Circumnavigation

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CIRCUMNAVIGATION

by

Vincent Reusch

A Dissertation
Submitted to the
Faculty of The Graduate College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy
Department of English
Advisor: Jaimy Gordon, D.A.

Western Michigan University
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Vincent Reusch
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Diagram of Pete's Sake
A boat caught in irons refers to a boat that has lost all forward momentum and is pointing directly into the wind. The term *irons* refers to handcuffs or leg irons, coming from the great days of sail, when a battleship stuck in irons could not maneuver away from its foe and therefore was unable to escape attack. Captains were careful, of course, to avoid finding themselves stuck in irons, but as these ships were slow to maneuver, taking as long as half an hour to tack across the wind, one error in sail trim could lock a vessel in place. A ship in irons could be stuck for several hours, an easy target for enemy cannon fodder.
CHAPTER ONE

June 17, 1987

41° 17′ 28″ N, 70° 48′ 52″ W

Nomans Land Island, south of Gay Head, Martha's Vineyard

Davison pushed back out toward the open sea, tacking east of Nantucket Sound in hopes of catching a wind that might carry her past the only boat that led her. For three days she'd been seeing off her bow the boat's crimson jib as they'd raced past Clarke's Harbour and across the open water from Nova Scotia to their first checkpoint in Provincetown, but only now was she drawing near enough to hope for a glimpse of her name. For the past two hours, she'd braced herself against the transom, against the mast, hooked an arm over the starboard lifeline, timed the peaks and troughs of waves, anything in order to steady her binoculars long enough to halt the shaking of the letters that spanned the stern of the lead boat. In one moment, she was vacillating between Exterminator, Eliminator, Excommunicator—and, for the briefest instant, the more heartening, Elevator. In another she was sure she'd read something completely different. Hopeless? she thought. What kind of name is Hopeless? Fearless? Painless? Doubtless? Then it was Deduction, or Induction, or Reduction. The longer she looked through the binoculars without pausing to take her eyes away, to defocus and to relax, the more blurry the letters became, and often the more sinister. The Reaper appeared. As did Purgatorio and Perdition. A break to tweak the steering vane, then it was Table Talk or Double Take or Check Mate.
So continued Davi’s Rorschach test, until the lead boat disappeared behind Nantucket Island, and she sailed deeper into what was quickly becoming an off-shore squall, the waves that led the storm rising in swells like the smooth rolling backs of the sperm whales she’d seen south of the Bay of Fundy. The wind rose to thirty knots, spray breaking from the waves’ crests, and she disengaged the self-steerer and took over the helm. The pressure of the currents transferred from rudder to wheel, and she listened with her hands, easing her grip to soften the momentum-halting shocks as her bow burrowed into the troughs, and holding firm to ride the steady pressure up the back of the next wave.

She picked up a full knot, and by late afternoon, when she rounded south of Nantucket, the boat with the crimson sail was off her starboard beam.

Avoiding Nantucket Sound had taken her away from the coast, however, and as they ran west she knew that her gain, as is so often the case in sailing, was more illusory than real. From Provincetown to Key West, the racers were required to drop anchor from sunset to dawn, and as she broke course to turn north toward shore, the lead boat would continue ahead, gaining back any time that it had lost. She thought fleetingly about not turning north, about continuing on course and dropping her sea anchor, a small submarine parachute that was legal under the First Circ race regulations, but the sea that night would be rough, and she was too close to shore and shipping lanes to spend the night adrift. An hour from sunset she turned toward land, while the lead boat rounded Gay Head in search of safer anchorage on Martha's Vineyard's leeward shore. She reset her self-steerer, climbed belowdecks and checked her charts for a protected cove. She found little good shelter on the south shore of Martha's Vineyard, but she spotted Nomans Land Island, due west. She would run there and keep the gain she'd worked for that day. By
the time she reached the island and doused her sails, the sun was touching the western horizon and Mars was shining over the eastern storm clouds. She motored into a bay on the leeward shore, and there dropped anchor for the night.

A few small bulbs, drawing from the battery, warmed the dark teak of Davi's cabin as she stood over a single alcohol burner in her galley, eating red beans and rice from a pot and looking occasionally at an envelope on her navigation desk. Inside was a letter from her brother, Peter. She'd picked it up at the marina office in Provincetown, but hadn't yet read it. More letters would come, she knew. She'd given her family a copy of the race itinerary, dozens of planned stops at marinas down the coast, through the Gulf, the south Pacific, Asia, the Red Sea.

Although this was a solo race around the world, and challenging by any standards, it would not have been considered by true salts a grueling race. It was not the Oceans Five, not the Golden Globe. It was a stage race, run with non-racing-class boats. The *Halifax Chronicle-Herald* had sponsored it, a tip of the hat to the Fisherman's Trophy it had begun in 1920. The boats were required to meet weight and measurement specifications that would prove them 'working' boats, as had the schooners in the Fisherman's Trophy. Instead of fishing vessels, however, these were to be cabin cruisers, pleasure craft. Fifty boats made the race's start in Lunenburg. The first thirty to reach Provincetown were allowed to continue down the coast, the remaining twenty disqualified. Davi had, to her surprise, finished that first leg in second place. She had always liked the lines of her boat, but the quick passage she attributed to her sail, a donation from the marina where she had worked that winter, "South Shore Marina," printed diagonally across the span of fabric.
With Provincetown behind them, the boats would continue down the coast, anchoring at night and regrouping in Key West before heading off to international waters, where they would sail through a series of checkpoints west around the world. Although they were just five days out from their start in Lunenburg, Davi had been working toward this race since buying the shell of her boat a year earlier. She sometimes thought it had been two years, though she rarely thought of the past at all. In fact, her quest may have begun even earlier, on the day she stepped aboard the sixty-foot schooner, *Wanderlust*, off the coast of Vung Tau, sailing as crew from southern Vietnam to Mindoro Island in the Philippines, for it was on this trip and the subsequent year of sailing around the South China Sea that Davi first thrilled at the utter severance of pulling in a dock line and pushing out to sea. Perhaps it would be fair to look even earlier than that sunny morning in Vung Tau, back to the severance that occurred three days earlier, when she walked away from the scrap-wood hut on the bank of the Siem Reap River in Cambodia, where she had been two months shy of completing her English-teaching contract. Perhaps her desire to be at sea was formed earlier yet. Perhaps it had always been a force within her, waiting only for the circumstance that would bring her foot onto the deck of a disembarking boat. Whatever the headwaters of her journey, the refitting of Davi's boat would never have occurred without the gift of Peter's money, financing that her brother offered impulsively, but not naively, and that she would not have accepted, had she not felt such need to step once again off the confines of solid ground.

Davi climbed from her cabin into the wide evening twilight of her cockpit, where she dropped a bucket into the ocean off the stern of her boat, a rope tied to the bucket's handle. A hint of light from the setting sun was still visible above the wall of coast that
rose to the west, but the east was almost fully dark, Mars having disappeared behind the incoming storm clouds. She waited while the bucket tipped, took on water and sank, before pulling it up and washing out the pot from which she'd eaten her beans and rice. She dumped the bucket, stored it in a seat-locker, went below and placed the three interlocking boards into the opening of the transom, sealing herself into the cabin. She clicked on a small black-and-white TV, and chose one of the two stations that she found, PBS, a documentary exploring the history of the telescope. The narrator measured the distances into the past that the telescope showed as it drew into focus the radiating light of celestial objects—the moon one second ago, the sun eight minutes, Centauri four years, Orion fifteen hundred. He talked about a planet twenty light-years away, discovered by a telescope in the Chilean Andes, a planet gauged by the bending of light to be roughly the same temperature and dimensions as earth. "You might look up and smile," the narrator said, "just in case they're aiming their telescopes at us. Maybe they'll see you—in twenty years." Davi picked up the unopened letter from Peter. She read the postmark date, June tenth, a week old. She ran her finger beneath the flap, and as the envelope tore open she felt the hot line of pain in her finger that she knew to be a paper cut. A sliver of blood showed the split on the side of her index finger. She pressed her finger against her lips and waited for the stinging to subside.
Davi waited at the baggage carousel with a few remaining passengers from her flight, departure and arrival announcements echoing unintelligibly off the far walls and vaulted ceiling. She had begun to wonder if her backpack had made the three connections—from Bangkok to Narita to San Francisco to Detroit. She could think of nothing that couldn't be replaced. She would lose two pair of pants and two pair of shorts. A few t-shirts. She would lose the souvenirs that she'd bought for Peter and for her mother, a marble Buddha and a silk skirt embroidered at the hem with elephants. But in truth she had only bought them at the Bangkok airport, having neglected to pick up anything for them, or for her father, in all the ports of call she had made in her year as crew on Wonderlust. When her backpack finally fell from the lip of the conveyer belt onto the carousel, she initially felt only that its appearance would save her an inconvenience. But with the sound of its bottom thudding against the sliding metal track, the tired flop as it fell to its side, she felt the weight of being home.

Davi handed the customs officer her declaration card—'nothing to declare' checked on the first line. She found a pay phone, dropped her pack onto the granite floor of the arrivals terminal, and set her watch three hours forward, from Pacific to Eastern Standard time, nine a.m.. She pulled a crumpled slip of paper from her pack, put a coin into the
pay phone slot, and dialed Peter's phone number. As the phone rang, she cleared her throat and pulled at the cord of the receiver. Peter's machine answered, his "Hi, this is Peter," almost fooling her into talking before his recorded voice recommended leaving a message. She hung up, waited for her coin to drop, fingered it out of the return and dropped it back into the slot. She dialed her mother's house, hitting the numbers hard and fast, as if to suggest that she punched them often into telephones, as if to suggest that this would be a casual call, one of many, as if she had at least once done this in the last year, once written, sent anything more than the postcard she'd mailed before leaving the school at Siem Reap. She said, "Hi it's Davi," twice into the air before Karl answered the phone with the plural possessive of his family name: "Gunters'."

Davi said a garbled hello, her voice thick with a bit of phlegm despite her efforts to clear it. "It's Davi," she said.

"Who?"

She cleared her throat again. "Davi."

"Davi?" her stepfather asked. "You want your mother?"

"Yeah," she said. "Thanks."

She heard the phone, already hitting the counter as she said her thanks. Karl yelled "Mary," and a moment later her mother's astonished voice said her name. "Davi?"

"Hi Mom."

"Where are you?"

"I'm at the airport."

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah, Ma, I'm okay."
"Where are you staying?"

"I called Peter, but he didn't answer."

"He'll be asleep," she said. "Just go there."

"I might."

"You might? Where else would you go?"

The question annoyed Davi, despite her inability to think of where else she might go. She could think only that she might go anywhere, that she had in her pack everything she would need, that she had three thousand dollars in a savings account, untouched since she'd wired it after her year of work on *Wanderlust*. "I could go wherever," she said. "I think I'm going to crew again."

"Crew? You're not even out of the airport yet, and you're talking about leaving again?"

"Well, I might."

"You just got home!"

"Yeah, but I've been thinking I want to get back out on a boat," she said, though she had not been thinking this, not as crew. She had been thinking only of how she might get the money to refit a boat in order to enter the First Circ race, which she'd learned about from a fellow crewman on *Wanderlust*.

"Do you really mean that?"

"Yes. What's wrong with it?"

"Nothing. Nevermind."

"There's nothing wrong with it."

"Okay. Okay, there's nothing wrong with it. But for now, just go to Peter's."
"Okay. Whatever."

"Just go there, and I'll drive down this weekend."

"All right. I said okay."

"I can't wait to see you, honey," Mary said, and, when Davi didn't respond, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Mom," Davi said. "I have to go. There's someone waiting for the phone."

"Don't forget to call your father."

"He's in Australia."

"That man, he's as bad as you."

"I really have to get off the phone."

"Okay, sweetie. But just so you know, Peter isn't looking very well. Try to make him feel good about how he's doing, okay?"

"I will," Davi said. The solidity of the floor wavered as she spoke, and she wished now in earnest that she were at sea, where she could roll with this motion, where she need never wonder if it were real or only a tremor of anxiety. At sea, anxiety is justified and easy to ameliorate, the cause apparent and a course of action always at hand. Only on rare still days did Davi suffer at sea. And even then there was always gear to clean, equipment to inspect. She put a hand on the steel enclosure of the pay phone. "I really have to go," she told her mother.

The other passengers from Davi's flight had already shuffled out, loading luggage into taxis and waiting cars. She hoisted her pack over one shoulder and left the empty lobby, focusing as she walked on the rectangle of air framed by the open sliding doors.
Peter's house stood out from his neighbors', though all the row of houses that Davi faced as she stepped out of the taxi were nearly identical, steep and narrow two-storey homes in this old south-Detroit neighborhood. The small patch of lawn in front of Peter's house had not been mowed, dandelions gone to seed, crab grass and scattered bursts of clover. His house needed painting, the white peeling away to reveal gray weathered clapboard, bits of green and pale-yellow from earlier paint jobs.

Davi exited the taxi on the wrong side, stepping into the street. She paid the fare with a twenty-dollar bill and left the change for tip. The fare seemed enormous after so many twenty-five and fifty-cent motorbike rides in southeast Asia. The taxi had seemed enormous, too, she tiny in the corner of the vinyl bench seat. And the tall rows of houses that leaned toward her from either side of the street, they seemed too big, too old, too close. Even the oaks that lined the sidewalk looked grotesque, the deep corrugations of their bark, bleached dead branches high in their crowns. The taxi engine roared, and the cab rose off its springs and was gone, gliding away over potholes, revealing Peter's car at the curb, blanketed in dust and in debris from the trees, the left front tire soft and nearly flat.

The mailbox hung crooked on the post of Peter's porch, glossy junk mail stuffed thickly into the rusting black box, more on the wooden steps beneath. Davi dropped her pack beside the door and pushed the painted button of the doorbell. Hearing nothing, she pulled open the screen, the bottom of the frame scraping across the porch floor, and she knocked on the frosted glass. Half a minute passed before she heard a door open somewhere inside the house and felt the faint vibration of footsteps. There was the rat-
tling of locks and a stuck latch, and then there was Peter, standing in front of her in a tattered blue robe, hair pressed with sweat across his forehead, and all Davi could think was my god, he's so thin.

"Back," Peter said, his long bare foot blocking the way of a gray cat about to pounce toward Davi and out the door. His ankle pinched the cat against the doorframe, and the cat extended a paw as far as it could reach, hooking a claw into the toe of Davi's sneaker, where it stuck until the cat became frantic and yanked it out, a strand of the shoe's fabric tearing loose with a loud pop.

Davi stayed with Peter for two weeks, sleeping on a rollaway bed in a small guest room that he had been using to store film—file cabinets filled with slides and negatives along one wall, wires strung with clothespins overhead to hang and inspect the prints he developed in his attic darkroom. He'd been working most recently on a series of self-portraits, nothing like his usual colorful work. These were full-bodied mug shots in unapologetic black and white—Peter looking at the camera, a black backdrop, boxer shorts hanging loosely from his thin hips. He made no mention of the photos and neither did Davi, and she fell asleep each night surrounded by these emaciated studies and by the sound of Peter's cat, Alex, pawing at the crack beneath her door.

In the mornings she jogged the broken sidewalks of his Detroit neighborhood, stopping by a corner store for juice and what foods she could think of that he might eat. This morning, her third on her visit, she bought two cups of coffee, blueberry Poptarts and a banana. The board game they'd been playing the night before was still set up on the
kitchen table when she returned. Peter was at the sink, the hem of his robe lifting as he reached into a cupboard for a glass, exposing a thin white calf laced blue with veins.

"Oh," he said, turning at the clatter of the screen door, "where did you go?"

"For a run," Davi said. "Same as yesterday."

"Okay," he said, then mimicking her impatient voice, "same as yesterday."

She placed the two Styrofoam cups of coffee and a small bag on the table. Then she bent forward and bounced her clasped hands from her left foot to her right. "I brought Poptarts," she told him. "And coffee."

"I could have made it. I have coffee."

"I was there," she said. Alex stalked around her shoes, sniffing. He was an unusually long cat, his tail twitching as he examined her feet.

"He likes you," Peter said.

"Yeah," Davi said. "He's cute." When Peter turned, she flicked her toe at Alex, and he arched his back and hissed.

Davi had bought the coffee because, in truth, she didn't want to drink Peter's coffee anymore. She had been forcing down half a cup each morning, but she couldn't continue. The problem wasn't that he made bad coffee, but that she hated the thought of it coming from his coffee maker. She hated the stains on the yellowed surface. She hated the steam-bloated grounds stuck to the lid, the cat hair electrostatic against the plastic, the pill bottles toppling each time she pulled out the carafe. She wanted to tell Peter to put the pills somewhere else. She wanted to tell him that his coffee made her sick. But it wasn't only the coffee maker that caused her anxiety. His entire kitchen was coated in a natural-gas residue, an emission arising from the stove and warmed tacky by the incessant
radiators that pinged even now in late May. His living room was coated with an amber film of cigarette tar, his tub with a gray film of soap. But even these were not the films that bothered her most—that made her sometimes wish that it would all just go away, that he would just go away—and that then drove her to such depths of guilt. The film that truly tortured her was that which coated Peter's left eye, a dirty white bubble ringed in blue.

Peter put two Poptarts into his toaster and pushed down the lever. The cat did figure eights around his feet.

"You want to finish the game?" he asked.

"Sure," she said. She sat by his kitchen window on one side of his red metal table and slid one of the cups of coffee to the other side. "I think it was your turn," she said, though she couldn't remember whose turn it was.

Peter sat down and studied the board. "I'll take Irkutsk from Mongolia," he said, and he rolled three dice. Davi rolled two, and Peter removed one of his roman numerals from the board. They rolled again, and he removed another. They rolled a third time, and he removed two more. He sighed a quick puff of air through his nose, irritated, and his Poptarts jumped out of the toaster and landed on the counter. They both looked at the toaster. "I don't know," he said, "It just started doing that."

Peter put his Poptarts and a handful of pills onto a plate, and he sat back down, the pills—round and oblong, pink and purple, yellow and orange—rolling around the blueberry poptarts. He swallowed the pills five at at time, washing them down with coffee. Then he took a small marijuana pipe from the windowsill and hit it twice. Davi held her breath and ducked away from his exhalation.
"I'm sorry," he said. "If I throw up, I take them all again."

For the next five minutes, Davi breathed shallowly, and Peter, dulled, tried to keep track of what was happening in the game. It wasn't the smoke that bothered her, but the breath that it exposed. Of course the room was always filled with Peter's breath, she knew. But it was when he blew out the smoke from his pipe or from his cigarettes that she became acutely aware of its disbursement. In half a minute, it had enveloped the entire kitchen, soft in the angling light from the windows. Even as she told herself that she was being ridiculous, she thought about sores in her mouth, and in his, about the dots of blood in her Kleenex that morning, her nose irritated from the dry heat of the radiators. The day before, she'd drunk from his coffee cup, and had excused herself to run to her bedroom where she'd rinsed with a travel-sized Listerine, swallowing the mouthful afterward so as not to let Peter know what she'd done. And she had grown increasingly afraid of his bathroom. She now brushed her teeth in the kitchen sink rather than at the small porcelain basin with its two toothpaste-dotted spigots, and she hadn't showered the day before, in spite of her morning jog. She stood instead in front of the tub clenching her teeth, breathing the hot steam of the scalding water that she let run from the shower head in hopes that it might sterilize. The water pressure dipped, and she knew Peter was in the kitchen, running scalding water in the sink there to wash down the residue of her spit toothpaste. She'd seen him do it the previous night. She was, after all, the greater threat. This knowledge haunted her as, even so, she continued to spit into the kitchen sink.

Peter studied the game board, and Davi studied Peter, the ledges of his cheekbones, the hollow spoons of his temples. He looked at Davi, and she looked away.

"Davi," he said. "It's me."
"I know," she said, and she studied the board.

