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Virginia beach

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Thesis

VIRGINIA BEACH

by

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He ordered a boat / that would ply the waves. He announced his plan: / to sail the swan’s road and search out that king, / the famous prince who needed defenders. /

Nobody tried to keep him from going, / no elder denied him, dear as he was to them.

Beowulf, trans. by Seamus Heaney
DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to the family, friends, and neighbors that provide me with constant inspiration.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to thank my teachers Leslie Epstein, Ha Jin, Sigrid Nunez, Zoran Kuzmanovich, and Alan Michael Parker, as well as my inimitable classmates and cohort for life, and most of all, my library partner and best critic, Jon Springfield.
VIRGINIA BEACH

ZOE BALACONIS

ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of short stories about a mid-Atlantic beach community, the people that leave it, and those that stay. The stories are loosely linked in that all the characters are neighbors, whether they know it or not.
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PART ONE: VIRGINIA BEACH

Freeze

Before I ruin your image of me, I’d like to tell you about a little about myself: I just started working at a pretty up-and-coming PR firm that just leased a second-story loft on 13th and Baltic, very moderne, and I love the beach, Radford grad, too embarrassed to tell you my year (Go Highlanders!), and, yes, I’m back in with my parents after Jake and I decided it was best if we parted ways and I went into a wee depression–don’t worry, nothing serious! And, anyway, I was going through all that, when the Mims happened to call me up to say she needed more help around the house now that little bro is gone, so I’m really doing Mimsy a favor. Feels good to be helping out the fam. Course it’s a drag to be back at home at my age. I mean, a lot of my friends have their own houses now, so that’s kind of funny. And I’m so happy for them. My old classmate Sara just had her second baby and it is the sweetest thing. It’s especially funny because she’s actually a year younger than me? But she and Ol are just the cutest and they are an inspiration, obviously. Wish them the absolute best!

Okay, getting on with it, the whole thing sort of started like this, a bit after the breakup:

“Jake! Come out here you asshole!” The street was dead quiet. It was the end of summer and pretty late at night, so the only other things screaming their heads off were cicadas.

“Jake!” I said, opening the door of my car and falling out of it. Some lights turned on in the house. A window opened.
“Seriously, Evelyn? You’re waking everyone up.”

A woman’s voice from inside the house said, “What is it, baby?” or something like that. Then some mumbling. So that was that, huh. That was the way. Kick one out, bring one in.

“I have to talk to you,” I slurred. I was drunkish, I forgot to mention.

“No.”

The window closed and I kept myself standing by holding onto a sapling. I might’ve fallen asleep there for a minute because when I woke up Jake was standing in front of me. Might’ve only been a second I was out. Poor little baby tree.

“Wake up, Ev. You’re drunk.”

“Yes, I am. And you are an asshole, as aforementioned.”

“Then why are you here? We’re trying to move on, remember? That means not coming to this house.” He said ‘we’ to mean ‘me,’ like you would say to a little kid. Like, ‘we don’t put our feet on the table, do we?’ Asshole.

“I am. But I needed to talk to you. And plus this was going to be our house, but nooooooo.” I wasn’t at my best. Please know that.

“So talk.”

“Do you love her? That skinny, uh, skinny temptress? That was fast, wasn’t it? What is she, a cashier? A cashier? What happened?”

“Candice is not a temptress, she’s a waitress and a poet, and, yes, I do. As for what happened, I don’t think we need to go over that again.”
“Three years of my life, Jake. Three years. That’s a long time for people with biological clocks, you know. I won’t even tell you how old I am now. And how dead I am. My uterus is probably dead.”

“I know how old you are.”

“Well, it’s ruined now. Us, not my uterus. And I just wanted to make sure one last time that it had to be.” I was attempting to touch his sleeve in a sexy, demure way.

He swatted my hand. “What? Ruined? I guess when you put it that way, yes, it does have to be. Do we have to talk about this again? Now, in my driveway?”

“No, you’re right. I look like an idiot, as always. I should go.”

“You should,” he said. “Time heals all, Ev. I’ve been meditating quite a lot. Maybe you should try it. Get to know yourself.”

“Shut the hell up. Go sleep with your beautiful what’s-her-name and make lots of babies, zen-master-butthead.”

“Okay, goodnight.”

I flung open the car door, pushed myself in, and threw the driving boat that was my Lincoln Town Car into reverse. I smashed backwards through the line of Jake’s and what’s-her-name’s trash cans which shot a confetti cloud of papers and wrappers up into the air. Oh sure, they meditate but they don’t recycle?

“Ha-hah,” I said as I sped away like a cartoon villain. Jake just stood there at the end of the driveway watching me go. Or probably making sure I actually left.

I don’t know why I did that; it felt really good at the time. But then when I turned the corner out of his street, I felt awful.
I slept in my car in the beach parking lot at 47th because I couldn’t face the Mimsy waking up in the middle of the night, all disoriented in her nightgown, asking me questions and demanding to know when I was going to move on. I couldn’t face the stupid wicker balls in a clay pot on the desk in my girlhood room that I’d bought at the Home Depot for the entryway that some waitress was now probably using as a poet’s station. Or bower. Or garrett or whatever. It’s probably filthy and rat-covered in there now. My former would-be house. Like, oh, we’re artists, we’re scraping by, but we’ve got love. I imagine in ten years I’ll go there on Sundays in my slick career-woman convertible and pass out canned goods to their seven-to-ten barefoot children. Aren’t they darling, I’ll say to the washed-up waitress mom and she’ll thank me for my benevolence before I zoom off to a hair appointment saying Ciao! Silk scarf all blowing.

***

When I woke up I was like, what the heck, why am I in a parking lot? And then I remembered busting through those trashcans “like a bat out of hell,” as the Mimsy would say. She’d also say, I don’t know if you should ever show your face north of 64th Street again, missy. My jaw was stuck together and I had morning death-breath. Perhaps I made a mistake, I admitted. Glad I don’t have to do that again. Last time. Over it!

I wiggled my feet out of my slip-ons and opened the door of my car. The warm asphalt and sand felt so lovely on the bottoms of my feet. Yeah, it was nice, this end-of-summer-time. I walked down the brick path to the edge of the beach and leaned my stomach against the aluminum railing. Everything looked so...clean. The tall grass along the side of the path, the sun that was just a couple inches or so above the ocean, the sand
that no one was on, and the three surfers in the water, who I imagined are, like, the best of friends. Just black outlines with the sun behind them. That’s some frigging poetry, people.

My head was killing me.

I pulled into my driveway, got out of the car and saw that the back of it was sort of plastered with a mixture of dew and Jake’s paper trash. And I’d been just driving around casually like that. Great. Okay, not plastered, but, like, anyone walking by would know unmistakably there was trash all over my car. I’d deal with that later. If it’s been there all night and all morning, it can be there another twenty minutes. The teeth needed brushing, the parents needed good morning-ing. It was a new day. I opened the front door as quietly as possible and left my shoes on the porch.

“Well, well, well, look who’s back,” the Mimsy said, not looking up from the newspaper.

“I have to shower.”

The Mimsy stood up all of a sudden and went to the front window. She peered over her reading glasses. “Where have you been? Are you alone? And why is the Lincoln covered in trash? You’re going to have to take care of that, missy.”

“I will. Just give me a minute.”

“Okay, I’m not even gonna ask.”

“You already did.”

“Well, I don’t want to know! Unless it was a date. You know, you’re not getting any younger, missy.”
“Thanks.” I was feeling worse by the second. Everything that was so clean and fine was falling back into its old horribleness. The shower couldn’t even help, and when I got out I did everything to not look in the mirror because I knew it would make me feel even lower. I ran down the little bit of hallway between bathroom and bedroom and got in bed, closed my eyes, and proceeded to see the usual slideshow of things I needed to do for work and the faces of the people I’ve failed or disappointed, one by one by one.

***

“Morning, E! Mims told me to get a garbage bag out for you to use to clean up your car, so I put it on the front steps and weighed it down with some pretty cool sunglasses I found on the beach yesterday! I bet with a little superglue those babies could be back in action and looking really good. Why people ever buy new stuff is just beyond me!”

“Thanks, Ribs. Dad.”

“No problem. I’ll be in the back re-sanding the deck if you need anything. Project of a lifetime!”

“Okay.”

He jogged away.

The glasses he was talking about were two rainbow-polarized lenses scratched beyond repair from being under the sea probably since the 80s set in pink plastic frames with only one arm and two rusted joints. *Vintage.* Thanks, Ribsy.

I picked up the garbage bag. I heard someone coming up the road and tried not to make eye contact.
“Hey, Evelyn. Is that your car or a dumpster?” Mikey.

“Shut up, Mikey. Shouldn’t you be in school or something?” Mikey lived down the street. I used to babysit him, and I don’t know where I went wrong. He grew up to be a complete ass-butt. Ass with sass. Probably my own kids would, too, knowing my luck. Oh wait, that’s never going to happen.

“School is for chumps! Plus, I graduated.”

“I heard you dropped out.”

“Semantics. Plus, I would’ve been graduated by now, so what’s the diff?” He did a bunny hop on his bike. “But I am supposed to be at work. Machismo Burrito? Don’t tell anyone you saw me and I won’t tell anyone I saw you and your janky car. Dealio?”

He rode away. I was beginning to feel like someone was always watching me. I mean, not just Mikey. Like someone would always be there to laugh or say poor thing or just do oohs and ahhs like a crowd following a tennis match. That was a sad thought. But then the opposite might be even sadder, no one watching, and I’m not sure which one is more true.

I put on the pink sunglasses even though they sat at a crazy crooked angle and smelled like dead shark because I guess I didn’t care. I opened the garbage bag and patted the Lincoln like you would a trusty mare, like, ‘there, there, girl.’

At first, I wasn’t looking at anything. I wasn’t reading anything. Just putting stuff in a bag. And not because I was trying to respect Jake’s and what’s-her-name’s privacy, but just because. But then words started jumping out and I couldn’t help it. It was all pretty boring trash actually: spam from a bank, a coupon packet from the grocery store, a
grocery store receipt for $85.74, an Atlantic Sea Tours brochure (Jake works at a kayak rental place), a receipt from The Sports Authority, and a few clippings from the newspaper that I assume was the work of the waitress because I can’t remember Jake ever reading the newspaper. Whatever. Then, things got interesting. A half-ripped envelope with the return address: Cavalier Cryobank. It was postmarked last week, but the name took me back a few years.

***

“Listen, Ev, if you don’t want me to do it, I won’t do it,” said Jake. He was brushing his teeth.

“I don’t want you to not do it, it’s just sort of weird. It’s like freaking me out to think about you you-knowing in some room. And then someone else seeing your sperm? And then even weirder is that afterwards you might have some kids walking around that you don’t even know about? What if they want to find you?” I said and rolled in the bed onto my stomach.

“I don’t think they’re allowed. They have rules about contact and identity and all that. You can say, yes, let them come find me, or no way, never.” He spit. “So, I’m hearing that you don’t want me to do this?”

“I’m just worried about what might happen after.”

“I get that.”

“I want to have your kids. I don’t want someone else to. And what if we do have kids, and then there are more out there? It’s just weird. It would be weird for them. How would that talk go? What if they meet each other at summer camp by some crazy
coincidence like in that movie? Or worse, what if you do this, and then it turns out we can’t have kids! How sad would that be?”

“Okay, okay. I won’t do it. I know we need the money, so I was considering it, but I won’t.”

And then, I guess, he did.

***

Cavalier Cryobank is in a medical stripmall-type place in the Hilltop area. I drove over there, scouted it out, and parked in front of a Panera in case anyone recognized my car. The Cryobank had two doors. One said “Donors,” and the other said nothing, so I opened it. Inside, the place looked like a dentist’s office, except there were more people in blue scrubs and those blue hair bags walking around behind the receptionist’s counter. When it didn’t look like the receptionist was going to say anything to me at all, or even look up at me from whatever she was writing, I walked over to her. I think her eyebrows were being pulled up into her forehead by the tightness of her ponytail.

“Hi,” I said. “I’ve never been here before.”

“Great, great. Good. Fill out this form and I’ll see if we have any availability for a walk-in consultation today. We had a cancellation, so you may be in luck.”

“Thanks.” So they just let anybody waltz in here? Ha-cha.

The form started out pretty standard: name, age, height, weight, history of disease, but I started turning pages and saw that that was just the beginning. Income, relationship status, sexual history, drug history, education, reason for interest, home life. It was like the longest form of all time. I was just barely trying to explain the tragedy that is my
sexual history when a door opened and a man who looked like a toothpick in a lab coat came out.

“Evelyn? Hi. Hi, we can see you.” I followed him through the door, past some more blue scrubs, down a little hallway to a small room with a table and four chairs in it. “Please take a seat,” he said. “Did you get a chance to fill out the forms?”

“Not yet.”

“That’s not a problem. We can still discuss what we do here and what you’re looking for. Tell me a little about yourself.” Always, this question.

“Well, I work in communications. I grew up here and went away for school for a bit, then came back. I’ve always wanted to have a family, and I think this could be a good option for me.”

“Great, great.” He was typing things on an iPad that he held on his lap under the table.

“Should I say more? About myself?”

“If you’d like.”

“Well, let’s see. I’ve moved back in with my parents to help them out around the house. I’ve gotten really into exercise and keeping fit lately. I love the ocean and I just started volunteering with my mom picking up trash at Chick’s Beach every month or so. Does that answer the question?”

“Great, great.” More silent finger-typing on the iPad. “So, why exactly are you interested in conceiving in this way?”
“I’m not in a relationship and I want to have a child while I still can because … it’s important to me.” Great answer. Nothing sinister here, doc.

“Well, that’s actually a more common reason than you know, Evelyn. And in cases where women are financially stable and able to have a child on their own -- and of course I see that you’d have your family to help you -- we’re happy to make that a possibility. I think I’ve got everything I need at this point in the process. I’m going to introduce you to one of our technicians who will take a blood sample, do a quick examination if you have the time today, we’ll take a look at your forms, and our receptionist, Martha, will contact you about making a follow-up appointment with us.”

“Okay, thank you.”

“You have a nice day.”

“You also have a nice day.”

Boom. Gave them some blood, waved bye-bye to ponytail Martha, and sprinted back to the Linc-machine. What did I want? To drive back to Jake, big-bellied, and say, Look what you did? To do some joint custody thing for ten years until one night after too much wine we’d kiss over a kitchen table? Maybe love. Maybe revenge. Maybe just to take matters into my own hands. Maybe I was lightheaded from giving them a blood sample, but I was pretty sure I hadn’t felt so good in a while.

