cross-legged on the hotel bed, a box of take-out in front of her, something mindless flickering on the television set. Alice doesn’t know how long she’s been considering leaving Suzanne, although she fears it might be years. Two weeks before they got the phone call from Sara, Suzanne had said, “When you know what you want to talk about, let’s talk.” They were

sitting at the breakfast counter in the kitchen having a supper of tomatoes and cheese on baguettes. Alice didn't say anything, and neither did Suzanne.

"Are you going to bed?" Sara asks.

She has been in the living room working on a cross-stitch. Alice has been sitting in the empty kitchen.

"Did you miss me when I went away to college?" Alice asks.

Sara sighs. Through all of their growing-up years, people remarked about how much Sara and Alice looked alike. Now, in their thirties, Alice thinks they don't even look related.

"Did you ever miss us?" Sara asks.

"You and Mom and Dad?" Alice asks.

"Yes."

"I didn't think to, Sara," Alice says.

Sara fills a glass of water at the sink. She checks the lock on the back door and then heads upstairs to go to bed.

"Shut the lights off when you come up," she calls down to her sister.

Alice rises and flips the light switch. She stands still, letting her eyes adjust to the sudden dark in the eerie quiet of a rural night. When she can make out the shape of the kitchen counter, she picks up the phone. She dials the number of Suzanne's hotel in town from memory. The phone rings three times before Suzanne picks up.

"Hi, Suz," she says. "You asleep?"

"No," Suzanne says, although she is lying by the sound of her voice. "Hi, Alice. How are you?"

“Tired,” Alice says. “Can I tell you something I’ve been thinking about?”

“Sure,” Suzanne says.

Alice can hear the rustle of sheets and blankets as Suzanne rolls onto her side. She imagines Suzanne curled up in an anonymous hotel room bed, her hair a tangled mess across her pillow, the phone pressed to her one available ear.

“I’ve been thinking about the time I was almost crushed under a hay bale. Do you want to hear about it?”

“Tell me, Alice.”

Alice roams through the house as she talks. Curtains stand open at all of the windows. From the southern-facing windows Alice can see a waxing moon.

“I was playing in the barn, even though I wasn’t supposed to. I climbed up to the top of this mountain of hay bales. Not the ones you’re thinking of, though, Suzanne. Not those rectangular things. I’m talking about those massive rolls of hay. The ones that are six feet across. Literally. Do you know what I mean?”

“Yes,” Suzanne says. “I know. Go ahead.”

“I was all the way up to the top, nearly up to the rafters, when one of the bales shifted and tumbled forward. I could feel everything giving way beneath me, and I fell headfirst into this crevice between two bales. I was up side down, just one leg and a hand hooked over the side of a bale, choking on dust. I knew the whole thing was just going to topple and I’d be crushed to death in an instant. I remember wondering if it was going to hurt. There I am, coughing up chaff, wondering if dying is going to hurt and thinking about how pissed my parents are going to be, when I realize that the bales have stopped shifting and if I climb out carefully, I might not get killed. I was scratched up from head to toe, but when I got inside I just told my mom I rode my

bike into a sticker bush and no one ever knew. No big deal, right? I still think about that sometimes, though.”

“Are you okay, babe?” Suzanne asks. “Do you want me to come out there?”

“No,” Alice says. “Don’t come out here. I’m okay.”

Alice has found herself in the laundry room. Sara has been stacking grocery bags and boxes full of the stuff she wants to keep from the house on the counter across from the washer and dryer.

“Alice,” Suzanne says, “would you please tell me what you want me to do?”

Alice begins rifling through the contents of Sara’s boxes.

“Nothing, Suzanne,” Alice says. “Don’t do anything. I just need to get through this and get the hell out of here. You just stay where you’re at.”

“Call me in the morning?”

“Yeah. I will. Good-night, Suz. Really, don’t worry about me.”

“Good-night,” Suzanne says.

In the first of Sara’s boxes, Alice finds a ceramic pencil-holder that Sara made for their father in art class, a number of old handkerchiefs, the stack of snapshots Alice had suggested they throw away, and their mother’s large, teak jewelry box. Sara hadn’t asked if Alice might want that, although she had offered Alice first choice of their mother’s jewelry. Most of it was simple and inexpensive. Alice chose a strand of pearls that their father had given their mother as a Christmas gift when she and Sara were small girls. Beneath the jewelry box, Alice finds a manila file folder marked *From Sara* in their mother’s careful script. Alice closes the door to the laundry room.

The folder is fat with letters addressed from her sister to her mother, a correspondence that goes back years. Some of the oldest ones, the ones from when Sara was away at college, look as if they've been folded and re-folded, carried around in a pocket, perhaps. The early letters are simple and thoughtful, an account of Sara's trials with a difficult math class, a description of her disappointment at not being chosen for the orchestra. They ask after the garden and the farm. They say she misses home very much. Shortly, the letters become more expressive, linger in detail, share fears and loneliness and hopes. The letters open with long responses to questions that must have been posed by their mother.

In the fifth letter Alice stumbles across her own name. *No, I haven't heard from her either, not for several months. It's a funny thing to miss her, I suppose, since we were never very close. Alice.* Her name its own sentence with a period placed after it. In the next letter she reads, *Oh heavens, Mother, of course it's not your fault. Alice is Alice. That's all. She'd as soon talk to the man in the moon as say two words to me.* Six months later Sara writes, *You know, I've wondered that, too. She could be, I guess. We pray for her, Mom. Don't you think that's all we can do?* Through fifteen years of letter writing, Sara and their mother hover around Alice's name like baffled moths around a lit porch light. There was a flurry of correspondence around the time that Alice moved in with Suzanne. It seems at one point their mother decided to come right out and ask Alice what was what, but nothing ever came of that. Two years later, Sara reports, *Paul asked me not long ago if I loved Alice and I said I hadn't the faintest clue. What kind of a thing is that for a sister to say?*

The letters, of course, are not all about her. Sara and their mother have exchanged long meditations about their lives, their longings, their men. The letters chart the meeting, courtship, and marriage of Sara and Paul. Sara and their mother exchanged a tentative and shy

correspondence about sex. The letters offer up in excruciating detail Sara's attempts at becoming pregnant—the excitement, the disappointment, the frustration, the fear. They cycle through a number of expensive and demoralizing fertility treatments. Alice can't remember ever being told about the two first-trimester miscarriages. The last letter is dated just a few weeks before their parents' death. The paper is still fresh and clean, neatly creased in a tri-fold. *I think my thirties have changed me*, Sara writes. *I think I've learned to be happy with my lot. Maybe I just feel this way because it will soon be summer and the windows are open and Paul is out on the patio putting fish on the grill, but deep down, I think that it's true. Did you feel this way in your thirties? A new sort of peace about things? I don't know, though, because you had us running around in your thirties. Maybe you didn't have time the way I seem to. I was thinking just the other day that you were only five years older than I am now when Alice moved away. I can't imagine, Mom. I really can't. I no longer worry about Alice. Perhaps she's happy in her own way, but if that's true, it's a happiness I can't recognize. Life's a mystery, sometimes, to me.* The letter goes on to talk of the patio garden that Sara hopes to plant, how good she feels in the summer seeing tomatoes growing even if she has to grow them in a pot on a patio in the suburbs. This seems to be the last letter to their mother that Sara wrote.

In the bright light of morning, Sara and Alice move efficiently through the first floor of the house wiping down the remaining furniture with damp cloths. The air sparkles with kicked-up dust. Alice finds the empty pantry most disturbing of all the vacant and echoing rooms. How banal, Alice thinks, to only ever think of my mother in the pantry and kitchen. But still. Alice stands for a long time in the kitchen, gazing out the window over the sink. In her absence, her parents have expanded the side porch to wrap around into a back deck. They have dug elaborate

flower gardens where her aluminum swing set used to be. Alice can't think when they chopped down the mulberry tree in the southeast corner of the property. She remembers how, playing in the backyard as a child, her mother's presence behind the screen of the kitchen window made her feel safe. Alice had laughed when Suzanne suggested the previous year that Alice would make a good mother. "I'm just saying, sometimes I think about us. It's not that difficult to adopt," Suzanne had said. "My god," Alice had said, "you're serious. I think I'd be a train wreck of a mother. Do you know me? Have we met?"

"What are you thinking?" Sara asks, coming to stand beside her sister at the sink.

"I was thinking about how Suzanne wants a baby," Alice says. "She wants to adopt. Probably something international, you know. If you can swing a plane ticket to China or Bangladesh, you can adopt in no time these days. How about you and Paul?" Alice asks.

"We don't have children," Sara says. There is a tinny sound to her voice.

"Yes, I know," Alice says, "but you and Paul could adopt if there's something wrong with you. You don't have to be a martyr if you don't want to, Sara. No one's impressed."

Alice feels her sister turn to stare at her, but she gives Sara nothing but her profile. Alice can hear her heart in her ears. She doesn't know if her sister has yet missed the folder full of fifteen years of correspondence.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Sara asks.

"It means people only suffer if they want to nowadays," Alice says. "Now that Mom's gone, there's no one left to be impressed by your ability to rise above the rest of us."

Sara surprises Alice by failing to move. She stands quietly at the sink gazing out over their property. Hot thumbprint blotches rise up on Sara's neck and chest.

"I wouldn't expect you to understand, Alice," Sara says.

“No, I’m sure not. I couldn’t possibly understand the way you feel, Sara. All that righteous stoicism involved in being a good wife, right? But you and Mom were thick as thieves trying to figure me out, huh? You don’t get it, either, Sara. You people act like it’s a goddamn mystery why I left.”

“I don’t know how many you read,” Sara says, “but those were private letters. I’d like them back.”

“Private, my ass. Private until they said word one about me.”

“Oh, for crying out loud, Alice,” Sara says. “You amaze me.” She pivots to leave the kitchen, hands up in defeat, but snaps back around before she’s taken a step. “You could have come home if you’d wanted to. You’re the one who took the easy way out. You ran off as quick as you could to have your whole life somewhere else. You didn’t even give us a chance.” She bites her tongue the way she used to when they were girls and Alice would drive her to furious distraction in a fight. When she can speak without shouting, she says, “Life’s not always easy. I don’t think I’m entitled to something just because I want it. If that’s how you think life’s supposed to be, you’re in for some serious disappointment. I’d always hoped some day you’d grow up.”

“You think my life’s easy?” Alice asks, her voice rising dangerously. “Where have you been, Sara? You think I could have waltzed home with Suzanne and sat down for dinner with Mom and Dad? You think it doesn’t bother me to sit in Mom and Dad’s church for their funeral with that god-awful sign out front? Marriage Equals One Man Plus One Woman, Forever. That’s where Mom and Dad were three Sundays ago. I’ve been out there on my own for all these years trying to figure shit out, and you and Mom were sitting on your fat asses praying for me. You tell me how it would have been if I’d tried to come home.”

The rage in Sara's face drains to nothing but exhaustion before she speaks.

"I don't know, Alice. I don't know how it would have been at first. All I know is that now you're fighting your own fight. You're in it alone."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"You've never known how to treat people. If you're miserable, it's not my fault, or Mom's. It's not Dad's fault, and it certainly isn't Suzanne's."

Alice hits Sara before she even knows she's going to. She smacks Sara across the face hard enough to nearly knock her down. In the stunned silence after the crack of skin against skin, Alice stares at her hand. She doesn't see her sister's blow coming. Sara socks Alice straight in the face with a closed fist. Alice's head snaps back. An instant later, she is standing in her parents' kitchen with her hands cupped helplessly beneath a thick flow of blood from her broken nose. Sara doesn't seem startled by the force of her fist. She stands, blinking at Alice, flexing and relaxing her fingers.

"Say you're sorry, Sara," Alice says, a command from their childhood.

"I'm only sorry if Suzanne loves you the way I tried to. That's who I feel sorry for here. We would have loved you if you'd let us, Mom and me. God help Suzanne."

A dust rag lies abandoned on the kitchen counter, and Sara tosses it at Alice as she crosses to the stairs. "Wipe the blood off the floor, Alice," she says. "The appraiser will be here by noon."

Alice blinks in the mid-day sun when she goes outside for a smoke, her left nostril stuffed with a tampon. Her left eye is swollen and bruised. She will tell people she got whacked in the face with a softball. It will take some doing to explain a softball game in conjunction with her

parents' double funeral, but people believe almost anything if you say it with a straight face. She doesn't light her cigarette on the porch. Instead, she goes behind the garage where she used to hide sneaking cigarettes in her last year of high school.

Alice wonders what her father managed to get in the ground before he rolled his pickup. When Alice and Sara were girls, slightly too old for a babysitter but still too young to quite fend for themselves, Alice was taught how to use the CB radio when her parents were in the fields. When the harvest kept her parents out late into the night, raking through the soybeans with the combine, Alice would get out of bed and pad down to the kitchen to watch through the window. She would climb up on the counter next to the CB, no lights on, and watch as the combine loomed close to the house, spun on pivoted wheels, and lumbered back down the field. Occasionally, she terrified herself by thinking the combine, with its ominous, high-voltage headlights, was really a spaceship. When she was cold and clammy with fear, she would click on the radio and summon her father's voice.

"Breaker-breaker, this is the Little Lady," she would say in her best trucker voice. "Looking for the Big Papa. You got your ears on, Dad? Over." She would lift her thumb and listen to the static, counting the seconds until her father's voice crackled through the handset.

"This is the Big Papa," her father would say, the rumble of machinery beneath him forcing him to shout. "What do you need, Little Lady? You okay? How's my big girl?"

When he fell silent, Alice would click on to speak.

"You have to say 'over,' Dad. Over."

"You okay? Over."

"Yeah. Over."

"Your sister asleep? Over."

“Yeah. Last time I checked. Over.”

“How’s about you get yourself back in bed? Over.”

“Okay,” Alice would say. “Over and out, Dad.”

“Back at you.”

“Dad.”

“Over and out, Alice,” her father would say.

Alice squats, her back against the aluminum siding of the garage, and then drops to the ground. She and Suzanne have an apartment out there. There is a city some hundreds of miles away, and in that city she has a grant application sitting on her desk. It’s from some zoo, Alice thinks. For rhinoceros. Maybe to acquire some, or to improve an exhibit of them, or to somehow stop their being poached. She is not sure. She is thirty-five, and she is relatively certain that her girlfriend would like to stay with her for the rest of their lives. Alice takes a last drag on her cigarette, stubs it out in the damp dirt, and flicks the butt into the space between the garage and the empty chicken coop.

“I thought I’d find you out here,” Sara says, coming around the corner of the garage.

“You know everything, don’t you?” Alice asks.

“I know you.”

Sara sits next to her sister in the dirt, apparently paying no mind to the seat of her clean and pressed slacks. She picks a foxtail and strips the fuzz from the stalk. She spins the smooth stalk in her fingers, then sticks the end between her lips.

Alice taps another cigarette from the pack.

“No one ever told me, you know?”

“Told you what?” Sara asks.

“That life was like this. These brief moments together and then long lapses of silence.”

She waits, but Sara doesn't say anything. “Are we at the beginning or the end of something?”

“There are no beginnings,” Sara says. “Just the middle, I think. I've been in the middle my whole life.”

“What do you mean?”

“I'm not sure.”

“I know,” Alice says. She smokes while her sister rips up little patches of grass. “When I was about eight, I came home from school one day all worked up with this idea that I wanted a big sister. Everyone at school seemed to have one. When Mom told me it was my job to be the big sister to you, I was shocked. I'd never thought of you like that. I couldn't comprehend our equivalency.”

Sara laughs. “That sounds like you.”

“I'm apologizing.”

“Yeah, I know.” Sara stands, dusts her hands, then swats at the dirt on her pants. “I'm going to go. I can't stick around to see this place sold. I've got what I need and the deed to the farm is on the counter in the kitchen. Their lawyer is coming over with the appraiser and all the rest, so you don't have to stay if you don't want to.”

“Are we friends?” Alice asks.

“I don't think so.” Sara shields her eyes with both hands. “I'm going to get home to Paul,” she says at last.

“So without Mom and Dad we're just going to drift apart?”

“Did they hold us together?”

“No,” Alice says.

“I’ll write when everything’s settled with the estate,” Sara says.

“Fine. That’s just fine.”

Sara turns to go, but Alice reaches out and catches her by one pant leg.

“Tell Paul I said hello.”

“Yeah, okay.” Sara looks down at her sister impatiently.

“Don’t you want to say anything?” Alice asks. “Maybe give me some advice?”

“No.”

“You could tell me to call Suzanne.”

“Take care, Alice,” Sara says. She extracts her leg from Alice’s grip and disappears around the corner of the garage.

“That’s crappy advice,” Alice calls, but her sister doesn’t answer. Sara’s car door slams and then the engine of her Honda roars to life. Alice listens to her sister pulling out of the drive, and then to the sound of the engine fading as Sara disappears up an empty county road.

II. AT THE HOLIDAY INN EXPRESS

Alice pilots her Subaru into a parking space in front of the Holiday Inn Express just off State Road 9. Suzanne isn't expecting her for hours, and Alice didn't bother to call when she left her parents' farm fourteen miles out of town. But Suzanne will be here. Alice knows that. For one thing, Suzanne doesn't know a soul in this town, and for another, Alice has had their car. There is nowhere to walk to from the Holiday Inn Express. Alice opens her door and the car dings at her until she takes the key from the ignition. The blacktop parking lot is sun-struck. It must have been recently sealed, because the smell of tar and paint makes Alice's head reel. As she heads toward the lobby doors, Alice panics over Suzanne's room number. Her memory spins briefly but then catches and Alice thinks two-oh-six.

Would the clerk behind the front desk have told her Suzanne's room number if she'd asked? If she'd said, "I'm here to meet my friend, but I've forgotten her room number," would the clerk have looked that up and simply told her? Would she have called the room first? Would it be different if Alice were a man and Suzanne were her wife? If Alice could say, "My wife is staying here but I've forgotten her room number, may I have it, please?" would the ponytailed teenager behind the counter respond differently? Asking after one's wife in a hospital is one thing, the one thing everyone always points to in the long and boring argument over gay marriage, but hotels off the highway are another. What about infidelity? What about intrigue? Maybe no one should be told anyone's room number—ever. Maybe we should all have the right to an anonymous room, some sanctuary from all the spouses and lovers and who-knows-whos who come looking for us. Luckily for Alice, Suzanne is not hiding from her, and she does know her lover's room number. Two-oh-six. Alice likes the roundness of it.

Suzanne has never cheated on her, Alice is sure of it. She doesn't have the constitution for it. And Alice has never cheated on Suzanne. Maybe she doesn't have the constitution for it, either. The closest to infidelity that Alice has ever come was at Suzanne's department Christmas party three years ago. Alice had worn a suit and had had a difficult time making conversation with the wives of all the other chemists. One wife of a faculty member—a lean, blond woman in her forties who worked as a tennis pro at a country club—followed Alice into the kitchen where Alice was hoping to add a good deal of gin to her drink. The woman had cornered her in the pantry and planted a wet, drunken kiss on Alice's lips. "Wouldn't it be nice," the woman had said, "if we could just be more *free*?" Alice had said, "If you make yourself vomit, that might help you sober up." Alice found the whole episode humiliating. When she told Suzanne about it on the car ride home, hoping to hear Suzanne disparage the sorry, sodden other woman, Suzanne had just sighed and said, "Oh, Alice. Why are people so sad?"

Alice leans against her car door. Her face throbs from where her sister punched her. She doesn't know how well her sunglasses hide her spectacular black eye, but she feels better behind them, even if the bridge of the glasses is killing her nose. Her nose is probably broken, but it has stopped bleeding. Alice removed the blood-clotted tampon from her left nostril before driving into town. There were no trashcans in her parents' house—everything having been swept and dusted and cleared out for the real estate auction in the afternoon—and Alice hadn't been able to bring herself to flush the thing after all those adolescent years of being warned against flushing tampons into a septic system. So Alice, embarrassed, had thrown the bloody tampon into the weedy ditch between her parents' yard and their bean fields beyond. Everything is over. Her parents are buried. Their lawyer will oversee the farm auction. Sara will handle all the other necessary details of the estate. After punching Alice in the face, Sara drove home to her husband

in Louisville. Alice doesn't know if they will ever speak again, although they will have to if there is money from the estate. There might be. It seems impossible to tell with a farm. Alice sat for a long time after Sara left, alone and angry, smoking cigarettes in the back yard of her childhood home, trying to figure out what to do next. She couldn't decide on anything, so she has come to join Suzanne in town.