They continued rolling the dice, and after several rounds, Peter took Mongolia. On her next turn Davi took back Mongolia, losing just two men. Then she took the Congo and then Brazil. She willed her dice small as she rolled, but they continued strong. Alex, impatient with their attention to the board game, hopped into Peter's lap and batted with a single paw the dice as they rolled. The claws of the opposite paw curled into Peter's thumb for traction each time it batted, then retreated into the pads as the cat froze to stalk the next roll. As Davi watched the claws move in and out, she saw that his hand was networked with the red threads of cat scratches. She reached for her dice, and the cat's free paw came down upon the back of her hand, no claws, just tiny balls of soft leather.

Davi's hand jerked away, and Peter tossed a single roman numeral through the door to the living room. The cat tore off of his lap. Davi could hear threads snapping as Peter's robe stretched under the force of the cat's claws. Peter didn't flinch, his legs together, passive and seemingly unfeeling beneath the table.

Peter's dice remained weak, and within twenty minutes he'd grown drowsy and had coupled his poor dice with poor decisions.

"I'm too tired to finish," he said. "I need to run my I.V. anyway."

"Yeah," she said. "I might take a nap, too."

"You don't need to say that," he told her.

In the living room, Davi sat on the sofa and Peter in a recliner chair. Something in the chair was broken, and the back leaned to one side, Peter leaning with it. He placed a steel tray of medical supplies on his lap and lit a cigarette. The cat stalked into the room from the kitchen and swiped the sofa by Davi's leg. A claw hooked into the couch and
unraveled a two-inch loop of fabric. Peter held the cigarette in his mouth, blinking through smoke as he untangled a clear plastic tube. He hung from the floor lamp beside his chair an I.V. bag filled with a bright green liquid. Marked on the side of the bag were the tri-foil wedges of a radiation symbol. He soaked a cotton ball with iodine and opened the neck of his robe to expose a plastic catheter, a plug for the I.V., that pierced his skin just above his collar bone, its soft tip, Davi knew, threading into his aorta, two inches from his heart. His chin rested on his chest as he swabbed the cotton ball around the catheter. Iodine leaked like liquid rust between his knuckles, down his forearm as he pulled the cigarette from his mouth. Davi turned away, picked up a photography magazine and flipped through the pages. When she looked again, he was turning a small plastic wheel attached to his I.V. bag, and the green fluid was flowing down the tube, pushing back a whisper of blood that had begun to draw upward from his catheter. She pulled her feet off the floor as the cat pounced again. A claw caught her sock and tore open the toe.

Peter lit another cigarette, and a haze spread eye-level around the room. "Alex," he said through the cigarette. "No."

The cat froze, one ear twisting back toward Peter.

"He really does like you," Peter said. "He ignores most people."

"Too bad for them," Davi said.

"What?"

"Nothing. I'm joking."

The cat swiped again at Davi, its paw probing between the couch and her leg, trying to find the foot that she'd tucked out of its reach. She tried to ignore it, until she felt a
little poke from a claw. She yipped and slid back, while Peter chuckled. "Alex," Peter said. "Leave her alone." To Davi he said, "Tell me about your trip."

Davi tried to think of what to say. Talking about where she had been was always difficult for her. She didn't know the language for it. She often talked about seeing other cultures, learning about herself, but this was not really why she traveled. In fact, she rarely reflected upon what she encountered, and even more rarely applied those reflections to herself. For her, there was simply the power of motion. When she was on the move, she was calm. "It was good," she said to Peter, and before she knew that she would say it, she added, "I felt free, you know?"

"Didn't it get lonely?" Peter asked, and Davi considered Peter's loneliness, how he had been forced by poor health to turn his camera on himself, when he had made his career shooting pictures of other people.

"No. There were two other crew on the boat. And I always met people in port. I met a monk once. I've got a picture of him that you'll love," she said. "He's a teenager, a month away from finishing his two-year monkship. Monkship? He's wrapped in a bright orange robe, hunched on the steps of an ancient temple, smoking a cigarette. Just a bored kid. He told me that when he got out, he was going to buy a motorbike and become a tour guide."

"Sounds like a great shot," Peter said. Peter was a street photographer, his forte a sort of snapshot—candid, but not surreptitious. He befriended people on the street, young teenagers and children, and he photographed them clowning around, riding bikes, skateboarding, playing with dolls, mugging for the camera. He shot with Ektacolor, the color film of the nineteen sixties and seventies, often warming it in the oven, aging it into
hues of pink and green. His pictures were in almost every way like photographs pulled from old family albums, except in Peter's pictures the parents were not behind the camera. A young boy might be smoking a cigarette, or he might have his hand in a girl's back pocket. Always, however, there was the innocence of youth in these children, hidden behind the cigarettes and the sexuality, a bright health of naivete emerging as one viewed his work. The girls were self-conscious in their halter tops and cutoff shorts, the boys uncertain in their shoving and muscle-making. Their eyes watched each other, searched the lens of the camera for feedback. These children weren't racing toward ruin, but simply playing at being adult, trying on the clothes, so to speak, the shirt sleeves swallowing their hands, the hats down over their ears, the heels of the shoes hanging off their undersized feet. "Life isn't a string of birthdays and Christmases," Peter once told Davi. "This is where it happens. In a vacant lot on a summer evening, just after the streetlights come on."

Peter displayed few of his own pictures in his house, but one hung on the wall near his chair. It was a shot of a red-haired boy, his freckled face close to the camera, a can of Pabst Blue Ribbon tipped to his lips. Another boy had just thrust his face into the camera, kissing the cheek of the red-haired boy, while behind them, in the top corner of the frame, a girl in overalls and a white t-shirt is riding a bicycle much too large for her. She's coasting toward the lip of a concrete ledge, standing tall on the pedals as she strains to see how far she will drop if she goes for it.

Peter asked to see Davi's picture of the monk, and she told him that she hadn't developed it yet, that it was still in her camera. He offered to help her develop it in his darkroom, and that evening they ordered a pizza and took it into the attic.
The stairs to the attic were tight and steep, bare wooden risers dark with age. Peter led the way. He disappeared into the darkness at the top, until he pulled the cord of a painted bulb that hung from a rafter, and a dim red light filled the room. As Davi followed, she felt the cat pushing past her leg. She pinched it against the wall and swept it back down the steps, swinging the door closed before it could regain its balance. The attic was narrow, like the house, an alley of rough-sawn wood, steep rafters rising close on either side. Strings like those in the guest room zigzagged overhead, clothespins caught like flies in the web.

"I'll develop the film," Peter said. "It has to be done in complete darkness. It'll be easier if I just do it. Then I'll help you work the enlarger to make the prints."

Peter rifled through shelves and cupboards. The darkroom was built from a mishmash of kitchen remnants—old cabinetry, three kinds of countertop, a fifties-vintage Admiral refrigerator with rounded corners and a latching door. He found the cylindrical developing tank that he was looking for, pulled a wire spool from its center and clicked out the light. Davi heard her camera open, the scraping of the film being threaded onto the spool. She heard Peter twist the cap onto the tank, and then he turned on the light.

"Here," he said, "you can do the rest." He instructed her as she poured and drained chemicals through the tank. They rinsed the film in warm water, and while Davi cut the film into strips of five shots, Peter pulled the dust cover from the enlarger. He clamped the end of the first strip into the enlarger head and switched on the light. A blurred image shone onto the white base. He turned a knob, and the image drew into focus, a shot of a tin-roofed hut, raised on stilts, six-feet off the mud of a river bank. In the reversed color image, the mud showed aquamarine, the lilting leaf of a banana tree red, the sky a
A plank of wood nailed to one of the stilts read, "Siem Reap English School." A short, stout woman stood beneath the hut, one hand on a ladder that led up, through the center of the floor. She stood stiffly for the camera, no smile, her dark eyes shining brightly in the negative image.

"That's Mau, who ran the school," Davi said. "That was my first day. I don't think she wanted me to take her picture."

"This must be the first roll of film from your trip," Peter said.

"I didn't take many pictures."

"Is this your only roll?"

"Uh huh."

"From two years?"

"I guess so."

Peter talked Davi through the process of setting the timer and exposing a print, which they set aside to develop. He pulled the filmstrip through the holder to the next frame, a shot of the river, its muddy water nearly the same blue-green as the banks.

"The river," Davi said.

They exposed the print, and moved to the next frame, a dirt street running through a market, stalls of fruit and sandals shaded under tattered canopies, smoke rising from a grill. The next frame showed the same market, highlighting a booth of boutiqued fabrics. The next also of the market, a group of young boys standing across the street. Peter leaned toward the image. There were six boys in a tight group, five of them wearing only tattered shorts, the youngest, probably not more than five years old, in only a dirt-encrusted t-shirt.
"What are they carrying?" Peter asked.

"Plastic bags filled with glue. I don't know where they get it."

"That's pretty horrific."

The pictures rolled on, students sitting on the floor of the hut, mouths open, reciting in unison. Mau again. A cityscape, Phnom Penh, a cacophony of poured-cement buildings, four- and five-storey walkups. Then a shot back in the Siem Reap market, a young girl in a school uniform sitting on the far side of a red plastic table, the table green in the reversed image.

"Cute," Peter said.

"A student," Davi said. She almost said her name, Chanthavy. She let herself feel the word in her mind for the first time since she'd left Cambodia, let the dropped coins of the syllables fall quickly and musically, the way they fell from the mouth of that girl, her voice sounding always to Davi like the coins her student would spread on the schoolroom floor after a day of selling postcards and trinkets at the Angkor Wat temple ruins. When she'd saved enough money, she told Davi, she would go to Phnom Penh, where she would study to be a teacher. She visited Davi every day. Even on Sundays, when there was no class, she took Davi to the market, helping her haggle for toothpaste and soap, until one Sunday, while Davi was sifting through a tray of bracelets, Chanthavy disappeared.

Peter talked Davi through the manipulation of the developing baths, and half an hour later the prints were hanging to dry on the lines overhead. Peter reached for the cord to click off the red bulb, and just before the light blinked out Davi saw, in the far background of Chanthavy's picture, a man in a straw fedora, his face hidden in the shadow of his hat. Before she could shut down, could overrun the image with thoughts of
waves breaking over the bow, lists of equipment she'd bring if she ever had a boat of her own, Davi saw clearly in her mind what was hidden in the shadow of that fedora—a white man's sunburned lips, beneath a black mustache, beneath mirrored sunglasses. She saw him as she always had, at a table in the market, hair thick on the back of his hand, palm cooling on a sweating bottle of Lao beer.

#

Davi had been staying at Peter's house for a week before she mentioned her desire to sail in the First Circ race. Peter's cat had shredded the corner of a boat-trader catalogue that she'd left on the living room floor, and Peter was looking through the advertisements when she came in from a run. She fell onto the couch, the neck of her shirt dark with sweat, and Peter asked if she were buying a boat.

"I wish," she said. "Just dreaming." She told him about the race, open to experienced sailors who hadn't yet done a circumnavigation.

"Can you imagine what Mom would say if you told her you were going to sail around the world? Alone?"

"Well, would she rather have me like half the girls we went to school with? Pregnant and living with their boyfriends?"

"Hell yes, she'd rather have you pregnant and living with a boyfriend. She'd be thrilled if you were pregnant and living with a boyfriend."

"True."

Peter asked questions then, questions about time and boat types and costs, and as Davi listened and answered, it became clear that he liked the idea. He wanted to help. She was surprised, not by his willingness to help, he would always be her big brother in
situations like these, times when she was excited about something. As a boy he had felt
the warm satisfaction of buying things for Davi when her allowance was spent—the wax
lips that she wanted, or the black jack taffy. There was in this act for Peter the sense of
fulfillment that came with being the provider—a calm for the duration of Davi’s pleasure,
the maternal feeling of purpose as he wiped the melted candy from her cheeks. For Davi
there came through this act the understanding that if her desire were great enough any­
thing was possible. She wasn’t surprised by this dynamic that had for so long been a shap­
ing force in their relationship. But she was surprised that he seemed genuinely to want
her to do this. Something about her traveling had always seemed to bother him, and
though he’d never disparaged her, she remembered when she’d come home from a camp­
ing trip on the Pacific Crest trail, a year before going overseas, Peter had called her a
'moving target.'

"I have an inheritance for you," he said as he turned a page in the boat trader. The
neck of his robe slid down and Davi looked away from the catheter on his chest. He lit a
cigarette, and pulled on the butt end with lips that were increasingly dark, veins of blue
exposing his poor circulation, a discoloration that Davi could not wipe away even if she’d
had the courage to step into that maternal role, a role she increasingly felt pressured to
assume. Every day, their mother called, and every day she told Davi how nice it was that
she was staying with Peter, how good it was to have someone there with him, their mother
pushing them together in this awkward hug. "I sold my insurance policy to a broker," Pe­
ter continued. "He’ll be paid a percentage when I go."

"What a vulture," Davi said. "I hope he likes waiting."
Peter's lips again clutched his cigarette. "At least he's a vulture I can bargain with. If I keep him waiting for more than a year, though, I pay a penalty. That may be the first bill I've ever looked forward to." His feet were propped on the footrest of his recliner, large and nicotine-yellow from the jaundice caused by his medications. His toes moved as he spoke, stretching and wiggling like a child's on a sunny day at the beach, and Davi found the incongruity unsettling. "My work has been selling well lately, too," Peter said. '"'Maybe he'll be the next late great artist,' they're thinking. Everyone betting on my demise. It feels strange. Sometimes comforting, though. Validating. If my death is a real thing, beyond my own fear and chagrin, then I must be real, too. Something like that."

Davi thought that she understood, and she felt ashamed of her repulsion as she continued to look at his feet and to wonder how much feeling he had in them, if death were such a slow thing, moving even now from cell to cell, up from his toes. More than ever, she wanted to feel the iron links of an anchor rode in her hands, the sudden give as the anchor broke away from the sand. As if in response, Peter finalized his offer. "I'll pay for your boat," he said, "if you'll let me."

"You don't have to do this," Davi protested.

"I want to," he said. "You know I do. Let's not do the whole dance. I'm tired. Take the money."

Peter finished his cigarette as Davi sat silent on the couch. When he snubbed the butt into the ashtray, she said, "Thanks, Pete."

"You're welcome, Davi."

"I'll keep the costs as low as I can," she said. "I can't believe it." The anchor breaking away from the sand. "You don't know how much this means to me." The bow pivot-
ing off the wind. "I already found a few boats that I think would work." The easy rise and fall of the untethered hull as it draws the contours of the incoming waves. "I want to refit an old boat, something from the early days of fiberglass. She'll be heavy, but she'll be strong. I'll have all winter to work on her." The fluttering luff of the rising mainsail, the quick catch and the snapping taut, the pull forward, a heaving toward the horizon, and the shoreline falling hull down astern.

"Her," Peter repeated.

"What?"

"Your boat. Your soon-to-be boat. She's a her. I like that. It's fun."

"She'll be a beauty when I'm finished with her."

"I know she will."

Davi was on a train the next day, riding to Erie, Pennsylvania, to look at a boat. The only available seats faced backward, and she rode uncomfortably, the receding landscape causing motion sickness. She tried to keep herself from looking out the window, but the longer she resisted, the stronger the desire became, until she gave in with a peek, and then another, and then a steady gaze. She thought, as she watched the backward slide of abandoned factories and farmers' fields, of her first boarding of Wanderlust. She remembered the dizzying trip that led her to that dock, a mindless stumbling along the path of least resistance, a downhill ride on the Mekong, across the Vietnamese border to sea level, still able to feel after three days the sting of Chanthavy's mother's hand on her cheek, still hearing the clumsy translation from one of her students: "She say you responsible. You take her daughter's life." Davi watched the scenery flow backward until her stomach fluttered and her head grew heavy with nausea. She saw the six shirtless boys standing on
the river bank at the market's edge, huffing on their bags of glue. She saw their dark eyes, liquid as if melted by the fumes. She saw their hands waving hypnotically palm up in her direction, the single word she ever heard them say in any language, their whispered hellos, again and again until she put a hundred riel into the hand of one. Finally, she saw the man in the straw fedora, the boys gathered around his table as he handed each an American dollar bill. Then the boys were back on the river bank, five now, the youngest boy gone.

At Toledo, a forward-facing seat opened up, and Davi took it, looking eagerly now out the window, her only discomfort an occasional hot flash of guilt, as she acknowledged that her excitement was equally split between the shrinking distance that lay between herself and this boat, and the expanding space that separated her from Peter.
CHAPTER THREE

May 28, 1986

44° 43' 29" N, 85° 50' 53" W

Karl and Mary's retirement cottage in Cedar Lake, Michigan, pop. 2,700

Mary kneeled in her flower bed on a foam pad not quite thick enough to keep the dampness of the soil from drawing through the foam and into her knees. The daffodils had come and gone, the tulips past their peak. She was getting in her Petunias and Phlox, and wondering if they'd have tomatoes this year. The weather was clear, with just enough breeze to sound the loose leaves of the aspen and paper birch, not enough to stir the small Cedar Lake to waves, and she worked to the slow rhythm of lapping water, smooth lines of it caressing the weathered rocks along the shoreline, a musical trinkle every few seconds. The slow repetition of the ripples didn't soothe Mary, however.

This first winter of retirement had not been easy for Mary. She had replaced her syringes with crocheting needles, her caring of patients with the cleaning of the cottage, the baking of the pies and breads that had seemed like such a treat when she'd had so little time between shifts at the hospital, but that now stretched before her in a meaningless line, a string of bread loaves rising and browning like soft and impotent firecrackers. Her retirement had been difficult also for the move away from Detroit, away from Peter, a move she never would have made had he not urged her to go, and had the arthritis in her fingers not grown so bad that even sorting patients' meds into a paper cup had become a tedious and painful task. Even so, she would not have made the move, would have con-
tinued fumbling with the pills, working the syringe with two hands, had she not been sure that when the time came, she could move Peter into the loft bedroom, having all her time free to care for him. The image of Peter, weak in the guest bed, she on a chair beside him, was where the loaves of bread sometimes stopped. This was an illusive image, however, with too many degrees of doubt between this moment and that eventuality, and she conjured it fully only on occasion, the portrait more often a ghostly image, the line of bread running through it and beyond.

She'd been in the garden since dawn. She planned to work until it was time to leave for her hair appointment. Then she had her volunteer shift at St. Luke's Thrift Shop. In fact, she would stop working a few minutes earlier, leaving herself space enough to call Peter. At least he has Davi now, she thought. Still she fretted. For how long? she wondered, surprised that Davi hadn't already left, that she'd stayed with Peter for these three weeks.

At ten minutes to nine, she carried her foam pad and weeding tools inside. She washed her hands in the kitchen sink and picked up the phone to call Peter. She'd talked to him three times the day before. He'd been exhausted when she'd last phoned, and he'd said only a few words, those she wanted to hear—fine and good and nothing and yes—and though she knew them to be disingenuous, she clung to his words all the same. She'd had him put Davi on the phone, and had gotten in as many questions as she could—Is he sleeping a lot? Is he drinking his protein shakes? Is he taking all his meds? She'd spoken quickly, keeping her voice high and light, knowing Davi's reluctance to face all this, the irritability that was so often her defense. How long? Mary wondered of Davi. How long? she wondered of Peter. This morning, Peter didn't answer the phone. "Just wanted to see
how you're doing," Mary said musically after the beep. She hung up the receiver gently, as if not to disturb him further. I won't call so often, she promised herself. From now on.

She showered, hoping that the hot water would soothe her, but instead the narrow space of the enclosure seemed to squeeze her. She'd been having this sensation of compression for weeks, maybe months—she wasn't sure when it began. Had it been years? Could it really have been years? She felt always as if she were slipping between things. She tried to slip her phone calls to Peter between his naps and his nausea, between Karl's hours-long television sessions, the volume rising each time she dialed the phone. She slipped questions about Davi into her conversations with Peter, and about Peter into her conversations with Davi, Davi's plaintive response always the same if Mary pushed too hard: "If you want to know so bad, then why don't you just ask him?" Mary had been losing weight, too, as if by growing thinner she could more easily slip herself into these discourses, of which she so greatly desired to be a part. If they would just keep me informed, she thought. I'm their mother!