***

On the day of my next appointment the Ribsy intercepted me by the car.

“Morning, E! Come check out the pond. The fish are getting huge!”

“I actually have someplace I need to be? Running late.”
He was already walking over to the tiny pond he’d built in our front yard. “Check ‘em out!”

The shallow pool was full of koi fish. Small, but bright orange and white. They glowed.

“Mims calls that one Giddyup because it looks like it’s got a saddle. Now watch this.” He moved his arm across the pond, casting a shadow. The fish scattered.

“Training ‘em. Used to be they were just orange targets for the herons. They’d swoop down and bam! It was a massacre.”

“Wow.”

“Smart little guys and gals. Couple of the neighbors up the street bring their four-year-olds by to look at the fish. I bring out the can, let ‘em feed ‘em. That’s probably why the fish are so fat. Kids like ‘em and it’s fun to have kids around again. Reminds me of when you were little. That was probably my favorite time, when you and your brother were crawling around.”

“Things were definitely less complicated for me then. Being four.”

“Well, it’s been good to have you back home.”

“Thanks.”

“You know what the fish do in the winter?”

“What.” I looked at my watch.

“The pond freezes over. Last winter it was so cold and the pond is so shallow that it froze all the way through. I was so worried! The fish were there, just trapped in the ice.”
“Okay.”

“Don’t you want to know what happened to ‘em?”

“Go ahead and tell me,” I said.

“When it got warmer, the ice melted real slowly, and the fish, I thought they were dead, they thawed out, too. They were frozen all winter, for months! Just stuck there! But then, little by little, they came back to life. Better than ever.” He winked at me. “Crazy fish.”

“Hey, Mr. P!” Mikey rode by on his bike. I scowled at him.

Ribsy waved. “Good kid, but I think he was dropped on his head at some point.”

***

I was shifting my buns in the waiting room chairs. The same blue room. The same people in the blue scrubs. There was a lesbian couple looking nervous and happy, an older woman, like forty-five, a husband with his hand on his wife’s knee. A coffee table piled high with magazines. It was freezing in there.

It’s hard to imagine Jake coming in here through that “Donor” door and leaving behind a little topped-off cannister thanks to some old Playboys or whatever they have in there. Maybe it’s not that it’s hard to imagine but just that I don’t want to imagine it. Why? Was he that hard up for cash again? Is it like a political statement? Nonattachment thing? Would some other woman in this room also choose to have his kids? Had some women out there in the world already? Don’t think about it. Don’t think about it.

Think about: once, Jake went away for a week or so to visit cousins in Ohio. When he came back it was like everything had been Febreezed. Like it had all been run
through the laundry. All the fights, all the jealousy, all the bad, gone. When we made 
love we didn’t close our eyes or look away once and when I finally fell against his chest, 
he kissed me and said, “I love you. I love you so much. I love you more than anything.” 
More than anything. How can that just go away? Don’t think about that either. Stop 
thinking about that.

“Evelyn Perillo. Evelyn Perillo.”

“Yes, that’s me.”

“You can come this way.”

Another technician set me up in my own room with a big three-ring binder of 
donors’ baby pictures and current stats: height, weight, education, race. Binder of babies. 
Like buying a car.

“Maybe this one,” I said, running my index finger along the side of the page. Was 
it him? It was hard to tell. It was funny to think that all these babies grew up, and, like, 
something happened in their life to lead them to this place. Lots of stories there, I bet. Or 
maybe it’s just boring life. Just life doing its thing.

“All right, I’m noting that number as well. And don’t feel like you have to decide 
today. You can take your time with this part of the process.”

“Right, of course. Thanks.” She walked out of the room and left the door ajar.

The baby in the picture on the next page was just as smiley as the last one but 
seemed a little more with it. It was staring past the camera with eyes that looked about the 
spill. They were all starting to look the same, to tell you the truth. I began to think that 
maybe this wasn’t such a foolproof plan.
I went through all the files on my shortlist and then went back to the ones I’d marked and looked at the donor information.

Five-foot-ten, too short. Six-foot-one, too tall. Is it possible Jake lied about his height? Seems unlikely they would let him do that, and unlikely he would care enough to lie, but who knows--

“Whoaaaa, Evelyn. Whoa. Evelyn?”

I slammed the binder shut. “What? Mikey? What the hell! This is a private appointment. Private!” I was whisper-yelling.

“Yeah, but the door was wide open. Dude.” He looked around the room. “Dude. What are you doing here?”

“What are you doing here?”

He held up an empty sample canister. “Auditioning. They put those flyers all over town, like, ‘Make fifteen hundred a week.’ How could I not? What am I doing with all that sperm, right? Literally nothing. Literally doing nothing with it.”

I shuddered. “Please get out of here. And don’t tell anyone you saw me.”

He poked his head into the hallway to see if someone was coming then looked at me. “Evelyn, seriously, what the fuck? You could just ask anyone out there to bang you. You don’t need to pay for it. Go ask the people in the waiting room and you’ll see I’m right. Ask any one of them to bone you.”

“Are you trying to make me feel better? You don’t even know why I’m here.”

“I’m giving you a compliment that happens to be the truth. Go on a fucking date.”

“How old are you? Why are you giving me advice? Please leave or I’ll scream.”
“Okay. Fine, fine. Just, like, think about all the stuff out there, Evelyn. The fish?”

“What? The pond? Please stay away from my house.”

“In the sea, dumbass.”

“Get out. Go home.”

“Fine.”

Just then the technician walked in the door. “Hello? Can I help you?” she said, looking at Mikey.

“I...” Mikey looked at me.

“Oh, sorry. Yes, this is my, um, my--”

“Boyfriend,” Mikey said.

My jaw dropped. “Yes, my boyfriend. He was late working. But he’s here now.”

“Work, work, work. That’s what I do. In an...office. Building. TGIF, right?” He punched the technician lightly on the shoulder.

“It’s a Thursday,” said the technician. “But it’s wonderful you’re here. It’s nice to see such supportive partners.” She sat down at the table. Mikey gave me big eyes and slowly sat down, too.

He held my hand on top of the table. I kicked him under the table.

“Do you have any questions for me?” the technician asked Mikey.

“Well, so, um, yes. Yes, I do have one question. How big is a sperm? Your average sperm?”

“How big is one sperm?”

I started flipping through the binder again.
All big cheeks, big eyes, but suddenly one of the pages caught me. The xeroxed portrait was grainy and faded. A studio photo with a blue sponge-painted backdrop. I really felt like I had seen it before, maybe in Jake’s parents’ living room? And it did look like him. Fat, dark hair, young, so young. My baby would look like that. It would look like Jake. And Jake would be there, carrying it through the supermarket, strapped to his back. Or maybe I’d be carrying it by myself, picking up just one onion, just one potato, just enough. Even in my imagining of it the whole scenario seemed so much more quiet than when I was little. Me and the bro always screaming at each other, Mims spraying us with the kitchen sink hose, and the Ribs, young then, younger than me now, chasing us around, tossing us into the ocean like it was nothing. Would our baby have that? Quieter, I think. Much quieter. Mine. Mine. Not ours. Maybe ours. No. Mine.

“So what you’re saying is, I need to drink more water,” Mikey was saying.

“It couldn’t hurt,” said the technician.

“This one, I think.” I pointed at the page. They both looked surprised.


“Wonderful,” I said. Mikey tried to take my hand again.

“And let me look up the account.”

She turned to a large computer monitor in the corner of the room and pulled up Jake’s file. My hand was starting to sweat inside Mikey’s. I saw the scanned baby picture in full color then, looking right at me. Dimple on the left cheek. Freckle on the right. It
was unmistakable. And to see Jake one last time, looking at me, smiling at me, I was satisfied. It was easier to say goodbye to a Jake that never knew me.

“What do you think?” she asked.

Mikey was watching me. He was waiting for my next move.

“Could you just leave the photo up a second longer?”
Study Group for Healing

From where we were hiding we could see pretty much everything. A group of high schoolers were unloading beach chairs from the back of a lifted pickup down the block. The streetlight at the intersection of Atlantic and 57th turned from red to green. The Cavalier Hotel was poking out of the trees and into the sky. Suzanne popped a seedpod against my face. She held her hand over my mouth when a pair of legs walked past the bush we were crouched inside.

“When you get old your veins turn blue and pop out,” Suzanne whispered.

I plucked a few more seedpods from the bush and held them in my palm to see if I could keep myself from crushing them. Suzanne was watching the street.

The traffic light turned from yellow to red and Suzanne said, “Let’s go!” I squeezed my hand into a fist and threw the mush of green onto the ground, and we broke through the bush and kept running.

Suzanne lived across the street from me. In the morning her house would drop a shadow on mine. They were both made of wood painted taffy colors. On the sunny sides the walls were rough with splinters and the spaces between the boards were home to small translucent spiders. Both our lawns were tall with weeds gone to seed and heavy with the smell of oleander. My front walk was covered with the twiggy remains of recently deceased tomato plants. All over the neighborhood dogs lay under trees with their tongues out and their ribs heaving. It was summer. I was ten and Suzanne was twelve.
We kept running on the other side of the road, past Franny’s mom, who waved from her porch, past the house that looked like the Alamo that we said we’d live in when we grew up. We left our flip-flops at the wall and raced across the hot sand screaming. We reached the water’s edge at the same time and stopped. Little waves lapped over our feet and with each lap we sank further into the sand.

“You go in,” Suzanne said. “I don’t feel well today. My head.”

“You sure?”

“Go.”

I walked in up to my waist and dove under a wave. I came up and flipped my hair back.

“I’m a flippin’ mermaid!” I said, because I thought Suzanne was watching. She wasn’t. She had stretched out on the dry sand, so I waded out and sat next to her.

The teenagers we had seen were a few yards away in a nest of towels and magazines and solo cups. The music coming out of their stereo surrounded them like a forcefield. My older sister Izzy was with them, pretending not to know us.

“That guy is cute,” Suzanne said.

“Which one?”

“The one with the longish hair.”

I nodded. “Doesn’t he live around 49th?”

“Dunno.” Suzanne shaded her eyes to get a better look. “It’s time for me to go back.” she said, still squinting at them. She made a show of standing up and brushing sand off her thighs before heading up the beach.
We had become friends at the beginning of that summer, right when my mom’s ‘phase of imbalance’ began. Which meant a lot of the time she was out of town or paying people to wrap her in seaweed. What that all added up to was me spending days at a time at Suzanne’s. I was hardly at my own house. During the daytime we were hardly at hers either.

The first thing Suzanne told me about herself was that she was dying. She had been dying almost her whole life; she didn’t say how exactly. It’s why her dad moved the family to Virginia Beach in the first place. “Edgar Cayce felt it was the spiritual center of the universe,” he said, cupping his hand. Suzanne gave him a high-five, smashing the tiny galaxies he was imagining. I called him Mr. Kevin. Suzanne called him dad. He told me to call him Brother. I called him Mr. Kevin. Suzanne’s parents always had people staying in their house who they said were relatives. Who they called Brother and Sister. Her parents fed us raw vegetables and meditated in the living room. Suzanne would tiptoe around them and wave her hands in front of their faces until they’d open their eyes. Then they’d all laugh. The laughing was the part that surprised me, every time.

I asked her once if she had ever been to a real doctor to see if they could help. “Oh, no. Never. Mom and Dad wouldn’t have it. Plus, they don’t know about my kind of sickness.” Instead, she went to study group meetings. That’s how we met.

***

“In There is a River, Edgar Cayce writes about the Akashic Records, and it is through these teachings that we now know that accessing the knowledge and the healing
power of the astral plane can only occur through trance hypnosis.” Mr. Kevin led study group. I sat in the back of the room with my mom.

Suzanne’s dad was, as mom said, “a completely enthralling speaker,” and I also knew she thought he was handsome. I think everyone did. Both he and Suzanne, you couldn’t stop looking at them. They had moved here from California, where he’d also led a study group. I once asked Suzanne what it was like to have him as a dad, but what I was really asking was what it was like for him to know you. He knew my name, sure, but he didn’t know me. I think because I’d seen him speaking in front of a crowd so many times, having a regular conversation, whatever that is, was impossible. Even in response to the simplest questions, even across a dinner table, even when driving us in the old VW or tucking us in, I’d clam up. “Silence, too, is speaking,” he’d said once before turning away. I think I was also asking Suzanne what it was like to have a dad at all. “Best dad in the whole wide world,” Suzanne had said without a tinge of sarcasm.

“As we know,” he said. “Edgar Cayce’s own voice, lost for many years, was restored by reaching such a trance-like state. Through activating the blood comes healing, and through activating the mind comes strength. We use so little of our mind, and yet it’s connected, it’s the only way, to reach what binds us all to our past and future.” He paused. “Suzanne?”

I saw her get up from somewhere in the front and sit on the recliner next to Mr. Kevin.

“There is a body,” he said, which is how it always started. And as he continued reciting Suzanne closed her eyes and he touched her temples, her shoulders, her wrists.
***

After every study group the leader would send all the kids outside to the meditation garden where we were supposed to discuss what we’d learned but we usually ended up playing concentration or dangling our hands into the koi pond. That day, Suzanne came out a little after the rest of us. Even though she was so skinny, she was still the prettiest out of everyone, and she knew it. I knew that she knew it by the way she didn’t sit on the benches of picnic tables, but instead sat on the table, leaning back on her hands, or the way she wasn’t scared to stare at people, or the way the other leaders looked, for just a flash, afraid to touch her. Most girls we knew worshipped her, but I knew a handful who were Suzanne’s ex-best-friends. When I asked her about them she said they were bores and lumps who weren’t worth our time, so stay away from them. Don’t listen to them. Don’t believe anything they say.

A few of us girls sat on the rocks and sand in that area of the garden a hand-carved sign told us was called “Reflection.” The boys had disappeared to their own hideout.

“What does it feel like, the trance?” Rachel asked Suzanne.

“Oh, I don’t know. Really you have to feel it to understand. It’s kind of like falling asleep and when you wake up you feel amazing, like you’ve just come back from a nice trip,” said Suzanne. Rachel wanted to ask more questions.

“I’m supposed to do it next month for my eczema,” Franny said.

“Franny, that’s gross.”