The hotel doors whoosh open. The cold air smells of industrial carpeting and cleaning products and chlorine. There must be a swimming pool. No one is behind the front desk. A family sits at the tables meant for the continental breakfast in the morning, happily eating hamburgers. The children—two boys, one small and lean, the other smaller and toddler-fat—are biting their hamburgers into the shapes of airplanes. The scene makes Alice inexplicably relieved that there are no children anywhere that she is supposed to take care of. She crosses the lobby and presses the up button for the elevator. The steel doors open with a ding, and Alice is efficiently elevated to the second floor, where a cleaning cart blocks the hall. A portable radio is nestled in amongst the clean, white towels, playing country music turned down so low as to be almost inaudible. Alice wheels the cart out of her way and strides down the hall—her feet silent on the carpet—to Suzanne's door. She knocks loudly.

"Housekeeping," she says, though she couldn't say why. She is light-headed and hungry.

"Just a minute," Suzanne calls from within the room, and then she throws the deadbolt and cracks the door, obviously ready to tell the cleaning staff to go away. "Alice!" she says. She swings open the door. Suzanne is in a bathrobe. She has been toweling her pale, limp hair.

"What are you doing here? What," she asks, and then gasps. "Oh my God."

Alice lifts her sunglasses to the top of her head. "Hi, Suz."

Suzanne drops her towel and pulls Alice into the room as if whatever has happened to Alice has just happened in the hall. “My God,” she says, again. She lifts her fingers to Alice’s cheek, but Alice winces away. “What happened?”

“Sara punched me,” Alice says. She is pinned between her lover and the hotel room door. She steps around Suzanne and surveys the room—two double beds, a mammoth television, a desk with a boardroom swivel chair.

“How?” Suzanne asks. “Why?”

“Have you ever been hit?” Alice asks. “I mean, really punched in the face? It’s amazing. It hurts like hell. And it happens so fast. I slapped Sara, and then the next thing I knew, she’d socked me in the nose. I didn’t see it coming.” Alice crosses the room and pushes open the curtains. The window looks out on a parking lot. “She’s got a hell of a hook. Or maybe it was a jab. I don’t know boxing terms.”

“Let me look at you,” Suzanne says. “Come in the bathroom where I can see better.”

A bank of vanity lights blaze above the mirror. Suzanne tips Alice’s face toward the light. Her fingertips are cool against Alice’s jaw line.

“I think your nose is broken.”

“Yeah. I could feel it squish.”

“Have you put ice on this? You’re swelling up like a puffer fish. We need to get you to the hospital.”

“I’m not going to the hospital.” Suzanne opens her mouth to protest but Alice cuts her off. “What are they going to do at the hospital? They can’t do anything for a broken nose. They’ll give me some painkillers, maybe. That’s the last thing I need.”

“We need to have someone look at this,” Suzanne says. She is using her let’s-be-reasonable voice. If Alice doesn’t comply, she will use her please-do-this-for-me voice. “Maybe you’ve got a concussion. Can that happen from getting punched? What do we know? We’re not doctors.”

“Well, you are,” Alice says.

“Be serious.”

“I’m sorry,” Alice says. “I am. I am serious.” But as she says it, Alice is overwhelmed by the desire to laugh. She knows it’s that hysterical type of laughter that makes everyone but the laugher nervous. Suzanne’s eyes well. Alice takes Suzanne’s hands in her own. “Babe,” she says. “Suz, I’m sorry. Really. It’s been a rough morning. I really think I’m okay. I’m fine. But I’ll ice it, okay?”

“Okay,” Suzanne says.

Alice sits on the closed lid of the toilet, and Suzanne takes a clean face towel from the rack above Alice’s head. She fills it with ice from the bucket by the sink and sits on the edge of the bathtub. She puts one hand on Alice’s neck and with the other she lays the ice pack gently against Alice’s face.

“Ow.”

“Sorry.”

“No. It’s okay. Ow. Okay.” Alice breathes. The pressure hurts—her skin is as tight as a ripe plum—but the cold is a relief.

Suzanne strokes Alice’s hair. Alice leans into her lover’s touch. She closes the eye not covered by the ice. Suzanne pulls Alice toward her. She holds Alice, and now, in the face of this simple tenderness, Alice can’t keep from crying. Tears pool by her nose. She hasn’t cried since

before the funeral, since just after Sara called to tell her their parents had been killed in a car accident. She didn't cry in the office at the mortuary when she and Sara picked out the caskets. She didn't cry at the wake, or the funeral, or in the basement of the church afterward where her parents' friends—people she has known since her earliest years—fed her and Suzanne and Sara and Paul lunch. She has felt empty, just scoured out. She has been wondering where the tears were. She hadn't even cried at the shock or the pain or the humiliation of being socked in the face. Oh, here they are, Alice thinks. Here are the tears.

“Babe,” Suzanne says. “Oh, babe.”

Alice covers the good half of her face with her hand. Her tears soak into the towel. Suzanne holds her. After Alice has ceased crying, the two women sit still, as if waiting for some sort of cue about what to do next.

“Is there another towel?” Alice eventually asks, her voice muffled in Suzanne's chest.

“Sure,” Suzanne says. She stands and hands Alice a bath towel this time. Alice wipes her good eye and dabs at her runny nose with the corner of the towel. She is surprised to discover that even her upper lip is tender. She swivels to face herself in the mirror. Her short, dark hair is a mess. The left side of her face is bright pink from the ice. Her left eye is swollen and purple. Capillaries have burst across her fat nose and her cheek. She's never looked worse. Suzanne stands behind her, looking willowy in her too-large bathrobe. They gaze at each other through the mirror. “Can you tell me what happened?” Suzanne asks.

“It's a long, sad story,” Alice says. “Can I lie down while I tell you? I'm not feeling that great.”

“Sure,” Suzanne says.

Alice's legs quiver when she stands. Suzanne turns out the bathroom lights behind them, and Alice stretches out on the thin, stiff comforter covering one of the beds. She lies flat on her back with the towel full of ice draped across her face. The ice is starting to melt, and a frigid trickle of water snakes down her neck. Suzanne picks up a comb from the dresser and sits at Alice's feet. She works the comb carefully through the tangle of her half-dry hair.

"Did you take a shower?" Alice asks.

"I swam."

"Oh," Alice says. "I thought there must be a pool."

"You said you'd be at the farm all day. I was trying to think up things to do."

"How was the water?"

"Will you please talk to me?" Suzanne asks. "Why did Sara hit you?"

Alice sighs. "It all started last night."

"Before you called or after?" Suzanne asks.

"During, actually." Alice had called Suzanne to tell her about the time she had almost killed herself playing in the barn. Alice has been regaling Suzanne with farm accident stories since her parents' death. "Sara was in bed already and I was all alone in that huge, empty house. I was just kind of wandering from room to room, and I ended up in the laundry room. That's where Sara was keeping all the stuff she wanted from the house. I wasn't trying to snoop—I don't care what she keeps. It doesn't make any difference to me. But I was kind of poking through her things. Not looking. Just poking through boxes of photographs and whatever. And I found his file folder. Of letters. From Sara to Mom."

"Oh no," Suzanne says.

Alice lifts a corner of the towel to look at Suzanne, sending another river of ice water down her neck. In the bad light of the hotel room, her lover is ghostly, her skin pale, her hair turning blonder as it dries. Without makeup, Suzanne's eyes have thumbprints of blue beneath them. Her skin was pinker, less translucent, when she and Alice met nine years ago. Alice drops the towel back over her face.

"I know. Don't look at me like that. I couldn't help it. They were incredible. Went back years, all the way back to when Sara left for college. Were you writing your mother letters when you were in college?"

"No," Suzanne says. "Maybe we sent birthday cards."

"Right. That's normal. That's what mothers and daughters do. Normal ones. My mom and I hardly even talked on the telephone, but here she and Sara were, writing these nineteenth-century letters back and forth. They talked about everything."

"Like what?"

"Sex!" Alice says from beneath her towel. "Can you imagine? How they felt about stuff. What they thought about me."

"Ah," Suzanne says.

"Yeah," Alice says. "This ice is melting everywhere. The pillows are going to be soaked."

"Here. Give it to me." Suzanne takes the soggy towel and returns to the bathroom. "The liner for the ice buck," she says. "I should have thought of this before."

Alice can hear Suzanne dump most of the ice from the bucket into the sink. She wraps what's left in the liner in the fresh towel and then scoops the ice in the sink back into the bucket.

She returns and hands Alice the new towel. The plastic liner crinkles when Alice lays the towel against her face.

“Much better,” Alice says.

“I’ll go get fresh ice if we want it for a drink. We can use the ice in the bucket if that melts.”

“Thanks, Suz,” Alice says.

Suzanne sits next to Alice on the bed. “How many of Sara’s letters did you read?”

“All of them. And then I took them. That’s what touched things off this morning.”

“I can imagine.”

“I know I shouldn’t have.”

“Why did you?”

“I don’t know,” Alice says. “They made me so mad. Here Mom and Sara were, having this whole relationship, you know? Doing this thing I had no part of. And they were talking about me. They were saying these things about me that just made me furious. Blindingly angry.”

“What did they say?” Suzanne strokes Alice’s arm. Alice knows Suzanne is just listening, just trying to understand. She wouldn’t have done what Alice has done, but she’s not judging. She’s just being so typically Suzanne.

“Nothing. I don’t know. Whether it was Mom’s fault that Sara and I weren’t close. Whether or not I was happy. Whether or not I was a lesbian. Whether or not that was Mom’s fault. They didn’t use that word, but that’s what they were talking about. Maybe Mom did—her letters weren’t in there, just Sara’s letters to Mom—but I can’t picture my mother writing the word *lesbian*. It all made me furious.”

“Why? You are a lesbian. People aren’t as oblivious as you think.”

“Shouldn’t they have said something to me? If they were going to get all curious, couldn’t they have just asked me?”

“Wasn’t that your job?” Suzanne asks.

Alice shifts her arm away from Suzanne’s touch. “Now you’re going to lecture me about coming out? Now that my parents are dead and my sister and I aren’t speaking? Thanks a lot, lover.”

Suzanne stands up and crosses the room. She lifts her suitcase onto the unoccupied bed and unzips it. Alice takes the ice from her face to watch Suzanne choosing what to wear. Suzanne turns her back to Alice as she pulls on her underwear. She drops the robe to fasten her bra. Alice can see the knuckles of Suzanne’s spine. She steps into a pair of summer-weight slacks and pulls a short sleeve shirt over her head.

“It’s colder than that outside,” Alice says. The sun is deceptive.”

When Suzanne finishes dressing, she turns toward Alice. Alice lowers the towel back over her face.

“I’m not lecturing you. I’m just saying. You weren’t talking to your mother or your sister. They love you. They had a right to try to understand.”

“Loved,” Alice says. “Mom’s dead and Sara doesn’t love me any more.”

“Yes she does,” Suzanne says. “Just because she hit you doesn’t mean she doesn’t love you anymore.”

“It’s a good thing you’re not a domestic violence counselor,” Alice says.

“Did you give Sara her letters back?”

“Yes,” Alice says. “But she doesn’t love me. She said we’re not friends. She said I’m a worthless human being.”

Suzanne comes to sit beside Alice again. She lifts the towel gently from Alice's face.

"She did not," Suzanne says. "Sara wouldn't say such a thing."

"She said I don't know how to love anyone."

"That's not the same thing."

"It might as well be," Alice says.

"Is that why you slapped her?" Suzanne asks.

"More or less." Alice returns the ice to her eye.

"And that's when she punched you?"

"Yes."

"Oh, Alice," Suzanne says.

Sara did say that Alice didn't know how to love, but that's not why Alice struck her sister. She slapped Sara because of what Sara said about Suzanne. "You've never known how to treat people," her had sister said. "If you're miserable, it's not my fault, or Mom's. It's not Dad's fault, and it certainly isn't Suzanne's." That's when Alice slapped Sara. It felt good to strike her sister after that. Who the hell was she to talk about Suzanne? And then Sara punched Alice. It was all so dramatic. Alice wonders what Suzanne would have said or done if she'd been there.

Suzanne takes Alice's hand and holds it to her own cheek. She kisses Alice's palm and then her wrist. "Are you hungry? You're exhausted. You've been traumatized. I know you haven't eaten a thing. You must be faint."

"I'm starving," Alice says.

Suzanne stands. She takes a small tube of concealer from the front pocket of her suitcase and turns to the mirror over the dresser. She dabs tiny amounts of makeup onto the dark shadows beneath her eyes. "Let's get lunch."

“I can’t go anywhere like this,” Alice says.

“Let me look at your face,” Suzanne says.

Alice struggles to sit up. The room tips around her. Suzanne touches Alice’s check and brow, her fingers feather-light against Alice’s skin below and above the injury. She clucks softly and kisses Alice on the forehead. “You look for all the world,” Suzanne says, “like someone who’s been punched in the face. But that’s not so bad. People have black eyes, sometimes. All sorts of things happen. Where should we go?”

“There’s nowhere to go,” Alice says. “I feel like a sandwich, but there’s nowhere to get a decent sandwich in the entire state of Indiana.”

“That’s absurd.”

“It’s the truth.”

“Let’s go somewhere with local,” Suzanne says. “Isn’t there some place you liked to go back in high school? We could drive around. You could show me all the old landmarks. I want to see what your life was like.”

“There’s nowhere to go and nothing to look at,” Alice says. “I’m serious. There are only chain restaurants and a biker bar and Grandma’s Kitchen—if it hasn’t closed—where everything is deep-fat friend or cooked to mush. There isn’t a single thing in this county I’m nostalgic for.”

“Nothing?” Suzanne asks. “There’s nothing you want to show me?”

Suzanne grew up in Connecticut and Alice has accompanied her home to any number of holiday dinners and family functions over the years. She’s always thrilled to turn up the brick drive to the house she grew up in. Her brothers are charming and their wives pretty and kind. Suzanne and her brothers seem to have an endless scrolling set of happy memories from when they were all children living under that same roof. Now that Suzanne’s brothers have children,

Alice and Suzanne have been relegated to a tiny attic room when they visit Suzanne's parents. The room that had once been Suzanne's and had since been a sewing room, and has, in the past few years, been turned into a playroom for all of the grandkids. Often, on their roughly annual trips out to Connecticut, Alice would leave Suzanne sitting around the dining room table with her siblings and their spouses as they opened more wine than was quite necessary and talked happily into the night. Alice would climb the third set of stairs up to the attic and climb into bed and read a book. The room was wonderful, actually. A little library with built-in shelving Suzanne's father hand planed, sanded, stained, and built himself. Slanted ceilings. An oval window of leaded glass old enough that it has begun to warp and run. Alice still felt relegated, however, when she and Suzanne were first told an inflatable mattress had been made up for them "up-up stairs." Alice has seen every square foot of her lover's hometown.

"Nothing," she says.

"It's probably the only time I'll ever be here," Suzanne says.

"That makes you lucky."

"You sound bitter."

"Because I lived here for all those years," Alice says. "Everyone around here takes Leviticus alarmingly literally. I'm not going out there."

Suzanne has been buckling her sandals, but now she stops. She looks steadily at Alice for what feels like a long time before she says, "You're serious. You feel assaulted by every person out there on the street."

"I don't know," Alice says. "Where's my ice?"

Suzanne hands her the towel. It's squishy now with water, but the liner from the ice bucket is keeping everything dry. Alice puts the towel to her face.

"I'm tired and hungry and bereft. I'm feeling very vulnerable."

"That's true," Suzanne says. She goes back to buckling her sandals. "You stay here. Take a nap. I'll bring us back something to eat. You said you wanted a sandwich?"

"You'll never find one. Not the kind I'm talking about."

"Do you need anything else while I'm out?"

"Tylenol?" Alice says. "My face is killing me."

"Of course!" Suzanne says. "You should have said something, love. I've got Tylenol." She rummages in the front pocket of her suitcase again and produces a bottle of extra-strength ibuprofen from a CVS. She drops it on the bed next to Alice and then brings Alice a cup of water from the bathroom. She sets the water on the nightstand when Alice doesn't sit up to take it. Suzanne gathers her purse and her sunglasses. "Car keys?" she asks.

Alice lifts her hips from the bed to dig in her pocket for the key to the Subaru. There is only one key. There has only ever been one key to the Subaru, but Suzanne has never given up referring to it in the plural. Alice holds out the key and Suzanne takes it.

"Take a sweater," she says. "It's colder than you think."

Suzanne pats Alice's feet. "It's going to be okay."

"What will?"

"Life," Suzanne says.

"Says you," Alice says.

"I'll be back."

"Could you bring me a pack of Camels?" Alice asks. The pack in her jacket pocket has only two cigarettes left. Suzanne turns at the door, a look on her face as if she's about to refuse. "I'll stop when we get home. As soon as we're back in Chicago, I'll throw out any cigarettes I

have left. I swear. It will just be this thing I did when we were in Indiana for my parents' funeral. Please don't look at me like that."

"Okay," Suzanne says. "What do I ask for?"

"Camels," Alice says. "It's not that complicated. Ask for a pack of Camels."

"Okay," Suzanne says.

When Suzanne is gone, Alice sits up and takes four ibuprofen. She stands, woozy from having been lying down for so long, and crosses to the window. Suzanne's room is in the rear of the hotel. Across the street, there is a Motel 6. In the middle of the afternoon, the parking lot of the Motel 6 is empty. The place looks abandoned. Alice removes the screen from the window. She retrieves her cigarettes from her jacket pocket and perches on the windowsill. She's sure Suzanne's is a nonsmoking room, but almost all of her, and certainly all of the cigarette is not technically inside the room. She smokes both cigarettes, flicking the butts out into the parking lot so the cherries scatter sparks across the blacktop. Then she brushes her teeth, refills her ice pack, and lies back down on the bed. She would have thought she'd have a hard time falling asleep, but she knows that's not going to be the case as soon as she closes her eyes. Her body feels heavy. She can feel herself sinking. She can feel the world around her vanishing as she succumbs to the black void of dreamless sleep.

Alice wakes in confusion. The room has fallen dark around her, and Alice struggles as if sleep were something she must clamber out of. Only when she sees Suzanne sitting by the window in the swivel chair, her feet propped up on the sill, does Alice remember who and where she is. The world beyond the hotel window glows in that strange way the sky glows after the sun has set. Alice thinks of rays of light caught and warped by the atmosphere. Her lover is nothing

but a silhouette, and yet Suzanne is the most solid, the most familiar thing Alice has ever known. Alice groans and Suzanne turns to her.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” Alice says. Her head throbs and her throat is dry. She must have been sleeping with her mouth open. She sits up. She takes the last swallow of water from the cup on the nightstand.

“Do you feel better?” Suzanne asks.

“Maybe,” Alice says. She rubs her head, raking her fingers through her unruly hair. “If by better you mean worse.”

“Your Dr. Pepper is probably flat,” Suzanne says, “but I bet your sandwich is fine. Ham and Swiss with pickles on rye.”

“Where’d you get that?”

“Arby’s. On the other side of town. Arby’s makes deli sandwiches now.”

“Who knew?” Alice says.

“Who knew?” Suzanne repeats. “It wasn’t on the menu like that, but I asked and they made it for me. You’ve been sleeping like the dead.”

“What have you been doing?”

“I read while there was light enough. For a while I’ve been looking out the window. You’re cute when you sleep.”

“Still? After all these years?” Alice asks.

When they first met, when they first started sharing a bed all those years ago, Suzanne always woke in the morning before Alice. It didn’t matter how late they’d been out the night before, or if they’d spent most of the night making love, discovering their own and each other’s

bodies with that wonder that Alice thinks must naturally burn out by the end of one's twenties—how else would anyone get anything done?—Suzanne would wake by seven or eight. She would get up and make coffee and then come back to bed with a crossword or a book. Often, on a Saturday or a Sunday, Alice would sleep until ten. Suzanne said she loved those hours. "You are a hopeless romantic," Alice had once said when she woke to Suzanne gazing down at her. "I'm in love with you," Suzanne had replied. Alice had pulled Suzanne down to her, and they had laughed and struggled until Alice subdued her lover with her mouth and her hands.