She applied her makeup in front of the bathroom sink. She'd let her hair go gray over the winter, and she was still experimenting with new colors to replace the coppers and rusts that had complemented her red hair. She dressed, slipped a book into her purse, and called down to Karl from the balcony. He was piling brush by the lake.

"I've got my hair appointment with Jean," she said, "and I'm at the thrift shop until three."

Karl stretched his back, the weight of his stomach pulling on his spine. He waved a hand, something between goodbye and go away, and he began piling more brush. The
lake behind him was beginning to stir, a breeze leading a line of clouds in from the west. He's getting so fat, Mary thought.

She walked the half mile to Shear Magic, the salon that Jean ran from her home on the edge of Cedar Village. The front porch had been enclosed, two chairs installed in front of two small sinks. From their chairs, the women looked out over the lake as Jean cut their hair. When Mary arrived, Jean was hunched over Mrs. Kloosterman, the curve of Jean's crooked spine raising high her left shoulder. Her left hand worked the shears, perfectly positioned above Mrs. Kloosterman's halo of blue-white hair. Jean turned to the counter behind her to pick up a spray bottle, her hunched posture unchanged, her left shoulder still positioned as if she were reaching around to fluff Mrs. Kloosterman's bangs. She nodded at Mary to sit in the other chair, and Mary wondered, as she often did, if Jean's scoliosis hurt, and if she took anything for it.

Mrs. Kloosterman talked with Mary about the next weekend's pie auction, about how much she thought Mary could fetch if she did another coconut cream. Mary demurred, praising the other woman's strawberry rhubarb. Jean misted Mrs. Kloosterman's head, then blew it dry, brushing from beneath with a cylindrical brush. She waved a mirror in front of the woman's face, held another at an angle above her head. Mrs. Kloosterman nodded. From the other side of the door that led to the interior of the house Mary could hear a television, the shouting of a courtroom reality show.

"Sure you don't want to get rid of that gray?" Jean asked when they were alone, guiding Mary's neck to the cold lip of the porcelain sink.
"I've thrown in the towel," Mary said. "And it feels good." Jean rinsed warm water over Mary's hair, and that felt good, too. She closed her eyes and settled deeper into the reclining chair.

"You don't have to go back to red. You could try something else. How about blond? Every man loves a blond. Get a little fire back in that bedroom." Jean bumped Mary's shoulder with her hip, "Or another bedroom. Who knows?"

"Oh sure," Mary said. "At my age. I bet the guys will be tripping over each other."

"I've got news for you, Mar. There's no age limit for romance. There doesn't even have to be for sex, I don't think. God, I hope not anyway."

"Tell that to my husband."

"I will."

"Don't you dare."

Jean inclined Mary's chair and held a box of hair dye in front of her, a woman on the cover, head thrown back in laughter, white teeth, cascading blond hair. "This is what I'm talking about. I'll help you choose some colors to go with it, too, and we can get that brown off your eyelids. Lord, Mary, what is that? You look like you're in a coma, for god's sake. Something with a little glitter to it. Dark on the lip liner. You'll turn heads, Mar."

"I'll think about it."

"Sure you will. You'll ask for blueing in your hair next. Then I can do you and Mrs. Kloosterman at the same time."

"Just a touchup today, Jean. I've got to be at the thrift shop at ten."
Jean slipped locks of hair between her fingers and pulled them up, scissors high and flat in her raised left hand. She complimented Mary's neck line as she always did, and told her once again that if she ever had occasion to put her hair up in pins, she should come down and Jean would do it for free. "How's Pete?" she asked.

"The same," Mary said.

"Don't tell me the same. How is he?"

"Oh, he's sleeping a lot. He won't admit it, but I can hear it in his voice. Davi's there now. I don't know how long she'll stay."

"Well, it's good that she can be there for however long."

"She's buying a boat. Actually, Pete is buying her a boat."

"A boat! That's nice of him."

"She says she's going to enter it in a race."

"I hope she wins," Jean said, her fingers tilting Mary's head.

"It's a race around the world."

Jean's scissors stopped, then started again. "I'll tell you Mary, nothing surprises me with that girl. She'll be okay. Besides, there's nothing you can do to stop her. You're just Mom. I couldn't keep my Wanda from running off with that George before she was out of high school."

"I know. You're right."

"My parents sure couldn't keep me living in their misery once I was old enough to get a job. To get a man, if you want to know the truth. Like mother, like daughter, I guess."
"I suppose. I just keep thinking she'll regret it if she leaves. She'll be gone for a year. First it was Ethiopia—"

"Cambodia."

"Same difference. Okay, Cambodia. Then a year on a boat with a bunch of sailors. What about her brother?"

"She'll learn her own way, Mar."

"But if I could somehow stop her—"

"You can't stop her. Who do you think you are? To that girl? She's just about a pirate, Mary. You should be glad she's not carrying a dagger in her teeth."

"You don't think she is? You haven't heard the way she talks to me sometimes."

"I've always liked her. To tell you the truth, I really have."

"Well, I'm working on her for Christmas. It might be our last one with Peter. It'll be Davi's first with us in three years. Do you know that she wasn't out of the airport before she was talking about leaving again?"

"I tell you, you can't stop them, Mar." Jean waved a blow dryer over Mary's hair, brushing from beneath as she had Mrs. Kloosterman's. "Let it grow out a little, at least. I just took off the split ends. That's all I'm going to do." She waved the mirrors around Mary's head, and Mary smiled.

"You do good work," Mary said.

"I know."

Mary paid and told her to keep the change.

"You tip too much."

Mary held her purse closed with both hands. "Goodbye, Jean."
"Bye, Mar. Think about what I said."

"Blond?"

"Blond. Every woman has to go blond at least once in her life."

"I'll think about it."

As Mary walked down the porch steps, she heard the television behind her, louder for a moment as Jean opened the door. She heard the door close and the bellow of a man's voice.

#

The village main street ran for a block and a half, starting at Shear Magic—a general store, the Cedar Grill on the lake side, a post office and bank on the other, a dozen shops fitted between these staples. Saint Luke's Thrift shop was on a side street, just around the corner from the bank.

Mary walked around the building and punched the combination on the back door. She stepped into the twilight of the back room, columns of fur-collared winter coats, terry cloth exercise suits, plaid flannel shirts, denim and corduroy hung from long racks, lined in four rows as if they were cued for some event, something worth the vague humiliation of leaving the back of the closet, the bottom of the drawer, the cedar chest in the garage loft, to come here, to line up for Mary's entrance.

She flipped the bank of switches that turned on the ceiling lights over the sales floor, that lit the florescent tube of the jewelry case beneath the cash register, a pale wash flickering then steady on the few dozen copper and silver bracelets, plastic costume necklaces, a stopped watch with a tag reading 'battery?' In one corner of the sales floor was a bank of bookshelves. In another, a collection of kitchenwares and dishes. In a third, shoes and
belts and hats. Circular racks of clothes filled the floor, a bicycle and a pair of cross-country skis in the front window. The skis were newly arrived, as was the watch. Every Sunday after church, volunteers sorted through the week's donations, pricing and putting on the sales floor those fit to sell. They tossed out the worst of it, broken appliances and the surprising volume of donations that smelled ammoniac of cat urine. They cut the most tattered or stained clothes into rags to sell for ten cents a bundle.

Among the new items that had been put on the sales floor over the weekend, Mary found a book on sailing that she thought she might buy herself, thinking that she would give it to Davi, despite her knowledge that it surely wouldn't be of use, that it would be outdated, or too basic, or something that Davi had already read. If she finds one thing in it, though, it might help her, Mary thought. Then she thought, absurdly, knowing the absurdity but finding herself believing it all the more strongly because of the absurdity: it might save her life. What if there's one thing that she's overlooked, she thought, and it's right here in this book? The more she asked herself this question, the more firmly she believed that in that entire, thick book, there must be some pertinent piece of information that her daughter will have overlooked. It was two inches thick. Something. How could she not buy it? Davi would be disgusted by it, she knew, would groan, mother, would toss it aside. Mary pictured her daughter in the cabin of her boat—an amorphous image in Mary's mind, something of a submarine, iron and rivets and hatches with wheels on them. She saw Davi tossing the book onto her bunk, the book landing on its spine, falling open, a picture of some thing, fuzzy in Mary's mind, some widget that would catch Davi's eye, would cause her to read the single paragraph that would get her out of trouble when the storm hit.
The books normally sold for fifty cents or a quarter, hardcover and paperback, but the more interesting or valuable books were featured, as was this sailing manual, on the round glass shelves that topped the clothes racks, usually priced accordingly higher. Mary opened the cover of the sailing book, and found no alternate price. It would be twenty-five cents. She decided to wait to buy it, the store rule being that someone else should ring up the sales for the volunteers. She would wait, and if she still felt this sixth sense, this nagging worry about Davi—no, not worry, suspicion, quickly on its way to assurance, a hand-wringing need close behind—if she felt this then she would buy it, giving two dollars, at least, the book worth that even if it doesn't save Davi's life. Although it might.

Mary had been volunteering at the store for just over two years. In that time, as inventory came and went, the smell of the shop had not changed. It was a smell slightly sweet, pungent, the smell of her garden after a rain, when the roses were too late in bloom, their flowers heavy and doubling over their branches, round heaps of petals dark in the wet soil. People sometimes baulked at the shop's smell, the crook of a sleeved arm over a face, and a turn back toward the door, toward the street and the fresh air, the tall crisp smell of concrete, a hint of the lake if the breeze blew from the right direction. These people who bolted did not always turn in disgust, however; a few turned away, Mary thought, because the scent of all those people, of all that abandonment, was too much for them. These people simply had a greater capacity for empathy.

Mary calculated that about one in a hundred were such people, though not all of them knew of their heightened sensitivity. In fact, few who turned and fled realized why. They would tell their coworkers about it after their lunch breaks, would laugh uneasily as they described the smell, saying B.O. and dirty feet and urine, maybe even puke and shit,
the crude words restoring the sense of callousness to which they strove in the belief that it would make life easier. To be fair, these descriptions were all true. But that's not why they turned away.

Every once in a great while, however, Mary had a customer who knew his or her mind or heart intimately enough to turn almost to tears at the first inhalation. This customer would walk to Mary behind the counter, would say, 'bless you,' and 'it's so sad,' would take one of her hands in two of his and press, would shake his head or nod, looking Mary hard in the eye, as if to communicate something that he did not know how to say.

Mary's first customer on this Monday, when she unlocked the door at ten a.m., was such a person, a young woman who came in joking about the pain medication she was on for her pulled wisdom teeth. Maybe this was the reason for her sensitivity. Maybe not. The girl was a college student, wearing overalls and leather clogs, her hair in a thick braid. She said she felt spacey, and she spent an hour in the store, touching in that time nearly every item on every shelf. She picked up a picture frame, looking for nicks, read the blurbs on the backs of half a dozen paperback books, turned the handle to spin the beaters of an antique hand mixer, holding each item for a little while longer than the one she'd held before, running her fingers along the spine of the last book she slipped into the bookshelf, using both hands as she set down the mixer. She broke while she was holding a crocheted booty. It was not a real baby booty, but a decoration, to be hung from a car mirror or a Christmas tree. She held it close to her face, and said, "So cute." Then it slipped from her fingers, and she said, "So sad." She looked around the store, and Mary knew that she saw now all the people inside all those clothes—the tweed suits of the dead,
the elastic-waisted denims of lost childhood. She saw the faded images of the bent figures who no longer needed the bed pans and the walkers and the canes. She saw, too, the lives of the customers, of the people who would buy the scratched glasses and the mildewed winter gloves—the needy and the confused and the compulsive—the reality of where she was, coming through her Darvocet more bittersweet than her heart could handle, and Mary heard the air rush out of her, a quick sob as the young woman, just a girl, looked around the store. "So sad," she said again.

Mary was not altogether one of these sensitive people, could not have been and still volunteered at the shop. It would be too hard, too emotionally taxing. She was certainly empathetic, but for her there was the practical matter of need. There were people who needed these things—these clothes, these dishes, knives, blenders, electric shavers, coffee makers—and there were organizations that needed money to continue their work—Red Cross, Big Brothers and Big Sisters, The United Way. To these organizations the thrift shop gave their profits, to these and to one other, which Mary had helped add to the list two years earlier, the catalyst to her coming on as a volunteer at the shop, the AIDS relief organization, HANDS.

For Mary, the smell of the shop was too much mixed with necessity to be sad, a combination as bittersweet in purpose as it was in scent. Further, she had become immune to the individuality that this girl felt when she held close the crocheted bootie. She had come to believe that if one took any thirty or more bodies and put them together in a room for a night or two, the room would smell exactly the same, regardless of whose bodies. This was not the smell of individual failure or discard, but the cumulative smell of 'we.'
Mary worked that morning alone, and it passed with few customers, mostly regulars, walking over from the subsidized apartment building a block over. Leo came in, dressed as always in University of Michigan blue and gold. And Doris came, with a walker after her surgery. She was Mary's age, mid-sixties, her hair short and uncombed, a winter jacket over her shoulders despite the early summer weather. "It looks like a cricket to me," Doris shouted. Mary nodded, unsure what looked like a cricket. "There's a basket in there," Doris continued. She lifted the back of her shirt, lowered the elastic waist of her sweatpants to reveal the thin spider-veined skin of her lower back, a new surgical scar there about two inches long. Doris repeated that it looked like a cricket to her and that there was some kind of basket in there now. "It's made of..." she said, searching for the word that the doctor had used. "My daughter can tell you what it's made of. But it's not iron. It won't set off the, you know, nor nothing like that." Mary said metal detectors, Doris nodded that's right, and Mary wondered where Doris would ever have occasion to walk through a metal detector.

Another woman came in who decided against a fifteen-cent picture frame because she thought it had been in the half-off bin. And the man who comes nearly every Monday morning arrived, picking through the store those items that seemed collectable or underpriced. His smell somehow preceded him, an acrid odor, the bitter smell of a house fire, and Mary seemed always to know when he was about to appear. It was an invasion, his smell, a kind of molestation, and whenever he stood near, Mary's head balked from side to side, as she tried vainly to avoid the stench. His appearance seemed to confirm that he had been in a fire, his hair and beard frizzled and damp, wet ashes encircling his face. His army jacket, too, seemed ground in ash, and Mary imagined him living in the
shell of a burned house, sleeping on the crumbling black remains of a single mattress. He was often waiting for the door to open at ten on Monday, knowing that the volunteers came after church on Sunday to price and put out the week's donations. Mary had seen his booth at the flea market by the fair grounds, a third of it stocked with their merchandise, the rest probably coming from garage sales and curbside trash. Today he found two silver baby spoons, inlaid in their handles with mother of pearl. He asked if the boots were included in the price for the skis in the window, and he took these when Mary said they were. He sorted through the record collection, pulling out half a dozen to buy. He was carrying these to the sales counter, when Mary thought of the sailing book, the oversight of pricing it higher than a quarter. "There's another box of records on the floor," she told the man, hoping to occupy his attention while she slipped the book behind the counter. He shook his head, grunted, placed the records on the counter. Mary rang him up quickly, commenting on the spoons in hopes of distracting him as he looked around the store. She didn't remember him ever missing a deal.

He spied the book just as Mary put a hand on his forearm and told him, "Six seventy-five."

He took the book from the glass shelf, flipped the pages, looked inside the front cover for the price. He tossed it onto the counter, pulled a blackened quarter from his jacket's breast pocket and dropped it onto the book. As she slipped it into a bag along with the spoons, Mary regretfully read the book's title, *Single-handed Cruising: what YOU need to know.* "Seven dollars even," she said.

#
Karl pulled with a wooden spoon two generous scoops of sloppy joe mix from a pot that cooled on the stove. He dropped the dollops on the bottom half of a hamburger bun, then slapped the top bun over the mound. This was his third sandwich. Mary had already finished her lunch and was washing up the dishes. She didn't say anything to Karl about his overeating, though she badly wanted to, and she knew that her desire to scold him showed in her clattering of the dishes, in her vigorous scrubbing of a plate.

Karl sat with his back to the kitchen, looking out at the lake as he ate, smacking the palm of his hand on the table in time with his chewing, as if to advertise each bite.


His hand slid back and forth along the surface of the table, then, his wedding band scraping across the oak grain, molars working sideways against the ground beef, the sound of silverware behind him, forks and knives tossed one after another into the plastic cup of the draining tray.

"I'm going to do the floors today," Mary said, "and I've got the pies for the library auction. I promised six. I don't know what I was thinking. I'll do two coconut cream, two lemon meringue, and two blueberry if I have enough berries left in the freezer. Otherwise, I'll do chocolate cream. That's easy."

Karl's hand continued its rhythm across the table, an occasional shifting in his seat as he adjusted himself to the business of his third sloppy joe.

"What are you going to do today?" Mary asked.

"I want to finish up with that brush down by the lake," he said, the metronomic sliding of his hand halting.
"I thought you did that yesterday."

"There's more to do yet."

"How much was there?"

"There was enough," he said. "There was a lot."

"How long do you think it will take?" she asked, knowing that she shouldn't, that this was not even a question but a jab.

The pitch of Karl's voice rose, the plaintive high key that Mary knew she would hear, that she had, in fact, provoked. "I don't know, Mary. I'll tell you once it's done. We had a hard winter. A lot of branches fell."

"Okay. I was just wondering," she said. She put another plate in the dish strainer.

"I just thought you'd finished it yesterday."

"I didn't," he said, almost putting down his sandwich.

"Okay."

He pushed the last third of the sloppy joe into his mouth and finished his half-glass of milk, drinking through the food. "I'm going to go change," he said, still working on that last bite as he walked to the bedroom.

Mary dialed Peter's phone number as soon as Karl had left. His answering machine picked up, his "Hi, this is Peter," tricking her as it always did, she wanting so badly for him to answer. In truth, she knew from a tiny electrical hiccup in the 'Hi,' that it was only his machine. Still, she allowed herself that second of hope, getting as far as "Hi Peter, this is your—" before she was interrupted by his recorded announcement that he couldn't make it to the phone and that she should leave a message. "It's your mother," she said. "I'm just
calling to let you know that I'll be down for your birthday. Give me a call. Love you, sweetie."

Mary heard Karl's heavy steps cross the living room, the scrape of the sliding glass door on its track. She mixed the pie crusts, two at a time, rolling them and fitting them into tins until she had six stacked together on the counter. She found the blueberries she'd hoped would be in the freezer, and for the next hour she moved from blueberry to lemon to coconut. She started on the floors, then, and when she'd finished cleaning, Karl still hadn't come up from the lake. She stepped onto the deck and looked through the slope of thin trees toward the patch of grass at the lake's edge. A trickle of smoke drifted from some dying embers in the fire pit, the brush pile high beside it. Karl lay on his back on the dock, eyes closed, shirt pulled up to his armpits, his hairless belly a giant white egg in the late afternoon sun.
Davison found the boat in the back of the shipyard, a thirty-foot cruiser with a white deck and baby-blue hull. It stood on a patch of baked dust, propped on rusting stilts, a scattering of saw grass and thistle brushing its belly. It was sun-faded and demasted, its deck spider-webbed with cracks, the fiberglass drying like bones on a desert butte.