“What! I am. It’ll be my first time.”
We all lived around the A.R.E. building, where study group was held. Because our parents were followers, so we were followers, too. The Association for Research and Enlightenment. With everyone living so close, there was always someone to play with, and there was always the ocean.

Suzanne perched on the rounded part of a large purple geode.

“Don’t sit on that,” Rachel said.

“My butt needs to be energized. It’s getting saggy. I’m like an old lady,” Suzanne said, and we all laughed and put our butts on it, too.

***

Some afternoons Suzanne’s dad would let us work with him at the A.R.E. “hospital,” which was a small house with blue awnings behind the main building. Besides leading, he was an herbalist, which to me meant he always seemed to be grinding things into powders and which to others meant he had drugs. Once when he came to a concert at our school in a collared shirt and dusty oxfords I realized I’d never seen him in clothes normal adults wear. He was always walking the grounds of the A.R.E. in only a pair of worn out jeans. When he worked inside or led he put on an unbelted blue cotton kimono. That was it.

Our usual job at the hospital was rolling joint after joint for the small pharmacy. We’d sit at a table in the back room and work away at a large jar of weed, stacking the joints tightly in little cardboard boxes.
“How are my little fingers?” Suzanne’s dad would say when he looked in. “I brought you some soda,” which is what he called bubbly water. Suzanne and I would drink it and pretend to get drunk.

“What’d he put in this stuff anyways?” Suzanne slurred as she made herself fall out of her chair.

By the time I stopped laughing I saw that she was sitting seriously and working again.

“I found out his name,” she said without looking up from her rolling.

“Whose?”

“Brady. From the beach. The cute one.”

“Oh. What about him?”

“I’m gonna get him.”

***

Up until this point I’ve only told you about Suzanne’s good days, but she had sick days, too. Days when I’d go over and her mother would open the door just a sliver and tell me, “Not today. Suzanne’s not feeling well.” There would be the days she’d have to go to bed at noon because she said she was so tired. There was the afternoon I saw the container of huge pills her dad had concocted for her. She picked the thing up and pretended it was a maraca. “Da-da-da dun dun! Da-da-da dun dun!” And then she said, “Ug, it’s such a drag being sick.” Some days she said she felt pain. She’d point to her chest, then her head, and then throw an arm dramatically over her eyes. Some days in school when our gym teacher wanted us to run around the block, Suzanne would say if
she did her heart would explode. Instead she would sit nymph-like on the bleachers and pretend not to notice the boys who’d stare at her when they jogged past. I had only ever known her with the sickness. I couldn’t imagine her without it, yet I never saw her show any symptoms.

“When did it start?” I asked in a rare moment of suspiciousness.

“Oh, a few years ago. We were in California and suddenly I felt just awful. I told my dad and the next time we had study group he brought me up to the front.”

She’d been at the front ever since, and she loved it.

***

We were in Suzanne’s bedroom sitting with our backs against the purple wall with our legs straight out in vee’s. The radio was on. It was too hot outside.

“God, I’m bored,” said Suzanne. “I wonder what Brady’s doing.”

“I don’t know,” I said.

“I bet he’s on the ferris wheel.”

“I bet he’s sitting on his butt in his house like we are.”

“I bet he’s on a yacht.”

“I bet he’s n-acht,” I said.

“Har har.”

I dragged a tupperware of old naked barbies out from under the bed. “Look at this,” I said. I picked two of them up and shook them in time with the music. Their matted hair barely moved. It had become one big hair. I put their arms up. “Dance, dance.”
Suzanne laughed. “You’re stupid,” she said. She picked up two more and starting
dancing them. She dropped one and picked up the only Ken doll. He was naked, too, but
his underwear was branded onto him. He could never really be naked. She stuck his arms
out and slow-danced him with a Barbie.

“Make them kiss,” I said.

She cocked Barbie’s head like we saw on T.V. and pushed their faces together.
She lay the Barbie down and put Ken’s already cupped hand over one of Barbie’s breasts
and moved him up and down.

“Ew! Stop,” I said.

Suzanne laughed. “What! That’s what they like! Big boobs!”
“Boobs!” I said, just to feel the word in my mouth. “My mom says her sisters got
watermelons and she got fried eggs and I was gonna get fried eggs, too.”

“That sucks for you!” Suzanne said.

“I don’t need them. I don’t even want them.”

“It’s not about needing them.”

Suzanne’s stick-thin mother walked past the door and looked in. She was wearing
the type of long, flowing skirt she always wore. I swished around her when she stopped. I
looked: fried eggs.

“What are you girls up to today?”

“Nothing,” we said.

“We’re bored,” Suzanne said.

“Well, it’s about time for your medicine, Suzy Q.”
“Now?” she huffed.

“It’ll take a second. Come into my room.”

Suzanne rolled her eyes at me as she walked away and mimed choking herself with a noose. I pretended to laugh.

I waited in Suzanne’s room for her to come back, but when the door opened again it was her mom.

“Sorry, sweetie. Suzanne says she’s not feeling well. She’ll have to see you tomorrow.”

I left out the back door.

***

My older sister’s room was dark and the walls were covered with pictures she’d cut out of magazines. She’d blocked her only window with a scarf embroidered with the portrait of a singer from her favorite band. His hair looked like a pile of black snakes and he was wearing lipstick. Sometimes when she wasn’t home I’d sit on her bed. I’d try on her clothes. Everything of Izzy’s had a smell to it I’ve never found anywhere else, like mildew, but sweeter. “Hormones,” said my mom.

I opened her desk drawer and took out a white letter envelope that was wedged under a stack of old language arts worksheets. The envelope was full of photos. I stepped back to make sure no one coming down the hallway would see me. My sister was in the photos. She was in each one, and only her. She was wearing black silk pajamas that our mom had bought. The pants hung low and loose on her hips and the top only had one button fastened. In some of them she was lying on a bed, butt up, or belly up, or on all
fours. In one her arms were above her head. She wasn’t looking right at the lens, but just past it, at the person holding the camera.

I heard the front door close and fumbled to put the pictures back in the desk. I was just leaving when my sister turned the corner.

“What are you doing in my room?” She wasn’t yelling.

“I was looking for something. Mom said she put one of my shirts in your drawer.”

“Did you find it?”

“No. I must’ve left it somewhere.”

Izzy narrowed her eyes and stepped aside to let me pass. “Okay,” she said.

“Mom says you’re watching me tonight.”

“Great.”

***

Our mom had left two foil-covered plates of steamed broccoli and macaroni and cheese on the kitchen counter.

“Where’d mom go?”

“Date,” said my sister through a mouthful of broccoli. “Still reaping the benefits of that A.R.E. singles retreat.”

I didn’t know there had been any retreat and couldn’t tell if she was joking, so I said nothing.

“How’s your little friend Suzanne? Still among the living?”

“Yes. And that’s not funny.”

She paused as if she were seeing me for the first time. “It’s kind of funny.”
“Can I ask you something?”

“Okay, sure. Unless it’s about study group. Or boys.”

“When don’t you go to study group anymore?”

“What did I just say!”

“I’m just wondering.”

She stabbed some macaroni before speaking. “It’s complete bullshit. I don’t need some wacked out shirtless dude telling me how to live.” She looked at my face. “And besides, I have other things to do.”

“But, don’t you think --”

The doorbell rang. My sister suddenly grabbed the collar of my shirt and said, “Listen, don’t tell mom anyone came over, or else.” Even though it was a threat, I was flattered; I was being trusted with a secret.

“Course not,” I said as she went to open the door.

Her friends came in and filled the house with loud voices and a low-hanging cloud of smoke. I retreated to my room.

***

A few hours later a lanky boy opened the door. A girl stood behind him. “Oh, sorry. Can we use this room? Do you mind?” He didn’t wait for my answer to lead the girl in and sit down on my bed. I walked out as they turned to face each other, her hand on his shoulder.

Outside the house it was dark and the only color anything looked, besides black, was a wet green. I walked across the street to the A.R.E. A small group of high schoolers
had spilled out of our house into the meditation garden. I heard the crush of a beer can. I heard one of them look at the sign for “Reflection” and say, “look, we’re in Erection.” I veered away from them and instead climbed the outside stairs to the roof of the building, where you can see the whole town.

I stopped short when I got to the top landing and found that someone was already there: my sister and some guy lying naked on their backs, side by side. Their bodies were bright in the dark. She turned her head to me and her unfocused eyes followed slowly after. I guessed that she would not remember any of this.

“Hey there, sissy. We’re healing ourselves,” she said as she turned her head back to the sky and closed her eyes. “With the moonlight.” She chuckled and he did, too.

“Is your name Brady?” I said to him, trying not to look at the dark area between his legs. I recognized his face. The longish hair. The cute one.

“My name’s not Brady anymore,” he said. “I can’t be labeled. I’m nameless. I’m the universe.” They both started to laugh again. I couldn’t tell what the joke was.

***

Mr. Kevin was leading study group again. I was sitting next to Suzanne.

“The concept of ‘The One’ is something Edgar Cayce wrote on quite a bit, but it’s not the way you hear about it in movies and all that, no. No sir-ee. ‘The One’ is someone you’ve met in a past life, loved in a past life, and so that feeling you get, butterflies, is recognition of your connectedness. So, you could have multiple people in this world who feel like ‘The One’ because you’ve met so many people in the history of your spirit.”

Suzanne pinched my thigh. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.
“What?”

“Listen.”

“It is important to confront them with a pure heart. A heart free of expectation and bile and poison and darkness and stress. Only then, in such an open and natural state, can such a connection be made. This is what we know as love and friendship.”

“To end this meeting we will call up a member of our group in search of healing. We will join hands and, collectively, we will form a conduit to a place of truer being. Suzanne, will you please come up?”

“Suzanne.” I elbowed her. “He called your name.”

That day the trance lasted longer than ever. Everyone was standing and sweaty, sweaty palm against sweaty palm. I felt faint and ill and it seemed like hours before Suzanne was woken up. She fluttered her eyelids open and the only light in the room was trained on her dewy face. I was mesmerized.

“We make slow but meaningful progress in this healing,” Mr. Kevin announced.

“How do you feel, sweetie?” I looked around the room: we had tears in our eyes.

“Better, so much better,” Suzanne said, and it looked like she meant it.

***

That afternoon we went to the beach. Suzanne was still glowing from her trance.

“You seem happy,” I said.

“I really felt something. Like everyone and everything in the world was looking at me. I could feel so much energy.”
I had never felt that way, and I suddenly wanted to hit her. I saw my sister walking down the beach with Brady.

“Oh my god, is that him?” said Suzanne. “Stars aligning!”

I nodded.

“Wait, is that your sister? Are they together? Did you know that? I’m going to talk to them.”

“Suzanne,” I said. But she was already walking away.

Brady and Izzy had sat down and were sharing a joint and a towel.

Suzanne plopped down next to them. “Is your name Brady?”

“Yes,” he said. He looked at my sister and smiled.

“Cool.” She flipped her hair and stretched her legs out. I had to admit, she looked beautiful.

“Can we help you,” said my sister.

“Oh, no. I just wanted to say hi.” She dusted a little sand off Brady’s shoulder. “I also wanted to let you know, Brady, that I feel like there’s something about you. I know you don’t know me.”

“I know you,” he said.

She looked delighted. “You do?”

“You’re the sick girl.”

She didn’t flinch. “I’m healing. I was just being healed today. Soon I’ll be fine. Better than fine. My dad’s a healer.”
“Suzanne,” my sister said, shaking her head. “I’m sorry, but it’s not real, dude. Trances don’t work. It’s all fake. You’re probably fine.”

“It’s not fake.”

“You’re not sick and you’re not going to die so stop telling people you are! Your parents are brainwashing you. That’s their job! Sorry but it’s true.”

“You’re wrong.” She stood up. “Your sister’s horrible,” she said to me. “Let’s go.”

“Suzanne,” I started.

“What?”

I couldn’t say anything. I looked at the little crab taking little steps across my foot. Suzanne kicked sand at me.

“Stay, then. You’re not the one and you’re not the one and you’re not the one. None of you are the one and none of you know anything about dying!” She ran fast up the beach, but I’m sure she could hear Brady and my sister laughing, and I’m sure she could hear me saying nothing to stop them.

***

When I knocked on Suzanne’s door a couple days later her dad opened it just a crack, like her mom did on the sick days. He was wearing the kimono. When he saw who it was he stepped outside.

“Sorry, Cassie. Suzanne doesn’t want to see anyone right now.” He lowered his voice. “She’s a little angry. I think it would be best if you didn’t come by for a while.” I turned to leave. He was trying to tell me that Suzanne and I could be friends again, that
it’d pass, but I knew I’d already become one of her ex-best-friends. “She told me about Brady, and your sister. The heart is… I’ll tell you what I told her, which is if you have questions about the writings, meditate. Turn it over, thinking about the ocean. We all used to be fish, remember? Shiny scales, all that.” He reached out with one hand and touched my temple, my shoulder. “Meditate, turning it over, thinking about the ocean…”

I tried not to listen, and words that would’ve once healed me, too, fell flat. I felt suddenly lonely knowing I would never go to a study group again.
Second Language

Let me tell you about my job:

The first heroic thing Beowulf does is cross the ocean to help Denmark. *What is ocean?* It’s big water. *What is water?* Water is like air but thicker, and you can drink it. But not ocean water. You can’t drink that. That makes you throw up. *What is ocean again?* It’s the stuff in between land. It’s salty. You know salt? Like salt and pepper? So, here’s this guy, Beowulf, and just look at the description of him. Turn to your books. He’s bigger than everyone else. He’s fought with a sea monster, and that’s telling us that he’s very what? Very… anyone? Very strong, he’s very strong. *What means strong?* Strong is when you can do difficult things with your body. *What is body?* Body is this; see what I’m pointing to? *Finger?* No, no, body is the whole thing. Finger is just a part of body. Do you get that? So, he’s come to this other kingdom. *What means kingdom?* It’s a place run by a king. The king is the guy in charge, like I am in charge of this room. *You our king?* No, no. I’m your teacher. *Teacher is king?* Teacher is not king; don’t write that down. *Teacher is kingdom?* Teacher is not king, dammit. *What means dammit?* Don’t write that down, okay. Please don’t write that down. Everyone hand me your notes. Let’s start over.