"Yes, still," Suzanne says. "Come. Eat." She nods toward the desk.

Alice stands and stretches. She feels like an astronaut, the tug of gravity on her body foreign to her, her limbs and muscles slack and weak. She crosses to Suzanne by the window. She bends and kisses Suzanne's knee. Across the street, the parking lot at the Motel 6 is now crowded with tractor-trailers and a few beat-up cars and pickup trucks. Lights burn in half the windows. A man with an enormous belly and a bushy red beard climbs down from the cab of his semi, pulling a case of beer out after him.

"Whoa," Alice says. "Glad you picked the Holiday Inn."

Alice unwraps her sandwich and takes a bite. It is delicious. The bread isn't soggy even after having sat for most of the afternoon. The ham is smoky, the cheese firm, the pickle tart and crisp. She takes a sip of the soda. The Dr. Pepper is flat and watered down by melted ice, but the sweet syrup feels good on her throat. This sandwich and soda from Arby's feel like a miracle.

"Mmmmm," Alice says.

"I know," Suzanne says. "Right? I had a turkey club on sourdough. It was great."

They sit in silence while Alice eats. Chewing hurts just a little bit. Even her teeth are sore on one side of her face. When she has finished the sandwich and ruined soda, Alice asks

Suzanne for her cigarettes, and Suzanne pulls the pack from her purse. Alice takes the screen out of the window.

“You’re allowed to smoke in here,” Suzanne says.

“In just a second, I’m not really going to be in here,” Alice says. She sits on the sill, this time letting her legs hang out of the window. She kicks her heels against the brick of the building.

“I’m not sure you’re allowed to do that, either.”

Alice lights a cigarette. She loves nicotine, the way it transfers almost instantly from the lungs to the blood. She hadn’t realized how much she’d missed it all these years. She last smoked regularly the year before she met Suzanne. Alice inhales and can hear the tobacco crackle.

The night beyond the hotel window is cool. Alice can hear traffic humming on the interstate. She and Suzanne will leave in the morning. They will be home in Chicago by early afternoon. Alice wonders how it will feel, traveling away from the tragedy of her parents rather than toward it. She doubts that she will ever set foot in this town again. The thought is hollow, empty. She thinks she should probably feel something about that fact, but she doesn’t. She is beginning to feel the geography of her own grief. She will not miss the farm, or this town, or her home state. She did not miss them before, when they had not yet been taken from her, and she will not miss them now. She will miss her parents, though. She will grieve them, that she knew she would do, but she is coming to realize that she will miss them, too. This Alice was unprepared for. She did not miss them when they were alive and living in a world that had almost no contact with her own. It never occurred to her to miss them when they were separated from her by a state line the basic premises of their different lives. She did not rely on them for

anything. And yet their death feels like having had an essential organ cut out. Alice feels like she has suffered something she isn't sure she was supposed to survive. She hasn't said a word to Suzanne about this. Maybe it is only happening to her now. She realizes that she woke thankful to have not dreamed about them. She's been afraid of sleeping, afraid of seeing her parents in her dreams. How will she bear her mother's bewildered face? How will she wake into this terrible new world where she is so alone?

"There might be money," Alice says.

"What?" Suzanne asks.

"From the estate. There might be money. Maybe a significant amount of it. The will just said Sara and I should split everything. But it's hard to tell what everything will turn out to be. They were pretty free and clear of debt as far as small farms go. They owned the land and the house and all the outbuildings outright. Seems like they owned most of the machinery, too. There's a lean on one of the combines, but that's pretty much it. And there's the loan for this year's seed and fertilizer and everything. That might be just a straight loss. We'll have to see. I have no idea what all that will go for. Went for, I guess. By now it's over. The auction, I mean."

Suzanne stands behind Alice. She wraps her arms around Alice's chest and leans her chin on Alice's shoulder. Alice wonders if it's a gesture intended to keep Alice from falling out of the window as much as to comfort her.

"I don't think it'd kill me," Alice says.

"What?" Suzanne asks.

"Falling. Two stories? I'd probably break my ankles. Maybe shatter my fibia and tibula—are those the bones in your shins?"

"I'm not going to dignify that with a response," Suzanne says.

“I’m not threatening to jump or anything. I’m not being a jerk.”

“Tibia and fibula.”

Alice flicks her cigarette out into the night and lights another one, but even that doesn’t cause Suzanne to let go of her. She hums softly, and Alice can feel the vibrations of her lover’s throat in her own skeleton.

“You know how I said that Sara said I don’t know how to love people?” Alice asks.

“Yes,” Suzanne says.

“You never said anything. You didn’t say Sara was wrong. You just said that wasn’t the same things as saying I was a worthless human being.”

Suzanne breathes. “It’s not the same thing.”

“So you agree with her? You don’t think I know how to love people?”

“Hush, Alice,” Suzanne says.

“I’m serious. You don’t think I know how to love people, do you?”

Suzanne lets her arms go slack. Alice takes a drag on her cigarette. She watches the plume of smoke she exhales dissipate in the evening air. Suzanne returns to the swivel chair.

“I think you had a difficult time loving your family,” she says, at last. “Like most of America. You were very different from each other. It doesn’t make you a bad person. You all had trouble loving each other. It’s hard work.”

Alice wishes she hadn’t lit her current cigarette. Her throat feels like sandpaper and her lungs ache. She knocks off the cherry against the outside wall, but then tosses the butt down to the parking lot anyway.

“They might have been better at it than me,” Alice says.

“You didn’t feel loved. That matters.”

Alice turns so that she is wedged sideways into the open window frame. Suzanne props her feet up on the free corner of the sill. Alice likes how it feels to be half in and half out of the hotel room. She rests her hand on her lover's ankle. Suzanne's skin is smooth and dry and cool.

"Can I tell you a story?" Alice asks.

"Not if it's a farm accident story," Suzanne says.

Alice's last few stories have been about limbs lopped off by machinery and children crushed to death under harvested crops, one story of catastrophe after another.

"It's not," Alice says. The empty groove for the screen digs into her right shoulder.

"There's no dismemberment or anything. It's just about me."

"Tell me," Suzanne says.

"Did you ever read *The Chronicles of Narnia* when you were a kid?"

"No," Suzanne says. Her father was an aeronautical engineer and her mother a high school physics teacher. Suzanne and her brothers went to science camp. Alice is not surprised that they did not read the *Narnia* books. Alice is struck by the fact that after nine years there are still questions like these to ask.

"I did. I loved those books. I can't keep them straight now, though. After *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*, they all kind of run together for me. I can't even think of the title for the one I'm talking about. I keep thinking *The Cup and the Throne*, but that can't be right. Anyway. In one of those books, there's a story about a horrible little boy. I forget who he was or why he was important, but he was this terrible brat—mean and selfish and cruel. Small minded and petty and unimaginative. Everything it's okay to dislike, even in a child. So this rotten little boy—I think I'm remembering this right—ends up abandoned on an island. He's all alone and he wanders around until he finds this enormous cave filled with treasure. Gold and silver and

diamonds and jewels. And it's his. He found it and there's no one else around to have to share it with. He's lonely, but he's also selfish and greedy and covetous, so he's happy in his own mean kind of way."

Across the way, a woman is having an argument on a cell phone. She's pacing under the sodium lights, swearing and threatening whoever's on the other end of the line. Alice runs her thumb along Suzanne's shin. Suzanne gets up and pulls a comforter off on the beds to wrap herself in. Alice likes feeling chilled.

"He finds this bracelet that he loves," she says. The woman in the parking lot gets into a rusted sedan and the engine roars to life. She's still shouting into the cell phone as she pulls out of the parking lot. "It's huge and gorgeous—solid gold and encrusted with rubies and emeralds, all sorts of gems. When he puts it on, the bracelet slides all the way up his arm. Eventually, the boy goes to sleep with this bracelet around his bicep, and when he wakes up his arm is killing him. Awful, terrible, monstrous pain. The boy has turned into a dragon in his sleep, and now the bracelet is cutting into his flesh. He can't get it off. He's in agony. Plus, he's terrified. He knows no one will ever love him as this terrible dragon. He breathes fire and he's scaly and he stinks."

Alice pauses to see if Suzanne wants to say anything, but she does not seem to. "And now, of course, he can see the error of his ways," Alice says. "He knows he shouldn't be such a nasty little boy. He'd be a different person if he could ever get back on the boat, or wherever, with the other children. He doesn't even want the treasure any more. But he's a dragon with a gold bracelet cutting into the flesh of his arm."

"You were how old when you read this?" Suzanne asks.

"Ten. Eleven, maybe. Where are my cigarettes?"

“Here,” Suzanne says. She picks up the pack from the desk and holds them out to Alice. Alice lights one, only half turning her head out the window when she exhales.

“When he’s suffered enough, Aslan the Lion finally shows up. The dragon is petrified of Aslan. Aslan pins the dragon on his back and digs his claws into the dragon’s chest. You should have read this stuff, Suz. It’s wild. The pain is almost unbearable. Aslan rips open the dragon’s chest, and the boy is sure he’s going to die, but once the agony of having his chest ripped open fades, the boy realizes that the dragon around him has died, but he—the little boy—has survived. He emerges from the chest of the slain dragon. I wonder if they’ve made that one into a movie, yet?”

Suzanne shrugs.

“For the first time in forever, his arm doesn’t hurt. He’s transformed. Aslan helps him get back to the other children and he’s a kind and noble character after that. The moral of the story is more or less—”

“I get it,” Suzanne says. “It’s awful.”

“I know,” Alice says.

The two women sit in silence, Suzanne watching Alice smoke. The sky is black now beyond the streetlights. There is music coming from the Motel 6.

“I thought you were going to tell me a story about yourself,” Suzanne says.

Alice doesn’t look at her. She watches bats swooping and diving above the security lights. She was never afraid of bats, even as a little girl. She liked to watch them feeding in the blue corona cast by the dusk-to-dawn behind the garage. “Nothing wrong with a bat,” her father used to say. “They’ll eat twice their weight in mosquitoes any given night. Some people kill bats. They must love getting eaten up.”

“I was,” Alice says. She exhales smoke through her nose.

“Will you still?”

Alice looks at Suzanne, and then back out into the night. “I used to feel like that dragon,” Alice says. “As a kid. I felt so trapped and angry and misunderstood. I wished for a lion to come rip me open and let the good version of me out. I really did.”

“Alice,” Suzanne says.

“Don’t fucking Alice me, Suzanne,” Alice says.

“I’m not—” Suzanne says, but stops. “I didn’t mean to dismiss you.”

“I still do,” Alice says.

“What?”

“Feel like that dragon. Fantasize about getting ripped open stem to stern.”

“Stop it,” Suzanne says.

Alice looks down into her lover’s face. Her high cheekbones catch the light from outside.

“You have spent nine years pretending that I am better than I am,” Alice says. “I wish you’d quit.”

Suzanne sighs. “I’m tired,” she says. “And you’re spent. It’s not doing you any good to talk like this.”

“You know what I want to talk about?” Alice asks.

“No.”

“When I asked you if you thought I didn’t know how to love anyone, you answered like we were talking about my family.”

“We were,” Suzanne says.

“I was talking about you,” Alice says.

Suzanne stands up. She unzips her suitcase, and Alice knows Suzanne is looking for the tank top and yoga pants she sleeps in. If Alice tried, she could probably name every item in Suzanne's suitcase. If she needed to, she could probably list every article of clothing that her lover owns.

"You've been out of sorts since you woke up," Suzanne says. "I don't know what you want from me."

"Really?" Alice asks. "I don't think I'm being that mysterious. I just want to talk."

"Let's not," Suzanne says. She closes her suitcase as if that were the end of it.

"Why?"

"Because you don't want to talk. You're in one of your moods. Nothing I say is going to be right and I think we'd both be better off if we just went to bed."

"I'm in one of my moods?" Alice asks. She laughs. "My parents are fucking dead and my nose is broken and my eye is swollen shut and you tell me I'm in one of my moods?"

Alice lights a cigarette. Her hands are shaking. She's had more nicotine than she can handle, but she doesn't care. She wishes she had a drink.

"It's been a long day," Suzanne says. "It's been two excruciating weeks. Let's not fight. We've got so far to go tomorrow. Please, let's just go to sleep."

"Don't tell me what to do, Suzanne. You're not the one who's just lost her whole family in one fell swoop."

"Come here, Alice," Suzanne says. She pulls her suitcase off the bed and shoves it under the desk. She drapes her yoga pants and tank top over the arm of the swivel chair. She smooths the comforter and sits cross-legged on the bed that neither she nor Alice has slept in. "Come here, love. Put your cigarette out and come sit with me."

Alice flings another cigarette out into the parking lot. There will be a pile of them for some staff person to sweep up in the morning. She pictures a teenage boy with a broom and one of those rectangular boxes on a pole that people use for dustpans when they're sweeping something like a parking lot. Alice's eyes take a moment to adjust when she climbs back down into the darkened hotel room. They have not turned on a light this whole time, and now Suzanne is well back in the shadows, waiting for her. Even in the dark, though, Alice recognizes the expression on her lover's face. Her eyes are gentle and patient. Alice feels herself giving in to Suzanne when it strikes her: they have lived their lives together according to Suzanne's rules. She's been so perfectly subtle about it. All this time, Alice thought it was she who dictated the parameters of their relationship, her needs and force of will that always had to be met. She'd felt bad about it, but she'd thought it was Suzanne's capacity to wrap her own soft shape around the hard edges of Alice that made their relationship work. But that hasn't been the case. Suzanne has been in charge this whole time, gently pulling Alice back from her nature, wearing away her sharp, hard corners the way wind can wear away stone. Suzanne has been so deceptive with her kindness. They have lived together according to Suzanne's fashion, and Alice is sick of it. Something seethes inside of her. She sits on the bed across from her lover in the dark and Suzanne takes Alice's hands.

"I am so sorry," Suzanne says. "I am so sorry this has happened to you. I love you like life itself, but I know that I cannot understand. I wish I could. Let's lie down together, Alice. It's all I can do. Even if you can't sleep, maybe lying down with me would feel good."

"You and Sara are a lot alike," Alice says, after a moment. "You are nice women. People like you. Nice women get away with almost everything."

Suzanne swallows. Her eyes flicker across Alice's face, as if looking for some hidden message there. Alice sees fear in the way Suzanne blinks. She doesn't know if it's her words or just the tone of her voice that has frightened her lover, but she likes that look of fear in either case. This is how Sara and Suzanne are different. Alice can hurt Suzanne if she wants to. For all of Suzanne's strength and good sense, there are chinks in her armor, there are secret, vulnerable passageways in. That's what love does. It leaves us at each other's mercy, Alice thinks. Alice had wanted to hurt Sara. She had wanted to punish her sister for all of the ways she, Alice, had had to live her life alone. That's what she'd been doing when she said what she said, what made Sara say she felt sorry for Suzanne. But Sara didn't love her enough to be hurt. Sara didn't love her the way Suzanne loves her. Sara had simply closed her fist and broke Alice's nose, and then she went home to Paul. But Suzanne has no one to go to. Alice is supposed to be her lover's last best place of refuge. Isn't that what partners do?

"I don't want to fight with you," Suzanne whispers.

"Who said I wanted to fight?" Alice asks. "All I said was that you are a lot like my sister. She likes you. Even though we're dykes. When it came right down to it, Sara took that like a champ."

"Let's not do this here," Suzanne says. "Let's get home tomorrow."

"Before what? Let's get home before we do what, Suzanne?"

"I don't know, but you're scaring me. Let's not say things we can't take back."

"Like what?"

"Please," Suzanne says.

"Like the fact that I've been thinking about leaving you?" Alice asks. Pain shines out like light from Suzanne's eyes. Pure, unadulterated pain. Alice has never seen anything like it.

“Like that,” Suzanne says.

“I have been,” Alice says.

“I know,” Suzanne says. Her voice is thin and higher than it should be. “For how long?”

“I don’t know,” Alice says. It is like a drug, being this cruel. It feels that good. She is filled with horror, and a dark kind of glee. She has wondered for a long time what it would feel like to say that. She doesn’t know what else she might be capable of. “A long time, maybe. But I’m not sure what to do. I don’t know if the problem is that I just don’t know how to love, or if it’s that I just don’t love you.”

Suzanne lets out a sound as if she’s been struck, and then she laughs. One short, exhaled, wounded laugh. “My God, Alice,” she says. “Oh.” She looks around in amazement, as if looking for witnesses. She laughs again. It is a sound Alice doesn’t know how to interpret. “I wouldn’t have known you were capable of saying it like that. That’s probably the most honest thing you’ve said to me in years. I don’t know either, babe. I don’t know how to help you.” She is speaking in full voice now, a voice more marked by wonder and surprise than by pain. She blinks rapidly.

“I haven’t asked for your help,” Alice says. “I need to figure this out for myself.”

“I know you do.” Suzanne looks down at her and Alice’s hands still laced together at the fingers. She takes her hands away and looks at them. “My God, Alice,” she says again. “I thought...I didn’t know...I mean, I knew. I’ve known. I just didn’t know it could happen this fast.”

“What could happen this fast?” Alice asks. She would have thought Suzanne would be crying by now, not weeping hysterically, but crying just a little bit. She would have expected silent tears from Suzanne. She would have thought Suzanne would be contradicting her, trying to

comfort her. She was expecting Suzanne to say Alice was traumatized by grief, that she was still in shock, that she didn't know what she was talking about.

"I guess that's the thing about living with a secret. Or a half-truth. You get so used to it. You get so comfortable with the way it makes your life possible that you forget it could be taken away from you, just like that. I don't think you love me, Alice. But I could have gone on loving you enough to make up for that if you'd let me."

Suzanne shakes her head in amazement. Alice feels for the first time in years and years the gravitational shift of her lover moving away from her. She feels Suzanne letting go, cutting her adrift. She did not know Suzanne had that in her. Panic seizes Alice. She is suddenly ice cold with it.

"Suz," she says. "I don't know. I'm not saying I don't love you. I'm just saying I don't know."

"Alice," Suzanne says, with the kindest of smiles, "that's the same thing."

"No it's not. I need time. My God, Suzanne. It's not—we're not—something that can be...I'm just angry. I'm angry at everything. I'm not angry at you. I need time."

Suzanne's face is as lit with love as it's ever been. She is as beautiful and strong and certain as Alice has ever known her to be. The world will be unimaginably cold and dark without her. Alice has never known fear before this. She has known rage and loneliness, rivers of both, but she has never known this cold, hard, glittering fear.

"Lover," Suzanne says, which is a word she almost never uses. "You've had nine years."

III. LIVING ALONE

Alice cannot listen to the news on public radio any longer. The presidential campaign is stressing her out. Iraq continues in its conflagration. A hurricane season is heating up. A court in California has decided the mayor of San Francisco had no right to start marrying gay people. Alice knows she is supposed to be outraged about this fact but can't muster the energy. Back in February, when things were really cooking in Massachusetts, Alice asked Suzanne, "What's the big whoop over one word? Let the straight people keep marriage if civil unions mean the same thing." Suzanne had looked at her, aghast, and simply asked, "Really?" Alice knows her instincts, political and otherwise, are not always as they should be.

Her now-silent office, on the 12th floor of an Art Deco skyscraper on Dearborn, is mercilessly air conditioned, but beyond the plate glass, she knows the city is sweltering through another white-skied August afternoon. Alice attempts to apply herself to the slickly produced grant proposal she's supposed to be evaluating. She has the proposal spread out on her desk. She puts her head in her hands and stops her ears with her thumbs, a habit she reverts to when her concentration is flagging, which is why she doesn't hear Stuart rap at her open door. He enters her office and touches her shoulder. Alice jumps.

"Jesus, Stuart," she says.

"Whoa, hey, sorry," Stuart says, hands up like someone has just said stick-em-up. "I didn't mean to scare you."