This was not the boat that she'd come to Erie to see. That boat had been in the water, reasonably well appointed, a few alterations away from becoming a sound, open-ocean vessel. That boat had not grabbed Davi, however. The contour of its hull had not called to her—its lines too pedestrian, eminently stable but obviously slow. This baby-blue boat in the scrapyard of the marina, on the other hand, had beckoned her over from the docks, the sun hitting the bow pulpit railing at just the right angle to sparkle in Davi's eyes. The boat was a regal old girl, sleek, with a high, proud bow, a bow that might catch a little too much wind, but that would handle a tall sea before dipping into the trough of a wave. She ran her hand along its dolphin flanks, memorizing the subtle curves from concave to convex, and thinking—she's fast. She climbed the back of the scaffold and sat in the cockpit. The wheel was gone, and the binnacle and compass. The winches were oxidized and wouldn't turn. She sat on the port bench and looked over the low roof of the cabin, imagining that noble nose, raised in defiance, cutting through a heavy sea. She'll
be fast, she thought again. She saw a mast in place, then, a mainsail taut in a beam wind, a genoa pinching the air into the sweet spot between the sails. Fast. She dropped through the companionway, the scent of rotting wood and mildewed fabric stifling in the dark cabin. She raised the hinged companionway steps, revealing a small Yanmar diesel, the bright red of the engine, the fingerprints of the previous owner still stamped into a healthy sheen of grease. There was no rust, no sign of it having been swamped. She heard that little heart beating, knew just how it would sound resonating though the fiberglass hull.

The previous owner, she learned, had recently died, and she bought the boat from the man's son, who hadn't known that it existed. Neither had the marina kept track of the boat, having no record of its storage. The yardmaster had had to look up its ownership up by serial number. It had slunk off alone to die.

"She was forgotten for a reason," the marina yardmaster told Davi. He introduced himself as Angus. He was probably not over forty years old, though years of sun reflecting off water caused him to look older. He toed the dust with a dry leather boot, rattled the scaffolding pedestal. Rust flaked down onto his hand. The rust looked like it belonged there, Davi thought, on this man's squared knuckles.

"If there was anything left on her, you could part her out."

"I'm going to sail her," Davi said. She pushed at the crease where the keel met the hull, and she found no give, no sign that the seam's integrity had been compromised.

"I'm not saying it's impossible," Angus said. He hooked a thumb into the pocket of his blue jeans. "But you could buy a good-condition Catalina twenty-four, for the cost of
this thing. She makes a great day sailer. And she's got a snug little cabin. You could sail her clear around Lake Erie if you wanted."

"I'm going to sail her around the world," Davi said, walking around the boat.

"Around the world," he repeated, following her.

"Around the world."

"This boat?"

"This boat," Davi said. "But if I'm going to rebuild her, then I'll need to be close."  

Peter wanted to know everything about the boat. He scolded Davi for not taking a picture, and made her promise that she would document the resurrection. "I'll give you a camera, and I'll develop the film," he told her. "Just get me the rolls when you're done." Alex did figure eights around Davi's ankles. "He missed you," Peter said. The cat fell onto its side and untied one of Davi's shoes.

Peter's birthday was four days away, and so Davi was forced to resist returning immediately to her boat. She borrowed his car to shop for a present, stalling at every stoplight, until she learned to feather the gas pedal in order to keep the engine running. A belt squealed under the hood; the brakes scraped, their pads worn to the metal shoes; cigarette butts rolled around the footwells when she rounded corners.

She drove up I-75 to Oakland Mall, where she walked from shop to shop wondering what Peter could use. She thought about a massaging chair insert, but decided it might be more painful than pleasurable. She didn't know what size to buy him in clothes since he'd lost so much weight, nor did she know what he might wear, as he hardly ever changed from his robe.
Only once had she coaxed him out to dinner, and then he had worn a flannel shirt that hung from his shoulders, and old jeans that he cinched with a belt, the waistline corrugated around his hips. He covered his wisps of hair with a neon green ball cap, Basic Menthol in block letters across the foam forehead. The hat was too big, propped on his ears, the back of his neck two thin cables beneath it. They ate at Tuscan Villa, a pizza and spaghetti place with broken pottery on the walls, red and white checkered cloths on the tables. Davi saw the hostess nudge a co-worker as they entered the restaurant, heard the laughter as the two whispered together. Neither Davi nor Peter ate much, Peter never able to eat more than a few bites and Davi thinking of what she would say to the hostess as they left. She said nothing, and for two days she thought of what she should have said, thought of swearing and fists, of going back, promising herself each night in bed, or in the morning while the restaurant was closed, that she would go back. But she never returned.

Davi looked at a camera store for Peter's present, but she didn't know what Peter might want, or what he already had. She thought she might find something fun in Radio Shack, but nothing caught her eye. In the end, she bought him a toilet paper stand, a wire cylinder that held spare rolls, a spindle for the roll in use at the top. Her face burned as she drove the toilet paper holder home, a new hot flash every time she saw through her rearview mirror the chrome tubes sticking up from the department-store bag.

Their mother drove down for Peter's birthday, and Peter dressed for the occasion, this time in gray dress pants, again too large, and a black silk shirt. Mary's presents were a new pair of slippers and a contoured cushion for the back of his chair. No one knew what the toilet paper holder was, and Davi explained it, mortified anew at her gift. Once
she understood, her mother made a fuss over it, insisting on filling it with rolls and setting it by the toilet. "Come look," she said, and when the three were gathered at the bathroom door, "How convenient."

Mary insisted on cooking, and the smell of her dinner overwhelmed the stale cigarette odor and the sour smell that had only gradually occurred to Davi, but that day by day had become anathema to her. They sat around the red metal table in the kitchen, the familiar baked chicken, mashed potatoes and gravy orphaned away from their mother's china, the green beans and potatoes served from warped Tupperware containers, the gravy from a soup bowl, scooped out with a tablespoon.

Peter finished the plateful of food that his mother gave him. He had seconds. He had a third helping of potatoes, ice cream with hot fudge for dessert. Mary seemed hardly to notice her own food, her attention absorbed by Peter's appetite.

"You could cook this yourself, you know," she said.

"Sure," Peter said, licking hot fudge from his spoon. "I don't even know how this could have come out of my kitchen."

"It's easy. You just brown the chicken in a pan before you bake it. And there's nothing to the potatoes."

"Sure, and magically it will taste like this." Peter waved his arm over the table, the corners of his mouth black with fudge.

"Well it will. A little salt and pepper, paprika, celery salt. You've got it all in the cupboard. That's where I got it."

"Mom, I wouldn't know what to do with a celery salt."
"You just shake a little on. Skin the chicken first, though. That's how I like it, any-
way."

"Skin it . . ." Peter said, nodding.

"Sure. You just pull it off and throw it in the garbage."

"Sounds lovely."

"Mom," Davi said. She looked from her mother to Peter, and saw that he had got-
ten a bit of potato on his cheek. She watched it rise and fall as he spoke, hoping that it
would fall away.

"Well it's just chicken skin for crying out loud. Bake it for twenty minutes—the
chicken, not the skin. It's better if you use a bouillon cube for the gravy. Your grand-
mother always used the neck, but who buys a whole bird anymore?"

"Neck," Peter said. "That sounds delicious."

"Mom," Davi said again.

"Well, you two sure seemed to like it when you were kids. And the potatoes just take
a little milk and butter. Mash them up and there you go. Of course, you could buy a
whole bird if you wanted, and quarter it."

"Mmm," Peter said. "Quartered bird."

"Yes! What's wrong with that?"

"I think your generation is a little tougher than ours," he said.

"Well you just spread the legs apart and cut it at the joints."

"Jesus, Mom," Davi said. "Leave him alone. He doesn't want to cook your meal,
okay? He doesn't want to boil a neck or quarter a bird. Jesus." She looked at her plate,
picked at cold potatoes with the tip of her fork.
"Davi," Peter said. "Come on, we're just joking around."

"It's okay," Mary said. She took her napkin from the table and wiped the speck of potato from Peter's cheek. "You two go relax. I'll clean this up."

Davi stood, stacked as many dishes as she could carry, and brought them to the sink. She twisted the drain-plug into place, poured in some soap and started the water running.

"I'm going to start my I.V.," Peter said.

"Sure," Mary said. "We've got it in here."

Mary brought more dishes to the sink as Davi washed. She scrubbed Ajax on the counters and stove, lifting away the residue from the gas burners. Davi made a round of the living room, collecting glasses, and found Peter fully reclined, snoring softly. His shirt was unbuttoned, one hand on the incongruous swell of his full belly. Some of the liquid from the I.V. had dripped onto his shirt, three bright green circles staining the black silk.

"He's asleep," Davi said as she placed the glasses into the soapy water.

"Good," Mary said. "It did my heart good to see him eat like that."

"He hardly eats."

"I know it. That's why I wanted to cook. You could stand to eat a little more yourself, you know."

Mary had called Davi too thin when she first saw her that day, her hands searching Davi's frame as they hugged, their first meeting since Davi left nearly two years earlier.

"Oh, those ribs," she'd said. Her eyes had rested since that moment on Peter, however, and had remained there until now.

"You're too skinny yourself, you know," Davi said.

"Oh, I don't care about that."
"Well you should care."

Mary made a dismissive face that Davi had known since childhood, a tightening of the lips, widening of the eyes. It was a gesture that said at once 'Maybe you're right,' and 'I think I know what I'm doing,' a two-pronged sentiment impossible to argue with. "Has he been nauseous?"

"No. Once. From the pills. Not bad, though."

Mary nodded. "Has he been having bad night sweats?"

Davi didn't know about this, and she said she didn't think so.

"Well, has he been washing his sheets in the morning?"

He had, Davi remembered, several times. Mary left the kitchen and returned with a bundle of sheets, the fabric, darkened by still-damp sweat, pressing against her bare arms. "Look at this. He needs to wash these every morning. He can't be sleeping in them like this." She put her nose to the sheets and inhaled. "I wonder if he's been wetting the bed."

"Mom!"

Mary pulled the sheets from her nose. "Well, I need to know!" she said.

"But, god. You don't need to stick your nose in there."

"I just need to know," she repeated.

"Look at yourself. You're blushing."

"We do what we have to do," Mary said, laughing. "It doesn't smell like urine, anyway."

"The way you poke and prod him. It's like he's a specimen or something."
"Davi," Mary said. She raised the sheets, and Davi was washed in the sour odor that had begun to find its way throughout the house. "This is your brother's reality. Do you want him to sleep in these, or do you want him to sleep in clean sheets?"

"Okay," Davi said.

"Because your brother is sick, Davi. Your brother is dying. He's not a specimen. He's a patient, and as long as you're here, you're the nurse, like it or not."

"I said okay, Mom."

"I heard you. I just want you to mean it."

"I do, all right? I'll check his sheets."

"Check him, Davi. Look at him. Try to notice if anything new is developing. I think he's getting a cataract on his other eye."

"I didn't see anything. He seems to see just fine."

"Well, I hope I'm wrong. He's always understood with his eyes, Davi. Since he was just a little boy. I can't imagine what that would do to him."

While her mother started the sheets in the washing machine, Davi finished the dishes. She pulled the drain plug, and as the gurgle of the pipe echoed in the empty sink, she saw that she'd missed the dessert dishes.

#

Davi gave her mother the rollaway bed in the guest room, setting up the couch for herself. She wrapped sheets around the cushions and settled in for the night, the living room too bright with the gold tones of a streetlight. Peter's snoring came loud from the bedroom, and the cat hunted imaginary prey and fled from imaginary threats. She drifted to the edge of sleep several times but, each time, the cat woke her. It ran across
the living room, claws skittering on the oak floor. It slid under the couch, tearing at the fabric over its head. It jumped onto the kitchen counter, the tinkling of a spoon against a bowl as it licked at the residue of ice cream and fudge. She had just drifted off again, when the cat shot across her body. Davi jumped awake, the cat hissed and catapulted itself off the end of the couch, landing in a slide and scrambling for traction as it ran into the kitchen.

Davi stopped trying to sleep then. Instead, she cursed the cat, 'That fucking little contagion. If I get my hands on it... I'll grab that thing, I don't care what..." She could feel it in her hands, could feel herself squeezing the life out of it. It continued to stalk through the house, every so often darting close, bounding onto the back of the couch, leaping over Davi as she fanned the air, trying to smack it, grazing only the tip of its tail. Then it was on Peter's chair, in the darkness just outside the wash of the streetlight, its eyes two pale moons staring at Davi, whose teeth were clenched in her effort to will the cat away. "Go away," she whispered through her teeth. "Disappear."

The cat's eyes blinked out, and for a split second in this three-a.m. state of mind, Davi thought that her psychic will had actually done something; as quickly, she felt a spark of regret. Then she saw the shaded contour of the cat's bobbing head, and she realized that it was licking its crotch.

"You little shit," she whispered. She flung off her sheet, and stood up. The cat leapt into the darkness of the kitchen. She sat down then, stock still on the edge of the couch, and she waited.

She saw the cat's eyes first in the kitchen, staring at her from the middle of the room. It crept closer, stopping beneath the archway that separated the rooms, ten feet
from Davi. It darted from there to the far corner of the living room, its eyes lit beneath the console radio. It stalked along the baseboard beneath the window, working its way in stops and starts to the edge of the couch. Davi didn't flinch as it hopped onto the couch's arm. She made no motion as it crept, one isolated step at a time, across the cushions and into her lap.

She waited until it had relaxed enough to settle its stomach onto her lap before she slid a hand, gently, beneath its belly and lifted it to her shoulder. She cooed at it as she stood, a half-hearted soothing sound, to Davi's credit not quite convincing, and the cat grew stiff in her arms. Its claws gripped her shoulder as she unlocked the deadbolt on the front door, its hind legs pushing away from her ribs as she pulled the door open. The cat began to quake as she stepped onto the porch. It had never been outside, and its fear worked on Davi, her resolve to toss the cat into the night softening. She might have taken it back inside had not a car alarm sounded. As the wail rang out, however, Alex tore himself from her arms, hit the porch boards and was gone through the railing and into the night. She lost track of him instantly, only the heat of his scratches on her shoulder proving that he had been in her arms at all.

#

It was late morning when Peter came out of his bedroom. Half an hour passed as he nibbled at the eggs his mother had scrambled, sipped on his heavily creamed coffee. Davi watched him for that half hour, noticing the moment his eyes scanned the kitchen floor, his immediate recognition that something was wrong.

"Where's Alex?" he asked.

Davi shrugged and turned her attention to her eggs.
Mary was sitting across the table from Peter, where she had been watching him eat. She looked away, scanned the kitchen floor. "I thought something seemed odd. I haven't seen him at all this morning."

Peter called Alex' name. He made a kissing sound and waited. When the cat didn't come, he dropped his fork onto his plate, and then he was up searching from room to room, shaking a box of cat treats and calling Alex' name, the alarm in his voice rising with each call, with each empty room.

"Oh, I'm sure he's here," Mary said. "Where could he have gone?"

"He's not here," Peter said. "He would come."

"Maybe he got shut in the attic," Mary suggested.

"I haven't been up there. You know that. You were here."

"Well, I thought maybe," she said. She looked at Davi. "He was here last night when we went to bed. You must have heard him? He was clawing at my door before I turned out the light."

Peter turned the deadbolt on the front door and pulled. The door didn't open. He turned it again, and swung the door wide. He looked from the lock to Davi, and then he stepped outside, his bathrobe blowing in the chilled morning wind, his bare feet padding down the splintered porch steps. "Alex," he called, rattling the container of treats. "Here, Alex. Come on, boy."

Mary followed as he started down the sidewalk, Peter bending to look under porches, shaking the treats and calling. Davi stepped onto the porch and watched them search down the block, Peter's bare legs as white as paper. She watched until they rounded the corner and disappeared. She could still faintly hear the cat treats rattling
against the walls of the box, her mother's voice joining Peter's as he begged for his cat to come back to him.

"Any sign of him?" Davi asked, when Peter and Mary returned empty-handed after circling the block.

"The door was unlocked," Peter said. "Did you go out last night?"

"Yeah, I guess I did," Davi said. "I was hot. He must have..." But she couldn't finish her lie, not with Peter and her mother staring so intently at her, hoping for some clue in what she told them. They were not looking for a clue to her guilt, she knew, but to finding the cat. Still, she couldn't tell the lie. Neither, however, did she have the courage to tell the truth, and so she let her words trail off, let the image of the cat slipping past her legs form in Peter's and her mother's minds, without her supplying the words.

Peter made signs with a grease pencil on the backs of photo paper, offering a reward for the cat. He cinched his jeans around his waist and pulled on a flannel shirt, which he buttoned askew. He stapled the signs to telephone poles, and he and Davi and their mother spent the day walking the neighborhood and calling for Alex.

"Just go home," Peter said that afternoon. The morning sun had given way to low clouds, and the smell of rain was in the air. "You two are just going to scare him away. He'll only come if I'm alone."

"We should all go home," Mary said. "It's going to rain. Someone will pick him up. Or he'll get hungry and come home on his own."

"He won't know how to get home," Peter said. "He's never been outside. Never. All these houses will look the same to him."

"Come on, sweetie," Mary said. "Let's just go home."
Peter shook his head and walked away from them. Mary and Davi watched him go, and when he started his calling again, shaking the box of treats, Mary called out to him. "Come back if it starts raining." Then she and Davi turned back toward his house.

"These streets really do look alike," Mary said, after they'd walked a few blocks. "Do we go left or right?"

The rain came just before sundown. It was a spitting rain, riding on a gusting breeze, flung in bursts against the windowpane in front of Mary as she watched the street for Peter's return. When dusk had deepened enough to trigger the streetlights, she and Davi drove around the neighborhood, searching for Peter. They returned without him, and Mary called the police.

"But he's sick," she said into the telephone. "He hasn't been out of the house in weeks." She argued, and then she hung up, the pinched voice on the other end still talking as the handset hit the receiver. "They said they'd put out a call, but they won't do anything more until he's been gone for twenty-four hours."

"He'll come home when he's ready," Davi said. "You know Peter, once he gets his mind set."

After dark, the precipitation thickened into a steady rain, and Davi and Mary once more drove the neighborhood looking for Peter, creeping this time down the alleys that bisected the city blocks, hoping to find him searching around a cluster of garbage cans or peeking into the back door of someone's tool shed. Rain blurred the windshield, and the women strained anew with each pass of the wipers, as if Peter might suddenly be there, standing in the glare of the headlights.
"Mom," Davi said. "I let the cat out." She had almost said this several times before the words finally came, and a wave of dizziness passed over her as she told this sudden truth, a weight lifted too quickly. She felt as if she would float out of her seat, almost hoped that she would pass through the roof of the car, up into the night.

Two beats of the windshield wipers passed before Mary said, "But it wasn't your fault."

Davi might have said more, might have spilled the entire truth, had not those wipers twice cleaned the windshield before her mother pronounced her innocent. Instead, she slouched lower in the passenger's seat and hoped to see Peter somehow dry and rested, Alex miraculously tucked into the crook of his arm.

Standing in Peter's living room, Mary argued again over the telephone with the police, until the officer promised to dispatch a car to the neighborhood. She picked up her purse, fishing for her own car keys, when Davi stopped her. "Mom," she said, "the police are looking now. We should wait here in case they find something." She spoke haltingly the word 'something,' becoming aware of the word's implication only as she was saying it. "Or if he comes home," she added. "He's going to need us here."

Mary put down her purse and fell onto the couch beside Davi. "I just don't know what to do," she said.

"We just have to wait," Davi told her.

Neither of the two were hungry. They brewed half a pot of coffee, Mary sweeping the pill bottles aside, rinsing two stained mugs. She checked again to see that the porch light was on. She turned on more lamps in the living room, and still more in the guest
bedroom, which faced the street. The house ablaze in light, she sat with Davi, and they waited.

They didn't talk at first, as if in their conversation they might miss something important. Then Mary's gaze moved away from the window, to the bookshelves that lined the opposite wall of the living room. "Your brother and his books," she said, smiling.

"Remember how he used to read to you when you were little? He would get so frustrated that you didn't want to read yourself. When you were just a baby, he was already picking out books for you, asking me when you would be old enough to read."

"I just never got the bug, I guess," Davi said.

"I don't think he ever wanted for anything beyond his books and his camera."

"What did I want?"