Let’s start over:

On one side of a folding table are Junha, Leo, Eric, and Sam Park. On the other side is me. The piece of paper taped to the door says in pencil *After-school ESL Homework Help, Subject: Literature.* They’re wearing hats that say the names of American basketball teams. I look like I haven’t slept in three days. They have acne and
very faint mustaches. I have acne and eye wrinkles. They are calm. I am doing a charade of yanking someone’s arm off. They are sitting. I am standing. I am now pretending to be Grendel who’s lost her arm. They are quiet. I am falling. They are still. I’m on the floor. They are silent. I am dying. They are bored.

Sam Park raises his hand. He is the best student in the class. He writes his name and the date on everything that’s ever been handed to him. The other boys steer clear of him. It’s never been attractive to be actually trying. And he smells.

“Yes, Sam Park?”

“I find it very...significant...that Grendel loses arm as arm is symbol to strength.”

“Symbol of strength. Good, Sam Park. Very good. Sam Park just brought up something very important, which is the notion of symbols. Who knows what a symbol is?”

Sam Park raises his hand.

“Does anyone else know? Junha?”

Junha is in a state of perpetual fear I will call on him, which is why I do it. Junha groans, says something in Korean, and puts his hands on either side of his head as if he might crush it. “Don’t know!”

“Leo?”

Leo wakes up when I say his name. Leo’s English is actually very good. The other students call him “cheatuh” because he went to school for two years in California. That’s cheating. He’s practically American, they say. He likes black people music. Cheatuh.
“Leo, what’s a symbol?”

“It’s like a flag.”

“How is a flag a symbol?”

Sam Park raises his hand.

“Eric?”

Eric hates it here. He hates being in this class. He hates being in this country. He hates learning this language. I can’t say I blame him. He takes the tests, gets straight A’s, does not engage. Everything he owns is shiny and new and not from here. All four boys were sent here by their parents to go to an American school and then an American college. Their parents are still in Korea, and the boys live here, in a place constantly disappointing them by its lack of public transportation, its weather, its food, built up by brochures of smiling young scholars of many races, essentially alone in some bare rooms in the rectory of the Catholic church next to our Catholic school.

“Eric?” Eric is looking through me. Not even out the window toward the ocean a few blocks away. He says something in Korean.

“English, please.”

Leo speaks up. “A flag is a symbol because it stands for something else.”

“Like what?”

“Like a country.”

“Good! Very good. Exactly. A symbol is something that stands for something else.”

Junha’s head is still in his hands. Sam Park is taking notes like a maniac.
They call me “Missy” because on the first day of class I told them to call me “Miss C.” “C” instead of my Czech last name that most native English speakers have trouble pronouncing. We’ve been over the difference. I’ve put the words on the board. We’ve practiced breathing. We’ve used mirrors and looked at our lips. I’ve spelled it out. Missy it is. The people have spoken.

I write the word ‘hero’ on the board. I also write heroic (adj.) and heroism (n.). “Beowulf is said to be a hero. Based on what we know about him, what does heroism mean?”

Sam Park raises his hand.

“Eric? Eric, what do you think?”

He lifts his head. “Someone who messes with other people, their business.”

“Okay, I can see how you could get that from what we’ve read. I can see it. But, no, not exactly. A hero does get into other people’s business, but why? How? Junha?”

“Hero...make better?”

“Sure, okay. Make better how?”

“Do things.”

“Let’s be more specific. Avoid ‘things.’”

Junha shakes his head. He is out of words.

“Leo?”

Leo sighs. “He’s a hero because he does things other people won’t or can’t because they’re scared or something.”

Sam Park writes that down.
“Good, Leo--”

“Can we go?” says Eric.

I glance at the clock. Time’s up.

Junha, Leo, and Eric leave their homework in a small pile in front of me. I sit down at the table and start grading immediately because if I’ve learned if you look away from the pile for one minute, it either grows or disappears. Both are bad.

“Bye, Missy.”

“Thank you, Missy.”

I look up when I realize Sam Park is still in the room. He’s writing in his notebook. I massage my temples.

“Please don’t yet erase the board, Missy.”

“I won’t. Take your time.” Unlike my other students, Sam Park’s pants are worn at the knees, and I’ve only seen him in this one shirt, but it’s always ironed. It reminds me of my own mother turning one of my ratty t-shirts inside-out, saying ‘good-as-new.’ Now that I’m older I know that worse things than having to wear ratty clothes can happen to you, but when I was young I wasn’t so sure. I was probably my school’s Sam Park. That’s a terrifying thought. I bet Sam Park would understand something about me if either of us could find the words for it. Instead I ask him, “What is Korea like?”

He seems confused by the question. “Korea is...very nice.”

“Aren’t you from Seoul?”
“No. I am from small-small village.” He squeezes together his thumb and index finger to show how small-small. “But very...beautiful there. Many people like you live there.”


He nods. “Yes. Like you. My house very beautiful there.” He takes out his phone and walks to my side of the table. I see him search “Korea Big House.” He chooses one of the many images of big houses and shows me. A stucco mansion clinging to a jungly mountainside. “This is like houses there, for example.”

“It’s lovely.” I am about to say, *It must be quite an adjustment living here.* But I do not. Sam Park uses pencils down to the metal band. Once I saw Sam Park eat chip crumbs out of a bag someone threw away. I walked into the room just as he fished it out of the trashcan. He hadn’t seen me, so I backed out of the room and made a big show of re-entering, sighing loudly, as if flustered, as if for the first time. He jumped and quickly tossed the bag away.

“Thank you, Missy.” He leaves the room.

I turn back to the papers.

Sam Park walks back into the room.

“Yes?”

“Missy, may I ask question?”

“Sure. What’s on your mind?”
He sits down on one of the folding chairs. He looks up at the ceiling, trying to read the pattern of dots there. “Do you think hero wants to make money?”

“Do heroes want to make money? Sure. I’m sure they do.”

“Is it not hero -- heroic -- to want to make money, be successful?”

Ah-ha. “Are you asking if it is unheroic to be motivated by money and financial success?”

He nods.

“Well, that’s tough.”

“Dragon is bad guy in story. Gold motivates Dragon. Gold--” he draws a circle in the air “--is symbol.”

“The dragon is a complicated character.” I put the grading aside. I can already see that’s not going to happen. “Heroes in stories are often motivated by wanting to do good for others. They are willing to sacrifice themselves for others. I don’t think heroes are necessarily motivated by money, but you can also do heroic things with money.”

“But I hear should get job with money, money, money -- all the time! My parents! My family. But I want to help others.”

“I think you can do both, Sam Park. You don’t have to be a big hero like in these epics. Those are just in stories. There are little heroes, too. You can do good things for other people every day. That is heroic.”

“But I think now my family wrong. Wrong to send me here. Wrong to tell me get a job. What then? One day I die? And then what?”

“I’m not sure I understand.”
“My money is only thing left? One day I die and not hero?”

“You’re pretty young to be worried about that. And plus, you’ve already traveled so far from your home -- further than most people ever go. That’s brave.”

“No, it is not brave. It is just duty. Could be home helping home, but here I am just going after money job. Why? You do not work for money.”

“Well, I do need to be paid. I like being paid. I don’t get very much money, but that is why I keep showing up. I suppose I wanted to help people learn. That’s why I became a teacher -- and there are downsides to every job, Sam Park. This isn’t all rainbows. But there are so many ways to help people. You can’t generalize about the money bit too much.”

“Rainbows? But what good is being banker?”

“Oh, bankers do good things.”

“Like what?”

I can’t believe I’m defending bankers. “Like, help others organize their money. Save their money.”

“Money! You see!”

“Everyone has their own priorities. Look, Sam -- I think if you’re intelligent, which you are, you should try your best to do something good rather than just move money around and rather than just try to get rich. But, there are always other factors. Family, commitments. Things get complicated. Like the dragon. Things got complicated for the dragon. He thinks the gold will keep him alive. People start to think that, too. But
I think there’s always a choice. You always have a choice.” I hope I didn’t just get Sam Park kicked out of his family.

He nods, but I’m not sure he understands. “I agree, Missy.” He stands and does a little bow. “Thank you, Missy.”

Now I can erase the board.

***

Only a few days after my conversation with Sam Park, I’m walking across the parking lot to my car. It’s warm and just getting dark and I’m leaving school. My car is the only one left in the lot, and something in the air or the din of bug-noise means summer is close, and it gives me that rare butterfly feeling that must be a holdover from when I was still in school and summer meant everything. Just the anticipation of it.

Across the street I see Junha sprinting towards me. I consider hiding. He doesn’t look before crossing the road.

“Missy! Missy!” When he reaches me he puts his hands on his knees and bends over to catch his breath.

“What is it?”

That look I know so well comes across Junha’s face. He’s trying to form the words. He’s trying to form his mouth into the words. He puts his hands on either side of his face.

“Take it slow; it’s okay.”

“Eric, Leo…” he begins windmilling his arms.

“Dig? Run? Swim? Swim!”
“To house.”

“House?... Wait, The House?”

There’s a landmark in our town. It is simply called “The House” because it is not a real landmark. Years ago a storm came and the then-beach was wiped. The cabins that used to be there were levelled and washed away. The House is the only one that is still standing, and it is barely doing that on its rotted pilings, hovering just feet above the water’s surface and some sixty yards offshore. Every year the sea level rises and the beach gets thinner and the town gets smaller and and the water gets closer to The House and The House gets further away. People still swim out to it. I hear you can get inside if someone gives you a boost. I’ve heard kids who’ve been inside say it’s like they didn’t even know the storm was coming. Shoes by the door. Photos on the fridge. But stinking like fish and everything waterlogged -- like the place was pulled up from the ocean floor rather than it slowly falling in.

Leo is nodding. “And… they…” He rolls his eyes back and wiggles his head. He makes a choking sound.

“They’re in trouble?”

“And Sam Park… try--”

“Sam Park is with them.” I drop my bags, start running toward the beach and hear Junha running behind me.

“Can they swim?” I yell back to Junha.

“They Korean!”
I cross the sand and stop at the edge of the water. Junha catches up with me. The ocean is completely calm. No sign of anyone, no sign of Sam Park. No sign of Eric or Leo. Just The House.

“Where are they?”

Junha looks surprised. He shakes his head.

“Could they have come out of the water?” A difficult construction, but he seems to get it.

Junha shrugs, but his eyes are wide.

I call 9-1-1 and tell them where we are and jump in the water. Like almost every other time I’ve jumped into something, I immediately regret it. This is my job. I should have become a banker. Everything I said before, forget it.

I come up for air and tread. I look around. I stupidly feel around with blind limbs. Stupid, stupid. The House looks even farther away from here than on the shore. Junha is standing on the beach stick-straight.

I start to breaststroke out and think with each alternating movement, they’re dead, they’re alive, they’re dead. I stop again and listen for something. I call their names. I shout. I look back at Junha and he’s still there. Waves come and I swallow some water. It tastes like the pickle juice I used to drink to cure hangovers and the association makes me nauseous. They’re alive, they’re dead, they’re alive, just keep moving. Oh, you just had to give him a hero speech. You just had to. The one time someone listens to you, takes something to heart, tries, they drown. Great. They’re dead.
When I finally swim up to The House, I hug one of its pilings and feel the inside of my arms being scratched by barnacles and soft splinters. I manage to call, “Leo, Eric….” No response. Barely hanging to the piling, I let myself wonder for just a moment what will happen to me. My job. If I should just… drift. In the cold….don’t be stupid--

“Missy!” Eric is poking his head out of a window.

“Dammit, Eric! God damn you!”

“Vocabulary is advanced, Missy.” He yells something inside the house in Korean.

“I’m so fucking glad you’re alive. Fuck. Fuck.”

“Stay there. We coming down.”

“We’re coming down,” I say. “Where’s Sam Park?”

Eric and Leo are able to grab my arms and lift me up to what is left of the front door. The kids were right. The house is preserved in slime. Grey floral wallpaper curls off the sides of the living room, there are large cracks above every doorway, the stairs are partially collapsed, a fat gull sits in a leather recliner and looks at me like, what?

“Where’s Sam Park?” I yell at the gull.

Eric says something to Leo in Korean.

“What? Where is he? English only!” I say.

“He’s in here,” says Leo. He looks scared.

I find Sam Park horizontal on a saggy bed. His eyes are closed. “Sam!” I say. I shake him. “Sam!”

“We were fine,” Leo says over my yelling. “Eric and I were fine just swimming. Sam Park is always trying to tag along. He followed us out here. He couldn’t keep up.”
Eric says something in Korean. Leo is starting to cry.

“What are you saying?” I say and turn to Leo. “What did he say?”

Eric looks guilty. I keep shaking Sam Park. “Sam!”

“He said he’s a stupid country person.”

“He is,” Eric says. He curses; those sound the same in any language.

I put my mouth on Sam Park’s and blow. I do it again. Eric is pacing the room. Again. Again. I hit his chest. Sam Park coughs sludge and flutters his eyes. The first words he speaks are in English: “I am fine.” If I had handed him a piece of paper then, I bet he would have written his name on it. For the first time since becoming a teacher, I am truly proud.

I feel the sudden urge to thank them, or say something to cement the moment, or teach something, make a cross-cultural connection, tell them I’m going to be a teacher for the rest of my life because of this, when all three boys launch into a flurry of Korean. Anger, then smiles. Embraces. Leo gestures distance with his hands. Sam Park responds. He looks thrilled to be alive, but mostly because he’s finally made it with them. He’s in.

Eric is doing a charade of someone drowning. They are laughing. I am standing. They are loud. I am still. I try to say something, but I can’t break into their circle. I try to understand, but I don’t, so I just look out the grimy window for the boat I hope is coming to save me.
The Inestimable Dr. Kliks

My mother, besides being a school librarian, an expert quilter, and a muumuu-wearing Samoan, was a beekeeper almost her whole life. In the few childhood memories I still have, her bees are always there, getting stuck in my hair or crawling across a plate of watermelon. Even as I got older I remember coming upon lone bees in our house and stupidly apologizing for disturbing whatever they had been doing. It’s true: they’re good at looking busy.

I never fell in love with bees like my mother did. Maybe it was jealousy; maybe it was my way of rebelling. Even so, it was impossible not to absorb some of the bee facts that she was always using as metaphors for whatever angsty situation I was going through. I also never fell in love with Virginia like she did. Even though she moved to the United States as an adult and I was born in this country, it meant so much more to her. She was one of those immigrants that fell right into step. She was charmed by everything: the paved roads, the winters, the pineapple welcome mats, the skinny neighbors, the new breeds of bees. She was proud to be here and somehow felt like she belonged.