Stuart works in legal. He's the kind of person who smiles so frequently and so genuinely Alice has long assumed he'd turn up on America's Most Wanted. He's a decade younger than her and always seems to be both freshly showered and freshly bathed in Patchouli. He smiles from the doorway, to which he has retreated. Alice and Stuart have little reason to interact in the

office, but he has shown an unnerving level of concern for her since her parents' death. He often asks her how she's *feeling*, and his searching brown eyes telegraph his desire to really hear the truth. Alice doesn't trust him for a second.

"Am I interrupting?" he asks now, pocketing his hands, leaning a shoulder into her doorjamb.

Alice regards the documents on her desk. She sighs, picks up a pen to click, and turns in her swivel chair to face him.

"What's up?" she asks.

"I just wanted to say I'm sorry to hear about you and Suzanne."

Alice clicks her pen. She has not talked with anyone at the office about her breakup. All of the sympathy that's been heaped upon her since her parents' car accident has been quite enough. But she has an appointment this evening with an apartment broker to sign a lease on a new place, and so yesterday she stopped in to change her mailing address with HR. She talked to Cherry, who drinks Cherry Coke and wears red nail polish in honor of her name. Word has, apparently, made the rounds. Alice represses the urge to whip her pen at Stuart's face. She shrugs and looks past him into the hallway. A summer intern sashays along, flip-flops slapping, chatting brightly into a cell phone.

"When it rains it pours."

"Yeah, I know."

"No, you fucking don't, Stuart."

Stuart's ears go pink, but he recovers, maintains eye contact, furrows his attractive brow. "You're right. My bad. Sorry."

Alice glances at her watch. "Did you need something?"

“I just— Listen. Christine and I are on a committee at church. We bring food. You know, to families going through hard times. We were talking last night. We thought, maybe, we could bring you something.”

Everyone in the office knows about Stuart and his church. It’s not so much that he evangelizes, although Alice has had an eye on him for signs of some clandestine version of it. She wouldn’t put it past him. It’s that he and his wife are always up to some objectively worthy activity through their church. They sponsor refugee families and cook gallons of soup for shelters and throw a huge holiday bash for foster kids each Christmas. Suzanne had liked Stuart and Christine and had always made Alice donate to their various escapades. Christine is as young and attractive as her husband. They are a breed of young, hip Christians Alice does not understand. In her adolescence, Alice had thought the best thing about the church youth group her parents made her attend was the fact that there, at least, it was okay to be a misfit if not a downright outcast. Worldly success was deemed suspicious. Popularity, bred of athletic and social achievement and the caprices of adolescent beauty, was something not to be striven after but pitied. Alice liked the active social leveling of the youth group. And their version of capture the flag, which was called, unironically, Communists and Christians. Alice loves mentioning this at cocktail parties. She laughs sardonically over a brimming dirty martini and says, “Can you believe it? *Communists and Christians*? I shit you not. The things that go on in America.” She thinks it must be exhausting for Stuart and Christine to have to be Christians and hold impressive degrees—a JD for him, an MBA for her—and have successful careers and be young and attractive and have expensive taste in oxford shirts and watches and be good people and the all the rest of it.

“I’m not a family,” Alice says. “I live alone.”

“It’s just this simple thing we do. It’s just food. It’s how we say we’re praying for you. It’d mean a lot to Christine if you’d let us bring something by.”

Alice narrows her eyes at Stuart. “Okay. I’ll take a lasagna.”

“What?”

“A lasagna,” Alice says. “I like spinach and Italian sausage, but go easy on the ricotta cheese. I know you have to put a little in to make it a lasagna, but I’ve never loved ricotta. It’s not really cheese, if you ask me.”

“It doesn’t... Usually we don’t... You don’t usually make a request.”

“You’d cut down on food waste if you did. I grew up Methodist, so I’ve seen my share of casseroles. Mostly inedible. The things I’ve seen church ladies foist off on the bereft and grieving.” Alice begins sorting all the various pieces of the grant proposal into their designated pockets in the portfolio. She is finished with Stuart and this proposal and the workday. She has just decided to get a drink at one of the plethora of bars in her new neighborhood before signing her lease. She hasn’t looked at him, but she knows Stuart hasn’t gone anywhere. “Ham salad,” she says. “There is a food invented solely for funerals. I know they made it with love. I ate it after my mom and dad’s wake. I ate it, okay? But if I ever see another ham salad sandwich in my life I will freaking choke.”

“A lasagna it is, then,” Stuart says. He is being patient with her because she is clearly a woman at the outer edge of her capacity to cope. He would probably be patient with her anyway, but it is especially noble to be patient with her in this state. “When can we come by?”

“I haven’t moved yet,” Alice says. She rubs her eyes for a moment. “I’m between places. Can we talk logistics later?”

“Sure thing. No problem.” He does not leave. “One more thing?”

Alice takes her hands away from her face. She wonders if this might be workplace harassment. Is relentless and unwanted kindness an actionable offense? She'd have to ask legal, but that would mean asking Stuart. Or HR, but that would mean talking to Cherry. She will simply have to suffer.

"Christine wanted me to mention this group that meets at our church." Alice suddenly feels as if Stuart and Christine spend most evenings discussing her. She doesn't like it one bit. It's an ambush. An intimacy ambush. It is not fair for people to become intimate with you without your knowledge and against your wishes. Who are these people? "A group for divorced women, or women going through a similar life transition."

"You know I'm gay, right?" Alice asks. "Suzanne's a woman. We're both women. So we weren't married. So we're not getting divorced. So I don't want to go to your divorce group."

"It's not my group. It's for women. And you'd be welcome there. I think the pain of a failed relationship can be even more acute when you don't have the rituals and protocols of a public dissolution, like divorce. It has to be unbelievably lonely."

Stuart is right. She would like to bash him over the head with a heavy book.

"If you don't get out of my office this very minute I will not allow you or Christine to bring me a lasagna."

Stuart looks at her, unsure if she's making a joke. Alice is unsure if she is making a joke.

"I'm sorry," he finally says. "No pressure. I didn't mean to offend."

"Join the club," Alice says. "Sorry people are the only people I've ever met."

When Stuart is gone Alice throws her pen. It skips off her desk, hits the window, and disappears into a crevice between a bookshelf and the wall. She'll probably never get it out of there.

Alice has two martinis at Simon's before meeting her apartment broker at her new apartment. Simon's is, as far as she can tell, the straightest bar in a heavily lesbian neighborhood. The last thing she needs, Alice thinks, is to be around a bunch of lesbians. And yet, here she is, signing a lease in Andersonville. Eventually she will want to be around lesbians. Just not right now. Not as she's about to sign the documents that will make her post-Suzanne life official. Plus, Andersonville is very far away from Suzanne's condo in Hyde Park. It will be like moving to a different city, Alice thinks. Almost. Not quite.

Warren, the broker, is waiting for her outside the iron gate of the yellow brick courtyard building that will be her new home. She is signing a lease on the fourteenth apartment he has shown her. She does not like this apartment any more than she has liked the previous thirteen. But this apartment has confirmed she will not like any apartment he shows her. She is pretty sure she is going to hate her new post-Suzanne life in this apartment, but she wasn't particularly happy with her mid-Suzanne life in the condo they shared, so perhaps this is not her new life's or her new apartment's fault. Suzanne had, to be honest, been the one to break up with Alice. But Alice had pushed her to it. Suzanne had subsequently apologized and recanted and suggested they seek therapy, but Alice knew what was wrong was something therapy couldn't fix. She didn't love Suzanne the way she was supposed to. She loved Suzanne, but somehow, not enough. Therapy would not change that.

After they returned from Alice's parents' funeral, Suzanne had agreed to move. This in spite of the fact that the condo was hers, not Alice's, or even theirs. Alice had made half the mortgage payments for the duration of the four years since she'd moved in, but she refused Suzanne's suggestion that they get a lawyer to figure out equity. "Think of it as rent," Alice had

said, which made Suzanne burst into tears. This hadn't been her intention. She didn't always know when she was being cruel, which was, of course, part of the problem. Since Suzanne was the one with the "support network," she moved into a friend's spare bedroom, telling Alice to take all the time she needed to find a new place. After two months, she told Alice to take another month, but then to please get out. That is when Alice engaged the services of Warren and began seeing three and four apartments a week. On the nights she hasn't gone to look at an apartment after work, Alice has gone home to Suzanne's, which is where she wants to live. She loves the sunroom at the front of the apartment and the stained glass panels Suzanne hung in the windows. She loves the pale pine floors, and the bedroom they shared, even though its only window looks out over an alley and on every Monday of their lives together, the trash trucks woke her up. She does not love Suzanne the way Suzanne wanted Alice to love her, but when she wasn't thinking about leaving Suzanne, Alice was happier than she'd ever been in her whole life in that apartment. She has been packing her possession slowly, one box a night. It has not been difficult to distinguish between Suzanne's possessions and her own, which Alice understands to be a material manifestation of her own failure to commit to the future Suzanne once dreamed for them.

Warren shakes Alice's hand. He points out which mailbox will be hers and explains how the buzzer system works. He leads her up to her new apartment on the fourth floor. Their footsteps echo in the empty rooms. In the kitchen, which will be flooded with light in the mornings but is dim at six o'clock in the evening, Warren clicks open his briefcase and extracts the paperwork Alice will need to sign. While she casts her eyes over the lease without reading it, Warren unhooks the keys to her apartment from a key chain bearing several other sets.

“I’ll bet you’ll be tickled pink to be done with me,” Alice says. She takes the Cross pen Warren proffers and sets about initialing and signing in multiple places. Alice has not made friends with Warren. He is absurdly young and wears his blond hair sculpted into a spiked fashion Alice thought went out of style in the early nineties, although she is old enough to have seen things go out of fashion and then come back in again, a phenomenon that is always startling. It’s like seeing a distant relative you’d assumed to be dead. Warren smiles impassively and looks out the kitchen window. Wooden stairs switchback down to the alley below. In profile, Alice gets a brief glimpse of Warren’s contact lens floating in front of his blue iris. It gives her the willies. Alice has heretofore assumed Warren was gay, but it strikes her suddenly that hair gel and beautifully exfoliated skin do not now mean on a young man what they used to mean.

“I’m glad we found something that’ll work for you.” Warren glances over Alice’s lease, and then holds out a set of keys. He is only smiling, Alice thinks, because he’ll get one month’s rent as his commission. If he is gay, he will spend it on recreational drugs and alcohol. He will buy a shirt that brings out his icy eyes and go to clubs where he’ll meet lawyers and investment bankers even older than Alice and they will vie for his affection. They will buy him things and take him on dates to the fanciest restaurants in the city, and it won’t matter what kind of commission he earns next week or the week after because there are always more lawyers and investment bankers looking to buy the attention of beautiful young men. Alice takes the keys from his hand.

“Yeah,” she says. “You’ve got to live somewhere, right?”

“You do.” Warren slips his portion of the paperwork into a file folder. He tucks his pen into a loop in his briefcase made especially for a pen of just such a thickness. He considers Alice for a moment and then says, “I hope things aren’t always this hard.”

“Oh,” Alice says, shocked, stung. “You think this is hard? My girlfriend kicking me out? Being single at thirty-five?” She has never said anything to him about the death of her parents. It is too macabre. Too close to a joke. “You’re what? Twenty-three? Twenty-two? I know it’s difficult to imagine, but life gets a thousand times worse than this, kid.”

“I’ll go now, unless there’s anything else?” He can take an insult like a champ.

“No, there’s nothing else,” Alice says. “I can stay here, right? I can just, stay here, for a little bit?”

“You can do whatever the hell you want, Alice,” Warren says, with a smooth smile. “You live here.” And then he turns and his leather-soled shoes click down the hall and then the front door opens and closes.

Alice’s ears burn. She’d wanted Warren to like her, not pity her. She feels idiotic. And betrayed. She doesn’t know the first thing about Warren. Maybe he’s not gay. Maybe he’s Mormon, for Pete’s sake. She hates Warren almost as much as she hates her new life. The person who would understand how Alice feels right now is Suzanne, and not only does she not want to love Alice anymore, Suzanne doesn’t even want to talk to her. Alice is not lonely. She is alone.

Maybe the problem is men, Alice thinks, as she pilots her Subaru down Lake Shore Drive. Lake Michigan is smooth as glass and dotted with sailboats that glow in the last of the summer sun. Stuart and Warren and all the rest of them. She’s never been the kind of lesbian who got along with men. She doesn’t know what kind of lesbian she is, but she knows she’s not that kind. She clicks on the car radio and pushes the button for an oldies station. The Subaru was Suzanne’s compromise. They’ve been making payments on it together since 2001, and it is Alice’s now, like the condo is Suzanne’s. Alice had wanted to point out that the condo had been

Suzanne's before Alice showed up. Suzanne had bought the place the summer before she and Alice met. It had been an enormous leap of faith. She'd been a post-doc in the chemistry department at the U of C, not yet a staff scientist. Alice zooms past downtown and Soldier Field and then on south past I-55. She exits at 47th and winds her way to Suzanne's street. She parks in front of the building rather than in their designated spot behind it. That parking spot is for the owner. Alice stopped parking there when Suzanne moved out.

Now, with her own apartment across town, Alice truly feels like a strange guest in Suzanne's condo. She drops her keys in the bowl on the sideboard in the hall. She kicks off her shoes at the threshold to the living room. She is glad Suzanne had somewhere to go these past three months. She's known couples who break up and then go on living together for weeks and months and longer. That sounds awful. This is awful, but that sounds worse. In the kitchen, Alice opts for cheese and crackers for dinner and a large glass of wine. She wanders into the half-bath off the kitchen with a hunk of cheddar perched on a cracker in one hand and her wineglass in the other. To avoid dropping crumbs on the floor, she stuffs the whole cracker in her mouth, everything, all at once. She considers herself in the mirror over the sink without turning on the lights. She has lost weight since her parents' funeral, and not in a good way.

She wanders into the living room. She feels the soil in the planters out in the sunroom and decides all of the houseplants need water. It occurs to her, as she is tipping the watering can into a hanging basket of philodendron, that her parents never saw her in this home. Before they were dead, Alice was glad of this. They were fearful of Chicago traffic, and truth be told, of whatever life Alice was leading here. When a visit was necessary, Alice visited them. Suzanne never chided her for not being out to her family. It was Alice's business. Suzanne would simply love and support her. Suzanne's worst quality, Alice thinks now, was her ability to put up with

Alice's bullshit. Even though her parents were the only people she was still closeted to, she feels more closeted, not less so, now that they are dead. She will be closeted to them forever. There is now no such thing as not out yet. Alice considers crying over this, but instead goes back to the kitchen for another glass of wine.

By the end of the week, Alice has managed to transport most of her worldly belongings to her new apartment. Each morning, she has loaded a trunk-full of boxes into the Subaru, and each evening, she has parked the Subaru in the alley behind her new place and lugged the boxes up the back stairs one at a time. Now, Alice stands sweating, surrounded by boxes, in her new kitchen. She had a site visit today at work, so she wore a suit, which she will now need to take to the cleaners since she didn't bother changing before unloading the car. Alice's jacket lies in a rumpled heap on the counter. She unbuttons and slips out of her shirt, which she drops on top of the jacket. She feels better immediately in just her sleeveless undershirt. Blinds clatter at the windows in the kitchen and the living room as a delicious cross breeze sweeps through. The suffocating heat of earlier in the week has broken, and the city feels less like the reclaimed swamp it is and more like a place reasonable people might live.

Alice unbuttons and drops her pants in the hallway to the bedroom. She kicks each foot free in turn and leaves the pants where they lie on the floor. She peels off her dress socks by stepping on their toes. In her new bedroom, she rummages through black garbage bags of clothes. She has packed like a college kid, stuffing the contents of her closet into trash bags and filling boxes she collected from a corner store without rhyme or reason. Nothing is labeled. A soap dish is probably in the same box as her French press and a heating pad and a framed photograph of her sister and an antique broach Suzanne once gave her, not because she thought

Alice would wear it, but just because it was lovely and old. From one bag Alice extracts a pair of baggy men's jean shorts. On her, they fall to mid-calf. Alice cinches them with a belt. She unclasps her bra and slips it off without removing her undershirt, pulling the bra out from one armhole. She drops it, too, on the floor. In another bag she finds a t-shirt from an AIDS run she and Suzanne did two summers ago. Alice had hated every single k of the 10K and hasn't run since.

Before beginning the process of unpacking boxes, Alice pockets her wallet and keys and heads down to a liquor store at the end of the block. There is a nicer one, a store that stocks quality wines and craft beers and an impressive selection of whiskeys up on Foster, but Alice doesn't need anything special. Just a case of some not-awful beer. Teenagers loiter on bikes in front of the store on the corner, and Alice has to weave her way around them to get to the door. The boys do not seem to notice her existence. A bell rings as she enters. From the coolers at the back, Alice selects a case of a Michigan beer. At the counter, a boy who looks all of fourteen rings her up.

"Oh, I like this one," the boy says, in clipped sub-continent English. "But their Oberon is my favorite."

"Yeah, people say that," Alice says. "I've never liked summer beers."

"Ah," the boy says, as if she has just revealed something important about herself. Alice pockets her change and refrains from asking him if he shouldn't be doing his homework. She wonders how often she will see this kid in the coming weeks. She has begun switching up where she buys her beer and liquor and wine, stopping by a liquor store one night, a grocery another, a chain convenience store the next. This is a development she has noted and decided to worry

about later. She had decided she would worry about it once she moved into her new place. Perhaps she will.

Once back in her apartment, Alice removes one beer from the case and puts the other eleven into the empty fridge. She pries open three boxes before she finds a bottle opener. She thinks about ordering a pizza, but instead begins unpacking her half of the stoneware dishes she and Suzanne bought when Alice first moved in. They had eight place settings total, so they can now each begin their new lives with place settings for four. Alice wipes each plate and bowl and mug with a dishtowel and places it in the cabinets above and to the right of the sink. She and Suzanne had held hands up and down the aisles of Crate & Barrel four years ago choosing these dishes. She remembers Suzanne as almost giddy, with all the light of the world in her smile. What did she look like selecting stoneware dishes? Alice honestly doesn't know. She remembers that that night, the first night she slept in Suzanne's bed not as a girlfriend staying over but as a girlfriend who lived there, she dreamed of Genevieve.

The summer before Alice met Suzanne, Genevieve broke her heart. Alice had taken the Amtrak from Chicago to Minneapolis to visit an old college friend. She was twenty-five, newly graduated from a master's program, still mostly a kid, although she didn't know it at the time. She'd just had a third interview for a job at the MacArthur Foundation, and she'd felt so good about it that she'd bought a ticket to the Twin Cities to go enjoy a little bit of the summer before she started what she hoped would be her career. Alice's friend, Meg, had followed her boyfriend, Brandon, back to his hometown after following him to graduate school at Georgetown, and she swore she *loved* Minneapolis. Alice knew both Meg and Brandon would be at work when she arrived. They said they'd leave the back door open for her. Alice took a cab from the train station

to Meg's apartment. When she climbed the back stairs of the apartment block and let herself into the kitchen, Genevieve was slicing a mango over the sink.

"Hello," Genevieve said, the word tinged by her native French. The Cities were in the grip of a lethal heat wave. The girl's dark skin glistened. Alice stood arrested on the threshold. It was ninety degrees outside, and hotter in. "I am Genevieve," Genevieve said, and slipped a slice of mango between her lips.

"I'm Alice," Alice said. "I'm here to visit Meg." Meg had not said anything about Genevieve.

"I am here to visit Brandon," Genevieve said, "but he is not, at present, at home. Would you like mango, Alice?"

Alice nodded and stepped into the sweltering kitchen. She was disheveled and smelly and wrinkled from a long train trip. She knew her short hair was sticking up at odd angles. She knew her skin was oily, not glistening.

"Yeah," she said. "Sure. That'd be great. I'm going to change first, though. You know. I took the train. I've been on the train a long time. And it's hot." Alice felt completely dumb in addition to smelly.

"Minneapolis is hotter than Paris," Genevieve said. "This surprises me. But it is not as hot as Abidjan. The Cote d'Ivoire? I am French, but that is where my parents are from. I have spent every summer of my life much hotter than this."