"You?" Mary said. "You wanted to be naked, for one thing. You were forever pulling off your clothes and running around outside. Such a little bugger. You wanted to be naked, and you wanted to run." She was still looking at the bookshelves, as if enough of Peter were there to merit a search. Figure out the riddle. Pull out the right book. Who knows? "And you wanted to sleep," she added. "I couldn't get your brother to sleep for love or money, and you'd just stop running and flop over where you were. You were on, or you were off."

Her mother talked about Peter's stubbornness then, his reluctance to leave a thing undone. "He was staying up all night by the time he was eight," she said, "sitting with his flashlight under his blankets, reading or drawing. When your father bought him the dark room equipment, forget it. I just gave up then. What could I do?"
"Oh, Mom, you're proud of him, though. Do you know that he's selling a lot of pictures now?"

"He deserves it. Look how hard he's worked. His entire life."

Davi leaned into her mother, cradling her coffee in both hands. "How about the way he used to arrange his toys?"

"Always just so," Mary said, still looking at the bookshelf—photography in the upper left corner, Art history followed by artist biographies, Literature from A to Z, drama dominated by Shakespeare, a set of encyclopedias lining the bottom shelf. "Look," she said, pointing to the tail end of the encyclopedias, to a six-inch space of books on sailing. "Your brother still takes an interest in you." Mary rubbed Davi's shoulder as she said this, and Davi felt the sting of cat scratches. "He always had a theme with his toys. It didn't have to be toys, either. He would go around the house collecting candles or dishes or his father's tools. I never knew what he'd go after next."

She stirred her coffee, grown cold in her hand. "At first he made lines, smallest to biggest, brightest to darkest. Then it was by color, and then the lines changed to patterns. I couldn't figure it out after a while, but he certainly had a plan. Remember how you used to take things from one part while he was working on another?"

"I think I was still in diapers, Mom," Davi said. "I don't remember."

"Well you did," Mary said. "He'd see what was missing as soon as he turned around. It didn't matter if he had the whole living-room floor covered. Oh, he'd just have a fit. But, honestly, he usually let you keep what you took, even if it meant that he had to rearrange everything to make up for its loss. I liked that about your brother. I didn't worry so much when I saw him do that."
"He still has pictures of some of those," Davi said. "He showed them to me once. He can talk about them just like he talks about any other artist's work. What he was going for, where he succeeded."

Mary took Davi's hand and squeezed, and the two sat for some time without talking. Mary turned toward the door a moment before Davi heard the first footstep on the porch. Davi could tell by the faintness of the footfalls that it wasn't a police officer. Mary pulled open the door, and Peter stepped into the room, shivering violently, hair pasted wet on his forehead, rainwater dripping from the elbows of his flannel shirt, his arms crossed over his chest, cradling the equally soaked and shaking Alex.

#

Peter developed pneumonia, and for the next three days as he lay in a hospital bed Davi's thoughts vacillated between a determination to stay with him—a thought that had in it a ring of penitence, sometimes an ugly hint of martyrdom—and a desire to get back to her boat. The desire for her boat increased in proportion to her brother's recovery, however, and by the time he returned home she had already bought her train ticket to Erie, erasing from her memory any promises she'd made to the contrary.

"I can't stay much longer, either," Mary told Davi as they waited on the platform for Davi's train. Peter had said goodbye from his chair, Davi leaning down to hug him, surprised by his pleasant smell, the scent of a freshly laundered robe, of Dove soap, the smell of their mother's care. "I have to get back up to Karl, and I have a shift at the thrift shop the day after tomorrow."

"Well, you have to have your own life still."

"The truth is that Pete wouldn't let me stay if I wanted to."
"That's a good thing."

"I suppose."

The whistle of the incoming train drifted faintly in the air, then the distant thunder of its wheels, the squeal of brakes. Mary hugged Davi, the train chuffing beside them now. "Visit him when you can, Davi. He needs us around him."

"I'll try, Mom."

Mary held her daughter as Davi tried to back toward the train. "It's important," she said. "For both of you. Don't avoid him, Davi. You'll grow to regret it if you do."
Davi spent her first three nights in Erie in a sleeping bag beneath her boat. She ripped from the cabin the bad wood, tossed out the rotting cushions, stripped the oxidized hardware from the deck, documenting it all with the Minolta rangefinder camera that Peter had given her. She pored over catalogues, called marinas, and climbed into other old boats in the yard, looking for parts. Angus had given her access to the catalogues, the boats, and the office telephone. After watching her for those three days, he also gave her a job. She worked the docks, filling diesel and pumping septics, cleaning the charter boats as they came in, checking their inventories, restocking, crewing for day races whenever she had the chance. She ran a heavy-gauge orange extension cord from a vacant dock-slip to her boat, still in the yard, dry-docked on its rusting scaffold. She hauled up a backpack and an 8-inch black-and-white TV, and she moved in.

Within a week, she had catalogued and located everything she thought she'd need to refurbish the boat. Peter had given her two signed personal checks. "Write the first for what you think you'll need," he'd told her, "and use the second when you run out of money. I know how these things go." She wrote the first check for an amount that ended in forty-two over one hundred, so sure was Davi of her needs. By summer's end, she'd cashed the second check, and by that autumn she'd begun to wonder if she shouldn't have written it for a few hundred dollars more.
After she had stripped the boat clean, Davi began the fiberglass work—a job she'd learned of necessity after *Wanderlust* struck a reef off Ko Phang Nan. Angus often helped her, and Davi let him, reluctantly at first, then freely as he was of so much help, the glass job more daunting than she had initially thought. By summer's end, they had patched, sanded and repainted the hull, and had at Angus' insistence reinforced the fiberglass on the deck where the new mast would be installed, strengthening it for the increased rigors of open-ocean sailing, and for the chronic weather of the Indian Ocean.

They were lounging on the deck, a white slick without the mast and the stainless hardware that would go on over the winter, when Angus told her that he had space for her boat in the warehouse, that she could keep it there. They had just finished reinstalling the drive shaft that ran from the boat's propellor to its small diesel engine, and their hands were black with grease. They were eating sandwiches that Davi had fixed, and drinking the last two beers from her ice box. They had wiped their hands only on dry rags, and their fingers slipped on the necks of their beer bottles, smudged the bread of the sandwiches. The sun was low in the west, the clouds over the bay tall and solid, harbingers of autumn, reflecting mauve and plum.

"The warehouse is drafty," Angus said. "I'll put you in the middle. It might be a little better."

Davi waited for him to follow with the offer of space in his apartment, an offer she'd been expecting for a while, and that she would refuse, despite the fact that she spent most of her time with him already, that she enjoyed their time together. Despite the fact that she hadn't another friend of any kind.
"There's no heat in there," he told her, and instead of the offer she'd expected, he said, "You'll want to get a space heater."

Davi nodded, told herself that she was relieved. A freighter was sliding into the bay under the colored clouds, and they watched it slip from a black dash at the bay's mouth to a solid ship, its hull a flaking rust-red in the setting sun, the shuddering of its engine a faint pulse in the air.

"Do they pay well in Cambodia?" Angus asked.

Davi stopped chewing her bite of sandwich, and looked at him to see if he were serious. He wasn't joking, she saw, but she also saw that he was disingenuous, that he was, in fact, asking how she was paying to refurbish the boat. "More than they pay me here," she joked. The freighter blew three long pulls of its horn, and a pair of tugboats skated out to meet it. "My brother is sponsoring me," she said. She said it quickly, as matter-of-factly as she could, as if it were just that, a simple matter of fact.

"That's a generous gift," he said. "A lot of money."

"He doesn't need it," she said. Angus waited for her to say more, having spent enough time with her to know that speech was a reluctant act for Davi, that nothing came freely from mind to mouth, but passed instead through a series of filters, a boat traveling through locks. When she didn't elaborate, Angus let it go. The tugboats had reached the freighter, the bumpers of their round noses pressed against it, one on either side, spinning it in line with the pier, the tiny figures of men scurrying around on the freighter's deck, another long blast of its horn.
"He's a photographer," she said, as the horn echoed and died. This simple statement was the product of Davi's locks, the edited version, pared down as it passed through the locks, having been whittled from her initial thought: he's dying.

"Must be a damned good photographer," Angus said.

"He teaches, too," she told him. The truth was that Peter used to teach—and then only adjunct—that for the past two years he'd only worked from home, writing a few articles for photography magazines, a user's manual for a new model of Beseler photographic enlarger.

"Is he a studio photographer?" Angus asked. The tugboats peeled away from the freighter. A bubbling wash built at the ship's stern, as the captain ordered a shot of throttle. The wash smoothed as quickly, and the freighter coasted forward along the line of the dock.

"No, he did street photography. He does street photography."

"I'd like to see some of his pictures."

"Yeah," Davi said, "I'll have to show you some."

"Do you have some here?"

But Davi didn't have any of Peter's work, had only spoken in some vague hope of ending the conversation. The color had nearly gone from the clouds, and the freighter was in full shadow. The men on the deck had grown indistinct, recognizable only by their action of heaving ropes overboard, other men on the pier materializing to take the thick loops and drop them around massive cleats.
Their sandwiches were gone then, their beers empty, and Angus sat with his legs in front of him, hands flat on the deck behind, watching the last of the activity on the freighter. "Well, it sounds interesting."

"It is," Davi said, the words sounding more forcefully than she had intended. Angus nodded and smiled at her.

"What?" she said.

He shook his head. "You haven’t named her, you know," he said, and he rapped with his knuckles on the fiberglass.

"I know. I’m not good at that kind of thing. I think it should somehow be a tribute to Pete."

"What have you been thinking of?"

"I haven’t."

"Oh, come on. There has to be something bouncing around in there."

"It’s stupid."

"What’s stupid?"

"Nothing. Forget it."

"No, tell me."

Davi looked at Angus, then looked away, shaking her head.

"Come on," he said. "Spit it out."

"Pete’s Sake," she said, glancing at him, then looking over the bay.

A moment of silence passed, before Angus laughed. Davi kept her eyes on the bay, felt the blood in her face.

"I love it," he said.
“Shut up,” she told him, her eyes still on the horizon.

“I’m serious. That’s it. Pete’s Sake.”

Her eyes flitted to him, then back to the horizon.

“I’m not kidding, Davi. Let’s paint it on the transom tomorrow.”

She looked at him again, longer this time, reading his face. “It’s retarded,” she said.

“No, it’s cute. It’s good.”

“You’re lying.”

He held his hands up to his sides, shook his head. “Cross my heart,” he said.

Davi sighed, nodding her head as she looked over the water.

"How about we fire up that Yanmar before it's too dark to see," he said, speaking of the diesel engine. "Make sure your propellor is spinning okay."

"Wouldn't you like to know," Davi said, this her first double entendre or sexual innuendo of any kind all summer with Angus. After she said it, she realized that despite the daily opportunities provided by their nautical setting—with its language still in actual, or joking, use; its blue peters and its Jonny-come-latelys and its jolly boats, its phrases of showing a leg and stepping the mast and bleeding the monkey—despite this easy fodder Angus had never joked in this way with her, either. Now, he only winked as he stood. He held out a hand and pulled her easily to her feet, picking up his empty beer bottle by the neck as he crouched back in counterweight to her standing.

The marina kept Davi on over the winter, part of a skeleton crew who ran the bubblers that kept ice from forming around the piers, who kept the bathrooms clean, answered telephones. Most of her time was spent with Angus, however, working on the boats that were housed with her own in drydock, so many dozen white elephants huddled
together beneath the high thin lights of the warehouse. Angus came by most evenings, knocking on her metal scaffold. She would lean over the lip of the cockpit and talk down to him for awhile, or she would invite him up. On Fridays he would bring beers and burgers from the pub, or she would cook and uncork a bottle of wine. They would tune her radio down the dial to the jazz program, or they would huddle in the silver light of her eight-inch television, foil around the rabbit ears, hoping to tune in a decent movie. He never asked to spend the night, and she never invited him. He simply took off his boots that first time, and it was understood.

For Davi, those Friday nights were a sort of reverse respite. They were not a time to forget her anxieties, but a time to give them voice. After the television, or in time with Ellington or Coltrane or Mingus—this susurrant jazz powered by the orange electrical cable that ran now from the boat to an outlet in the warehouse wall—she spoke of her uncertainty about the race, of the trouble she'd had in Cambodia, and of her brother, Peter, of how difficult his life had been, how she believed that he'd brought so much of it on himself, and how guilty that thought made her feel. She spoke most often about the drifting course of her own life, however, about how it had no good line, no point of sail. Tucked naked in the crook of his arm one night in the close damp air of the triangular forward berth, Nina Simone's voice warm from the radio, Davi told Angus, "I feel like I'm waiting to be born."

#

Davi took the train to Peter's house the day before Christmas. In his living room was a dry Christmas tree, a circle of needles on the oak floor beneath it. On its branches were lights with long upright stems through which green liquid bubbled. Davi recognized
them as the same lights they had used on the tree when they were children. She recognized also two wooden ornaments that she and Peter had painted together. Hers was the drummer boy, Peter's the elf with bells hot-glued to its toes. Red and green candles in dusty waxen wreaths stood here and about on tables and windowsills, and on the console stereo was a chipped nativity scene with two wise men and a yellow-ribboned marble in place of a missing baby Jesus. The radiators pinged madly, and condensation on the windowpanes flattened the pale December light, dripping onto the sills where it impregnated and softened the wood.

Davi spent the afternoon fighting crowds at the mall, buying the gifts that she'd neglected to buy earlier—a shirt for her mother, a wallet for Karl, a pair of quick-dry travel pants for her father, Rudy. She hoped they would fit. She'd learned his size when they'd gone shopping together in Hong Kong. He'd met her there when she was crewing with *Wanderlust*. They spent four days roaming the streets, shopping and trying whatever foods they encountered, egging each other on with dares. She rarely saw her father, had not seen him twenty times since her parents divorced when she was a child, but on those few occasions, she felt almost as if she were on an open sea. He never questioned what she was doing with her life, why she didn't settle down. In his youth, he had hitchhiked from New York to Los Angeles, up the coast to Seattle. He had worked on the pipeline in Alaska, as a smoke jumper parachuting into forest fires in Colorado and Wyoming. When they met in Hong Kong, he had just finished a trip around the Black Sea. "Don't go to Romania," he had told her. When she asked why, he simply said, "Trust me." This would be their parents' first Christmas together for two decades, one of a handful of times they'd seen each other since the divorce. Only Peter had spent any length of time with their fa-
ther, three weeks on a trip through New England. They had gone after Rudy learned of Peter's contracting AIDS. Rudy's reaction to Peter's infection had seemed as matter-of-fact as his acceptance of Peter's homosexuality. Mary had been the one to tell him of both. In response to the news about AIDS, Rudy had asked, "How much time does he have?" Of his son's homosexuality, he had said, "I knew a guy in the service who liked to do it with sheep. To each his own." Of both facts, he said he'd had his suspicions. After their trip to New England, Peter had told Davi, "You two have a lot in common." She almost asked how so.

For Peter's Christmas present, Davi bought a record, Glenn Gould's Goldberg Variations, which he had hinted that he wanted. "You'd rather have that than another toilet paper holder?" Davi had asked.

When Davi returned from shopping, Alex stalked around her and Peter as they sat on the living room floor and wrapped their presents. Peter's gifts were an odd mix—for their mother a neck heater/massager, and a pool mattress; for Karl a five-flashlight set, from six d-cell to keychain; and for their father a shave kit outfitted with an array of travel-sized toiletries, and a three-in-one game board with pieces for chess, checkers and backgammon. Alex grew bolder as he sized up the repetitive motion of folding and tapping. He pounced on loose ends of paper, rolled himself up in ribbon. Peter teased him with his hand, and Alex clawed at his wrist.

"You shouldn't let him scratch you," Davi said.

Peter shrugged. The cat was on its back. He waved his hand over it, and the cat swiped the air.

"It's not healthy," she said. "You could get an infection."
"I did once. Red tracks started growing up my forearm. I had to take antibiotics."

"That's really scary, you know?"

"What can I do? He relies on me."

"He's just a cat."

"Just," Peter said, and he nodded. "Did you hear that Alex?"

Davi scooted to one side as Peter's waving hand drew Alex closer to her. Peter tossed a bow, and the cat jumped after it, using Davi's shoulder as a springboard. "Shit!" she shouted.

"Jesus, Davi. Lighten up."

"I can't, okay? That thing is scratching— It just puts me on edge."

"I don't think you need any help being put on edge. I've never seen you not on edge."

"Okay, I'm on edge. Okay? Can we talk about someone else now?"

Alex came back with the bow and dropped it by Peter's knee. "Did you take pictures of the boat?" he asked.

Davi nodded.

"Do you have them?"

"In the camera. You can take it back. There's not much more to photograph."

Peter offered to develop the pictures with Davi that evening, but she declined, saying they'd be up half the night. They played cards, talking little, Peter smoking until he ran out of cigarettes. He asked Davi if she'd drive him to get more. "I don't like driving at night," he told her. They drove half a mile to Walgreen's, Peter again in his oversized clothes and neon-green Basic Menthol ball cap. While Peter was ordering his cigarettes,
Davi saw the game board and neck massager that he'd bought for gifts. They lay disheveled and dusty on a bottom shelf. At the checkout counter, she saw the pack of flashlights.

The cashier was chewing gum. Davi watched him move it from one side of his mouth to the other as he listened to Peter asking for his Basic Menthols, the black of the man's goatee working around the gum as he looked Peter up and down. He was a big man, his face unshaven around the dark goatee. He nodded as he walked back to the cigarettes, still nodding as he tossed the carton in front of Peter. He took Peter's money with the tips of his fingers, and he set the change on the counter, where it lay a moment before Peter picked it up.

As Peter picked up his change Davi watched the clerk's mouth, the black hair puckering around his lips as he chewed his gum. "Asshole," she said as she walked away with Peter. She said it quietly, after her back was turned. She said it not so that the man would hear, but so that she could feel as if she had done something.

But he did hear.

"What did you just say to me?" he asked. Then to Peter, "What the fuck did she say?"

"Nothing," Peter said.

"Bitch better watch her mouth." He was walking parallel to them now, on the far side of the counter. "Who the fuck do you think you are?" he said to Davi. Then he was ahead of them. By the door, he kicked the underside of the counter, and a hinged section flew open and banged against the countertop. He stepped between Peter and the door. "Don't you ever bring your ass in here again," he said to Davi. And to Peter, "And don't
bring your fairy ass anywhere near my store. You know, you're lucky you have AIDS, you AIDS mother fucker, because if you didn't, I'd kick the shit out of you right now."

The man crossed his arms and stared down at Peter and Davi as they walked around him, slipped between him and the door. Outside Davi's fear turned to elation. She felt that she had done something important, had turned some corner.

"What the hell was that, Davi?" Peter asked as the door closed behind them. He tore open the carton of cigarettes, fumbled to open a pack with shaking hands. He flicked his lighter several times, his trembling hand bumping the flame out on the tip of the cigarette. "Why would you want to provoke a guy like him?"

They didn't talk as they drove home. When she entered the house, Alex flopped on the floor by Davi. She stomped her foot, and he jumped up and ran.

They went back to their card game, the air thick and hot between them, Peter chain-smoking his new cigarettes. "I'm flattered that you wanted to protect me," he said as he shuffled the cards. "But you don't need to. You can't, Davi."

Davi didn't respond, taking the cards Peter dealt.

"Do you remember when we were kids," he asked, "the summer we stayed with Grandma and Grandpa?"

"Not really," she said, arranging her hand.

"Mom and Dad were on a trip. You were seven and I was eleven."

"I don't remember."

"You were seven. How could you not remember the entire summer?"

"I remember being there," she said. "Who's turn is it?"

"Yours. I dealt. Remember?"
"Funny."

"You remember I got hurt, right?"

Davi shrugged. She played a card.

"A shrug? That's an answer?"

"I don't have a great memory, okay?"

"I wish I could hold you still sometimes."

"What does that mean?" she asked.

"Just forget it. That's easy enough for you," he said, and he played a card.