And besides, neither the bugs nor the country ever really took to me either.

“My bees know me,” my mother would say. “Isn’t that something? They recognize their keeper. Now, if you spent more time out there with me they would know you, too.”

The bees, it seemed, only had room for one human personality in the bundle of nerves generously called their mind. When I saw her last I wasn’t sure my mother had
enough room either, which is why it was so surprising she mentioned someone about whom I had never heard.

***

My mother’s condition had worsened, so we had moved her into the guest bedroom of my sister Elei’s house. She still lived in the neighborhood where we grew up and I was visiting from out of town for a few days before I left the country. I was carrying a bowl of rice to my mother’s bedside when Elei stopped me in the hall.

“Talia,” she said. “You shouldn’t be going right now.”

We’d had this conversation. “It’s a short contract, I told you. I know it’s not the best time, but it’s a really great consulting job. How many actual Samoans work in Samoan development? And there’s so much change happening there. It’s been, what, ten years since I’ve been? More? It’s an honor, really,” I lied. “I want to see home. And I’ll be on the next flight if something happens. I’ll call the whole thing off.”

“Something’s already happened. And you’re only half Samoan.”

I don’t remember what I said after that, and maybe I said nothing and walked past her into my mother’s room.

***

“Hi, Mom.”

“Hello! How’s Elei?”

“Elei’s good. She’s cleaning.”

“Elei’s here? She’s not supposed to get back from college for another week!”

“Elei graduated fifteen years ago.”
“That’s a hoot. I’ll have to tell Elei that when she gets home. She usually rings me on Thursdays, but you know how forgetful she can be, ay ya.”

Here, she lapsed into silence and her eyes looked through the walls of the turquoise room to some other time. “I should check on the girls.” That’s what she called her bees. “It’s going to be a hard winter for them. They can take it, but it’s going to be hard.”

“Okay, Mom.” Her bees had been sold a year ago to an old man who taped their hive shut and drove off with them in the bed of his blue Chevrolet.

“Talia!” She screeched, perhaps just recognizing me. “You said you’re going to Samoa?”

“That’s right.”

“Look up a man there named Michael Kliks, if he’s still alive. He’s a cousin. And he’s a beekeeper. We were friends growing up, and he’s so white I doubt we’re really related, but a cousin’s a cousin.”

“I’ve never heard you talk about him.” My mother had never gone back to Samoa. Dad took us the one time Elei and I made the trip and he’s not even from there. At first she claimed it was because of the cost, but as time passed I think she’d just moved on.

“So, who is he?” I said. Trying to find out things I didn’t know about my mother was taking on a new urgency. Who would remember these things now that she barely does? In a hive, they say there’s a collective memory; with people, things just get lost. Even I have a hard time remembering anything about when I was in elementary school. Who were my teachers? Who were my friends? When I learned about my mom’s disease
I immediately started to examine myself like someone might after being in an explosion. Have I been hit? Arms, legs, is it all there? I found gaps in my memory that I, suddenly paranoid, felt as strongly as if I were missing a hand. What happened to those lost hours? Days? Years?

Mom suddenly said, “You know what’s so funny? What’s a funny English joke? He’s a beekeeper in Apia! Like apis! Get it, Elei?”

“Elei’s downstairs. I’m Talia.”

“Elei’s here?”

***

I found out when I landed in Apia that my mother had died during my sixteen-hour flight. I called my sister back and told her I’d get on a plane home immediately and she said, insisted, “No, stay. You wanted to see it. See it. Then come back. Seriously, Tal. She was so proud of you going over there. Seemed so unlike you.” I couldn’t tell if she meant that to be a compliment or not.

After we said a terse goodbye I stuck my face into an airport water fountain outside of the men’s room and let myself cry. Even though I was sure my weeping was ruining the mood for the lei’d tourists walking past me, I couldn’t stop, and I didn’t care that they saw. I hefted my bags off the carousel and stepped out into the humidity and damp that would surround me until I left the island.

***

The Planning and Urban Management Authority offices in Apia are deep in the Fiama Mataafu Faumuina Muliniu II building that juts out like an accident into the
harbor. Everyone calls it FMFMII. When I walked through the office for the first time I was surprised to see tabletops covered with the same land use permits that covered mine back home.

She said, “And this will be your desk during your stay. Let me know if you need any help finding anything or any help with technology. Someone should come by later today to get you logged into our system and get your mail set up, so don’t worry about that. I see Mr. Tanaka has already left you some reading material. It’s an exciting project you’re joining.”

I had already forgotten her name, this poor office person tasked with showing me around. She was handling it nicely enough. She actually seemed to genuinely care about making me feel welcome. Perhaps this is one of those cultural differences. That island kindness.

When she left, I sat in my musty chair and picked up the bound report labeled in plain black typeface, “Manoa Valley Development Proposals.”

***

Apia is just a name. It was given to a cluster of forty-five villages that the country is trying to make into one city. Some of the villages are shiny blocks of wealthy financial buildings, others have the thatched look of colonial trading posts. My job, supposedly, was to begin to think about how to merge those worlds together and build up the Manoa Valley so that more people could live in the city in better conditions, but I couldn’t focus on details, couldn’t tune myself in to the research I was doing on site visits. I had wanted to feel something when I came here -- a feeling of belonging. I wanted to see other brown
people. I wanted things to make sense, but all I could hear again and again was my mother, maybe asking in her last hours where I was. Or more likely, where Elei was. I could hear her voice. There was no other feeling.

After my first week, I was sent to interview a resident of the Manoa Valley about the development proposals. During our conversation the old woman said, “We don’t want it to change, my husband and I. I want Apia to be prosperous, but there are so many ways to be that and live well. We’ve been doing it for a long time now. I know there are problems with all the cars people are buying.” I transcribed in messy shorthand onto a clipboard. She paused and looked at me. “You’re not from here, are you?”

“No exactly. I…

“You look like it but you’re not.”

I have to say, though, alone, so far away, with my ears filled with the shush of waves and everything so heavy with moisture, was like being in a landscape designed for grief. That’s what the tourism industry got wrong. The tropics aren’t a place for romance and family fun; they’re a place of isolation and decay. Walking home from FMFMII to the spartan apartment that housed my still-unpacked suitcases I let my mind drift away from my job and from that interview. It wasn’t until that day, as I arrived at my doorstep and had to dig through my bag for my house keys, that I remembered Michael Kliks. And how she had looked, remembering him. At once, finding him, not a planning solution for Apia, became my only concern. It would be like finding a piece of her, preserved in honey.

***
The first internet search I did for Michael Kliks brought me to the site of the Samoa Beekeepers’ Association, where “Dr. Kliks” was presiding as its leader. The honeycomb-themed website said the monthly meeting was going to be held at a house in the back of the Manoa Valley. I marked it in my calendar and emailed the contact listed telling them that I was new, and I wasn’t really a beekeeper, but that I’d be attending. I never heard anything back.

On that day I veered from my normal walking route and started the climb up the steep grade of the road to the location the website had listed. It was still golden afternoon when I started, but as I got higher, the sun got lower faster, and soon it was twilight. I could look down and see the valley laced in green, dotted with white, square houses, then roads, then fat hotels, and then the expanse of the Pacific receding into a haze. Even though it couldn’t be more different, the view reminded me of Virginia Beach. Beach towns all over the world have something in common that’s hard to describe. There’s a laziness to them -- a lazy, ungrateful beauty.

By the time I got there I was high up on a mountain built like a wall, the roads hacked into its upright side. The house was vertically stacked and precariously perched, like a snaggle tooth. I was surprised to find it almost completely dark inside. My eyes focused on a movement behind the dusty screen door.

“Hello?” I said. “I’m here for the meeting?” There was silence. A prehistoric-sounding birdcall echoed from deep in the valley.

Finally a voice cracked out of the dark doorway. “Well, you’re the only one!”
The door was pushed open and there stood a small, weathered white man. This was Dr. Kliks -- contentious president of the Samoa Beekeepers Association, expert in tropical diseases and infections (retired), owner of the Manoa Bee Company, and, as I was about to discover, a completely unpleasant, yet intriguing, curmudgeon.

All my life I’ve wished for a clearer path. I wanted to know exactly what to do next. I wanted someone to tell me, and that feeling had only grown since my mother died. Bees, she would say, do not suffer from lack of purpose. They move with certainty and die without hesitation. They are born and they are given a job. If you excel through the ranks quickly and prove yourself to be a good worker, only then can you venture out of the hive. You can also, of course, be the queen. But there can only be one. And anyone can be raised to be queen. Sometimes the nurse bees raise several queens at a time, and once the first hatches, she goes around and stings her queen sisters before they are born, killing them. If they all hatch at once, they fight, and whoever lives becomes queen. They are powerful from the beginning, and ruthless.

The unwavering largeness of Dr. Kliks’ myopic eyes staring me down from the doorway told me immediately that he was no worker. He was a queen.

“Well, you’re already here, so come in,” he turned and let me follow him into the darkness.

“I’m Talia. I just moved here.” He didn’t appear to have heard me. My eyes adjusted slowly. The inside of the house was filled with unidentifiable skulls, tribal statues, brassy trinkets, dusty framed drawings of Maori tribespeople, yellowed maps,
piles and piles of books, and a large muted television set to the news. Dr. Kliks was still shuffling away toward the kitchen.

“Those asses at the Beekeeper’s Association tried to make me quit! Slugs! I told them, I didn’t even want this damn job! Give it to some other poor sap. Anyways, no one comes to the meetings anymore, and they’ve started a new group. The ‘Society of Beekeepers of Samoa’ or some horseshit, what!”

“I’m sorry to…”

“Not that we don’t have enough to do around here. No, we’ve got our hands full at Manoa.” Here, he turned, and I saw his magnified eyes again.

“It looks like you’ve traveled quite a --”

“Yes, I used to travel for my work. I studied meningitis, and the things that carry it.”

“What things carry --”

“Slugs! They ooze it onto fields and crops, and the epidemic spreads, and then, a people, gone, you see. Slugs.”

“I had no idea.” We were standing across from each other in his little museum of a living room, eyes locked. Suddenly he looked away.

“Bees, of course, are a very different story. Shall we go on a tour?” He motioned toward the hallway and whatever lay beyond.

***

Queen bees do not just lay eggs. They set the tone for a hive. If a hive is aggressive, it’s because of the queen. If a hive is dirty, it’s because of the queen. If your
hive is not to your liking, you find the queen and kill her and replace her with a queen that has been bred to be gentle or clean or productive or deadly -- whatever you want. She controls all the others.

“Come!” Dr. Kliks had disappeared around a hallway. He was walking very fast, and speaking hurriedly, with excitement, gesturing from one thing to the next with his veiny hands.

“Here, you see, I catch the rainwater and it’s funneled down into here. You see it? This tube takes it to my fish tanks there where I raise tilapia -- very tasty. I keep my compost in these bins and pull out this tray to get the fly larvae from it. They just fall down. I use those to feed my tilapia, you see? We take the compost in buckets here to my coffee plants, and they grow and grow, and we roast the beans once every few months! It’s all self-contained, what?”

“I didn’t say anything.”

The whole operation was built on and over a rickety, wooden porch that poked out from the house into the abyss. Bees zipped past my ears so fast they were just a fading sound in the near-darkness.

“You’ll be helping with the bees, is that right? Hello!” He yelled back into the house.

“I didn’t know --” It was at this moment that two young men emerged from the doorway. One had blond hair, almost white, and pale skin like sand. He stepped forward.

“Hello, I’m Peter. I’m touring you,” he said with a heavy Eastern European accent.
Dr. Kliks began to walk back into his house. “Take her to the queen rearing room, Peter!” He yelled over his shoulder.

“So, is Hiromi,” Peter said, motioning towards the Japanese man behind him.

“Hello,” said Hiromi.

“Please to come in,” Peter said quickly as he pointed back into the doorway. We filed through into the orange light.

***

The buzz inside the room was deafening. The space was filled with tiny hives, hives behind glass, and little wire cages housing angry queens suspended from the ceiling.

“Terrifying,” I said to them. “Bees still kind of terrify me. And this set up isn’t really helping.” Neither responded. I went on, “How did you come to work for Dr. Kliks?” They were both standing motionless by the door and looked from the bees to me as if surprised I was still speaking to them.

“Work exchange program,” Peter said. “I was working with bees home in Latvia. Now here.”

I looked at Hiromi.

“I needed a job and the pay’s decent. So, now you’ve seen the queens. That’s pretty much the tour. We extract out here on the balcony. 1,800 pounds of honey last year, and some good quality pollen.”

I followed them out of the queen rearing room. We all put our elbows on the balcony railing and looked out into the valley darkness. Hiromi lit a joint.
“Plus, it’s free rent.”

“You live here? With him?”

They both nodded. “I guess it’s kind of weird, but it’s not bad. We have to wake up super early anyway. It’s kind of nice to already be at work. You’re moving in, right?”

Hiromi took a long draw after he said this, passed it to Peter, and looked at me. “Kliks mentioned it.”

“What? No, I’m just visiting. This is the first time I’ve ever met him, so no.” I declined the joint Hiromi held out to me.

“Oh, okay,” Hiromi narrowed his eyes just a little, maybe from smoke, then looked back at the valley. “He must’ve been talking about somebody else.”

When I had told my mom I was nervous about my first day of high school, instead of giving me advice she began talking about what happens to a wasp that goes into a hive to steal honey. I think she loved telling me about this because it is gruesome and horrifying and makes the idea that bees are cute little bugs in furry coats impossible to maintain. The guard bees form an inescapable sphere around the wasp, and while stinging it, they raise the temperature within the sphere so high that the wasp explodes. “So, Tal, it could be worse. High school’s not that bad.”

Hiromi, Peter, and I stood in silence for a few minutes and I began to think about how stupid I was for not going home. This wasn’t my home. I should be with my family, but here I am, with these two guys on a balcony. But I had to ask Dr. Kliks about her and collect whatever he knew.

“So, do you sell the queens?” I said.
“Usually do, but not now,” Peter said. “Saving them for special project.”

Hiromi smiled.

“What kind of project?”

“I’m sure he’ll tell you about it. It’s stupid,” Hiromi said. “But somebody’s got to do it.”

He and Peter laughed like he had told a joke.

“Time for dinner,” Peter said.  