Alice had wanted to die. She'd scampered off to the bathroom, cursing Meg for not warning her about Genevieve, praying that Genevieve would still be in the kitchen when she returned, hoping she wasn't having a hallucination from heat stroke. She stripped to her underwear in the bathroom and washed up at the sink. She pulled a fresh pair of pants and a

men's seersucker shirt from her duffel bag. She ran her wet hands through her hair and hoped it looked attractively bed-headish rather than just messy. She rolled deodorant under her armpits. When she returned to the kitchen, Genevieve had retreated to the back porch with a plate of mango and two glasses of gin and tonic, condensation already beading their outside.

"I made you a drink, Alice," she said. "Come and sit. If we are very still we will feel a breeze."

They spent the afternoon like that, sitting languidly on the back porch, eating slice after slice of mango and drinking. Genevieve told Alice about herself, about life in Paris, about the politics of being a black Frenchwoman. "The colony has come home, all over Europe," Genevieve said with a grin, "and Europe doesn't know what to do with us. People are forever asking me where I am from, and I smile and say, the 4th *arrondiesmant*. We will see. I think French-speaking Africa is better off than English-speaking. The British built railroads across their empire. The French built schools. My parents went to Paris for graduate school, and now a French passport is the only passport I hold." Alice nodded and drank gin. She didn't know what to say.

Alice learned that Genevieve was two years older than her, that she'd met Brandon at Georgetown, that she'd completed her master's degree in economics the previous year. That she was wrapping up a year of traveling around the U.S. and would be returning to Paris at the end of the summer. She had a great deal to say about how being black in America was different from being black in France. She said American's didn't know what to do with her once they discovered she wasn't African American, or Caribbean, or from Africa itself. "American men," Genevieve said, then, and whistled through her teeth. All the blood in Alice's body had drained from her head. "They are different from French men. They don't understand women who love

women.” She placed a slice on mango on her tongue and smiled at Alice with closed lips. All of the blood in Alice’s body raced to her face.

By the time Meg and Brandon got home from work, Alice and Genevieve were drunk. They had walked to the grocery store and walked home with a watermelon, half a dozen ears of corn, and steaks and shrimp to put on the grill. Alice had paid for everything with her credit card. Meg arrived first and found Alice and Genevieve brining shrimp in a bucket in the kitchen. She called Brandon and told him to bring charcoal and lot more gin. Alice split the watermelon theatrically with a cleaver. When Brandon arrived with the charcoal and the gin and a bag of limes and a bag of ice, the women cheered. Genevieve put on CD after CD and sang along in French. They ate chunks of fruit with their fingers and charred everything on the grill and waited for night to bring relief from the heat but it did not.

Before Meg and Brandon went to bed, Meg pulled sheets and blankets and a pillow from the hall closet and helped Alice make up the couch in the studio. The “studio” was really the living room, but Meg’s art supplies and canvasses and stray furniture collected from the alley so littered the room that Meg and Brandon hardly used it. Meg had to clear a path to the couch under the front windows. She was not entirely steady on her feet.

“You should have told me,” Alice said, as Meg wrestled a fitted sheet over the couch cushions.

“What?”

“About Genevieve.”

“Oh,” Meg said. She sat on the couch and pushed her wild curls off her forehead. “We didn’t know she was coming. She just sort of showed up. I can’t tell how long she’s planning to stick around.”

“I might love her,” Alice said.

“Try not to.”

“Why? She’s incredible. She’s the most incredible woman I’ve ever met.”

“You don’t think she’s a little too good to be true?” Meg fluffed the pillow into its pillowcase and dust floated up. “I don’t even think she’s gay.”

“What?”

“She’s been flirting with Brandon.”

“She’s French!”

“Yeah, well, that doesn’t mean she has to flirt with my boyfriend.”

“Brandon’s probably been flirting with her,” Alice said. “American men don’t know what to do with women who love women.”

“That sounds like something Genevieve would say,” Meg said. She whacked Alice in the shoulder with the dusty pillow. “Do what you’ve gotta do, Alice. Just don’t get your heart involved. Goodnight. Kisses. Thanks for coming to visit.”

Once the apartment was dark and silent, Alice lay awake on her couch, sweating through her boxers and undershirt. A window-unit air conditioner hummed from behind Brandon and Meg’s closed bedroom door. The room was so hot she’d begun to wonder if she should get an icepack to put on her feet. When she was a girl and her mother took her and Sara to the public pool, her mother never got in. She’d sit at the edge of the pool with her feet in the aquamarine water and say, “If my feet are cool I’m cool. All your blood circulates through your feet.” This was what Alice was momentarily thinking about when she heard the guest bedroom door creak open and Genevieve whisper, “Alice?”

Alice sat up with a jerk. Genevieve giggled from around the corner.

“Yeah?” Alice whispered.

“Are you hot?”

“I’m dying.”

“I have a fan in my room,” Genevieve said. “You will be cooler in here.”

Alice lay back for a moment, her pulse thrumming in her ears. She wanted to prolong the misery and ecstasy of life before Genevieve, now that life before Genevieve was about to end.

“Alice?” Genevieve asked. “Are you coming to me?”

“Yes,” Alice said. “I’m on my way.”

Alice felt as if she were dreaming as she stood up from the couch. Genevieve stood in the open door of the guest bedroom. She was wearing a white tank top and white panties, and her lean dark limbs were little more than a silhouette of herself in the dark. Alice’s legs went weak. Genevieve held her hand out, and Alice was surprised by how sweaty her palm was.

“Please don’t sleep on the couch,” Genevieve said as she drew Alice into the room and closed the door behind her. “Sleep here, with me.”

Alice fingered the straps of Genevieve’s tank top. They were standing so close together that Alice could feel the corona of heat thrown off from Genevieve’s body. Genevieve touched her hips, her shoulders, her cheeks. She put a finger to Alice’s lips.

“I like this,” Genevieve said. “This way you are looking at me.”

Before Alice could say anything, Genevieve’s mouth was hot against hers. Genevieve pressed Alice to the door and wedged a knee between Alice’s legs. Alice couldn’t breathe, but she didn’t think she would ever again need to breathe. When Genevieve applied her open mouth to Alice’s throat, Alice said, “Oh, please.” A box fan rattled in the open window and a ceiling fan whirled above them. Genevieve pulled Alice to the bed and then pulled Alice down on top of

her. They made love until both girls arched and moaned and collapsed, sweating and shocked and laughing, into each other's shaking arms. Alice lay on top of Genevieve, their naked bodies slicked together, until Genevieve said, "Lover, you are going to crush me."

Alice rolled off and lay next to Genevieve. "Where have you been all my life?" she asked.

"Mostly in France," Genevieve said, and they both laughed.

Alice and Genevieve lasted one week. They lived together like lovers in Meg and Brandon's spare bedroom. They spent their days in art museums and parks and seeing matinees to get out of the heat. Genevieve was shameless, holding Alice's hand on sidewalks in the heart of uptown with tourists and businessmen looking at them sideways. In the evenings they met up with Meg and Brandon for cocktails and dinner. One night, they all splurged on a fancy bistro and Genevieve flirted with their waiter in French. Once each day was finally over, Alice and Genevieve made love too loudly to be good houseguests and then slept late, only rising after Meg and Brandon had left for work the next day. Somewhere during that week, Alice checked her messages at home and discovered that she had been offered the job at MacArthur. Which meant she really did have to return to Chicago.

On their last night together, Alice and Genevieve lay facing each other in the dark, their foreheads and knees and fingertips touching.

"Oh, lover," Genevieve said. "What will we do?"

"I don't know," Alice had said. "We'll work this out. This feels like who I am. Like what I'm meant to do."

"Alice."

“Listen,” Alice said. “I love you.”

“Love,” Genevieve said, as if trying to remember what the word meant. “The world is bigger than two girls in love in Minneapolis.”

Alice was pierced by both hope and fear. She didn’t know what to say.

“You will go to Chicago,” Genevieve said, “and I will go back to Paris. What else can we do?”

“I could come to Paris,” Alice said. “Not right away. I know. I’ll need a visa or something. I’ll learn French. Not tomorrow, not immediately, but I could come live with you.” She meant it, too. She would leave her country for Genevieve. She could already imagine telling her parents. Just telling them. Straight out. She’d say, “I love a woman named Genevieve and I’m going to live with her in France.” She’d say it and then get on a plane.

“In America, you and I are lesbians. That’s what people see when they look at us, two lesbian girls, holding hands. In France, I am African and you would be American. I have to fight every day to be French.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Alice asked.

“I am not asking you to understand. I am only telling you. You cannot come to me in France.”

“Then live here,” Alice said. “Live with me in Chicago. I could take care of us.”

“That is the last thing I need, to be kept by an American,” Genevieve said. She said it so swiftly she must not have known how it sounded to Alice.

“I love you, Genevieve. I don’t care. I’ll do whatever you need me to.”

“Alice,” Genevieve said, tenderly. She touched Alice’s lips. “What do we know of love? We are just girls.”

Alice had cried at that. She'd simply lost it.

"Alice, lover, *m'amour*," Genevieve whispered. "Do not be sad. Do not cry on our last night. We do not know the future. Time will tell. We shall see."

Alice and Genevieve exchanged addresses the next morning and then Genevieve went with her to the train station. Alice didn't know what kind of goodbye they were saying and she didn't ask Genevieve. In Chicago, she started her new job and then started running and then started lifting weights. She only let herself write Genevieve once a week. Genevieve answered her letters for several months, and then, without warning, Alice's latest letter was returned. Genevieve vanished, no forwarding address. Alice was sick with grief. And then she met Suzanne. Suzanne who looked at Alice the way Alice had looked at Genevieve. Suzanne who was so pretty and blond people turned to look at her on the street. For the first two years of her relationship with Suzanne, Alice had held out hope that Genevieve would show back up. That she would find Alice at her office and say, simply, "I have changed my mind. Come to Paris. Come live with me." And Alice knew she would go. She even knew how she'd tell Suzanne. By email. Like a terrible person. But it would not be her fault because love smashes the rules we are all supposed to live by. It is brutal and devastating and glorious.

In their nine years together, Alice told Suzanne almost everything, but she never told her about Genevieve. Eventually, she stopped hoping Genevieve would contact her. She thought about looking around on the Internet for her when the Cote d'Ivoire tumbled into civil war, but did not. The Cote d'Ivoire was not Genevieve's country, Alice told herself. She was in France. Probably still in Paris. Probably married to a Frenchman. Alice decided Genevieve was pretty much a bitch. This did not stop Genevieve from showing up in Alice's thoughts and dreams. Like the night she moved in with Suzanne. Like now. In her echo-y, empty apartment.

Now, Alice is drunk. There are beer bottles piling up in her sink. Many of her boxes have been emptied, or are half-emptied, and many of her cabinets and closets now have things in them. But everything feels provisional. She doesn't know if she has chosen the right drawer for her silverware or if the French press should live in a cabinet or just on the counter since she'll use it every day. Her new apartment is small, but Alice can't imagine how she'll fill it. Things will be better, she assures herself, when her new furniture is delivered. A new bed and dresser. A leather couch in "library coffee," whatever color that turns out to be. A café table and chairs. Her apartment will not always feel like the half-empty apartment of a person who doesn't know how to live in it. She realizes now she should have kept some of the furniture from her parents' house. Sara wouldn't have minded. She'd asked her if she wanted any of it. But Alice had said no. She couldn't imagine possessing her mother's cherry rocker or that roll-top desk in the basement or the kitchen table or any of it. They hired a woman to oversee the estate sale and the donation of whatever from their parents' lives was left over. Neither Alice nor Sara had wanted to know what objects no one wanted to buy.

Her cell phone rings and Alice almost jumps out of her skin. She finds the phone on the floor in the hallway, beneath a pile of dishtowels she used as packing material. It is Suzanne. Alice takes a deep breath and flips the phone open.

"Hey, Suz," she says.

"Hey," Suzanne says. Both women breathe.

"What's up?" Alice asks.

"I don't know," Suzanne says. "I... How are you? I guess that's why I'm calling. To see how you are."

“Okay,” Alice says. She could cry. If she let herself she could cry, but she will not do that to Suzanne. “I’m at my new place. I’m unpacking.”

“Are you drunk?”

“What? No. Well, yes. Probably,” Alice says. “It’s been a long week.”

Alice sits on the floor in the hall. The bathroom door is open. The room reeks of the plastic shower curtain Alice has just put up.

“For me, too,” Suzanne says. “Look, I don’t mean to be pushy, but how close are you? To being out?”

It takes Alice a moment to realize Suzanne is talking about her condo. About Hyde Park. “Oh, close,” Alice says. “Super close. We could... I’m done, really. I could... We could do keys this weekend.” Alice’s furniture won’t arrive for another week, but she has a sleeping bag and one of the camping mats she and Suzanne bought one summer when they tried to go camping. Mosquitoes and a failed attempt at cooking over a fire and a thunderstorm had all driven them to a Quality Inn.

“Okay,” Suzanne says. “Can we? This is killing me, Alice.”

“Yeah. I know. I know.” They are quiet again. Alice smooths a dishtowel over her thigh and folds it with one hand. “How are we going to get through it?” she finally asks.

“One day at a time,” Suzanne says. “And when that’s too much, one hour after another.”

Alice would like to say she loves Suzanne. She really does. Just not enough. And since she knows that, she doesn’t say it. She feels briefly proud of herself.

“Stuart asked me to go to a group for divorced women at his church,” Alice says.

“What?”

“Right?” Alice asks.

Suzanne laughs. “That sounds like Stuart.”

“Yeah. He might bring me a lasagna. Will people bring you food? When you’re back at our place? Your place? Once you’re living alone?”

Suzanne seems to consider this. “I don’t think so,” she says. “They’ll probably make me go to dinner parties.”

“Oh, those.”

“Sunday? For the keys?” Suzanne asks. “I’ve got to go.”

“Sure. Oh. Yeah,” Alice says. “Sunday. Hey, listen, Suz. Before you go...”

“Yeah?” Suzanne asks.

“I should have fucking come out to my parents. I should have told my mom. I should have just—God. I can’t believe I didn’t.”

“I know,” Suzanne says. “I know.”

Alice looks up at her ceiling. She’s glad she lives on the fourth floor and won’t have to worry about someone walking back and forth over her.

“I’m sorry,” Alice says.

“So, Sunday?” Suzanne asks.

“Yeah. Sunday. Goodnight, Suz.”

“Goodbye, Alice,” Suzanne says.

Alice closes her phone. She stands, steadying herself against the wall. She walks carefully to the kitchen and drops her bottle in the sink. She kills the lights. She has a toothbrush somewhere, she’s sure of it. And she is probably drunk enough to sleep.

IV. EMERGENCY FOSTER CARE

Alice's flight from Chicago to Louisville is delayed three hours because of snow. It's been coming down for six hours in that wet, cruel way it snows in March in Chicago. This winter has left Alice feeling as if she is living in one of those sci-fi novels where the sun is a legend. Alice booked her flight to Louisville a month ago. She got her hair cut and bought a new outfit for this trip. She has called Suzanne to say that she can't do it, this was a terrible idea, she is canceling her trip, on three separate occasions. Each time, Suzanne has said, "Relax. Don't panic. It's a weekend. Go to Kentucky. See your sister. What's the worst thing that could happen?"

"The worst thing that could happen could be terrible," Alice said.

"Don't be ridiculous," Suzanne had said.

Alice and her sister are only tottering toward a relationship. They're like one-year-olds who haven't figured out their legs yet. They're top heavy and they keep falling down. It's charming and funny but only so long as nobody gets hurt.

Alice has been Getting Her Life Together for six months. Suzanne says Alice has been experimenting with kindness and optimism. This is supposed to be funny, and though Alice laughs, she is not sure that it's funny, especially coming from Suzanne. Perhaps if Suzanne were experimenting with cynicism and cruelty, that would be better. They would each be trying on the other's worldview. But Suzanne has expressed no desire to see the world from Alice's perspective. Alice has stopped drinking. Although she had never thought of herself as an alcoholic, she responded to her breakup with Suzanne by drinking alcohol in large quantities, mostly alone. She had justified this by the fact that since she now lived alone, she did almost everything alone. She cooked and ate meals alone. She showered alone. She slept alone. She sat

on her couch in the living room and read magazines alone. Why it should matter that she also drank one highball after another alone? However, of course, it did matter. When Alice started saying that she was going to have to cut back, or maybe it was time to rein it in a little, mostly in a joking fashion, mostly to casual acquaintances at work, it occurred to her that yes, maybe she better had. Except after her first bourbon and gingerale of the evening, just to relax, just after work, she no longer felt like cutting back or reining in anything. She felt like having another bourbon, this one without the gingerale. And then another, and another. So, utterly annoyed with herself, Alice stopped having the first. Now she mixes virgin cocktails of various juices and club soda. This way, she hasn't had to give up the clink of ice cubes in her glass.

This is what she orders on the flight to Louisville once it finally leaves the ground. She asks the flight attendant for a cranapple with club soda, and is delighted when the flight attendant gives her a cup of ice, a can of juice, and another whole can of soda. She has two beverages all to herself, and she can mix the juice and soda into the exact shade of pale pink she most prefers. The lady in the seat next to Alice glares at the flight attendant when she places a cup of Pepsi on the woman's tray table, slips the half-full can into a compartment in her cart, and rolls off down the aisle. Alice feels delightfully smug, as if she has done something to earn or deserve her cans of juice and soda, although she knows she has not.

The flight from Chicago to Louisville is short and uneventful. When the lady who ordered the Pepsi isn't reading her *Oprah* magazine, she naps, so Alice doesn't have to worry about avoiding conversation. She can concentrate on trying to keep her heart rate under 120 beats per minute. She is afraid of two things. First, she is afraid that when she sees Sara she will be swamped by a high tide of envy and anger and she will no longer want to have a healthy relationship with her sister. She will want to fight with Sara, and she will want to fight dirty. And

win. Second, she is afraid that when Sara sees her, Sara will be reminded of all terrible things Alice has ever done and will no longer want to have Alice in her home, or her city, or her state for that matter. Alice has a manila file folder of Sara's letters to her tucked under her clothes in her carry-on. She was completely packed the night before when she thought of bringing the letters with her. She had to unpack everything to put the folder at the very bottom of her suitcase. She has kept Sara's letters in a manila file folder because that is what Sara and Alice's mother did with Sara's letters to her. And she has brought them as a talisman, as proof of the kindness and forgiveness Sara has offered her, in case Sara suddenly wants to take that kindness back.

Alice wrote the first letter, more than a year ago. She hadn't known what to say. She wrote: *Dear Sara, The day Mom and Dad's place was auctioned, Suzanne broke up with me. I know you won't be surprised to hear it was my fault. Now I've finally found my own place, and I guess maybe you'll need my address. Here it is: 1356 W. Carmen Ave., Apt. 3B. It's also on the front of this envelope, but it seems weird to say I'm writing to give you my new address and then not write my address. Anyway, it's an okay apartment. I haven't lived alone in a long time, so I kind of forget how to do it. I'm sorry about how things ended when we were in Indiana. Please write, if you can. I don't know what to do without Suzanne. Love, Alice.* Alice had still been drinking at the time, which was a good thing, since she probably wouldn't have sealed and stamped the envelope and walked down to the mailbox at the end of the block at eleven o'clock at night to send it before she had second thoughts if she'd been sober. Alice began checking her own mailbox for a reply days later, even though she knew Sara was probably just then receiving her letter. She began feeling rejected and angry on the fifth day. Sara and Paul were laughing at her, sitting on the back patio of their stupid suburban townhouse in Kentucky. Sara and Paul liked Suzanne more than either of them had ever liked Alice. They were probably thinking it

served Alice right to be dumped just after her parents' funeral. They were glad she was living alone in a rented apartment without a soul in the world to turn to.