They drove the next morning three hours to their mother's house. Peter drove the first half, Davi relieved to take over the wheel. Peter had never been a good driver, and with the loss of sight in his left eye, he'd lost his depth perception. For an hour and a half, they'd raced up behind cars, Peter riding the gas, then swerving or hitting the brakes when he realized at the last instant how close the cars were.

Their mother answered the door, their father coming up the hall behind her.

"This is weird," Peter said.

"Isn't it?" Mary said.

"I sure as hell never thought I'd be standing next to your mother again, inviting you two in for Christmas," their father said. He was tanned, squinting lines white on the corners of his eyes. He was smaller than Davi remembered, no taller than herself. She was struck by his size each time she saw him, his stature somehow always remaining large in her mind. He still had all his hair, cut short. For convenience, Davi thought, as he spent so much of his life living from a suitcase or backpack.
Karl was standing beside the fireplace, his arm on the mantle—lord of the sief. He welcomed them in a high-pitched voice, squeaking out hellos and questions about the drive, looking at Davi as he spoke. When she told him how long it took, he suggested an alternate route, going over the directions in detail, as if they hadn't already finished the drive. He asked next about the weather, and then he looked around the room. "Mary," he said. Then to Peter and Davi, "You kids want something to drink?"

Rudy didn't join the conversation, but sat instead on the couch gazing at Peter and Davi, a smile on his face. "Jesus, it's good to see you two," he said. "So tell me about the rest of your trip, Davi."

She began with leaving Hong Kong, sailing southeast to Manila. Her father interjected here, relating an adventure he'd had in Manila in the seventies, involving an old man with a cow, and a mason jar full of lambanog, a distilled coconut alcohol. When he finished his story, Davi tracked her course through Malaysia, Indonesia and back up to Thailand.

"The Thai are good golfers," Karl said. He had a paper plate in his hand now, its surface curled to support the thick weight of cheese cubes and shrimp. "Good golfers," he repeated, and he began to finger cubes of cheese into his mouth.

They opened presents, Mary carrying on about the neck massager that Peter had gotten her, Rudy smiling at his shave kit, and Karl looking puzzled over his flashlights. Peter gave Davi a hard copy of *Moby Dick*, not new, but one from his book shelf. "I know literature isn't really your thing," he told her, "but if ever there was a place and enough time to read *Moby Dick*, it's got to be on your boat over the next year."
As the afternoon wore on, Peter retreated often to the deck to smoke cigarettes, though a bitter wind blew from the frozen lake and Mary had put out an ashtray. Mary mixed drinks and opened bottles of wine, only Peter abstaining from the alcohol, though Davi could tell that he had hit his pipe a time or two while he was on the deck. At dinner, Karl launched into a long prayer filled with 'thee's and 'thou's, until, at a pause in which he was thinking of his next plea, Mary interjected "amen." He looked hurt for a moment, but seemed as happy as anyone once the food began moving around the table.

"Rudy," he asked. "Do you like lamb? I love lamb."

During dinner, Rudy and Mary reminisced about past Christmases, when the children were young, Mary's voice growing loud by the time she poured her third vodka and grapefruit juice. "And the Christmas that you bought me that toilet!" she shouted. "He wrapped it up, this big heavy box. I didn't know what it was. He built that present up all week. I couldn't wait to tear it open. And here's this damned toilet."

"Come on," Rudy said. "It was funny."

"It was the last Christmas you had with me, wasn't it?"

"Yup. Shouldn't have given you the toilet."

Rudy brought up the rabbits that they raised together in the barn, and the rabbits that came of those rabbits, and more rabbits, until they had a barn full of rabbits and no idea what to do with them. "We weren't farmers," Rudy said. "What the hell were we thinking?"

"Well you discovered one thing to do with them," Mary said, her third drink half gone.

"Hey, it was free food. There's nothing inhumane about killing your own food."
"Do you remember when this one," Mary said, pointing at Peter, "asked if I could, 'Please pass the bunny'?

"And you ran into the bathroom," Rudy said, laughing, "and you puked!"

"I've never had rabbit," Karl said. "How is rabbit?"

"It's great," Rudy said. He did a Bugs Bunny impression, nibbling on an imaginary carrot, looking out of the corner of his eye at Mary. "Lots of iron."

Mary hit his shoulder.

"I've had squirrel," Karl said. "Tastes like chicken."

They talked about the difficulty of getting Davi ready for the bus on time, about the chronic power outages and the snowed-in roads, wondering why they ever bought a house so far out in the country. "You were rebelling," Mary said. "It was the times. We all wanted to get back to nature. We had no idea how much work it was. Oh, that garden. I still have nightmares sometimes that I'm out weeding that garden, and the weeds are growing around my ankles. And I like to weed! That was just too big."

"An acre," Rudy said. "We had canned goods all winter, though."

Karl moved to the living room, and turned on the television, while Rudy and Mary talked about hauling wood for the stove, about bath time and bedtime, Peter and Davi interjecting here and there to correct or expand. Mary went on about how she couldn't for the life of her get Peter to accept going to bed. How he'd stand stiff as a pole, and bounce right back up when she'd wrestle him down, and how he'd fall asleep there on his feet rather than lose that contest of wills. By the end of her third drink, all Mary's stories were about Peter, and the rest of the family had grown quiet. She talked about his dressing up—as Captain Hook, as Robin Hood, and, once, naked with a bath towel around his
neck, as Jesus. She talked about his all night painting sessions, and then about his first camera. Peter interjected to say, "Kodak Instamatic, fixed focus." She talked about his raiding her makeup for war paint, until she'd finally bought him his own makeup kit—and here the last interjection, Rudy making a caricatured gesture of rolling his eyes.

Davi could see the strain on her mother's face as Mary continued to exhume and to brush off these memories of Peter, not wanting to overlook one, not wanting to forget, eulogizing Peter as he sat across the table from her. Davi was afraid to look at Peter, or embarrassed to look, she wasn't sure. When she finally did, she saw that he was only half-listening. He had slipped out after they'd finished eating, and she realized that he would have taken his pills, would have hit his pipe to settle his stomach. As she watched him, she realized that he hardly knew what was going on, and it occurred to her that he had been shaking since they'd finished dinner.

Mary's voice thickened with emotion, and Davi interrupted, suggesting that it was late. Peter looked relieved, but Davi suspected that it wasn't due to having felt awkward in the presence of his mother's speech, but from the knowledge that he could lie down and sleep.

The group moved to the living room, where Peter dropped onto the couch.

"I think we should take a picture," Mary whispered to Davi, her arm squeezing Davi's waist. Her whisper had been hoarse and loud, and Peter lifted his chin from his chest.

"Mom," Davi said, quietly. "It's late. Another time. Next time."

"Davi," Mary said. "Do you think there will be a next time?"
Davi started to protest again, but her mother was already corralling people for the photo. The family gathered around the tree. Davi set her mother’s snapshot camera on the counter, started the timer and ducked into the picture, just making it into the edge of the frame as the shutter snapped.

Rudy had booked a motel room by the highway, and would leave from there in the morning. He hugged Peter and Davi. Told Peter, "I love you, son." Mary walked him to the door, and they talked for a few minutes, just the low sounds of their voices, their words inaudible. Karl busied himself with straightening up the living room. He said goodnight, looking at Davi as he spoke, his eyes flicking for the briefest instant to Peter, who looked away, as if Karl's glance were a puff of bad breath. After his single word, he stood for a moment in the middle of the room, but as Mary and Rudy continued their conversation, he walked into the bedroom and closed the door behind him.

"I figured you two could stand sharing a bed for one night," Mary said after Rudy had gone.

"I can just take the couch," Davi said.

"It's a queen-sized bed, for crying out loud," Mary said. "Karl never sleeps past five, and he'll be having a fit to watch the news. You won't get any sleep down here." Mary stood beside Peter as she spoke. She held her son's arm in a possessive grip, and she stared at Davi, until Davi looked away.

Davi changed in the bathroom into sweat pants and a t-shirt; Peter buttoned himself into pastel flannel pajamas, and the two stood looking at the bed. "Do you want the left side or the right?" Peter asked.

"Geez, I don't care," Davi said. "Do you have a preference?"
"I usually sleep on the left."

"The left from where we're looking now, or the left once you're in?"

"Umm. The left we're looking at now," Peter said, pointing. "That left."

"That's fine with me," Davi said, and they took their sides, Peter getting in first, and Davi following, slipping in so close to the outside edge that the bedspread between them remained flat against the mattress.

"Do you want this on for anything?" Peter asked, the single bedside lamp on his side.

"No, you can turn it off."

He clicked off the lamp, and they lay side by side on their backs, not talking as their eyes adjusted to the faint moonlight that came in from the window, the room slowly exposed, like a print in Peter's developing tray.

"It was nice to see Dad," Peter said.

"Yeah, he looks good," Davi said. She could smell Peter now, not the clean, soap smell of their mother's care this time, but stale cigarette smoke and a hint of the sour odor that Davi sometimes thought of as the scent of his disease, the bite of contagion, and at other times as the smell of death, cells shutting down, a microscopic rot. She turned her head away and watched through the window the silhouette of tree branches wiping out the stars.

"This reminds me of when we were kids," Peter said. He was looking at the ceiling, covers pulled to his arm pits, arms long at his sides.

Davi looked at the ceiling, too. "But we had our own rooms," she said.

"I'm still thinking of that summer at Grandma and Grandpa's."
"We were in the same room, but we had separate beds. The twin beds."

"Ah, you do remember something."

"Not much. I remember being afraid of Grandma's eyepatch, and I remember missing Mom and Dad."

"And you remember that I went away to camp."

"Yeah, I guess," Davi said. She slipped from beneath the sheets, out the side of the bed. "I have to go to the bathroom."

When she reached the bottom of the stairs, she overheard Karl's plaintive voice coming from the master bedroom. ". . . could have included me," he said, and Davi stopped on the bottom step, the bedroom door on the wall opposite her.

"You could include yourself," Mary said. "Speak up."

"What do I have to say about your previous marriage? You don't make me feel welcome. You don't try."

"I don't try? What have you done to make my family feel welcome here?"

"I welcomed your kids. I was talking to them."

"Her," Mary said, and Davi could hear the heat of alcohol in the force of that word.

"You were talking to her. You won't even look at Peter."

Davi sat on the step. "I don't like to be around him," Karl said. "I don't understand him."

"Why?" Mary asked. "What about him is so hard to understand?"

"First of all, he hates me. Admit it. He can't stand me."

"Oh, and you're full of love for him, aren't you? He knows you don't want him here. I know you don't want him here."
"I can't help it. Maybe you think I'm old fashioned."

"Maybe I don't think you're old fashioned. Maybe I think you're a bigot. Maybe I think you're being a hypocrite, too. Have you looked in the mirror lately? Look at yourself. Look at your stomach. The last time I checked, gluttony was one of the seven deadly sins, Karl. And you know what? Homosexuality wasn't even on that list."

"Lust," Karl said.

"Oh, for God's sake, Karl. Is that what you think this is about? Is that why Peter has put himself through such hell? Growing up gay in a small town. Living in fear of discovery. Self-loathing. Because he can't control his lust? His lust?!"

"Quiet," Karl said, then in a hoarse whisper, "I don't understand him. I told you that. Besides, I feel bad about my eating. You know I do. I've tried to diet. He doesn't feel bad about what he does."

"It's not what he does, Karl. It's just part of who he is. And the worst thing I could imagine for him right now is to feel bad about who he is."

"Well I feel bad for him. I feel bad for his soul."

Mary sighed, a hint of a laugh, and again Davi felt the heat of vodka in her breath. "You worry about Peter's soul? What do you do to save your own soul? What was your last good deed, Karl? You're such a hypocrite. Maybe you need to feel bad about that. Maybe you need to go on a hypocrite diet."

"How about you?" Karl shouted, the squeaky tone of defensiveness slipping into his voice. "What do you do?"

"I spent my life as a nurse. I sort through dead people's clothes three times a week at the thrift shop to make a few dollars for some good causes. I take care of you. And
when it's Peter's time, I'm going to take care of him. Besides, I'm not the one talking about saving souls."

"Well, maybe I don't believe it's all about good deeds."

"Well, maybe that's where we differ."

Davi was about to slip away, when Karl said, "I can't have your son living in this house."

"I didn't say anything about him living here," Mary said.

"But that's your plan."

Again, the dark door silent in front of Davi.

"I want him to die here, Karl. I want him with me. I want him to feel safe. I want him surrounded by his family."

"It goes against my integrity," Karl said. "That's what I believe is important. You draw a line in the sand, and you don't cross it."

"Integrity!" Mary said, another breathless laugh. "Where does your integrity go when you load up your plate with your third sloppy joe?"

"You're cruel, you know that? Maybe I am a glutton, but you're cruel."

Davi remained on the bottom step of the staircase, exhausted by the past two days with Peter, by the conversation in her mother's bedroom. She was not waiting anymore for the conversation to continue, but was instead lost in thoughts of Peter's house, feeling that tight air around her, the hands of stale smoke grabbing her, the press of Alex's paws darting across her body. She heard the dishes clattering in the kitchen, and then the house was moving, lifted off its foundations and heeling away from the wind, Davi watching out the front window, Peter in the attic adjusting the sails.
"You're right," Mary said, and Davi's head lifted. She didn't know how much time had passed. She thought she had fallen asleep. "I was being cruel. I just can't have you getting between me and my son. If you can't understand Pete, then try to understand that. I need your support."

There was no response from the dark door. Then there was the sound of shifting sheets, and then Karl's voice, low and a little blubbery, "I'll try."

"Thank you," Mary said.

"I do feel bad about my eating," he said.

"But that's not the point, Karl," she said, easier now, softer. "Don't you see? It's not about feeling bad about yourself. That's not the way."

When Davi returned to the guest bedroom, Peter was asleep, and she slid into the bed and fell asleep beside him. She dreamt that night that she was in love. Her dream was not image-driven, but simply the overwhelming sense of emotion, warm and comforting, a pocket of safety. Had she dreamed an image it might have been of a cove, in a bay, on a leeward shore, a crescent moon lying on its back, silver clouds lazy against the stars. She woke from this dream in the middle of the night, the aura of it soft around her, then gradually drawing away, as she drew away from it, toward consciousness. She knew first only that she was warm. Then she knew that she was not alone, then that she was with Peter, that they were in their mother's guest bed, and finally that they were in a gentle embrace, her head tucked under his chin, her arm around his chest, his hand on her back. She lay motionless for a moment before easing out from beneath his arm. His pajama top was unbuttoned, and the sweat taken from his bare chest cooled on her cheek, a small pain on the side of her head, where her temple had been pressed against the plastic
catheter at his collarbone. She rolled slowly away, onto her side. She didn't look to see if Peter's eyes were open, though she would later hope, while in another embrace, that they had been.

#

Davi drove back to Peter's house, her brother asleep in the passenger's seat. Alex greeted Peter at the door, jumping from the red kitchen table into his arms, pressing its head into his chin. "Hey boy," Peter said. He squeezed the cat and Alex meowed. "I have to run my I.V.," he told Davi.

While Peter hooked up his I.V., Davi lay on the couch, engaged in a book on open-ocean cruising. She tested herself on emergency procedures for broken rigging, for torn sails, for running aground on reefs, on sand, on rocks. She reread sections on sound signals for communicating in fog—under power, one long foghorn blast every two minutes; under sail, one long blast followed by two short; at anchor, rapid ringing of a bell every minute; aground, three bells, rapid ringing, three bells.

"When are you leaving?" Peter asked. His I.V. was connected now, the green drops falling quickly from the bag into the tube. Alex batted across the floor a roll of white tape that had fallen from the tray.

"Tomorrow at four."

"No, for your race."

"Oh, I'm not sure exactly. It starts in June, but that's from Nova Scotia. I'll have to sail up there. It'll be a good test. I'll probably leave at the end of April. Give myself some time, in case I find a problem with the boat."
Peter nodded, and Davi could see that he wanted to say something more. She almost asked him what, but she instead turned back to her book, flipping through the pages until a section on knots caught her eye, a list of which knots would tighten fast under stress, and a list of which were designed so that they could be released under a heavy load.

"Are you sure you'll be ready?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said, looking thoughtfully out the window, "I think I will."

Peter nodded again, and again Davi didn't ask what was on his mind.

"Does it go every year?" he asked.

"Every four," she said.

He lit a cigarette, exhaled and kissed the air in Alex' direction. The cat froze, not looking toward Peter. "He's mad at me for leaving him," Peter said. He smoked his cigarette, and Alex circled the room and climbed the back of Peter's chair, jumping from his shoulder into his lap. "Tell me about your boat."

"Well, it has a name now. In your honor. Pete's Sake."

"You didn't have to," he said. He smiled, pulled on his cigarette and exhaled, thoughtfully. "I'm flattered."

"You made it happen."

"How big is it?"

"It's thirty feet long. Don't forget you've got that camera with my pictures."

"But how big is that? What's the inside like?" Alex pawed at Peter's hand, attracted by his tremulous cigarette.
"Well, there's a v-berth in front, a sort of triangular bed. There's the salon—a diner booth, really. The galley with a little stove and sink, and the head, which is just a toilet. The rest is storage. It's like a small camping trailer in there."

"How many people could sail in it, if this weren't a solo race?"

"I guess it depends on how far you want to sail," Davi said, looking away from Peter.

"Four for a weekend. Two anywhere."

"Won't you be lonely?"

Davi looked back at her brother. "Peter, I can't take you with me," she said.

"Are you kidding? Believe me, you're not going to catch me out in the middle of the ocean on a tiny little boat."

"Do you want me to stay?" she asked, suddenly hot. Sweating. Her breath shallow.

"I can. If that's what you want." Her staccato proposal was out, the 'if' spoken a little too loudly, the pause before it a little too long. Still, Peter might not have taken offense, had she not added another if. "If you don't want me to go while you're sick."

"While I'm sick? While I'm alive, you mean." Peter's cigarette shook in his hand, a cylinder of ash falling onto his lap. Alex smacked the ash, and lifted his paw to see what he had done. "That's not what I'm getting at. I want you to go, okay? I'm just asking about your boat. Forget it."

"No, I'm sorry," Davi said. "I just really want to do this, and I'm afraid it won't happen."

"It'll happen. It better happen. I'm counting on it."

"Why?"
Peter's dimples appeared. He hit his cigarette. "Tell me more about your boat," he said. "Draw me a picture."

Davi started by calling her a thirty-foot sloop, and Peter interrupted for a definition of sloop. "Triangular sail," she said. "She will be a sloop, that is, once I get her rigging in place." She mentioned the stern and Peter asked which side is the stern, left or right. The back, she told him, and as Peter's I.V dripped, she described the boat one component at a time. When she had finished, both Peter and Alex were asleep. She took her book into the guest bedroom, where she lay on her back in the rollaway bed, looking vacantly at an antique wooden tripod in the corner of the room. Mounted to the tripod was a large-format camera, also antique, a twelve-inch wooden box with a black bellows tapering to a glassy round lens that pointed at Davi. A straw hat rested rakishly on the camera. She looked at the camera until she felt as if it were looking at her. She looked self-consciously away, and then she stood and took from the top of a film file cabinet a stack of negative strips. They were black and white, held in clear plastic sleeves, five to a page, a dozen or more pages. She lay again on the bed and held the first page between herself and the light of the window. It was nearly all black. Black was white, she remembered, in the reversed image, and she realized that these were taken in front of Peter's house after a snowfall. There was a shot of his buried car, a shot of a neighbor shoveling, a shot of Peter's own footsteps leading back to his porch. In this last negative, his front window cut into the top right corner of the frame, and in the window, a tiny gray softness, Alex in miniature, his medium gray unchanged in the reversed image. In the final row of this page were the negatives for the self-portraits that still hung from the lines in the guest room. The next page continued with the self-portraits, and the next, and the next. Now,
however, he had removed his boxer shorts and stood naked, his hips angular, his penis obscured within the white of a reverse-image shadow, the small cavity beneath his pelvis having withdrawn with the wasting of muscle—as had the cavities of his eyes and temples and cheeks, anywhere bone didn't preclude. Davi pulled the page away from the light, and she put the stack on the floor by her bed. Thinking of her own strength, of her ability to hoist the mainsail single-handed, to weigh the anchor against a tide, to winch the foresail tight under tension, thinking of her quick reflexes, of her ability to grab a hold and to hang on, thinking of her good health, she realized once again her exhaustion, and within a few minutes she had fallen asleep, her body letting go like an exhalation of breath.