***

Peter and Hiromi led me upstairs and then disappeared into the kitchen. I heard the popping of a stove lighting. In the main room, where I was left, the gigantic T.V. was still set and muted on the endless stream of news. Dr. Kliks shuffled in carrying a bottle of wine.

“Mead! Not wine,” he said. “1967. I only have a few bottles of this stuff left, but we should toast to the Beekeepers’ Society and all those asses who claim to be in it. Good riddance!”

“Yes. Shame on them,” I said half-heartedly.

“Come, sit. My wife used to sit just here and watch the news with me. How she loved the view from here. And the news.”

“I see.”

“It was just like this.”

“How nice. So, Dr. Kliks, what do you do with those queen bees?” I said, trying to work up the courage to ask about my mother.
“What! They didn’t tell you? I was hoping you could help us. You seem a reasonable person and any reasonable person would want to help stop a great injustice, you see.”

“Slugs?”

“What? No! Not slugs this time, not that I know of, my god.” He looked pensive for a moment, then went on, “No. Have you heard of the plans to develop Manoa Valley?”

I faltered. “I’ve heard, but I don’t know any specifics, really.”

“Well, to make it short, those hypocrites at City Hall are planning on destroying a major bee foraging area that should be a sanctuary. Even the houses that are already here are too much! And now this!”

“So what are the bees for?” I asked, though I felt I knew the answer.

“I’m glad you asked. I’m very glad.” He reached under the coffee table and pulled out a large schematic drawing.

“The valley.”

“Yes, very good. And you see the dots there. That’s where I’m going to place the hives. The developers won’t stand a chance!”

“You can’t be serious. They’ll just get exterminators. They’ll kill all the bees you put there, and who knows what else in the process. I think, I mean I’m pretty sure it’s going to happen, the development.”
“Sure! Sure? That surety is why we must act. Me and the bees! And exterminators won’t be able to do much against the queens I’ve raised. Special breed. Beauties. Not exactly hospitable.”

“But what about the people who live in the valley? What about the people the city hires to get rid of the hives? You want them to get hurt?” I suddenly saw a horrible headline flash in my mind. And the development proposal that would soon include my name.

“Well, I don’t want to say yes, but it is sort of necessary for this plan,” Dr. Kliks blinked at me through his thick glasses and attempted to hold my gaze for what seemed like too long.

“Dinner is ready!” Peter and Hiromi came in carrying two hot plates of salted, mashed taro, long beans, and roast chicken. Dr. Kliks popped the top off of the mead and I thought perhaps that his whole speech had been a joke.

“Drink up, Tal. This is special stuff here. And this, you see, is a kind of celebration. You have to fight. You have to fight. You have to remember.”

“Why did you call me that?” I asked. Dr. Kliks looked at me. Hiromi stopped chewing and Peter’s forked stopped in midair. “Only my family calls me that.”

Dr. Kliks nodded.

“You know who I am?” I asked.

“Of course I do. You look just like your mother. You speak just like her. Plus, your name is a giveaway. When you emailed I knew.”

Even the bees seemed quieter.
“So you know she died.”

Dr. Kliks sat back against the couch and relaxed his shoulders. “I hadn’t heard, but I haven’t heard from her in so long.”

“Before I go, can you tell me something about her? Something from when she lived here?” I saw him smile and sensed things were pooling in Dr. Kliks’ memory. Probably things he could never convey to me as much as I wanted him to.

“Let’s see. There was a little bit of forest between our houses. And the nun that taught our class, she was a pill! Your mother walked with her sister to school. Her mother was so kind to me. And her father, so quiet. But he knew a hundred jokes. The old city was so green. How funny, thinking back on it now. We learned about bees together, did she tell you? Our neighbor, Mr. What-was-his-name? Mr. Conway? Conrad? Englishman. He kept bees. He would let us have a look if we weeded part of his garden, the sneaky bastard. We loved it. Before I turned ten I probably thought your mother was my sister, though of course we looked nothing alike. She was probably twice my size then. Did she tell you to come see me? That’s very like her. Very sneaky. Talia?”

I ducked my face into my hands and saw my mother there, but her as a child, and her growing up and having me and seeing me as a child and me growing up and seeing her.

“I’m sorry,” Dr. Kliks said, pouring mead into a glass and trying to get me to hold the stem of it. I didn’t look up from my hands. “I loved her and I’m sure she was an unforgettable, extraordinary mother because she was an extraordinary person. She was
when we were kids, and that was before we knew anything about anything. You should be glad you had such a mother.”

“She’s dead. I should never have come here. She needed me and I left her. I left.” Hiromi and Peter were still watching us. “What are you looking at?” I yelled at them.

“Tut, tut, Tal. She’s not dead. Not to us. I remember her.”

“And you’ll die.”

“Yes, and then you’ll remember her.”

“And then I’ll die.”

“She would’ve liked this view, don’t you think?” Dr. Kliks was looking out the large doors to balcony. He was far away. He had the same look that my mother had the last time I saw her. Perhaps they were thinking of the same memory, something I would never know. The Manoa Valley was a dark green and the moon had just risen. The few houses deep in the jungle glowed like coals. The whole place was buzzing, the house, the forest, all of it. That day we’d decided on the winning development proposal. It was called ‘A New Apia.’ With it, the Manoa Valley was set to get condos, new roads, the works. Construction would start in four months and in eight I could leave. I could see the swinging cages of the queen-rearing room from where I was and thought, maybe the queens would fight hard enough. Maybe they would win.

“You’re right. She would’ve liked it,” I said. And then I could hear her saying, “But it’s no Virginia.”
A Thief’s Funeral

Storm Lacey woke up when he heard someone come up the back stairs. The person waited a few moments before knocking, then whispered, “Storm!” through the open window. He was pretty sure it was Paula, and when he didn’t respond and she kicked in his screen door, he knew it was her.

“I need to talk to you,” she said.

Storm was on the couch next to last night’s take out. “It was unlocked,” he said. Paula was standing in her Virginia Beach PD uniform in a ray of streetlight.

“What time is it?” he asked.

“About 4:45 am.”

When Paula drove her squad car to his apartment, which wasn’t often, Storm’s neighbors usually thought he was being busted for something. It wouldn’t be the first time.

“To what do I owe this --”

“Remember Donovan Au? From when we were kids? You knew him much better than I did, obviously.”

“Yeah, of course. I haven’t seen him for about fifteen years.”

“I think he’s dead.”

Storm wasn’t sure how to respond. He listened to the shushing of the waves a mile across his neighborhood, Shadowlawn. During these quiet hours, when the wind was right, sometimes you could hear the surf all over town.
“Looks like your furniture is made out of old pizza boxes. Let me buy you breakfast. The Belvedere?”

***

Paula stood on her toes to say their order into the window and Storm sat down at one of the wooden picnic tables on the scrubby grass. The sun, just barely up, was turning the sky a strange orange-blue.

“Runny, and extra hot sauce,” Paula said as she dropped a styrofoam plate in front of him. He was about to ask Paula how things were going on a personal level, with Mark or Mike or whatever his name was, when he saw her watching him, shoveling egg into his mouth. He was wearing a fisheries t-shirt, smelling like yesterday, with an expression of, you would have to say, distaste. (“Nice guy,” his mother had said. “Not from around here, but handsome. Has a real job, unlike some people I know. Maybe if you had a job...”). Storm hadn’t changed much since they met on the first day of school at WT Cooke Elementary; he’d be the first to admit that. Paula, on the other hand, was put together the way she used to swear she never would be. She looked like a rich lady, wearing makeup that makes it look like you’re not wearing makeup at all.

“So what happened?” he said.

“We got a call from the Cavalier Hotel that a vagrant had been sleeping out on their beach for the last couple days. We went down there to wake him up and move him to a shelter and he wouldn’t.”

“ Wouldn’t what? Wake up?”
“I turned him over to look at him, and I’m not completely positive, but I think, I’m pretty sure, it’s Donovan. It was Donovan. He has, or had, a beard, so it’s hard to tell, but it really looks like him.”

Storm felt a little sick. “That’s awful.”

“Yeah.”

“Homeless? Wait, we’re talking about the same Donovan, right?”

“Yes. Look, Storm. I was hoping you’d come to the morgue to ID him. I’d ask your mom, but I don’t really want to put her through it. You should tell her though.”

He looked at her and puffed his cheeks out, one, then the other, then the other again.

“Please, Storm.”

“Okay, yes. I just haven’t thought about Donovan in a long time, and it’s just … weird. Call me when it’s a good time. I’m off today.”

“You’re off everyday seems like.”

“That is not even true. I’d like to see you try carving up tunas all night--”

“It’s a joke, man. Trying to lighten the mood. Okay, so, I have to be at the station in five minutes. Sorry I don’t have time to drive you back home. Say howdy to your mother for me?” And then she stood up.

Before she turned her cruiser into the road he saw the beam from another car’s headlights fall on her profile and for a second she looked younger, like a kid pretending to drive. In the distance, an airplane was taking off through the clouds heading west, away from the coast.
When he got home Storm forced the door back into its frame, sat down on the couch, and looked at the quilted tapestry hanging on his wall. The scene was tropical—bare-breasted women bending over to pick some lumpy crop (coconuts? but why on the ground?), sunset in the background, waves on the shore. Sometimes when he didn’t want to look out the real window, Storm would watch shadows play across the woven surface, and, usually when he was high, it would seem to move and give the promise of better times ahead. This day, though, was starting out badly, and he was thinking about Donovan. Donovan, in a faded green t-shirt and shorts, smoking a cigarette on the porch when he’d get home from school.

He picked up the phone and called his mother, who had moved from that mildewy apartment he’d grown up in and to a much nicer part of town up by Birdneck Point. Ten years ago she got licensed to sell real estate from “bay to beach,” as they say on her ads. She ran her own agency out of the house. Right when he thought she wasn’t going to, she picked up. The TV was loud in the background.

“Storm! What a surprise, calling me. You’re up early.”

“Are you busy?”

“Too busy! But never for you, my baby. I have a showing in about two hours, but at the moment I’ve got a towel on my head and cucumbers in my eyes, so I’m not going anywhere. What do you need?” He could imagine her fat legs propped up on the glass coffee table.

“I think Donovan is dead.”
“Who told you that? And good riddance.”

“Paula told me. They found him on the beach.”

“Someone killed him? Can’t say I’m surprised.”

“No, I think probably exposure. She thinks he was living on the street.” He started punching his thigh with his free hand. “You’re being very casual about this, Mom. Is this not affecting you at all?”

“Well, I can’t say I didn’t see it coming. Sometimes you just get a feeling about people. And when you get to be my age dying just happens. Happens to everyone. I’m not happy he’s dead, but I have to say kicking him to the curb was one of the best decisions I ever made. I’m sure he’s in a better place now.”

“Do you think he got into drugs or something?”

“He already was when we were together! Part of the reason I said no way, no how, no more.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“Well, you were little.”

“I liked him.”

“I know you did, baby. And I’m sorry he had such a lonely end. No one deserves that.”

“Didn’t he have any family or anything? Is there anyone I should call?”

“His parents died a while back, and no brothers or sisters. He had some cousins on the Outer Banks, but I wouldn’t really know how to find them.”

“So that’s a no.”
“I think that’s a no. Poor Donovan. I have to energize my crystals before I leave, and it’s nice and sunny in the back now, so I should go. Thanks for calling. Tell Paula thanks for letting us know. And tell her to come visit me! Haven’t seen her skinny behind in too long!”

“She kicked in my door.”

“What? Oh, Storm, I’ve got another call coming in! Gotta run. Love you!”

Donovan had dated Storm’s mother for a couple months off and on when Storm was in elementary school, and he’d been their neighbor before that. Sinking into the couch, Storm thought about one time in particular he was sure his mother didn’t know about. He must’ve been in fourth grade. It was hard to remember Donovan without remembering him as a thief. Of course, when Storm knew him, Donovan made it seem like there could be no vocation more noble.

They must’ve just started dating because Donovan was playing that I’m-a-nice-guy angle and told Storm’s mom he would take her kid to the beach while she was at her waitressing shift. She agreed. The two of them got on a bus and got off at the boardwalk. They had been walking down the beach a few minutes when they passed a large purse on a hotel towel. Storm still remembers its color. And then Donovan just took it.

“What are you doing?”

“Follow me.” Storm trailed Donovan into an alley between a frozen custard place and a parking garage. Donovan quickly emptied the bag and took a wad of cash from the wallet inside.

“For you, my fine feathered friend.” He said feathered like “feathahd.”
“Really?”

“Really. That lady, she don’t need it. It’s a present. Consider it locals’ tax.” Storm remembered he thought that was just about the best thing he’d ever heard.

Another time in a 7-11 Donovan was crouching down to Storm’s level waving a bag of cookies at him before putting it in the lining of his shorts. He held his finger to his lips. They tore the bag open and ate them, laughing, on the drive home.

Storm also remembered going with Donovan, more than once, to the back entrance of a bar on the strip. “Stay in the truck, S. Secret mission,” Donovan said. “I have to talk with a friend. Secret mission.”

He remembered Donovan’s apartment as dark and cool. He had a motorcycle poster and a tribal mask on the wall that he let Paula wear around when they were over after school. He made them scrambled eggs. They all lived in the same building.

He remembered Donovan’s truck, light blue and rusty with no seatbelts and no side windows. One time he took Storm and his mother to the Eastern Shore in it and they drove right onto the sand.

He remembered Donovan joking with Paula’s mother, telling her, “Oh, Paula’s gonna be a looker. You better watch out. Especially watch out for Stormy here. One day he’ll wake up in love, you’ll see. You’ll have to fight him off!” And she laughed and laughed.

He remembered when Donovan came into his room to say goodbye for the last time. His mother was standing in the doorway, arms crossed. “I’ll be seeing you, big
man.” That was the last beau his mother really kept around and the closest thing Storm had to a father. That was a sad thought.

Storm’s phone rang.

“It’s me,” said Paula. “I can meet you down at the morgue in about half an hour. Can you make it?”

“I’ll be there. Just send me the address.”

“Will do.”

“Paula.”

“What?”

“Thanks for telling me.”

“Course, Stormy. Crazy part is I think we’re the only next-of-kin he’s got. See you soon.”

***

The morgue was in a whitewashed wasteland of stripmalls a couple of blocks from the police station. Storm handed a couple dollars to the homeless couple sitting in the shade of the building and patted their pit bull on its head. It was cold inside. Paula met him in the lobby.