By the second week, Alice was certain she deserved to be abandoned by her sister, that Sara was right when she said that she and Alice had nothing holding them together, hadn't had anything holding them together even before their parents were dead. Alice had proved herself so unworthy of love that the two kindest and most patient women in America—her sister and her lover—had both fired her from their lives. She was abject. At the end of the third week, she received a letter from Sara. Alice dropped her keys to her mailbox, she was so startled by the square envelope with her name and address penned in Sara's careful script. She had a fistful of bills and fliers and junk mail and an armload of file folders she'd brought home for the weekend from work, and she felt ridiculous, heart racing, scrambling for her keys and dropping things. In college, when she had to do her laundry in the basement of the dorms, she lived in fear of dropping her underwear in the hallway for everyone to see. She thought this was an irrational fear until she dropped the same pair four times between the basement and her dorm room. Each time she stooped to pick up the pair of underwear, some other item fell out of her laundry basket. She was so mortified by the tumbling underpants that she couldn't take the time to tuck them securely into the basket before taking two more harried steps toward her dorm room door. Alice, flustered by Sara's letter, felt kind of like that. She finally set everything on the floor, there in her building's lobby, and tore open the envelope. It said: *Dear Alice, I'm so sorry to hear about you and Suzanne. You must be heartbroken. Please let me and Paul know if there's anything we can do. I'm sorry, too, that it's taken me so long to write you back. Paul and I have been making some decisions about where our lives go from here. That sounds ominous, now that I write it. I don't mean for it to be. We're still in the early stages of things, so I'll explain more when more*

becomes clear. I wasn't ignoring you. I actually just found your letter under a stack of unopened mail on Monday. It's been like that around here for the past couple of weeks. Tell me about your new apartment. Do you like your neighbors? What is your new neighborhood like? How is work going? Paul and I drove up the other weekend to see Mom and Dad's gravesite now that their stone is up. I could send you a picture if you'd like. It's really pretty, actually. Pink granite. Not so pink that Dad would hate it. It has an inscription from Psalms about rest for the weary. I'd have to look it up, but I could send that, too. Let me know. Or, let me know if you don't really want to talk about Mom and Dad yet. Please write again, Alice. I promise to write back. Oh, and things are still up in the air with the estate. Taxes and a lien on a combine, and bank loan for the crops that never went into the ground. It'll all get sorted out. Love, Sara.

Alice stood in the lobby of her apartment building trying to take it all in. The lobby was always cool and dim, something about the tile floor and the low ceiling, maybe. The mailboxes were located between the security door and another glass door to the corridor and the steps. Alice's hands were shaking. She gathered her things that she'd left scattered on the floor and went up to her apartment. She threw the junk mail in the recycling bin and propped up the bills in the wine rack in the kitchen. She put the letter from Sara on the table. She made a gin and tonic and stood at the other end of the kitchen, just looking at it. The stationary was creamy white with lilacs. It looked just right for Sara. Two days later, Alice answered Sara's letter between her second and third drink of the evening. She answered Sara's questions and said yes, she'd like a picture of their parents' headstone, and then asked a few questions of her own. They have been sending letters back and forth, usually about every three or four weeks, ever since. At first the letters were formal and a bit stilted, but then they grew warmer, more candid, more honest. Alice remembered this from reading all the letters that Sara sent their mother over the years, how the

ones from when she was in college were like reports from camp, full of events and activities, and how the later ones were like one side of long, winding conversations that seemed uninterrupted by the end of one letter and the beginning of another. In her Christmas card this past year, Sara suggested Alice come visit. Neither Sara nor Alice has ever suggested talking on the telephone.

And now Alice's plane is dropping at an alarming rate toward a runway in the state of Kentucky, and Alice is certain that both quitting drinking and agreeing to visit Sara were colossal mistakes. She watches the runway rush up to meet the plane from her window seat in front of the wing. If she'd only had a nice little bottle of vodka along with her cans of juice and soda, she would feel a great deal better about this. She wonders if her plane will crash when the wheels seem to bounce off the runway and the wing visible from her seat tips first toward the pavement and then toward the sky, but no one around her seems alarmed and the plane brakes and turns and is soon taxiing calmly toward the terminal. Alice considers what she can see of Kentucky through her window. All of the men and women working on the runway are going around without coats on. Alice has a parka stuffed into the overhead compartment next to her carry-on. Kentucky doesn't seem to think March is still winter. Alice worries about what she has packed.

Alice thought Sara would be waiting for her in the baggage claim area, but she is not. Instead, it's Paul Alice finds standing amiably by the luggage carousel. He's wearing jeans and loafers, and has the sleeves of his oxford rolled up. When he sees Alice, his eyes light as if he's genuinely been looking forward to seeing her. Alice tries to smile, though her face feels like she's baring her teeth.

"Alice," Paul says, crossing the crowded claim area to greet her. He opens his arms and hugs her as if there has never been any hurt or anger or violence between Alice and his wife.

“Hey, Paul,” Alice says. She pats her brother-in-law on the back and pulls away.

“Where’s Sara?” Maybe her sister is waiting for them in the car. Maybe they’ve pulled up curbside and Alice will only have to spend a few moments solo in Paul’s company.

“At home,” Paul says, and Alice’s hopes are dashed.

“Oh.”

“We just got a new baby. She thought she’d better stay home.”

“Oh.”

The carousel Alice and Paul are standing in front of beeps out a warning and then begins to turn. Suitcases thump down out of a chute.

“What’s your suitcase look like?” Paul asks.

“Just like all the others,” Alice says. “But I tied an orange ribbon on it.”

They stand in silence together, watching one bag after another plop onto the conveyor belt and wind its way toward and then past them. Alice’s skin prickles with sweat. When Paul sees Alice’s suitcase, he reaches down and lifts it by the handle. He smiles at Alice and leads the way to the parking lot and the car.

Alice has only been to visit Sara and Paul a handful of times in their adult lives. There was a Thanksgiving or two, and once Alice had a meeting in Louisville for work and stayed with Sara and Paul for three days. On her own, Alice wouldn’t be able to recognize Paul and Sara’s housing complex or distinguish their front door from all the other identical front doors. But Paul knows how to find his own home in the twisting curlicues of suburban Kentucky. He knows what driveway to pilot the Honda into. He knows which rectangular façade of brick and stone belongs to him. Once the garage door lowers behind them and Paul kills the ignition, Alice can hear a baby wailing. She looks at Paul.

“Desiree,” Paul says.

“What?”

“The baby.”

Alice doesn’t know much about babies, but she knows you shouldn’t be able to hear one crying from inside a car, which is inside a garage, which is who knows how many doors and walls and floors from the child.

“Here we go,” he says, and opens his door. He takes Alice’s suitcase from the trunk and leads Alice into the kitchen. It sounds as if somewhere in this house Alice’s sister is doing terrible things to a baby. Alice’s pulse picks up. She can feel any number of stress hormones being pumped into her blood. She breaks out into a cold sweat. “Come meet her,” Paul says, and he leads the way to the stairs at the end of the hall. On the second floor, in what used to be the guest bedroom Alice slept in on her rare visit to Louisville, Alice finds her sister bending over a changing table. The room is a solid block of sounds. Alice can’t enter it. She doesn’t understand how Paul can.

Sara turns, one hand steady on the screaming baby’s chest, and kisses Paul. She smiles and mouths “hello” at Alice and then returns to the procedure of changing the baby’s diaper. She lifts the child’s legs as if she’s been doing it all her life. Paul pulls the foul diaper free and Sara wipes between the baby’s legs with a soft cloth dipped in water rather than those wipes people use. Alice wouldn’t have thought it possible, but the child’s screams grow louder and more berserk. She is drawn into the room in that way she is drawn to Law & Order SVU. She knows she’s not going to see anything she wants to see, but she has to look anyway. Alice looks over Sara’s shoulder. The baby on the changing table is small and scrawny in a way Alice thinks a baby should not be. The rope of her thin muscles strain against the bone of her arms and legs.

Her belly bulges, and the place where her bellybutton should be is puffed out with infection. But the sight of puss oozing from the infants midsection is not as astonishing as the rash that covers the child's skin from her hips to her spindly thighs. Her skin is the color of boiled beets, blistered and bleeding. She writhes as Sara wipes the runny feces from between her buttocks. The room reels around Alice. The room smells of shit and infection. Alice retreats to the door, where she waits until the screams of the baby subsided a bit. The baby sounds now like the survivor of trauma, her wails broken by ragged inhales of breath. Paul stands some feet away from the changing table, a fist pressed to his lips. Sara smooths a prescription ointment onto baby's skin. The sounds the child makes change again, and the baby cries in a way Alice wouldn't have known possible for such a small thing. She cries as if from heartbreak, rather than from pain. It is the saddest sound Alice has ever heard. Sara diapers the baby, wraps her in a clean blanket, and lifts Desiree to her chest. Sara's eyes shine.

"Hello, Alice," she says.

"Oh my god," Alice says.

"This is Desiree."

"Yeah. Paul told me her name."

The baby buries herself in Sara's chest. Sara is all fluid motion, swaying and rocking and dipping.

"What's wrong with her?" Alice asks.

"Aside from the diaper rash?" Sara asks.

"That was diaper rash?"

"Yes."

"Oh my god."

“I know.” The baby struggles, flails her tiny arms, and Sara pins the baby more firmly to her chest, which quiets her.

“How does that happen?” Alice asks.

“Neglect. She’s malnourished. Failure to thrive. Probably still suffering from withdrawal. But mostly just neglect.”

“Would you like a glass of wine, Alice?” Paul asks.

Alice looks at her brother-in-law. She looks at her sister. Neither of them know that Alice has had to quit drinking, so neither of them know that having a glass of wine would mean that she has quit drinking. Alice can picture herself, however, sneaking out tonight after Sara and Paul have gone to bed in search of a bottle of Grey Goose to hide in her suitcase.

“Not at the moment, thanks,” she says, preserving the possibility of a glass of wine later if it truly becomes necessary.

“I would,” Sara says.

“I’ll bring you one,” Paul says. “Should I get started on dinner?”

“Please,” Sara says. “I’m starving.”

Paul touches his wife’s hair on the way out of the room. Desiree squirms in Sara’s arms, still not comforted. Her whimpering threatens to rise again into a full-blown cry. Sara shifts the baby so that Desiree is draped across her right arm, her head nestled in the crook of Sara’s elbow. Sara pats the baby firmly on the back. She hums, not a tune but just single low notes. Alice can imagine the resonance within her sister’s body, the way each low note vibrates through Sara’s skeleton. She wonders if it is the sound or the sensation that quiets the baby. By the time Paul has returned with a glass of chardonnay for Sara, the goblet already pearling with sweat,

Desiree has succumbed to sleep. Paul sets the wineglass on the windowsill. Alice realizes that it is only now that Sara is able to truly look at her.

“Hello, sister,” Sara says. She is pale, the skin of her face tight and shiny. She has not had much sleep. A blue vein throbs in her temple. “I’m sorry for the poor reception. I’d hug you, but,” she looks down at the baby, “I can’t.”

“No,” Alice says. “Of course not. Good grief.”

“How was the flight?”

“Fine, once we got off the ground. It’s still winter in Chicago.”

Sara smiles. She’s sweating. Alice is sweating.

“Open the window a crack?” Sara asks.

“Sure.”

Alice removes the wineglass to a clear corner of the changing table and then unlocks and pries open the window. This bedroom is at the back of the townhouse, and the window looks out on a narrow strip of fenced-in back yard. Beyond the fence, there is a pebbled path that loops around the housing development. Beyond the path, there is a sweep of lush green grass and a grove of willows, their long thin branches already live with pale green leaves. The breeze smells of earth. The sun, slung low over the horizon, dazzles the landscape in afternoon light. Alice hadn’t realized how close the room was until a fresh breeze changes everything.

“Have a seat,” Sara suggests, motioning toward the rocking chair with her shoulder.

“Don’t you want to?”

“She’ll wake up if I sit,” Sara says. “Go ahead.”

Alice lowers herself into the rocking chair reluctantly. The wood creaks. In addition to the crib and the changing table and the rocking chair, the room is furnished with a set of bunk

beds along the west wall, a bookshelf and a toy chest. The walls have been painted a bright yellow. The last time Alice was here, there was a fold-out couch and a cluttered computer desk. She thinks the walls were then some shade of taupe. A beautiful map of the world—the globe opened and flattened like an orange peel—hung on the wall now blocked by bunk beds. It has been just under a year since Sara and Paul became emergency foster parents.

“When did you get her?” Alice asks.

“Last night.”

“What were the, um, circumstances?”

“Drug arrest. Meth. Desiree was found in the house. Hadn’t been changed in days. It’s all pretty terrible. Child Services has been looking for a brother. Desiree’s mother has a two-year-old, but no one’s sure where he is.”

“The mother doesn’t know?”

“She said the boy’s father had picked him up a few days ago.”

“Desiree’s dad?”

“I don’t think so.”

Alice and Sara are silent for a moment. Sara swings and sways.

“How long do you have her?”

“We’re not sure,” Sara says. “Through the weekend, we think. The maternal grandmother lives in Houston. She says she’s driving out.”

Alice doesn’t know what she thought her first conversation with Sara would be like, but she didn’t think it would be like this. She wants Sara to ask about Suzanne, but it’s crazy to want to talk about a break-up that happened more than a year ago when there is an infant’s life at stake. “And then what happens?” Alice asks.

“Desiree’s mother goes to jail. The grandmother gets temporary custody, unless a father shows up.”

“Either way, you and Paul never see her again?”

Sara nods. She sways. She pats Desiree’s back.

“That sounds shitty,” Alice says.

“It’s not fun,” Sara says. “That’s pretty much not the point.”

“I know. I’m just saying I don’t know how you do it.”

In the silence between them, Alice can hear Bruce Springsteen floating up from the kitchen.

“Not everybody could,” Sara says. “But Paul and I can. We can love a baby God gives us for three days. Give her three good days and then wait for the next kid God gives us. So it seems like probably we ought to. It’s not about being better than anyone.”

“I didn’t say it was,” Alice says.

“I know,” Sara says. She dances over and looks out the window. She lifts her wineglass for a sip and then returns to thumping Desiree on the back.

“Where did you learn to do that?” Alice asks.

“What?”

“Hold her like that.”

Sara looks down at the limp infant.

“Is there a class?” Alice asks.

Sara laughs. “Mostly about legal stuff. Mostly about licensing and compliance and caseworkers and child court advocates. This is just the baby dance. Nobody teaches you that.”

“I wouldn’t have known,” Alice says.

“You want to hold her?”

“No,” Alice says, alarmed. “God, no.” She can smell onions frying in butter from the kitchen. She is hungry and tired and confused.

There is a large rubber ball, the kind you see in physical therapists’ offices or behind the plate glass windows of trendy gyms, tucked behind the crib. Sara rolls it out of its hiding place with her foot. She scoots the ball into the middle of the room and then lowers herself onto it, never ceasing her swaying until she begins to bounce rhythmically on the ball.

“Can’t you just...stop?” Alice asks.

“It takes her a while to really fall asleep.”

“Jouncing around helps?”

Sara nods. Alice can see the muscles in her sister’s right arm quivering.

“How did you know?” Alice asks.

“It’s just natural. Babies like to be bounced.”

“No,” Alice says. “How did you know you and Paul could do this?”

“I didn’t, at first,” Sara says. “We kind of ended up here by default. We were talking about adopting. Foster-to-adopt. An older child. Maybe special needs. But one night we were sitting at the kitchen table and Paul just looked up at me and said, ‘Sara, God help me, all I hear is the pitter-pat of delinquent feet.’”

Sara laughs. The memory must be much funnier than the telling of it. Alice is pretty sure you’re not supposed to say things like that about children in state custody. She might say it, but people like Paul and Sara shouldn’t.

“And then we got a call,” Sara says, “from our social worker. She asked if we’d be interested in an emergency placement. Forty-eight hours. And I thought, you know, I could learn how to do that. I could love a kid for a minute and then let go.”

Alice stops rocking.

“You’re amazing,” Alice says. Sara looks like she’d like to say something, but Alice shakes her head. “I’m not being hostile.”

“I’m just trying to do the right thing.”

Paul appears in the doorway. He’s wearing a denim apron. If Alice didn’t know Paul, she would have spent her life believing men like him only existed in JC Penney catalogues.

“Dinner’s on,” he says. “You girls ready to eat?”

“Who are you people?” Alice asks.

Alice and Sara’s parents are buried in the cemetery across the road from the Methodist church their father’s family has attended for three generations. The church is white clapboard with a steeple, peaked stained glass windows. A stone addition was built a hundred years ago to make space for an office and Sunday school classrooms. The limestone was quarried just a few miles from the church, probably by men from the congregation. Fifty years ago, a plot of land was donated three miles up the road and the congregation built a squat, brick parsonage. From the cemetery, Alice can just see the shingled roof of the parsonage. An alfalfa field between the church slopes down to where the Blue River winds its way sluggishly toward the Wabash. When Alice’s great-grandfather was a boy in this church, baptisms were performed down at the river. It must have been quite a sight. Though their father’s brother drowned as a teenager in a fishing pond several miles from the river, Alice has never been able to separate the tales of river baptism

from the vague contours of her uncle's death-by-drowning. As children, Alice and Sara would sometimes ride their bikes down past the church to the place where the road forded the river. Now it strikes Alice as a remarkable thing, to have grown up in a place where roads forded rivers instead of crossing them by bridge. This was America in the last quarter of the twentieth century, for heaven's sake. In August, the river barely trickled over the road and Alice and Sara would leave their bikes in the ditch and splash back and forth in bare feet. In the spring months, though, the river could run high enough to knock a kid over. The river has forever filled Alice with both curiosity and dread.

The cemetery itself was never a play destination for the children of the congregation, although Alice's attraction to it was not different from her attraction to the river. Or to the two empty farmhouses that stood for years between Alice's house and the church. As a kid, she loved to be a little frightened, and she took Sara with her on explorations of the empty farmhouses one summer. One house stood completely open, the door and window frames utterly empty. Nothing kept children and animals from wandering in and out. Alice once skinned a shin when her foot broke through the rotted floorboards of the porch. Surely now even the oldest farm families would see such a place as a liability, but at the time, Alice can't remember her parents telling her not to go exploring in abandoned houses. The other old house was not nearly so old or so forlorn. It had windows and doors and had proved impenetrable until Alice found a skeleton key hidden under a brick on the back porch. Sara was afraid to go in when Alice showed her sister how the key opened the lock, but Alice made her. The house was used for storage, and most of the first floor rooms were chock full of bags of seed and drums of kerosene and rusted but perhaps not worthless farm implements. The stairwell to the second floor was utterly dark, and even Alice's heart thrilled with fear as she and Sara felt their way up, the walls and stairs strangely soft with

decades of dust and cobwebs. The second floor was just two empty, square rooms with peeling wallpaper. In the center of one room lay an abandoned leather child's shoe from some other era. Alice was sure that the solitary shoe and the utter emptiness of the room were evidence of a long-ago murder, and she terrified Sara with this notion for years. Even though Alice was certain that she and Sara had been as stealthy as bats, the farmer who owned the property soon came to speak with Alice and Sara's parents, and they had been given a stern lecture about not going back. Two days later, Alice did go back, alone this time, out of fear that Sara would tattle. But the skeleton key was no longer under the brick on the back porch and the doors had been secured with a padlock. Alice was deeply disappointed, but the property owner's overreaction confirmed her most homicidal suspicions about the place. Once, riding past the house alone one afternoon, Alice was sure she saw the silhouette of a hanging corpse in one of the upstairs windows. She so terrified herself with this idea that she told no one what she thought she'd seen. Not even Sara.

"It's over here," Sara says, pointing Alice toward their parents' headstone. The cemetery is small—less than an acre—and will soon be filled up, although Alice suspects the church will dwindle to nothing and have no one left to bury before that comes to pass. The oldest headstones date to the early 1800s and can only be read by making crayon impressions on white paper. An enormous old oak tree supports one side of the cemetery, its knuckled roots exposed by erosion where a hill was hacked into to make way for a road. Their parents are buried on the north edge of the cemetery, just a few plots away from Alice and Sara's uncle, and their grandparents, and other relatives distant enough not to be remembered. Neither Alice nor Sara will be buried here, Alice is sure of that, and the thought suddenly strikes her as sad. Sara has brought a coffee can covered in tin foil and filled with crocuses from her front yard. The yellow flowers bob their heads cheerfully and Sara settles the can in front of the stone. The inscription on the stone is

from Psalm 91: *He who dwells in the shelter of the Most High will rest in the shadow of the Almighty. I will say of the Lord, "He is my refuge and my fortress, my God, in whom I trust."*

Alice studies the words chiseled into the pink stone. She isn't sure how to feel about them.