When she awoke, the room was dark. She clicked on a lamp beside the bed and saw that the negatives had been moved back to the top of the file cabinet. She stood stiffly, and walked into the living room. It was dark. Peter's chair was empty, and his bedroom door closed. A light was on above the kitchen table, and she found her name written on a red envelope. Inside was a card with a cat on the cover. The cat batted at a gold glass ball that hung from the tip of an evergreen bough. Inside, Peter had written this:

Take him, Davi. Don't leave me wondering what's going to happen to him. Don't let me die like that.

When Peter came into the kitchen in his bathrobe late the next morning, neither of them mentioned the card, or the negatives. Davi had woken up early and gone for a hard
run, the cold wind causing her eyes to tear, until the corrugated sidewalk smoothed and
she floated over it as if it were something soft, as if it were a stream.

"Good morning," Peter said, looking at the clock on the stove. "Barely."

Davi had a Styrofoam cup of coffee for him, and he used it to wash down his pills.
He hit his pipe, and he fell asleep on his recliner chair. She had several hours to wait for
her train, so she lay in the guest bedroom and read a chapter on weather and cloud rec­
ognition, information that she already knew, her book between herself and Peter's self
portraits.

When she came back out, Peter was still asleep in his chair, fully reclined. His robe
had loosened and fallen aside, and he lay naked, his head tipped back and his mouth
open. Davi leaned over him to pull his robe closed, and saw torn into his thin thighs
again and again the raw swollen tracks of Alex' claws. She closed his robe, and as she
lifted the velour belt from where it lay draped over the arm of the chair, Alex was there,
following the belt's tail with his claws and catching Davi on her left wrist. She jerked
away, and the claws hooked into her skin, tearing four three-inch-long grooves that, even
in the time it took her to turn her wrist to look, were already strung with tiny beads of
blood.
When the wind is directly off the stern, a boat is on a run. But if the wind shifts slightly, approaching on the same side as the mainsail, the boat is sailing by the lee. This should never be an intentional point of sail, as the wind may back the mainsail, causing the boom to swing violently across the cockpit in an accidental gybe. Sailing by the lee has been the final point of sail for many sailors, killed or thrown overboard by the boom.
CHAPTER SIX

June 17, 1987
41° 17' 28" N, 70° 48' 52" W

back at Noman's Land Island, just after sunset

Davi pulled her finger away from her lips, the sliver of blood from the paper cut now a dry line, staunched from the pressure. She lay on the bench seat in her boat's salon and bent backward the trifold creases of Peter's letter, the dim glow of the single cabin light painting the page the color of rust. Wrapped inside was a small photo, the first she had taken with the camera that Peter had given her. It was a shot of her boat as she had found it, the husk of it propped on its scaffold. She set the photo on her navigation desk and smoothed the two pages of her brother's letter. Her boat rocked on its tethered anchor rode, as the storm that she had ridden that afternoon east of Prince Edward Island brushed the shore, sliding down the coast to the south. She rolled unconsciously with the eddied waves that backed into the bay, unaware of the motion after so many days at sea, and she read Peter's letter.

Dear Davi,

Thank you for not waiting here for me to die. You've done the best thing you could already by taking Alex. And I promise that you won't miss anything important. I worry I'll say some nonsense that you'll believe profound. I'm trying to tie up loose ends, not create them. I'd be mortified to think that I introduced an unsolvable puzzle with my last
breath: "They're under the stairs, but, dear god, don't—" There are so many absurd endings. I'd rather not be remembered for mine. Believe it or not, I have been trying hard to maintain my dignity.

I'd rather talk now, while I'm in control, but do you know, as much as I've anticipated this moment, I'm not sure how to begin? I'm like a man who's waited all week to curl up with a book on a drizzling Saturday, and so relishes the process that he never quite gets down to the reading. He lays the book in his lap, listens to the patter of rain outside the window, prods the logs in the fire. Myself, I find I am enthralled with this pencil. I chose it over a pen for its intimacy. There's more voice to it, isn't there? I've always thought the same of Thomas Edison's stylus on his tinfoil cylinder. The first recorded human voice: "Mary had a little lamb. Its fleece was white as snow. And everywhere that Mary went, the lamb was sure to go." Of all the things he could have said. What a gift. There's just such intimacy to it. No magnetic current. No electronic voodoo. Only the thumbprint of his voice, the waves of it pushing the needle through the foil. So close to the real thing. Can't you just about smell him, there in his laboratory? And can you smell, through this residue of lead, the cigarettes that I refuse to quit, the coffee that I cut now with so much milk, the musk of this robe that hangs on my shoulders day after day? Put the page to your nose and inhale. You see? Here I am.

I know it was difficult for us to see each other clearly while you were here, Davi. I'll take my share of blame. I'm not very good with company anymore. But let's be honest. We really don't know each other as well as we used to. You're always on a boat, or hidden beneath a backpack in Peru or in the Philippines or someplace like that, and I'm living here like a bat, flitting between my darkroom and my library, Alex purring at my heels.
He and I are like something from a B movie, I'm afraid. Were, I should say. We were like that. Don't worry if he doesn't warm to you right away. Leave him some food and water, and he'll be fine. He's on the adventure of a lifetime.

Speaking of my library, I'm reading a book that I just love so far. Theodore Dreiser—Sister Carrie. He can't keep himself out of his own story. He keeps butting in at the ends of chapters. Listen to this: "Oh, blessed are the children of endeavour in this, that they try and are hopeful. And blessed also are they who, knowing, smile and approve." Is he vain, or is he just excited? I don't know, but I can't get enough of him. And what will happen to poor Carrie, our child of endeavor?

And on endeavors, Mom says she hasn't heard from you since you left for your endeavor. She thought you'd call before the start of the race. You know how she worries. Just call her once in a while. Collect. She'll be thrilled. She calls here every day now, checking to see if I'm still kicking, no doubt. She's been hinting that she wants me to move up there. I keep telling myself never, but I think about it lately. I think about it a lot, Davi. If it weren't for Karl, I might just go. But it's hard enough to think about the meaning of that trip without his presence making it worse. It's a walk up to the edge of the river Styx for me. Such an admission, and not one of my dry jokes, either. With Karl standing on the shore, looking on in all his righteousness, how could I bring myself to step into the boat? No, I'll stay here awhile longer yet.

Ah, but I almost forgot—the big news. And, I'll admit (only to you), my saving grace. I have a nurse. She only has one name that she'll tell me—Beth. She comes by once a day for an hour or two, does my dishes and nags at me in the most endearing way.
She scolds me, Davi. I'll keep you updated. Maybe by the time I next write, I'll have a family name to go along with this Beth.

Now, you see, I've hardly begun to talk, but my antibiotic drip has finished. And I should try to get an hour in the darkroom before bed. The man has fallen asleep with the book unread in his lap. I'll write again, though, Sis. Look for me in the mail at Norfolk. I think I have a story to share.

As ever,

Peter

P.S. Don't write back. I couldn't say a word if I thought you might reply.

Before she clicked out her cabin light for the night, Davi crouched in front of a vent that led to the boat's engine. One of the teak slats in the louvered vent was missing. It was through this four-inch slot that Alex had slipped the day she dropped him down the companionway steps, just before setting sail from Erie. The engine compartment was open to the bilges, she knew, the bilges to the compartments that housed the water and fuel tanks, and those compartments to several storage lockers. She hadn't seen Alex since he had slid through the vent a month earlier, though she knew he was alive by the disappearance of the food she set out each morning, by the messes he left in the bilge, and by the occasional sound, on windless nights, of the cat's paws padding across the foredeck above her berth, though how the thing was able to escape the sealed cabin, Davi was never sure.

"Alex," she whispered into the vent. This was the first time she had spoken his name, and her hesitant call was answered with silence.
It was still dark when Davi awoke. She brewed coffee and boiled a pot of oatmeal, carrying them up the companionway steps to the cockpit, eating hurriedly as a rich blue developed over the ocean to the east. She had untied the sailstays from the main, started the engine and was pulling in the anchor as the sun broke over the horizon. She turned her boat head-to-wind in order to hoist the main, chugging slowly forward, the banging Yanmar pistons shaking the hull. She pulled and then winched the halyard, the main rising tall and proud above her. She cut the engine and steered several points off the wind. The sail filled, and the boat heeled twenty degrees. As she was raising the jib, she saw the boat with the crimson sail sliding past the mouth of the bay.

"Shit," she said, steering a line of interception, trimming the sails until the telltale ribbons stopped fluttering and blew straight back. The boat pulled forward to six knots, and she sat at the tiller, not yet wanting to set the wind vane that would hand the piloting over to the automatic steerer.

All that morning she stayed within sight of the lead boat, though it was slowly drawing ahead, by noon just a red splinter on the sea. The day was sunny, and the breeze fell as the temperature rose to the first warm day of her trip. She pulled off her windbreaker and unzipped her fleece jacket. She was at first frustrated by the dropping breeze, the race having so far given them only one decent day of wind, but as the hours passed she began to relax, the pressure of the chase fading with the pulse of mild waves and the slow rolling of the sun overhead. She managed only four knots in the fickle breeze, but that was better than most boats her size would maintain, she knew. In a stiff wind, she gave the credit of her boat's speed to the hull, and secretly to herself for recognizing the poten-
tial of this boat—though, in fact, as much as she had recognized it, the boat had called to
her with its flashing wink. In these light breezes, however, she credited her speed to her
sails. They had been an unexpected gift from Angus, who had volunteered South Shore
Marina as a sponsor after seeing the sails Davi had bought—rugged and practical, but
nothing that would win a race. Davi's original sails, now stowed in a locker beneath the
fore berth, had been her last purchase, bought from her own wages after she'd spent all
the money from Peter's two checks. "These are shite," Angus had said, and Davi had
shrugged off his surprise, not wanting to admit that by the time she'd bought her sails,
she'd been over budget. She had already had to defend to Angus her choice of mast. It
was squarish and heavy, Davi having decided to go for strength over sleekness, not want­
ing to risk a dismasting. She had had ladder rungs added to its sides, thinking of fouled
rigging and the risk and time of winching herself up the halyard in a storm. Angus re­
minded her that she was in a race, not a pleasure cruise, and he nicknamed her boat the
fire truck. "Maybe you can ring your bell and get the other boats to pull aside for you," he said.

The new sails arrived the day before Davi was to leave Erie. They were so smooth
that they were slippery to the touch. "It's not mylar," Angus told her. "It's better."

"But what if they tear?" Davi asked. "Where's the ripstop?"

"They're strong," he insisted. "They won't rip in the first place."

"How many years have you spent at sea?"

Angus laughed. "Maybe you do have a little salt in you," he said. "You'll have your
old main stowed. Trust me." He helped her attach the main and went with her on her
trial run outside the mouth of the marina, a perfect fifteen-knot wind steady from the
west. The boat fairly flew, quickly reaching the seven knots that Davi had thought was
hull speed—the fastest her boat could travel, given the physics of design and water dis-
placement. Angus whooped as they sped to seven-and-a-half. At eight he made the
sounds of a fire engine siren, rang an imaginary bell over his head. They reached eight
again several times that afternoon on different points of sail, an impressive feat, as boats
such as Davi's tended to favor the wind off their beams. It was on her second trial run,
however, that Davi discovered the true beauty of her new sails. Heading out alone onto a
glassy bay, she found that they sailed on a breath of wind. In breezes under ten knots, her
speed nearly doubled with these sails. When the wind all but died, and she would have
slowed to the point of losing steerage, she was now making two knots, hopefully enough
to ghost through a doldrum. "She's a beauty," Angus said, catching a line as she coasted
up to the dock. "Really something special, and she was right under my nose this whole
time. You've got a good eye, Davi. Take care of her, and she'll do the same for you."

By mid afternoon, the wind died to fluttering breezes, and Davi ghosted along. The
crimson sail was still within sight, creeping down the coast ahead of her, the luffing of its
sails just visible through her binoculars, the fabric filling for odd moments with breaths of
air, then falling slack, as was her own, though on a different rhythm.

Without the work of sailing, she busied herself pulling gear from her lockers, in-
specting and repacking. She played solitaire with a deck of cards, and she read a little,
making it through only half a dozen pages of Moby Dick, Peter's Christmas gift, before her
mind drifted, impatient with the fickle breeze, with the reluctant retreat of landmarks on
the coast—the radio towers and the gray smudges of towns seeming frozen off her star-
board beam. She felt as if the coast were holding her in place. She closed the book,
dropped it through the companionway into the dry sink, and used the molded fiberglass
benches in the cockpit for step aerobics. She checked for corrosion on the battery termi-
nals, oil in the engine well. She occasionally tethered a fifty-foot line to her ankle and
jumped into the sea.

Still, the wind remained calm, and having been through nearly everything in her
boat, she decided to go up the mast. She strapped on a safety harness, from which two
static lines ran, a carabiner clip at the tip of each—her lobster claws. She would attach
these to the jacklines during storms, to the rungs of the ladder when she climbed the
mast. She held the lobster claws in her hands and clipped alternately the rungs of the
mast as she climbed. She inspected the aluminum for marks of stress, for hairline cracks,
though the mast had been untested by any critical wind. She examined the eyelets and
pulleys of the mainsheet, the wiring of her mast light. She scanned the horizon, spotting
three distant freighters, and one white sail far off her stern, the crimson sail of the lead
boat still luffing ahead. Keeping her feet on the rungs, she eased her body back until she
was sitting in the harness, arms at her side, and she hung there, suspended from the lob-
ster claws.

She could think of nothing more to do, nothing with which to occupy her mind and
so it grew restless, something inside there pulling at her attention. She felt it as a force
beyond her control, the blinking of an eye. The longer she tried to hold it still, the more
it burned to break loose, the more determinedly it pulled her focus inward, toward those
deeper recesses, which used to be so easy to obscure, she as adept in this as Peter in his
darkroom, burning a shadow over an unwanted bit of clutter in an otherwise serene
composition. It was only recently that she even noticed the effort of avoiding introspec-
tion, only recently that she became aware that she did this at all. Now, in response, she wished for wind, the wish a verbal apparition in her mind, a mantra of wind wind wind wind, so that her thoughts only dimly surfaced, half-seen murky images—the matted slick of Peter's unwashed hair, wind wind wind, her mother's strained face, wind wind, the cracked lips of the man in the straw fedora, wind wind wind wind. Davi could think of wind for hours, for days. For her, it was a perfect thought, a thought purely of motion. In fact, motion had been the sum of her concentration for years, and the sum of her action.

Before her sail on Wanderlust, before her teaching at Siem Reap, Davi had traveled the length of the Philippines, from Cebu to Banauwe, first by bus and boat, then by jeepny, then on foot along the narrow paths that ran between ledges of rice paddies, the paddies stacked like bleachers up the mountainside in the north of Luzon. She had been lost in this maze of rice paddies, the sun down already over the high mountain ridge, darkness thickening, until she found an old woman working the terrace, holding onto the clay wall with the strength of her toes. "Banauwe," Davi had said to the woman, and the woman had made the motion of striking a match. Davi gave her a lighter, and the old woman flicked it to flame. She pointed down the path. She shouted and laughed and pointed some more, the lighter flicking on and off in her hand. Davi had flown from the Philippines to Bangkok, where she walked the streets for days, where she was offered drugs on every corner, where Asian men tried to solicit sex from her with money, and European and American men with a shrug of their shoulders and the lighting of a joint. She had passed from Thailand to Laos, from Laos to Vietnam, from bus to van, riding with pigs and chickens the broken roads among the blaring horns four hundred miles from Hanoi to Ho Chi Min City. She had spent a new year's eve south of Ho Chi Min,
in a town whose name she didn't know, with a white-bearded American vet who'd re-
turned to Vietnam (Texas wasn't the same, I couldn't take the open space), new year's eve
with this man whose name she didn't know, his Laos 'wife' asleep at the table, somewhere
east of the Cambodian border, drinking local beer brewed in plastic soda bottles, sitting in
red plastic chairs under an eye-straining florescent light, until the light seemed to break
into her head like a flash bulb that wouldn't quit. Then that night was gone, and she had
awoken the first morning of the new year on the banks of a river near the town market, a
group of children catching carp with a plastic bucket and their bare hands. She crossed
the Cambodian border by boat, through a checkpoint newly opened after a months-long
string of robberies and murders along the river, the boat that she'd hired chugging past
hand-hewn skiffs sunk to the gunwales with sand for the making of the poured concrete
that seemed to build everything in the country, families and hanging laundry on the skiffs,
an incensed shrine riding on the wood-slat canopy over their heads.

These and others like them were the thoughts that Davi allowed, the thoughts of
motion and of experience, not so much of where she had been, nor at all of where she
was going, but of the interim between one destination and the next. Before she had dis-
covered sailing, Davi's favorite thought had been of herself, riding alone atop a pile of
luggage on the roof of a van, banging down a dirt road in northern Thailand, beneath a
sky of cumulous clouds and electric blue, an arched tunnel the only interruption in the
serenity of that day-long drive. She had been facing backward and hadn't seen the tun-
nel. There was blue sky, and then there was concrete racing forty miles an hour over her
head, close enough to graze the tips of her blowing hair. Then there was blue sky again,
reappearing before she even had time to think that she might have been killed.
Davi had paused only twice in the last four years, once of necessity to build her boat, and once for reasons that eluded her, the almost-year that she taught English by the river.

When the boat she rode on the Mekong docked at Phnom Pen, Davi hired a ride on the back of a motorbike to S21, the school that had been transformed to a prison and then to a museum. She walked through rooms with iron bed frames, shackles bolted to the floors, concrete crumbling from the walls. In the lobby hung mug shots of the people who'd been held there, in the playground wall the bullet holes of those who were not transported to the killing fields. The motorbike driver took her next to the fields, where she stared up at a tower of bones, tiered platforms filled with skulls, a pile of clothing beneath. The driver pointed to the different types of holes in the skulls, teaching her to identify which were formed by bullets, and which by the ammunition-saving nail on the end of a stick. She wandered away from the tower, from the smell of rotting clothes, the dry attic-scent of the bones. In a depression in the ground, she found a bit of cloth, and, as she pinched it and pulled, it held to the earth, tearing free like a tree root, until she was holding in the air an entire shirt, short-sleeved, blue plaid showing through the dirt. She draped it across a fence railing, one more shirt in a line of tattered clothing that others had pulled from the ground and draped over the fence, a macabre clothesline, the shirts and pants of the victims who were piled in the tower. She stayed a long time in the killing fields, walking the treeline, dipping into the depressions of the open graves, the work of excavation as crude and rudimentary as had been the killings and the burials, shallow bowls picked out here and there by spades. She saw more bits of cloth but didn't pull at them, fearing that if she began there might be no end. She stood twice more at the base
of the tower, until the last of the color darkened from an intense and quiet sunset. She
found her guide asleep on his motorbike, his back on the saddle, his head nestled in the
crook of the handlebars.

She spent one night in Phnom Penh, the most desperate city she'd seen in her trav­
els, the eyes of people either dead or fierce, the ghosts or the doppelgangers of the people
stacked in the killing field monument. The next morning, she took a boat farther up the
river, and two days later she walked by the tin-roofed school in Siem Reap. She read the
painted letters on the plywood sign that had been nailed to one of the stilts: English
Teacher Needed. She rapped with her knuckles on the bamboo ladder that angled
through the opening in the floor, and allowed the small old woman, Mau, who scurried
down the ladder, to lift the pack off her back.