“Good,” Paula said. “You’re here. Follow me.”

“Officer,” a man in a white doctor’s coat said to Paula. He winked at her.

“Hi, Tommy. Could you open up for us?”

“Sure thing, sister.”
Tommy opened a metal door and slid the body out on a shelf. It was covered with a rubber sheet. He pulled it back and waited.

Storm could tell that the skin of Donovan’s face had been brown as a nut, but now it just looked gray. The eyes were closed and relaxed, but lined from years of squinting at the sun.

Donovan had taught Storm to surf. He remembered the first time the man took him to a real surf spot better than almost any moment in his childhood. A muscular man had paddled up to them and said, “Dude, Donovan, there’s a lineup, man. No cuts. There’s not enough out here today to go around.” “I know, Eddy, but I’m trying to get this little guy a wave. First big one.” The man looked down at Storm. “Oh, well that changes things. Hey there, little friend. Special day. Guys, let’s get this little grom a wave!” And they had. There was Donovan, sitting on his board, tipping his face up to the sun with his eyes closed. “This is the life, isn’t it, Stormy?” Just weeks later, Donovan’s eyes, bloodshot, and not registering Storm’s mother as she shouted at him to get out and not to come around when he’s like that again.

“That’s him,” Storm said. Tommy pulled the sheet over Donovan’s face.

Back in the parking lot Storm asked, “What’s going to happen?”

“He’ll get cremated,” Paula said.

“We should do something. Like, say a few words or something. Don’t you think?”

“Sure, Storm. If you’d like.”

“Scatter the ashes. I think he’d like that.”

“Okay.”
“Smuggle his ashes into someone’s wallet. He’d really like that.”

She laughed.

***

A few days later Paula pulled up to Storm’s apartment. He was sitting on his back porch. She craned her head out of the car window and said, “Your door’s broken.”

“You’re funny.” He let himself imagine for a second her coming home to him like this.

“I got a couple leis from down the street. I think he would’ve like that.” She handed him a metal screw-top canister. “That’s him.”

There was traffic on Atlantic and sitting in the heat with the windows down Storm said, “Were you there when Donovan told the story about pickpocketing the bus?”

“Oh my god, yes. He pickpocketed a bunch of people’s wallets and then a cop got on the bus and he tried to go back through and put them all back? Amazing.”

“Didn’t work of course, but--”

“I don’t even care if he made that up because it’s so great. I mean, what if I had been that cop?”

“Well, that would be impossible. Because you were, like, ten.”

“Yes, but it could be me now. How many Donovans have I arrested? I don’t even want to think about it. Everyone’s a person, you know? You forget that doing this job sometimes.”

“I can’t imagine his reaction if he’d found out you became a pig!”

“Hey, that’s not nice. But I’m glad he didn’t.”
“We turned out kind of different, didn’t we?” Storm forced a laugh. “Paula.”

“Yeah?”

“Do you ever think about leaving? Like, starting over somewhere else?”

“Where’d that come from?”

“Just thinking.”

“Well, remember when I moved to Florida for a hot minute? That was awful.”

“No, I mean, like, somewhere else completely. Where no one knows you. Like… Norway.”

“Oh, like Norway.” She laughed. “No, not really. All my friends are here. My family—”

“And Mike. How is he, by the way?”

“Mark. And he’s fine, thanks.” She slapped his thigh without taking her eyes off the road. “Anyways, people pay money to come here for vacation just to see what we get to see every day. The beach is the best there is. You don’t think so?”

“Sure. But sometimes I think about what it would be like to get to start over. It’s like a second chance.”

“No such thing, Stormy.”

“I know, but…”

“But what?”

“If I could start over I’d probably try to snag you in middle school and not let go.”

She took her eyes off the road a second to look at him. “Storm…”
“Don’t say anything. Don’t. But I would. I messed up. I messed up in a lot of ways.”

“I didn’t know you felt like that.”

“Forget it. You can let me out here.”

“Storm…”

“No, I wanted to get a little walk in today. It’s a new thing I’m doing. Getting fit. Turning over a new leaf. Let’s do something for Donovan soon though. Start planning. I’m thinking he would’ve liked one of those burning viking ships.”

She laughed. “You’re probably right. I’ll see if we have one in the evidence locker.” She started to pull away. “Storm!” She opened her mouth to say something more, but just gave him a weak wave and drove on.

Instead of walking into Shadowlawn, Storm headed toward the oceanfront. When he got there he hailed a bus near the boardwalk. There were mostly tourists on it. People in white polo shirts tucked into belted khaki shorts, floral halter dresses showing off sunburnt, freckled chests, striped t-shirts, bright, solid-colored trunks, dark glasses.

The bus turned a corner and Storm thought he saw Donovan on the sidewalk but it was just another old man that he didn’t know.

Storm turned his mind on low hum. He thought about Paula driving away in her big cop car. He thought about when they were little, running barefoot up the concrete stairs of their building to Donovan’s porch. He remembered them listening to his stories about the heists he’d pulled. Storm moved through the packed bus, dipping his hand into
one bag and pulling out one wallet. He hadn’t stolen anything in a long time and was surprised at how easy it really was.

He made it to the back seats. The bus driver pulled over to let more people on. Storm felt the wallet heavy in his pocket. He touched the money inside it, but took nothing. He started moving slowly again from the back of the bus to the front, apologizing, saying he had to get off. He stepped on someone’s foot.

“Sorry about that. I’m the next stop,” he said.

He slipped the wallet out of his pocket and dropped it back into the bag he stole it from. When its weight fell the owner’s hand shot out and grabbed Storm’s wrist.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing, son?” The man had a Texan drawl and wore a white collared shirt buttoned halfway up. He moved to stand.

Storm felt the bus driver’s eyes on him in the large rear view mirror. “Nothing,” he said, and ran.

He could hear yelling from the bus, someone called, “police!” People were chasing after him, but he didn’t look back.

The bus had stopped near 1st Street, so he sprinted across the weedy grass in front of the beachfront hotels, sidestepping strollers, crossing the concrete path, then the thin beach, and then he dove and was in the ocean, swimming. He kicked and the movement billowed white sand up in the water.

The pressure of being underwater is nice, the weight of it, and then he thought, Swim.

He made it pretty far out before he heard someone call his name.
“Storm!”

Paula was shouting from the edge of the jetty. He heard the Texan from the bus, too. It felt like he had been swimming for miles, but he hadn’t. The waves were small today. Longboard waves. The sun was blinding. The ferris wheel across Atlantic Avenue was barely moving. Ahead of him, whitewater off the sandbar obscured the horizon.

“It’s okay!” she yelled, or, “Go away!” or, “Don’t go that way!” or “something–something hey!” He couldn’t tell over the noise of the surf.

He stopped swimming for a moment and churned in his place, looking back at her, small on the concrete. Everyone small, not just her, blankets and towels tiling the sand pink, turquoise, red, proportioned like money, and from this distance about the same size. From where he was the boardwalk didn’t look so seedy. It looked magical. He treaded and floated, even closed his eyes. He pretended Paula was smiling at him from back on the shore. She wasn’t yelling anymore, perhaps because she knew, like he did, that he wanted her to catch him, and he always would.
Day Pass

Seven Snows was a mid-sized ski resort. Four lifts, two lodges, one bar, one million kids who are tiny skiing prodigies. Rex was supposed to meet his daughter and her fiance by the rental place. He decided instead to go to the bar, get a drink to shake off the drive, and let them know to meet him there.

***

“Dad!”

“Hey, Tut! There you are!”

Rex’s daughter, Sara, was tall and slim. She was studying to be a nurse. Unfortunately for her, she looked exactly like Rex, and nothing like her mother, who was beautiful. Sara’s fiance’s name was Oliver. Despite being the future-son-in-law, Rex liked him. He remembered what being in that position is like. He wanted to be one of those cool dads – show everyone a good time and pass on some wisdom while doing it.

“What about this snow! What’d they say, seventy inches? Perfect!” said Rex.

“Oh, yeah, it’s perfect,” said Oliver.

“Sorry I wasn’t here in time to pay for your lift tickets,” said Rex.

“It’s not a big deal. We have jobs now. We’re adults,” said Sara.

“Well, let me get you a drink to make up for it. What’ll you have,” Rex asked Oliver.

“You don’t have to do that,” said Oliver.

“Come on, loosen you up,” Rex said.

“I’ll have an IPA,” said Oliver.
“Two IPAs,” Rex said to the bartender and held up two fingers. “Two.” The bartender, he noticed, had lovely breasts. “What’s your first name?” he asked her.

“Lucy,” she said and smiled.

“Lucy. Rex. Nice to meet you. Two IPAs, and, Sara, you want anything?”

“No, thanks.”

“And that’s it,” he said to Lucy.

He was feeling better. He had been nervous about seeing Sara, which seemed stupid now. When she was young, she had been his girl. He’d taught her how to fix a shower head and drive the MG. They’d team up against her. It was so strange, he remembered thinking then, how alike they were. A miracle of science. When she was a baby, she’d sleep on his chest. But after Rex and Sara’s mother separated, she became more tame, more measured, a much more responsible and conscientious person than he had ever been. She’d become quiet. She wore practical shoes. Maybe it was her way of rebelling, choosing so obviously not to be wild like him. If she weren’t his daughter, he’d say she was square. Now when they spent time together her mood was colored with embarrassment. Even now, she seemed to be apologizing with her eyes to Oliver.

“Put everything on my tab, Lucy.”

“Okay, Rex.”

“She knows your name?” Sara said.

“I’m famous.”

“Uh huh,” said Sara.

“You all ready to hit the slopes?” said Rex. “I am.”
***

Rex pulled his goggles down against the white light of the mountain and scooted forward in the lift line. “So what’s new with you two?”

“Not much,” said Sara. “Same old.”

“Any medical news, Oliver? Making any big breakthroughs?”

“I wish. Mostly I’ve been acting as a glorified hospital janitor. I won’t know anything about my residency placement until May.”

“It’ll be Dr. Oliver then! Exciting times,” said Rex.

“Three!” The man directing lift traffic pointed at them with three fingers. They slid into the chute to wait for their chair.

Once they were in the air Rex took off his backpack and took out two beers. He handed one to Oliver.

“Yikes,” said Oliver. “I might have to split one with you. That IPA filled me up.”

“No time for that,” said Rex. “We only have about three minutes before we’re at the top. Drink!”

Oliver glanced at Sara, but drank dutifully. Sara was used to this. The backpack Rex wore skiing was infamous. Once he accidentally bought bottles instead of cans, wiped out on one of his last runs, and smashed glass and beer all across the mountainside.

“Done!” said Oliver. He crunched the can.

“Nice! Here, help me, Tut,” Rex passed his can to Sara. She took a few sips and passed it back.

“It’s all backwash.”
Rex put the empty cans in his backpack and got ready to get off the lift. Tips up. They slid back onto solid ground and Rex felt his knees begin to ache. Sara stopped and looked at her trail map. Oliver skied over to her and looked over her shoulder.

“No maps! We don’t need maps!” said Rex, skiing past them and grabbing the paper out of her hands. “Let’s do it!” As he slid away he thought he heard Sara groan.

The run they ended up on was beautiful. It was narrow, powdery, and twisted around the far side of the mountain. When they took a turn the trees cleared and they could see the lake below, the little farms beside it, and more mountains beyond that.

“What a view!” Rex yelled.

“Pretty good!” Oliver answered when he crossed behind him. Sara was further back, shakily making her way down. It usually took her longer to warm up and get loose.

They all met up at the bottom and rejoined the lift line.

“That was a good one,” said Oliver.

“Primo first run!” said Rex. “What’d you think of that one, Sara?”

“Pretty,” she said through layers of scarf and goggle. The only visible part of her face was the tip of her nose.

“Let’s get back up there!” said Rex.

When their lift was a few meters off the ground Rex swung his backpack around and got out two beers.

“Oliver, you in?”

“I don’t know,” Oliver said. He patted his stomach.

“You don’t have to,” said Sara to Oliver. “Dad, he doesn’t want it.”
“No, it’s okay,” said Oliver, taking the can. “We are on vacation after all.”

Sara stared forward and made her mouth into a straight line.

“So I wanted to talk to you two about something. Something that my father-in-law, your Grandpa Art, told me. He said real estate is the best investment. And that turned out to be true. He helped us buy our first house, which we sold for a fortune, bought the next, and you know the rest. I remember that first house cost $70,000 and signing that paper, hoo, that scared the shit out of me.”

“Okay,” said Sara. She didn’t like when he talked about money.

“Well, if we sell one of the houses, we’d like to buy one that you guys could live in. We could rent it to you, you know, for legal purposes, but it’d be yours. What do you think? I’ve been thinking about it and I think it’d be nice for you to get some more space. Get out of that little apartment. And I could have a room to stay in when I come visit, of course. That’s part of the deal.” He laughed.

“That would be amazing, Rex,” Oliver joined in.

“Yes,” said Sara. “Real estate is expensive up here, though. I don’t think you realize how expensive it is.”

“I’ve got the money.”

“We also don’t know if we’re going to live here for long. What if Oliver gets a placement in another city? Then what?”

“Well, I just wanted to present the idea. Think about it. And let me know when you know about job stuff and where you all are going to be. I just want to help you out.”

“I don’t need to be helped out,” Sara said.
“I know that. What I meant was Art did the same for me and I appreciated it. I want to do the same for you and Oliver. I want you to have a solid start, you know?”

Sara nodded. Oliver put his hand on her knee and she seemed to relax. “I appreciate it,” she said.

“And either way we’re going to Germany for a ski trip. Who’s in for that?” Rex said.

“That’d be great,” said Oliver, though he seemed to be adopting Sara’s suspicion of him.

“Remember when we went, Sara? Remember the Zugspitze? We have to go back. Best skiing in the world.”

“I remember.”

“Rex, we’ve got about thirty seconds to drink these,” Oliver said, nodding at the summit. They both drained the beers and put the empty cans in the backpack.

Once they were off the lift and at the top of the mountain, Rex handed the trail map back to Sara. “Okay, okay, I give up. Point us in the right direction, captain.” He bowed dramatically. She liked to plan; even when she was little, she needed to know what was coming.