"I'm sorry about Suzanne," Sara says. A light wind tosses her hair around her face, and Sara pulls it back into a ponytail with the rubber band she's had, since this morning, around her wrist. Alice stares at their parents' headstone.

"Me, too," Alice sighs.

"Want to talk about it?"

"There's not much to say."

"Let's sit," Sara says. She plops down right on top of their parents' grave, her back against their headstone.

"I thought you weren't really supposed to step on peoples' graves." Alice looks around as if someone might scold them.

"Don't step, then," Sara says. "Just sit. This headstone is really warm from the sun. It feels great."

This pilgrimage to the cemetery hadn't been part of Alice's original plan for her visit with Sara. It had just come up over breakfast. Paul had suggested the two of them make the drive. He'd offered to stay at home with Desiree. Alice had thought this was just to make the trip more pleasant, but later discovered that they couldn't have brought the baby with them even if they'd wanted to. It was illegal for Paul and Sara to take the child further than fifty miles from their own home, and crossing state lines could be considered kidnapping.

"Did I ever tell you about how I went to a support group for divorced women at a church?" Alice asks.

“No,” Sara says. “You didn’t.”

“Yes, I did.”

“I meant, you didn’t tell me,” Sara says.

“Oh,” Alice says. “It was pretty weird.”

“What happened?”

“It was at this mega-church out in the burbs. Is that an okay thing to say, mega-church? Is it pejorative?”

“I don’t think so.” Sara tips her head back against the gravestone and closes her eyes.

“I’m still listening,” she says.

“I think the sanctuary could seat thousands. And there was a gym, a fitness center, all these conference rooms. A co-worker said I should go. I felt like I had to. He and his wife brought me a lasagna.”

“A lasagna?”

“It’s a long story,” Alice says. She, too, closes her eyes and leans her head back against the warm granite. It’s freakishly warm for March, even for southern Indiana. Alice wonders if it’s still snowing in Chicago or if this same sun is melting yesterday’s snow.

“They knew you weren’t exactly divorced?” Sara asks.

“Yes. In addition to the real divorced women, there was a woman whose fiancé had left her once he came back from Afghanistan, and a woman who had had three kids with a guy without marrying him because he was married to someone else, and there was me. They knew I was a lesbian. The church is very welcoming.”

“There are some gay people who come to Paul and my church,” Sara says.

Alice opens her eyes to look at her sister sideways. “You never told me that.”

“It never came up,” Sara says.

“That’s true,” Alice says.

“Did it help?”

“The support group?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t tell,” Alice says. “I don’t think so. It made me sad, being around all those other people and their grief. Suzanne left me, but I wasn’t dumped the way all those women were. I’d been thinking about leaving Suzanne for years. They mostly talked about how to deal with child support.”

“Is there someone new?” Sara asks after a moment.

“I’m too damaged to inflict myself on another human being,” Alice says.

“That’s not true.”

“Yes, it is.”

The silence between them is broken by a strange, prehistoric-sounding birdcall. Both women look skyward. Sara shields her eyes. A noisy flock of birds, their legs trailing behind them, flies over Sara and Alice in V-formation.

“Cranes!” Sara exclaims. She jumps up and darts around to the other side of the oak for a better look.

“What?” Alice asks.

“Cranes! Sandhill cranes! I’ll have to tell Paul.” She waves, delighted. She watches the cranes until they disappear into the ether blue of distant sky. When she returns, she’s flushed with excitement. “I can’t believe it!” she says, plopping down again next to Alice.

“Me neither,” Alice says.

Sara laughs. "It's okay, Alice. You don't have to care about cranes."

"They must be special. Or endangered?"

"Both," Sara says. "But they're making a comeback."

Somehow, the thought is comforting to Alice, even though she hadn't known they existed, let alone existed under threat of extinction, until just then. She thinks she will find out more about Sandhill cranes when she gets home.

"Do you believe in love?" Sara asks, interrupting Alice's thoughts.

Alice looks at her sister. Sara has gone back to sitting with her eyes closed, her face tipped up to the sun. "I don't know what that means," Alice says.

"Okay," Sara says.

"You know what we haven't talked about?"

"Mom and Dad."

"I don't know how to start," Alice says. "I think I made Suz break up with me so I could be sad about that and not about Mom and Dad."

"It's possible to be sad about both," Sara says.

"Maybe that's why you and Paul became foster parents," Alice suggests. "That's pretty sad."

"I'm sad about Mom and Dad," Sara says.

Alice watches the sky but there are only the normal Midwestern birds flitting between trees and telephone wires.

"Do you ever forget they're dead?" Sara asks.

"No."

“I do. Just the other day. Three weeks ago, maybe. I picked up the phone to tell Mom about these kids we’d had for four days. Rayshawn and Rayshawnté. With an accent mark over the e. They were twins. They’d ended up in the hospital after their mom’s boyfriend watched them overnight. When the mom said she’d kicked the boyfriend out, Rayshawn and Rayshawnté went straight from us back to her. Their caseworker came to pick them up, and then I picked up the phone to call Mom. I dialed most of their number before I remembered.”

“That sounds awful.”

“It was. But also kind of nice. For five or six seconds, it was like Mom was alive.”

“Don’t you think we’re too young to be orphans?” Alice asks.

“Yes,” Sara says.

Desiree sleeps in her car seat when Sara drives Alice to the airport the next morning. Her flight is at ten, but Sara has to drop Alice off at seven-thirty because Desiree’s caseworker is coming to pick her up. The grandmother has arrived from Texas. Paul told them when they got home from Indiana. Sara spent the evening packing up Desiree’s few things. Desiree had come with next to nothing, so Sara had purchased a Babar the Elephant diaper bag, a dozen onesies, two packages of diapers, a fuzzy cream-colored baby blanket, and a couple of outfits for her. All of this, Sara packed up to send with the caseworker. Alice had held Desiree while Sara did this. At first Desiree felt like a bundle of wayward sticks in Alice’s arms, but once Alice raised the baby to her shoulder and the girl burrowed her tiny face into the hollow of Alice’s neck, Alice felt much more comfortable. She could feel the baby’s hot, shallow breath against her skin. She tried to sway and swoop as Sara had, but Alice had never had good rhythm, so she sat on the bouncy-ball instead.

“Shouldn’t you keep all that stuff?” Alice asked. “In case there’s another baby who doesn’t have enough clothes?”

“I bought them for Desiree. We’ll buy clothes for another baby if we need to. It’s the least we can do.”

Paul had cooked dinner again. Hamburgers on the grill and fried potatoes. Sara hadn’t been able to eat anything.

Now, in the car, Sara’s eyes are glassy with tears.

“Thank you,” Alice says. “For this weekend. We did pretty good, didn’t we?”

Sara’s eyes dart between the road and the rearview mirror. Alice noticed that when they got in the car, Sara adjusted the mirror so she could see Desiree instead of the road.

“No one got their nose broken,” Sara says. Alice laughs. She feels like she can’t remember the last time Sara made a joke. Sara glances at Alice and smiled. She clicks on her turn signal and they merge onto the ramp that will take them from the Interstate to the airport. Alice will buy a bagel and her first decent cup of coffee since leaving Chicago at the airport. She’ll buy a *New York Times* Sunday edition. She is also considering crying in the bathroom for a while.

“Maybe Paul and I will come up to you next time,” Sara says. “Maybe at the end of the summer?”

“Do,” Alice says. “Chicago is great in the summer. We’d have fun.” She wonders if that is true.

“I’ll talk to Paul. We’ll see.”

Sara pulls up to the curb outside of the Delta terminal. She puts the car in park, but doesn’t look at Alice. She sits straight and still, staring at the windshield.

“You know what I’ve been thinking about?” she asks.

“No.”

“I’ve been thinking about you taking Desiree.”

“What?” Alice asks. She turns in her seat to look at her sister. Sara stares straight ahead. She’s not looking at anything.

“You don’t need a ticket for her or anything. You just hold her in your lap. How would anyone know she wasn’t your baby? I put her diaper bag in the trunk. Isn’t that crazy? You could just sling it over your shoulder. You’d look like a mother. Once you got home you could, I don’t know, drive to Canada with her or something. No one would ever find you. And if Paul and I started driving right now, immediately, we could maybe get away. We could all meet up in Calgary.” Tears stream down Sara’s blotchy cheeks. Alice doesn’t say anything. “That’s crazy, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Alice says.

“I don’t mean it. I don’t actually want you to steal Desiree for me. Except I do.”

Alice doesn’t know what to say. Sara leans over and pops open the glove compartment. She takes out a travel pack of Kleenexes and blows her nose.

“Oh, God,” Sara says. “Okay. All right. I’m pulling myself together.”

Alice has her parka in her lap. “Is it always like this?” she asks.

Sara runs both hands over her face. She looks at Desiree in the rearview mirror and then she looks at Alice. Alice sees so much of their mother in her sister’s face that it nearly takes her breath away.

“Yes,” Sara says. She smiles again, an expression of anguish. “It’s always like this.”

“Is there anything I can do? You know, other than steal a baby for you?”

“No,” Sara says. “Stealing a baby is pretty much it.”

Both sisters laugh. Desiree wakes in the backseat, looking startled and frightened. Her brow furrows and her face turns red.

“Now we’ve done it,” Alice says.

“I love you, Alice,” Sara says.

“I’m trying to be a decent sister,” Alice says.

“I know,” Sara says. “You’re doing all right.” She takes another Kleenex and blows her nose. Alice wants to cry, too, but Sara is crying and soon Desiree will be, and Alice thinks not everyone should cry at the same time.

V. ADULT DATING

Greta had suggested that she and Alice meet at the Plymouth for their first date. Alice supposes that is what she would call these happy hour rendezvous she's been going on lately. She has been on seven with seven different women over the past eight weeks. None of them have gone especially well as far as Alice can tell, although she has gone on two second dates. One second date involved a bowling alley. That date, Tray, arrived with her own bowling ball—blue-marbled, wrapped in a special cloth, secured in a leather carrying case—and her own shoes. Alice had rented a pair of two-toned size nines and then spent thirty minutes trying to find a bowling ball with holes that fit her fingers in a weight she could lift with one hand. Tray had suggested bowling but had neglected to mention she was a highly ranked amateur who once flirted with the pro circuit. Tray had taken the game very seriously, swearing each time her careening ball failed to knock down all ten pins. Alice drank two PBRs and tried to make jokes, but Tray didn't have a discernable sense of humor. By the second game, Alice couldn't remember why she'd agreed to go on a second date with Tray at all. Had they enjoyed each other's company when they first met at that fancy place on the river for a glass of wine? Tray had looked exhausted when they'd first met, her suit rumpled, her blond hair pulled back in a ponytail, her eye makeup smudged and runny. She was a public defender and had said she'd had a hell of a day. Maybe Alice thought Tray was noble? She did not seem noble at the bowling alley, swearing at a lone, tottering ninepin. Tray didn't call Alice and Alice didn't call Tray after that.

Alice's second second date was with a woman named Lisa. On their first date, Lisa suggested they meet for ice cream cones rather than drinks, and so they did. They had purchased huge scoops of ice cream ensconced in still-warm waffle cones and they'd eaten the dripping

messy desserts while strolling Michigan Avenue, right in the heart of the Magnificent Mile, tourists spilling past them on all sides. They wound their way to the steps of the Museum of Contemporary Art and sat there talking and laughing while dusk fell around them. Lisa was pretty in a mysterious fashion. Her hair and eyes were very dark and her skin was olive in a way that made Alice wonder if she was, perhaps, not white, although there didn't seem to be a reasonable way or reason to ask such a question. Lisa had produced hand sanitizer and napkins from her purse, which had made Alice like her for her foresight and thoughtfulness, and for the fact that Alice didn't have to spend the second half of their date with sticky hands. When they parted ways at the steps down to the Red Line, Lisa having refused Alice's offer of a lift home, Alice asked if she could buy Lisa dinner. Lisa had smiled and tucked a lock of her thick dark hair behind one ear. "Yes," she said. She was shorter than Alice, significantly, and already one step down into the subway, so she'd had to look way up at Alice. She stepped up out of the stairwell, stood on her tiptoes, and kissed Alice quickly on the lips. The thrill of that quick kiss made Alice's heart beat so hard her ribcage hurt.

Their first date had been on a Tuesday. Alice looked forward to their dinner plans on Saturday all week. She'd asked Lisa if she could pick her up, but Lisa had asked that they meet at Jin Ju, a fancy sushi restaurant in Alice's neighborhood. They sat at the dimly lit bar, watching chefs roll the glistening fish and bright, narrow strips of vegetables into maki. Alice had felt nervous and fluttery and had even caught her own hand shaking as she spooned miso toward her lips, but Lisa had seemed calm and effortless. Halfway through their meal, as she was stirring wasabi into a small tray of soy sauce with her chopsticks, she said, "Can I ask you a question, Alice?" Lisa had been asking most of the questions through both of their dates. She knew far

more about Alice than Alice knew about her. Alice studied Lisa's profile, but she seemed deeply intent on her business with the soy sauce and wasabi.

"Sure," Alice had said.

"How do you feel about men?" Lisa lifted a chunk of tuna, dunked it in the soy sauce, and popped it in her mouth. She looked at Alice while she chewed.

"In general?" Alice asked. "As a category? They seem okay. I'm partial to the guy who just made this dragon roll at the moment." Alice gestured toward the man in the very white smock behind the bar.

Lisa swallowed and took a sip of her martini. "I mean sex with them," she said.

Alice was just about to put a slice of the dragon roll in her mouth, but she faltered with the chopsticks and the whole thing splatted on her plate, rice and avocado and pink gooey fish exploding out of the nori. Lisa laughed.

"Well," Alice said. "I guess, I have no feelings about sex with them." Lisa eyed Alice, her smile warm but teasing. Alice couldn't tell if they were in the middle of a joke. She took a deep breath. "I mean, I don't have sex with them, if that's what you're asking."

"Never? Like, as a policy, or a political position?"

Alice tried, briefly, to imagine the closest she'd come to having sex with men. Boys in high school. Back seats of cars. A picnic table at a park one dark night. In none of these scenarios had she come all that close. She remembered those events as brief struggling tussles, some groping through denim and t-shirts, some hot breath and sloppy kissing, and then her saying that they needed to stop. Later, she had been enormously thankful for Midwestern sexual mores of the 1980s. She'd never really had to explain herself.

“Well, no,” Alice said. “It’s not really a political position. It’s more like I can’t for the life of me imagine why I would.”

Alice imagined a fully naked man, hairy and erect, making his way toward her. She wanted to shriek but she managed not to. She’s not repulsed by the thought of men. She just can’t put them in a sexual category any more than she could put a grizzly bear in one.

Lisa bit her lip and cocked her head. Alice knew their date was over. She tried to prod the pile of broken maki on her plate into a form she could pick up with chopsticks.

“My boyfriend will be sorry to hear that,” Lisa said.

“I couldn’t care less about your boyfriend’s feelings,” Alice said.

“There’s no reason to get mean.” Lisa drained her martini, caught the eye of the bartender, and indicated for another one. “We’re not just looking for a threesome. We’re looking for a girlfriend. We both liked you, so we thought we’d take a shot.”

“I have never met half of the people you’re talking about!”

“Your profile,” Lisa said, accepting her martini and plucking the olives out of it. “We liked your profile. He sent half the messages when we were chatting back and forth. You made him laugh. He’s got a better sense of humor than I do.”

Alice had felt deeply creeped out. She had been confused and uncertain about the thought of on-line dating in the first place, all those anonymous women behind anonymous computers poring over her pictures and her personal statements and deciding if they wanted to meet her and maybe have sex with her. She couldn’t imagine a less romantic way to meet anyone on the planet, but her sister had assured her that was how everyone met people these days and there was nothing to be ashamed of or creeped out about. Sara was clearly wrong. Which was no surprise since Sara had been with her husband since almost before there was such a thing as the Internet.

Alice hadn't even considered the thought that there were men behind those anonymous computer screens, too. She had paid the bill for their dinner and left Lisa at Jin Ju with half a plate of sushi and her new martini. She was only a few blocks from her apartment, but she'd walked all the way to the lake and back, wandering up and down side streets, glancing in front windows when they were lit up enough to reveal a family or a couple or a solitary person going about their or his or her Saturday night. She had thought about stopping at T's to sit at the bar and drink bourbon, but she and her therapist had agreed that if she was going to experiment with drinking—She'd quit entirely after her parents' death and her breakup with Suzanne. She'd felt like a car that had just hit a patch of black ice. Moments before she'd been fine but suddenly she had zero control over her own trajectory. A couple of years later, she'd asked her therapist if maybe she'd had a coping problem rather than an alcohol problem and her therapist had said, "That is entirely within the realm of possibility."—she should have one rule: no drinking alone. And sitting alone at a lesbian bar drinking bourbon out of embarrassment and anger was still drinking alone, even if she was so hemmed in by women she could hardly lift her glass to her lips. Alice had walked and walked, and had noticed for the first time that the wind in the leaves sounded dry and rattley, that the summer, again, astonishingly, would not last forever. Eventually, she had gone home.

Alice has never been to the Plymouth before. In the lobby of a building that had probably once been a skyscraper before all the buildings around it grew so tall, Alice pushes the button for the elevator that will take her to the rooftop bar. It is a little before six o'clock on one of those September evenings that makes a person wish it could be September all year long. When she steps out of the elevator, Alice discovers the Plymouth is already crowded with a happy hour cast of characters, young lawyers and corporate types with their ties loosened and their heels kicked

off getting drunk and flirting with each other, red-faced middle aged men, beefy tourists marveling at it all. The hostess seats Alice at a high top table tucked up against the railing that separates the bar from a two-story drop to the top of a parking garage. Beyond the garage, Alice has view of an el stop, and beyond that the façade and winged roof of the Harold Washington Library. The sun slants from the west and a gust of wind causes napkins to scatter and a number of the young lawyers to laugh and pull their hair back into ponytails. Alice is scrolling through her email on her phone when Greta plops down on the barstool across from her.

“Oh, hello,” Alice says, startled.

“Hi,” Greta says. “Am I interrupting?”

Alice sets her phone face down on the table. “No, sorry,” she says, “I was just—hello.”

“Greta.” Greta extends her hand.

“Alice.” They shake, which has not, in Alice’s experience, been how first dates greet each other. “This place is...great. Thanks for suggesting it.”

“Isn’t it awful?” Greta asks with a grin.

“Yes, actually,” Alice says, relieved.

“I work there,” Greta says, indicating the library partially obscured by a train clacking past. “So I’ve got a soft spot for this place. No one I know actually comes here, though.”

“We don’t seem to be its demographic.”

“Which made it easy to spot you.”

Their server appears and both Alice and Greta order a beer.

“Are you hungry?” Greta asks when the server leaves. “The food is terrible.”

“I guess not, then?”

“We’ll see,” Greta says, turning over a menu. “Not terrible as in inedible, just terrible as in the French fries taste like a grocery store freezer and the sandwiches are all smothered in mozzarella.”

“You’re really selling the place,” Alice says.

“It has its charms,” Greta says, and takes a sip of her water.

“Which are?”

Greta gazes dreamily about. “It’s a roof.”

The server delivers their beers but doesn’t ask about a food order. Greta angles her green bottle toward Alice. “Cheers.”

“Cheers.”

Greta is not the type of woman Alice would have messaged, but after ignoring Match.com for two weeks after the Lisa incident, Alice had logged on to find a message in her inbox from her. Alice had thought about ignoring the message, which seemed to be what most people did with most messages on the site, since Greta looked much too young and little too tattooed for her, but as she had decided to take a what-the-hell approach to on-line dating, she replied. Rather than chatting back and forth and trying to be witty, Greta had asked right away if Alice would like to get a drink one night the next week after work. Alice knows almost nothing about Greta other than the fact that she knits, reads mid-century pulp lesbian novels, and runs marathons, although she does not in any way look like a marathon runner to Alice.

“So, what number is this for you?” Greta asks.