They followed Sara down the mountain. “Little Bear to Fire Escape to Kon Tiki,” she yelled. The trails she chose were wide and soft. Oliver skied the edges and ducked in and out of the trees. Sara cut slowly across the middle. Rex followed her. He always tried to ski behind her; he had to remember to tell Oliver to do the same.
When she was in high school they’d gone skiing in Maine. She was a faster and a more confident skier then. She’d go screaming down the mountain while everyone else was still adjusting their boot straps at the top. Black diamonds, glades, moguls, she did it all, and recklessly. He was proud of her for that. Near the end of the day Rex waited for her, as usual, by the lift. He’d passed her and gone on ahead and said he’d meet her at the bottom. He waited fifteen minutes, twenty, but she never came. He took off his skis and went to the lift operator who got on his walkie-talkie. “There’s a Sara in the infirmary,” he said. Rex ran across the resort, slipping in his boots, knocking people over, praying in some garbled Latin he was trying to recall from Catholic school mixed with incantations of “Shit, shit, shit. You idiot. Come on, Rex.” When he got to the infirmary, there she was, laid out on a little cot, murmuring, half her head bandaged and bleeding. “What happened?” he’d said.

The doctor on duty was a tall brunette with a goggle-tan. “She’s been concussed and her face got pretty cut up on the ice. I’m guessing she fell, hit her head, and slid a little. She was unconscious when a snowboarder named Gary found her. He’s over there.” The doctor pointed at a shaggy-haired teenager in the corner who waved at him.

“Thanks, Gary.” Rex kneeled to Sara. “Hey, there, Tut. Can you hear me?”

Her unbandaged eye cracked open. “Dad.”

“Yep, that’s me.”

“Dad. Do I have school on Monday?”

“No. You’re on vacation,” Rex said, trying to smile.
“Oh, okay. That’s good.” She yawned and considered his response. “Dad, do I have school on Monday?”

“No, Sara. I just told you. You’re on vacation. You don’t have to go back till January.”

“Oh, okay. That’s good.” Sara closed her eye and opened it again. “Hey, Dad?”

“Yeah, Sara?”

“Do I have school on Monday?” Rex looked at the doctor.

“This is a symptom of her traumatic brain injury,” she said. “Sara should be back to normal once the swelling goes down. All we can do is watch her, keep her comfortable, and wait.”

“Shouldn’t she go to a hospital?”

“Unfortunately the nearest one is a few hours away. I recommend you make an appointment as soon as possible, but I think it’s safest to keep her here where I can watch her.”

“Okay,” he said and pulled up a chair. The doctor, he noticed, was an athletic sort of pretty, and his wedding ring was hidden by his gloves, so. He put the thought out of his mind and stroked Sara’s hair. Even though she was fading in and out of lucidity he thought he sensed her judging him, but not for looking at another woman -- for letting her fall.

But then she said, “Dad, do I have school on Monday?”

Rex choked back a sob to answer, “No, baby. You’re on vacation.”
“Let me know if you’d like to call your wife or any other family members” the doctor said. “We have a landline here.”

“Thank you,” he said. My wife. That trip marked the beginning of the end for his marriage; it wouldn’t last another six months. It wasn’t anything in particular that happened, but around that time the fights with his wife became vicious and louder, and Sara became quieter. He thought at first the change in her was due to an incomplete recovery from the accident.

Ever since that trip Sara skied more carefully and he tried to never pass her. Waiting for her, not knowing what had happened, was one of the worst things he’d ever felt. Then knowing what had happened, hearing her babble like an idiot, his little overachiever that he’d broken, he thought at the time, forever, that was the worst, too.

He shook off the memory.

Oliver, Sara, and Rex all met at the bottom back at the lift.

“Nice route, Sara!” said Rex. “Good mapping!”

“Thanks. Yeah, I liked that last one,” she said and smiled.

They did a few more runs before Sara said, “I’m a little hungry. Are you guys?”

Oliver nodded.

“Let’s go get some food then. I’m not hungry, but my treat,” said Rex.

The lodge was packed. They managed to get one stool at the bar, so Sara sat down and Rex and Oliver stood around her. She and Oliver shared a menu and Rex took a few seconds to look at them, heads bowed to read the list of burgers and chilis. They looked good together. Oliver couldn’t be more unlike him. Perhaps that was the appeal.
“Lucy, right?” Rex said.

“That’s right! Good memory. What’ll you have?”

“My daughter here would like to order some food --”

“I’m still deciding,” Sara said. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“But I will have two, no, three IPAs, please, Lucy. Love that name!”

“Your daughter, sure,” said the man next to them at the bar. He spun around in his chair. He was already drunk.

“She is my daughter,” Rex laughed. “Can’t you see the family resemblance?”

“Okay, okay, fair enough. Name’s Jim. Nice day we’re having, eh? S’posed to snow soon, though.”

“Oh, really? We better get back out there then,” said Rex, attempting to turn back to Oliver and Sara. He didn’t need a new drinking partner.

“Listen,” Jim said, putting a hand on his shoulder, “where’re you from? I’m from Rhode Island. You sound like you could be from Rhode Island.”

“No, I’m not, but I used to live there. Newport. Beautiful place, great sailing. Do you live there now?”

“No, no. Now I live down in Arlington and come up here every Saturday. Ski in the morning before it gets crowded, come in here and get some painkillers, if you know what I mean.” He winked. “And the chicken tenders. But I tell you I can never finish the fries. It’s too much and I hate to waste food.” He held out the little basket to Sara and Oliver. “Here, eat these fries. Seriously, help yourself. I hate to waste food. You look starving. You kids in school? You students?”
“Bingo,” said Oliver.

“Hey, what has a hundred balls and screws old women,” Jim said.

“I don’t know,” said Sara. She never seemed to care when it was obvious that she didn’t want anything to do with someone.

“Bingo,” said Jim. “Get it?”

“That’s a good one,” Sara said flatly.

Rex bent over laughing so Jim wouldn’t feel bad. He was also getting pretty loose himself. Lucy slid their beers across the counter. Sara and Oliver ordered two cheeseburgers. “Put it all on my tab,” said Rex. “And a beer for my friend here, uh, Jim.”

“You don’t have to do that,” said Jim. Rex noticed that Jim skied in jeans and a hat with a bunch of multi-colored tentacles coming out of it.

“It’s my pleasure! Let me get you a round,” Rex said.

“Hey, can’t argue with that!” Jim turned to Sara. “I love your dad. Great guy. He’s like a regular guy, you know? Such a good, regular guy.”

Sara said nothing.

“Hey, so, what do you do? You look like you could be a model,” Jim said to Sara.

“I’m going to be a nurse.”

“Just as good. Cute uniforms. Helping people. Good for you.”

Sara put her beer to her lips in response.

“And what do you do, Jim,” Rex said.

“Computers.”

“Oh, yeah?”
“I design software. Got a small company. Work’s good.”

“Bet that’s good money.”

“Oh, sure, sure. Let’s me come up here every Saturday, which I think my wife appreciates.” Jim laughed.

“I know how that is,” said Rex. Oliver and Sara had turned away and were talking quietly to each other.

“Speaking of, you seen the waitresses in this place, hoo-ey,” said Jim. “That one, her name is Shwarma or something, she’s Indian I think. Got a work exchange program. She was doing a little dance earlier? Looked good. And Lucy here,” he said, leaning over the bar.

“Yes?” said Lucy.

“Would you be a dear and get my new friend Rex here a new beer-friend?”

“Of course. On your tab, Jim?”

He answered by making a clicking noise and pointing his index finger at her.

“I’m full,” said Sara. “Let’s go.”

“I’ve got a beer coming,” Rex said. “Help me drink that and we can go.”

“Fine.” She took his current beer from his hand and tried to chug the rest of it so he wouldn’t.

“How’re the cheeseburgers, kids?” asked Jim.

“Pretty good,” said Oliver. “Typical bar food.”

“Hey, so there’s this place back in Arlington, menu says, hamburgers, $4, cheeseburgers, $5, handjobs, $10. I’m looking through my wallet for some money,
naturally. The woman at the counter is just a knockout. Blonde, you know what I’m talking about.” He raised his eyebrows and punched Oliver in the chest. Oliver coughed. “So I go up to her and I’m like, hey, you the one that gives the handjobs? And she says, yes, that’s right. So I say, well,” he took a swig of his beer, “wash your hands because I want a cheeseburger!”

When they were back outside Rex said, “Sorry about that.” But on another day he probably would’ve stayed.

“It’s okay,” said Oliver.

“Had to get away from our friend Jim. Seemed like a lonely guy though, jeez,” said Rex. “Wanted to give him some company.” He let himself wonder for a minute about the times when he went skiing on his own, when he’d be at the bar on his own, what people thought of him. If he was just another Jim.

“Seriously,” said Sara.

Two little kids ran past them.

“See? That’s what I like to see,” Rex said.

“What, babies going to a bar?”

“No. Just, when are you two going to have some kids? You’re killing me here.”

Sara and Oliver laughed. “Don’t hold your breath,” said Sara.

Rex was feeling good on the lift. He was loosened up. The air was clean, and it was starting to snow. He felt virtuous somehow. He loved skiing and being here, being able to look over at Sara and know she was okay.
“Look at the snow!” he said, turning his backpack around. He couldn’t tell if he was yelling or not. He got out a little bottle of Fireball Whiskey.

“Oh no, not that,” Sara said and laughed. She seemed a little drunk herself.

“Yes, that! Just for ceremonial purposes. A toast! Let’s have a toast to you two and your future. I love both of you so much and I can’t wait to see what happens next.” Rex was tearing up. He kissed Sara on the forehead.

“Thanks, Dad.”

They all passed the bottle around. Rex had a few extra swigs then put it away, right before it was time to get off. He was late getting his pack together and when he put his skis on the ground to go down the little ramp, he fell and slid sideways. He watched Sara and Oliver ski away before they stopped and looked around. He tried to stay low to keep them from seeing him. He was having trouble getting up.

“Sir,” a ski patroller was next to him, “are you okay?”

“I’m fine, I’m fine. I’m really, really fine. Just took a spill.”

“Sir, have you been drinking?”

“No, I swear I’m fine.”

“Okay, sir, I’m going to have to ask you to come with us.” There were two of them now. One of them was holding onto his elbow.

“Please get your hands off me! Get your damn hands off me!”

“Sir, please don’t get aggravated. Who are you with?”

“I’m just trying to have a good day with my daughter. Please just let me go and have one last run with my daughter. Please, I’m fine.”
“Is that your daughter over there,” he said, pointing to Sara, who had caught sight of him and was motionlessly watching the scene. Oliver must’ve skied on ahead. He’d forgotten to tell him to stay with Sara, to keep her in his sight.

“Yes, that’s her.”

One of the ski patrollers walked toward her while the other held onto Rex’s arm and kept him standing. Rex could just barely hear what the ski patroller was saying to her.

“Is that man your father?” he asked.

Sara looked at Rex a moment and considered. “Yes…he is.”

“Has he been drinking today?”

“Yes, sorry. He has a problem.”

The patroller seemed to soften towards her. “I see. Listen, there’s a storm coming in here and we’re worried about your dad getting down the mountain. He seems pretty incapacitated. He doesn’t really want to cooperate, but we think it’d be best if we took him down on the lift. We’re not trying to get him in trouble or anything -- this is for his own safety.”

“I understand.”

“Could you help us talk him into it? I think he’d listen to you.”

“Sure.” Sara got out of her skis and handed them to the ski patroller who walked a few steps behind her.

“Dad,” she said gently, like a nurse would, as if addressing a small child.

“I’m fine, Sara. I’m fine. These guys are trapping me here. Tell them I’m fine.”
“Dad, I think we should go down with them. What do you say?”

“I just want to do one more run with you. I just want to do one more run with her. Okay? Okay? I came all this way.”

“Come on, Dad. Let’s go. They’re just worried about the snowstorm coming and that it’ll be hard to get down the mountain. For everyone. It’s getting hard to see. They want to help you.”

“I’m fine. This is nothing! A little snow! This is my favorite! Primo conditions!”

“Please just come with us,” Sara said.

There was nothing for him to say.

The ski patroller helped him get off his skis and walked him to their hut. The inside was lit with bright fluorescent lights and young ski employees in red jackets lounging in plastic chairs. They all looked at Rex and Sara when they came in. One of the ski patrollers said, “Hey, guys, this is Rex and we’re going to help him down the mountain, how does that sound?” They gave wan smiles. One person clapped a few times. “Okay, buddy, let’s maybe get you settled down a little then we’ll get you back on the lift, okay? So, tell me about yourself, this your first time on this mountain?”

“No, I’ve been here before, but never gotten this treatment. What is this, like headquarters or something? Secret hideout? Am I like under arrest or something? What’s the deal? One time Sara and I, we went skiing in Germany, on the glacier, the Zugspitze, and nothing like this. Nothing. Wonderful place and they treat everyone great.”

“That sounds amazing, Rex,” said the ski patroller. “Never been myself, but always wanted to go.”
“That’s Sara, okay, that’s my daughter, and she’s my most prized possession, okay?” Rex couldn’t help it; he started tearing up again. “And I just wanted to have a nice day and then you guys come in here.”

“I know, Rex, I know. But we’re worried about you getting down.”

“I tell you what though. I’ve been interrogated before, but never by such nice people,” said Rex. That got the ski patrollers laughing. He looked back at Sara and even she was laughing. It was going to be okay. “All right, I’ll cooperate. All right. But let her ski down one last time?”

“Sure, Rex, of course. You can meet her at the bottom.”

“Okay.”

“Okay, bye Dad. You’re so lucky. I’ve always wanted to go down the lift backwards,” she said. Sara left the little building and he was alone with them. Cornered. What if something happened to her? And he’d come all this way and for what? And what would Sara think? They were escorting him to the lift, one hand on each of his elbows.

“There you go, Rex, nice and easy.”

“This is humiliating, you guys. Really. I was just trying to have a nice day. Now I have to take the ride of shame?” He realized he was yelling and hoped no one had heard him.

“There you go, Rex. Up you go. Nice meeting you, buddy.”

They slowed down the chair and helped him on. What had tipped them off? Did someone in a chair in front of him rat? Was it the fall? Don’t a lot of people fall coming off the lift?
He shook it off and sat back. This was a new experience, riding down; as if falling in slow motion. He liked the feeling of the little flakes hitting his cheeks. It was clearing his head. He avoided the faces of the people riding up the lift, staring at him, wondering what he’d done, and instead looked at the trails below and was sure he could see Sara down there in her pink jacket making her way carefully across the snow to where she’d be waiting for him.