Alice looks at the bottle in her hand, perplexed, and Greta laughs.

“Not the beer. The date. What number is this for you? Match-wise.”

“Is that a question people ask?” Alice asks.

Greta arches her eyebrows, smiles, sips. “I do.”

“Well...” Alice takes a moment to calculate, even though she does not have to. “Eight, I guess. My eighth first date. Since July.”

“That’s impressive,” Greta says.

“It is?”

“You’re my...fourth. I just signed up. Bad break-up. She took the cat. That song and dance. How’s it been going?”

Alice laughs. “I’ve had two cups of coffee, three cocktails, a glass of wine, and an ice cream cone. I’ve been beaten mercilessly at bowling which was an unfair situation because she was basically a professional and I was last in a bowling alley in college, I think. And my last second date ended when my date told me her boyfriend was kind of into me.”

Greta’s face lights up. With her back to the setting sun, her curly strawberry blond hair is a glowing nimbus around her head. “That’s awful!”

“I know! And when I told her I didn’t sleep with men she asked me if it was a political position. And then ordered a second martini!”

“Were you paying?”

“Unfortunately.”

Greta shakes her head. She has a very round face that Alice has decided is quite pretty, even with the absurd glasses people her age seem to favor these days.

“Do you usually?” Greta asks. “Pay? Play that role?”

“I don’t know. I asked her to dinner. It seemed appropriate. Up until the whole boyfriend business.”

Greta runs both her hands through her wild hair in an attempt to push it back from her face. The gesture reveals words tattooed on the pale, soft insides of her forearms. She must notice Alice trying surreptitiously to read them, because she pushes her sleeves up to the elbow and angles her arms to catch the light. The right arm says *I could show you* and the left *You would like it* in cursive. Alice feels herself blush.

“Oh,” she says.

Greta grins and pulls her sleeves back down. Their server reappears and Greta asks for another round. “We’ll split it,” she says, reassuringly.

“So who do you usually date, Alice?” Greta asks. “Lesbian-wise.”

“Lesbian-wise?” Alice is beginning to understand that the eight or ten years between them means Greta has a vocabulary, and a set of social customs, alien to her own. Rather than finding it off-putting, Alice finds it funny. Charming, almost.

“I’m guessing femmes. Maybe blue jean femmes, or even Chapstick lesbians? You’re not a sporty dyke, but maybe you date a sporty girl every now and again. We all do at some point. The world is overrun with sporty lesbians.”

Alice laughs. She can’t help herself. “I don’t even know what some of those terms are. Who am I? What kind of lesbian do you think I am?”

“Oh, that’s easy. You’re a soft butch, right?” Alice must look surprised. “Or a suit? You are wearing a suit.”

“What are you?” Alice asks.

“I knit,” Greta says. “I’m a librarian. I’m a hipster dyke. Obviously.”

“Who do hipster lesbians date?” Alice asks. She isn’t someone who usually says “dyke.” She feels as if she’s in an anthropological experiment.

“Suits and soft butches and Chapstick lesbians. We try to date other hipsters but it gets complicated because half the time you find yourself hitting on a straight chick.”

“What on earth is a Chapstick lesbian?” Alice asks.

“Oh, you know,” Greta says. “Ellen DeGeneres.”

“Who took the cat?” Alice asks.

“A sporty dyke. We were a total mismatch. She wanted me to play beach volleyball all summer. Do I look like I play beach volleyball?”

Alice considers Greta. She is wearing a floral blouse and a mustard cardigan. She is pale and freckled and Alice assumes that exposure to direct sunlight almost always results in blistered skin. “You do not,” she says.

“Volleyball is not the only reason we broke up, but it’s one of them.”

“How long had you been together?”

“A year and a half. We’d lived together for most of it. We were on total lesbian time. She wanted to have a big fancy commitment ceremony. I said I wasn’t sure and that’s when she absconded with the cat.”

“What was her name?” Alice asks.

“Henrietta, after that scary puppet on *Mr. Rogers*. ”

“Your girlfriend was named after the *Mr. Rogers* cat?”

Greta laughs, causing her to snort beer. She coughs and chokes and goes pink in the face. “No!” she finally says. “The cat! My ex’s name was Kelly.”

“Oh, that makes more sense,” Alice says. She is not sure why everything revolves so thoroughly around a cat.

Greta waves over their server. “Will you share onion rings? They’re straight from a freezer, too, but I like them anyway.”

“Sure,” Alice says. This is not the worst date she has been on. The worst was probably with a woman who wore a bowtie and grilled her for thirty minutes about when she’d come out to whom. They’d met for a drink at the bar of a famous steakhouse. The woman had ordered them both Manhattans before Alice could make up her own mind. The place was dark and windowless, so even though they’d met just after work, the date immediately took on the grim, boozy seriousness of last call. An hour and a half later Alice had been stunned to emerge into the glow of a rather spectacular sunset.

“So what calamity led to your on-line dating?” Greta asks, after she orders the onion rings and another round.

“Oh, the usual,” Alice says. “A break up.” What could she possibly tell Greta about Suzanne?

“How long had you been together?”

“Nine years,” Alice says. Greta’s orange eyebrows shoot straight up. Alice doesn’t know exactly how old Greta is, but she’s guessing Greta was still a teenager when she and Suzanne got together. In high school probably. Nine years must sound like an eternity to her.

“Holy cow,” is all Greta says.

The server drops off their basket of fried onion rings and two more beers. Alice does not want another beer, especially since she is driving. Eventually Greta will drink it for her. When they part ways on the sidewalk in front of the Plymouth, Greta headed to the Blue Line, Alice walking back up Dearborn toward the parking lot by work, Greta hands Alice her card. For the

first time all evening she seems a little nervous and Alice is surprised to realize Greta would like to see her again.

“My cell’s on there,” she says. “You can text or whatever. You don’t have to call. I’m not really a phone person.”

“Okay,” Alice says.

“Okay,” Greta echoes. “This was fun. See you later, maybe.” She waves, a nervous little gesture given the fact that they are standing a few feet apart, and then turns and strides briskly down the sidewalk. Alice slips Greta’s card into her wallet. She has no idea if she’ll call her. Alice puts her hands in her pockets. She cannot remember why people date. Is it any version of fun? It must be. People are great fans of dating. Americans alone must spend a bazillion dollars on it. After one summer of dating, Alice couldn’t describe the kind of person she’d like to date if her life depended on it. She would have to be a woman unlike any of the women Alice has gone on a date with. She would have to be someone very much like Suzanne except different in some small but specific way that would allow Alice to feel the proper sets of feelings for her. And Alice can’t imagine why anyone would date her. What experience did Greta have, precisely, that would make her want to spend another evening with Alice? People are a mystery.

Alice hasn’t seen Suzanne since her commitment ceremony at The Drake Hotel eighteen months ago. Suzanne had started dating an old friend, Sonal, shortly after she and Alice broke up. Sonal had come out rather dramatically after her husband had died of pancreatic cancer, leaving her a young widow with a baby daughter. Alice and Suzanne had actually discussed whether or not Sonal had proclaimed herself a lesbian just to deflect her extended family’s desire to see her married again. Or, perhaps, Alice had discussed this possibility with Suzanne. She had

been shocked when, a year after she'd moved out of Suzanne's condo, Suzanne asked her to meet for coffee and told her Sonal and Divya would be moving in. At first Alice had thought Suzanne meant as roommates, that Sonal would be moving in as a friend.

"No," Suzanne had said, smiling ruefully into her latte. "Alice. Sonal's moving in. We're together. We have been. For a while."

Alice had had to blink back tears, but she couldn't figure out why. Sonal was perfect for Suzanne. They were both chemists. They could talk about chemistry. And she was loyal and kind and she and Suzanne had always been close, even before Sonal was a lesbian. It even sounded right: Sonal and Suzanne. And Divya. An instant family. Alice found it absurdly convenient that Suzanne would get Sonal and Divya free and clear, that she wouldn't even have to compete with an ex-husband out there somewhere. Divya would have a tidy origin story and two happy moms and it was all so perfect it made Alice feel briefly, dangerously mean.

"I'm glad," she'd said, and then laughed, and teared up, and had to wipe her eyes with a Starbucks napkin. "Really, Suz. I'm glad."

Suzanne had nodded. She didn't look away. She didn't do anything to make things easier on Alice.

"I wanted you to hear it from me," she'd said.

"You deserve to be happy," Alice had said, and she'd truly meant it. She couldn't have said she wanted Suzanne to be happy, although she did, of course, want that, at least in her better moments. But it was true, utterly and inarguably, that Suzanne deserved to be happy. Even Alice knew that.

A year later, Alice got an invitation to their commitment ceremony. Sara flew in from Louisville for the weekend to be Alice's moral support and her date to the ceremony. Alice had

not been prepared for the wedding-ness of the ceremony. She had somehow expected something practical and efficient, both women in pants suits, something bureaucratic and rather than nuptial. Even when she knew where the event would be held and even after sending in her *RSVP* card with Sara as her plus-one and requesting the chicken for Sara and the lamb for herself. Still she was not prepared for the profusion of bright flowers, the sight of Sonal in her red sari, of Suzanne in white silk. The hall had been packed with friends and family, half of whom Alice had once known rather intimately, the other half strangers to her. There was nothing legally binding about the ceremony, of course, but it included Sonal, Divya on her hip, and Suzanne marching around a lit candle seven times as they made their vows. Alice had said hello to Suzanne's parents, her brothers and their families, a whole host of friends she now no longer saw. She'd shaken hands with Sonal's family who beamed at Sonal and seemed pleased as could be to have their daughter married to Suzanne. Alice and Sara had stayed at the reception through dinner, but Alice asked if they could leave before the dancing began. By eight-thirty that evening, they were back at Alice's apartment, curled up on the couch under a blanket watching *Caddyshack* and pointedly not discussing Suzanne's wedding.

Now, after a strange evening with Greta, Alice decides to drive down to Hyde Park on a whim. The city is lit up like a miniature of itself in her rearview mirror as she zooms south on Lake Shore Drive. She doesn't know what she plans to do in Hyde Park, perhaps just drive past Suzanne's condo, just out of curiosity. She has no reason to be in Hyde Park now, so being in this section of the city feels like she has been transported here by a time machine. It's a quarter to nine by the time she is parked on Suzanne's familiar block. The front windows of the condo are lit up and wide open, but from her angle Alice can't see anything but ceiling. She takes her cell

phone from her workbag and calls Suzanne. She is just about to snap her phone closed when Suzanne is suddenly on the line.

“Alice!” she says, happily.

Alice blinks. The digital dashboard clock reads 8:52. “Hi, Suz,” she says.

“What a surprise,” Suzanne says. “How are you?”

“Oh, I’m good. I’m good,” Alice says. “How are you?”

“Hold on,” Suzanne says. There is crying on the other end of the line. Alice can hear Suzanne hushing her son. For a panicked moment, Alice cannot remember the child’s name. She can picture the birth announcement, the cream cardstock and the black and white photo of Divya holding the tiny baby in her lap. “Shhhhh, shhhhh,” Alice can hear Suzanne saying. And then, in a singsong, “Hush, Arav. Hold on. I know.” Arav, Alice thinks. Yes, of course. Suzanne had told Alice over the phone that she and Sonal had chosen the name because it meant peaceful, that they hoped it would be true for him. “Okay, there,” Suzanne says, and then, to Alice, “sorry about that.”

“Oh, don’t be,” Alice says. “I’m probably interrupting bedtime.”

“Not really. Divya’s been in bed since 7:30 and this little guy won’t really go down until about 11. We’re just starting to get a solid stretch between his 11 o’clock feeding and his 5 o’clock feeding. What time is it now?”

“Almost nine,” Alice says.

“Perfect,” Suzanne says. “Right on time.”

“How old is he now?”

Alice can picture Suzanne’s gaze cast skyward, calculating. “Seven weeks tomorrow,” she says.

“Wow.”

“Yeah.”

“Hey,” Alice says, taking a deep breath. “I know this is weird, but I’m downstairs. Would you and Sonal mind if I came up?”

“Oh,” Suzanne says. And then she is quiet for a second. “Sure.”

“If you guys would rather I didn’t, I totally understand. It’s late. I was just in the neighborhood. It’s weird, I know.”

“No, it’s fine,” Suzanne says. “It’s just me. Sonal’s in New York.”

This time Alice is quiet. “For work?”

“Yeah.”

“Would that be...”

“No, it’s fine,” Suzanne says. “I have to get to the buzzer. Are you at the door yet?”

“No, hold on.” Alice opens her door and the car dings to remind her the keys are still in the ignition. She pockets them, glances both ways, and trots across the street. Her cell phone is still open and pressed to her ear. A full moon is slung in the indigo sky above her. “Okay,” she says. “I’m here.”

The door buzzes. “You in?” Suzanne asks.

“Yes,” Alice says, and then snaps her phone shut. Her heart is racing, so she takes the stairs slowly. At the third floor landing, Suzanne stands in the open door to the condo cradling a nursing Arav. “Oh my God,” Alice says. “You have a baby!”

Suzanne laughs. “I know. Crazy, huh?”

“It’s one thing to know it. It’s something else to see it. Him,” Alice corrects herself.

“Come in, come in,” Suzanne says. She swings open the door and kicks a pile of blankets and books out of the way. “Divya makes nests these days,” she explains.

Alice follows Suzanne into the living room. The place has been transformed. There’s a toy kitchen in one corner and a mechanical baby swing in another and a bright pink child-sized recliner next to the couch. Suzanne settles into an armchair. She drags an ottoman over with a foot and stretches her legs out.

“There,” she says.

Alice kicks off her shoes and sits on the couch. Arav detaches from Suzanne’s breast. He writhes and scrunches up his face and grunts a bit, but it takes Suzanne a little effort to get him latched on again. This gives Alice a moment to really look at her former lover. Suzanne’s hair is pulled back. Pale acne dots her forehead right at the hairline. Her breasts are enormous and unfamiliar to Alice, as is the softness of the rest of her beneath her hiked up t-shirt and her pajama pants. Suzanne is, physically, a complete stranger to Alice. It feels embarrassing to think they were once lovers, that Alice used to put her hands and mouth on those breasts. Suzanne looks happy. Even with dark sleep circles beneath her eyes. When Arav is nursing again, she returns her attention to Alice.

“You look good,” Alice says. Suzanne laughs. “Just, happy. Doing that. You look good.”

“Thank you,” Suzanne says. “I am. We are. It’s wild.”

“I know,” Alice says.

“What brought you down here? Did you say? I’m not always the best listener these days.”

Alice briefly considers lying but it feels like far too much work.

“I drove down,” she says. “For no reason, really. I don’t know. I’d been on a weird date and it ended kind of early and I just, I don’t know. I just drove down here. And saw the light on. And blah, blah, blah.”

“Do you do that? Drive by?”

“Never,” Alice says. “Not before tonight.”

Suzanne nods. Alice realizes she’s got her guard up. Or something. She is busy reading the situation. Alice has never been on the receiving end of such a look from Suzanne. Not that she’s seen, at least.

“I just felt this need to talk to someone who actually knows me,” Alice says.

Something softens in Suzanne. “That I do.”

“I’ve been trying to date. Sara’s been on my case to meet people. So I signed up for Match at the start of the summer.”

“Oh dear Lord,” Suzanne chuckles.

“I know!” Alice rubs her eyes and then looks at Suzanne through her fingers. “It’s brutal out there. I don’t think there are any women in Chicago that I would like to date.”

“It’s a big city.”

“Not big enough, apparently. And I can’t imagine why anyone would date me! I’m an orphan in my late thirties with commitment issues and a cruel streak! What is wrong with people?”

Suzanne strokes Arav’s head. She seems to genuinely consider this question.

“You’re still really cute,” she finally says, deadpan. Or perhaps seriously. Alice can’t tell.

“What did you see?” Alice asks. “Honestly.”

“Are seeing a therapist?” Suzanne asks.

“Yeah.”

“That explains it.”

“What?”

“The introspection.” Suzanne picks up a cloth diaper from a pile next to her armchair. She places it over her shoulder and removes Arav from her breast, drapes him over the diaper, and begins thumping him on the back. The baby sleeps through the whole production. Splotches of milk soak through Suzanne’s t-shirt. “You’ve always liked to imagine you’re more terrible than you actually are, Alice,” she says at last. “Your main problem is that you don’t know what you want. That’s all. Like half the people on the planet.”

Alice considers this. Suzanne isn’t being either kind or cruel. She isn’t trying to hurt Alice’s feelings or make her feel better. She has a gift for honesty Alice has never known in another person. Sara is the only person who comes close.

“I don’t,” Alice says. “That’s true.” She casts a glance around the cluttered living room. “That’s not your problem, is it?”

“Nope,” Suzanne says. Her eyes light with surprise on something behind Alice. “Divya, sweetheart! What are you doing up?”

Alice twists around to see the girl, the corner of a comfort blanket stuck in her mouth, peering at her from the threshold of the hall. When Alice looks at her, Divya puts the blanket over her head.

“Come here,” Suzanne says. “Come here. Tell me what you need.”

“Mommy Suzy?” the girl says from under the blanket, not moving. “Who’s that lady?”

“She’s my friend,” Suzanne says. “Her name is Alice. You met her when me and Maji got married.”

Divya takes the blanket from her face. She narrows her dark eyes at Alice. She sidles toward Suzanne without turning her back to Alice. Halfway across the living room, she turns suddenly and scampers to the armchair, burying her face in Suzanne's lap. Suzanne holds Arav against her shoulder with one hand and with the other rubs the girl's back.

"Where's Maji?" Divya asks.

"In New York. You know that. Remember? She's in New York until tomorrow and then she'll be back."

Divya climbs into Suzanne's lap. She burrows around, attempting to dislodge Arav from Suzanne's shoulder with her head.

"Will you take him?" Suzanne asks.

Alice hesitates for a moment but then realizes it is not actually a question. Not the kind a person is allowed to say no to.

"I don't know much about holding babies," she warns, rising from the couch. Divya puts her blanket over her face again as Alice approaches.

"It's not rocket science," Suzanne says.

Alice takes the baby from Suzanne's shoulder, holding him under the armpits as a child might a kitten. She turns him to face her and drapes him across her own shoulder and rubs his back. He squawks a little and grunts but doesn't wake up.

"You're a natural," Suzanne says, and Alice laughs.

She tries to bounce up and down, the way she learned from Sara.

Suzanne hauls herself to her feet. Divya clings to neck. "Carry me!" she says. Suzanne settles the four-year-old on her hip. Divya's legs hang down to Suzanne's knees.

“Ooof, you’re getting so big, kid-o,” Suzanne says. She disappears down the hall to the kitchen, leaving Alice and Arav alone. Alice closes her eyes and tries to smell the baby. Everyone is always going on about how good babies smell. He smells like lotion, but also like sour milk, maybe spit-up. His fist instinctively grips the open collar of her shirt. Holding a baby *is* nice, Alice thinks, but not nicer than holding any other soft, small, adorable animal. She supposes this is not how most women feel. In some alternate universe, this baby could belong to her. He could be hers and Suzanne’s. The thought makes Alice want to cry with both regret and relief. Alice can hear Suzanne in the kitchen running water and chatting quietly with Divya. She wonders if Divya remembers anything about her life before Suzanne. Probably not. She hears Suzanne’s cell phone ring, hears Suzanne say brightly, “Oh, Sonal, you’ll never guess who’s up.” She hears Divya hopping up and down crying, “Maji, Maji, Maji.” She hears Suzanne say, “Just a second, Div. Hold on.” Suzanne’s voice drops but not so much that Alice can’t hear her. “You’ll never guess who’s in the living room, babe,” she says, and then laughs, and then says, “Yes.”

Alice wanders out into the dark sunroom. The street is dark and still and it suddenly feels like it is very late at night. Alice wishes Arav would wake up and cry so Suzanne would come take him from her but he does not. She tickles his feet. She gives him a little jostle. Then she pinches his thigh. She has to pinch surprisingly hard to do the trick. When he jerks his little head up and lets out a shriek, Suzanne calls from the kitchen, “Hold on, Alice! I’m coming.” Alice bounces the baby and pats his back saying, “Shhhhh, shhhhh, shhhhh,” as he cries.