Davi thought of these journeys, or rather she felt them, the sensations ending with
her knuckles on that ladder. From there, the images recycled and she was back on the van
in Thailand or on the skirt of a rice paddy in the Philippines, but though she thought so
seldom about her time teaching English, she couldn't help but hear the voice of her stu­
dent, Chanthavy. She heard it especially often while sailing. She heard it in the tinging of
a turnbuckle against the mast, in the ripple of water on the hull, in the spray of a wave
breaking over the deck.

While she'd been teaching, Davi had often awoken before sunup to the sound of
Chanthavy's voice, to the musical tonality of her Khmer accent, the high-pitched English
words that came so fast, yet with such careful enunciation, always in her words the ca­
dence of the speech she gave to the tourists: "My name is Chanthavy I am nine years old
You are surprised to know this I'm sure I appear younger because I am an Asian child. I
am Cambodian and I live with my mother and four brothers and sisters. My father is no longer alive. As you know in Cambodia there was war and my father was killed I miss my father but I am happy that war is over and I can go to school. You are probably not aware of this but in Thailand children must pay a fee to go to school. Outside the school gates you can easily see those children who cannot pay. When I grow up I want to be a teacher. Do you want me to teach you something? America contains three hundred millions of people. The major cities are New York and Los Angeles. Your first president was George Washington. Your country was born in seventeen seventy six. You eat eight-hundred millions of hamburgers each week and your garbage is two pounds each day for each person . . ."

Davi had heard this speech half a dozen times before Chanthavy stopped offering it. Davi felt then that the girl had accepted her, an acceptance that seemed to Davi a reciprocation of her competency as a teacher. And though she at first resisted the girl's offers of help shopping in the market, she appreciated that as well, repaying it with Cokes and candies, as if it were a business arrangement, Chanthavy seeming such a little entrepreneur with her boldness and her salesmanship. Only on the day that Chanthavy hugged her, did Davi become uneasy.

She had been in Cambodia for five months when Chanthavy hugged her. The girl had come to class early that day, as usual, waking Davi. On this morning, Davi let her talk, as she woke slowly, the sun not quite above the horizon. Mau, the school mistress, already up and gone to market, her mat rolled neatly into the corner.

"Will you be in the first class today?" she asked Chanthavy, as the girl stroked the skin of Davi's forearm. Chanthavy wore long cotton pants and a pink t-shirt, and Davi
knew because of her lack of uniform that she hadn't been able to pay the public school fee.

"Your skin is very pretty," Chanthavy said. "The hairs on your arm are very fine."

Chanthavy would go that day to the Angkor Wat temple ruins, Davi knew, to sell bamboo flutes, or sun-faded postcards on cheap card stock, or disks of hardened cane sugar wrapped in woven strips of palm leaf. From the right tourist she could get as much as two dollars for one of these trinkets. Davi knew this, but she had never gotten Chanthavy to tell her from whom she received the items, nor how she paid for them, nor how much of her profits she turned over to her family for household expenses. She did know that competition for sales was stiff, Chanthavy being one child in a crowd of dozens swarming each tourist as they entered or exited the main temples at Angkor Wat, the children so overwhelming that most tourists quickly stopped buying. When Davi first arrived in Siem Reap, she bought a packet of post cards from one child in a group, and immediately regretted it as the other children hung their heads. A girl no older than Chanthavy spat on the ground. "Bad luck to you," she said, a strong curse in Cambodia. The others pushed the girl around and told Davi that she was a bad girl. That her mother was a bad woman. Davi had not bought from any children since.

"Your skin is very beautiful, too," she told Chanthavy, pulling her arm away from the girl's fingers.

"Thank you but it is too dark."

"It's beautifully dark," Davi said, and Chanthavy smiled and pinched her own arm.

"We should get the room ready."
"Yes, I have come to help ready the room but I am very sorry that I won't be com-
ing to your English class this today Miss Davi because I want to go to school tomorrow. I
will go to the temples early to sell to the tourists when they come down from watching the
sun rise."

"What are you selling today?"

"I am selling the flutes. People like the flutes but now so many are selling them that
it is difficult. It is better for those who can play them."

Chanthavy swept the floor, while Davi sorted books, stacking them in piles accord-
ing to her day's lessons. "Go," Davi told the child. "Get your money for the public
school. I hope I don't see you back here for a long time."

"I don't hope so," Chanthavy said. "I hope to have money for public school every
day, but even so I will visit you in the evening." She swept the small pile of dust she'd
gathered over the edge of the opening in the floor, and she leaned the broom in the cor-
er. Davi was just standing, the books sorted from beginner to advanced, when she felt
Chanthavy's arms around her waist, the girl's hug so quick that before Davi could think
through her awkwardness, it was over.

"Good luck to you," Chanthavy shouted over her shoulder, already hopping down
the rungs of the ladder.

"Good luck to you," Davi said, feeling still the pressure of the girl's arms around her.
An hour later, she would feel in that hug the weight of responsibility, a yoke that threat-
ened to lash her to this place, to Chanthavy and other children like her, to their parents
and to the small community along the river. An hour later, she would become aware that
the bond had already formed more fully than she had realized, that she had for weeks
been sliding down the scale from tourist to local. She would realize that she no longer
needed Chanthavy to help her in the market, that she hadn't needed the girl's help for a
long time, her Khmer good enough now for shopping and for greeting neighbors, but that
she had welcomed the girl regardless, and would, in fact, have felt lonely going to the
market without her. An hour later, she would feel all this, but for now she felt only the
warm impression of the little girl's arms, smelled only the light hint of the river that had
drifted up from Chanthavy's hair.

Davi hung off the end of the mast for half an hour, the light breeze not quite
enough to blow aside these thoughts. She hung here until her hips ached with the biting
of the safety harness. She looked around one last time before descending, and she no-
ticed that the sail of the lead boat had grown larger off her bow. She was gaining
ground. These light winds that she so disliked would be her greatest ally in this race.
CHAPTER SEVEN

June 18, 1987

44° 43' 29" N, 85° 50' 53" W

St. Luke's Thrift Store, Cedar Lake, Michigan, pop. 2,700

Bill Collins was smiling when he walked through the front door of Saint Luke's Thrift Shop. Mary wouldn't have recognized him had she seen him on the street, but, knowing that he would be arriving at any time—it being now five minutes to one—she placed him as her coworker for the afternoon, a new volunteer. He must have been sixty years old, she guessed, but he looked younger. His hair was white, but thick and a little out of control, a wavy lock of it sweeping across his forehead and hanging heavily above his left eye. His head tilted to that side, as though from the weight of that thick white wave.

"William," was the first word out of his mouth, followed by, "Bill."

Mary introduced herself and offered to show him around the store. He wore a herringbone sport coat that stretched tight across his shoulders. The jacket was worn in the elbows, the wool pilled around the collar. He wore blue jeans that were stretched in the knees, having been worn several times at least since they were last washed. His shirt, too, was wrinkled, though not stained. Despite his unwashed clothes, however, he was clean-shaven, and his breath smelled of mouthwash. He wore a wedding ring, and Mary wondered if his wife were ill, or in some way incapacitated. He seemed too much a bachelor. Perhaps his wife is gone, she thought, and he still wears the ring.
Bill paused at a corner that held the arts and crafts items, board games and playing cards and cassette tapes, anything that didn't seem to fit elsewhere.

"These are really fine," he said, holding a box of wooden chess pieces. He put them down and picked up a microscope, a bundle of slides taped to the side of its optical tube. "Wow, great stuff," he said. "I had one when I was a kid. I used to sneak a glass from the house and fill it with water from the pond across the road. You wouldn't believe the life you can find in a drop of pond water." As he spoke, excited, turning the microscope in his hand, putting his eye to the lens and taking it away, the curl that overhung his left eye dropped by degrees past his eyebrow. He flicked his head and the curl sprang back up. He turned his attention next to a game of Parchese. "Do you know how old this is?" he asked. "I had one just like this. I used to play with my grandmother. Look at these cups. They don't make them like this anymore," he said, holding up a black leather dice cup, dry and cracked with age. He spilled the dice into his hand. "Just look at these," he said, and he held his palm toward Mary. His curl had worked its way back down as his head bobbed with his exuberant talk, and he flicked it up again with the motion of his head. Mary looked at the dice, three cubes, yellowed with age. "Those are real ivory," he said. "Did you know that dice were originally made from the ankle bones of sheep? There's a carpal bone in there that's almost a perfect cube, right in the center of the ankle." Finally, he found a matryoshka, a Russian nesting doll. It was painted as a woman with a red shawl over her head, the doll shaped like a rounded cocktail shaker. "I love these," he said. "Isn't it always amazing how many are inside? I always think I must be at the last one, but there's always another inside that." He picked up the wooden doll, pulled off the cap, and looked into the empty chamber.
“Welcome to the thrift shop,” Mary said.

“It’s a shame,” he said, quietly. He closed the doll and placed it back on the shelf.

In the back room, Mary showed him how the system of donations worked, where the bank bags for daily sales and startup cash were kept in a desk drawer, how they 'locked' the drawer by way of closing the top drawer, which must be open in order to allow the other drawers to open. She led him to the sales counter and showed him the price lists for unmarked items. She showed him how to operate the cash register, and where to mark each sale and to count each customer on a form attached to a clipboard that hung on the wall over the telephone.

"What customers?" Bill asked, as half an hour had passed since he’d arrived, no customers coming through the door.

"There's always a lull after lunch," she said. "We should get a rush mid-afternoon."

Bill greeted the first customer, stepping around the counter as a woman of about forty entered. "Beautiful day," he said.

"Yes."

"I love to see that sun."

"Yes, it's nice," the woman said, looking past him at a rack of clothes.

"I'd like to be on my bike," he said. He flicked his hair higher on his head, and Mary suddenly had the impression that his youth was somehow captured in that curl, that if someone cut it, he might devolve on the spot into one of the shuffling old men who shop at the store on the first of the month, when their social security checks are cut.

"Are you looking for anything particular?" Bill asked. The woman said that her twenty-five-year high school reunion was coming, and that they were having a sixties
theme. Mary culled through the racks with her, and the woman walked out with a paisley shirt and red miniskirt.

"Remember those days?" Bill asked Mary.

"Are you kidding? I was in a maternity dress by then, not a miniskirt. I had one to take care of already, and one on the way."

The afternoon was quiet. Mary learned that Bill had grown up around Detroit, but had lived as a teenager in Alaska, where he had worked on a crab boat, having gone up with a couple college buddies, one of whom was still up there. She learned that he had recently sold his business, a framing shop, and had retired early.

"You must be lonely," she said.

"Lonely? Now you're kidding me. I've never had it so good. I get up when I want. I ride the bike path on the bay in the summer, cross country ski in the winter. I watch a game at the pub over a beer on a Tuesday night, and I don't give a damn about the morning."

"Your wife lets you do that?" Mary asked, a squeezing pinch of adrenaline catching her as she pried. "I bet she does."

"A man has to live a little," he said. "I'm sure you kick up your heels now and again."

"Oh, sure," she said sarcastically.

"Well, I don't believe it, but you have only yourself to blame if you don't."

#

Bill and Mary were scheduled together on Mary's next shift. He was there when she arrived, having already set up the store—lights on, ceiling fans spinning, daily cash
loaded into the till. He turned the key in the deadbolt to let Mary in, flipping the sign to 'open' as he held the door for her.

"Well, you sure learn the ropes fast," Mary said, looking around at the lit lamps, the three zeros on the cash register.

"I'm sure I screwed up something," he said. "There's a pile of clothes that I think is waiting to be priced, but I'm afraid I'm not too sure what they should go for."

"Don't worry about that. I'll work on it today."

"Oh," he said, "almost forgot." He darted into the back and came out with a white cardboard box, half a dozen doughnuts. "You're not decaf are you?"

"No," Mary said. "Well you didn't have to do that."

"Black?" he asked.

"Cream and sugar if we have any."

"Got you covered," he said, ducking once more into the back and returning with two Styrofoam cups of coffee, sugar packets and creamers. Mary took a nut-encrusted doughnut from the box. "I knew it," Bill said, triumphantly. "Second choice . . ." he added, his finger hovering in a circle above the box, pointing finally to a doughnut in the corner, "plain old honest fried ring."

"How did you know?"

"Go ahead. What do you figure me for? Buttermilk? Honey glazed? Sour cream?"

"I don't know," Mary said, giddily.

"Guess."

"Oh, I can't guess!" she protested. "Sour cream."
"Sour cream? Come on, I still have some life left in me. Try again."

"Honestly, I don't have any idea," she said, looking into the white box. "Okay. Angel cream."

"Bingo."

"You're just saying that."

He smiled and took a bite of the angel cream, a dusting of powdered sugar on his top lip.

By noon, customers were coming in, Bill rushing toward the door each time the bell rang, hiking up the white lock of his bangs as he greeted them. Mary spent most of the day in the back, sorting and pricing.

"Next time I'll do the dirty work in the back," he said, as he pulled the stack of one-dollar bills from their slot in the cash register.

"You don't have to," Mary said. She reached past him to hang the deadbolt key on a nail. "I like it. Besides, you're better with the customers."

"Thirty-two ones," he said, and she wrote the number down on the daily sales slip. "Six fives," he continued, "two tens and three twenties. There's a check here, too. Two-dollars and sixteen cents."

Mary subtracted the starting cash and came up with fifty-seven dollars. "Could be worse," she said.

They left together out the back door. Mary's Blazer was parked against the building, and she fiddled with her seatbelt, while Bill walked across the back-alley lot. She tilted her mirror and watched him get into a maroon, twenty-year-old Oldsmobile. The car was in good shape, she noticed, despite its age. Bill waved his hand over his steering
wheel, motioning for her to go first, and Mary fumbled for her key. She straightened her mirror, and Bill's face swung out of the picture.

When Mary worked her next shift at the thrift shop, Bill wasn't there. She worked instead with Pirro, a large woman with a Finnish accent who spent most of her time behind the vacuum cleaner, or in the back room, running the steamer over the summer dresses that were to be put out the following week.

It was Saturday, raining, and the store was not busy. Peter had not come for the weekend, promising only to think about the following weekend. Karl had been watching TV when Peter called to cancel. As Mary spoke on the telephone, he began cleaning up the living room, complaining loudly about Mary's magazines, the half-dozen subscriptions that she never read. The magazines had been an impulsive purchase for her several months earlier, when she'd first begun to feel the stagnation of retirement, and it was true that she rarely read them. Peter had been talking about the nurse he'd hired, but as Karl's blustering continued, his voice carrying into the telephone receiver, Peter wrapped up his story with, "Anyway," and then offered only the barest answers as Mary tried to coax him back into conversation. "Maybe" was his answer to her invitation for the following weekend.

When she hung up the phone, Karl dropped into the recycling bin the stack of magazines that he was carrying. "What's for supper," he asked.

"Damn it, Karl," she said. "That's my son."

He made an effort to look bewildered, but it was the clumsy, exaggerated gesture of a child.
The store closed at two on Saturday, and Mary mouthed "I'm sorry" to a woman who knocked on the door at five after. She saw behind the woman a patch of blue sky, the rain having let up. She calculated the total sales and wrapped the money in a rubber-band. Just thirty dollars for the day.

On the way out the back door, she saw that the May signup sheet had been tacked to the bulletin board. The first name she saw was Bill's, the 'B' catching her eye, large on the line for next Monday. As she browsed the rest of the calendar, a tune ran through her head, a casual melody for this casual perusal, casual on a whistling sort of weather-clearing Saturday afternoon. She took in her hand the pen that hung from a length of yarn beside the sheet, and she marked her name on the empty slot beneath Bill's for Monday. She continued the song, marking her name half a dozen more times, four of them coinciding with the large boyish 'B' of Bill's signature. The tune continued as she closed the back door behind her, as she started up her Blazer and put it into reverse, a tune that she now recognized as the music from Jeopardy, the game show that Karl so often watched, without once calling out an answer. She thought of him on the couch, the answers hitting his blank face. "Just guess," she said aloud, as she put the car into drive. "At least take a damn guess."

"I'm going to try to get Peter up here," Mary said as she skewered another chicken breast, slipping in this statement as she slipped the chicken onto Karl's plate.

"What?" Karl asked. "He's fine where he is."

"What do you mean?" she asked, forking a pile of green beans onto his plate. "I want him to visit for the Fourth of July. He can't sit in his house alone on the Fourth."
"Aren't we already having people over?"

"The Roysons. Their son is working, and he's giving them little Gabe for the weekend. Such a cutie. He needs to see the fireworks."

"We can't just add Peter in. We told the Roysons it would just be us."

"How do you know what we told the Roysons? You didn't even remember they were coming over." Mary pushed the mashed potatoes toward Karl, and he spooned another dollop onto his plate.

"Well, how much fun are they going to have with Peter here?"

"What does that mean?"

"I just don't think people do very well with this kind of thing," Karl said, holding his chicken breast pinched by the ends and working free a bite from the middle.

"What kind of thing? Peter's sick. They know that."

Karl chewed his chicken, a spot of grease, red with paprika, wet on his cheek.

"Should he crawl into a hole?" she asked.

Karl mumbled through his food.

"What?"

He swallowed and said, "They're bringing Gabe, Mary."

"So they're bringing Gabe," she said. "I'm bringing Peter. We're bringing Peter."

"Maybe you should just run it by them first."

"I don't need to run it by them. Not everyone thinks like you, you know."

"Hey, I've been nice to him. Ever since I told you. I tried to talk baseball to him."

"He doesn't follow sports."

"I tried cars."
Mary shook her head.

"I tried movies. I've never even heard of the movies he watches. 'The Celluloid Closet? What kind of title is that? Was he making a fat joke?"

"CellulOID, not cellulite."

"What is it?"

"Well I don't know, but he wasn't making a fat joke."

"Just give them a heads up. They've got Gabe," Karl said, and he turned his attention back to his food. "Is there rosemary in this chicken? I love rosemary. Did you put rosemary in here?"

"Chef's secret," she said, and Karl asked about lemon pepper and about garlic and about parmesan, not expecting answers, simply tasting and trying to put names to the flavors he found. He finished his dinner and his litany of ingredients as Mary cleared the table. "Cardamon," he said as he stood, and then there was the sound of the television, the creak of couch springs.

Mary worked in the kitchen until Karl clicked off the TV, managing to wait until after he'd said goodnight and left the room before she called Peter. No answer, as usual, and she left no message. Half an hour later, she was curled beneath an afghan on the couch when the phone rang. It was Peter. "Hi sweetie," she said, and as she and Peter talked, Karl padded past the open bedroom door, wobbly on sleepy legs, his belly swelling over the tops of his white cotton briefs. He looks like an enormous baby, Mary thought.
A pod of dolphins broke the water off Davi's hull as she sailed out of Pamlico sound, south of Ocracoke, a mandatory checkpoint where she had docked for the night. Motoring out of the sound that morning, she had recognized several race boats that had come in behind her the previous evening, their captains starting their engines, loosening the reef knots on their mains. The lead boat was not among them, however, and she suspected that it had arrived early enough the day before to check in and sail out before dusk, anchoring somewhere farther down the coast. She had not caught up with it that calm day south of Martha's Vineyard, and in the subsequent days the wind had been a steady twenty knots, a relief to Davi even as she watched the crimson sail disappear hull down in front of her.

For an hour the dolphins rode alongside Davi, leaping and chattering, their spray crystalline in the morning sun. The breeze was good, and Davi was sailing fast, seven knots, her prow slicing through an easy chop. She engaged the auto-steering and stood on the bow, leaning over the pulpit railing, almost touching the dolphin's backs with her extended arm. She whooped and cheered, her knees flexing in perfect time with the surging bow, a sensation as close to being on the back of one of those dolphins as she could imagine.
Three pieces of mail had awaited Davi at Ocracoke—a traveler's check that she had mailed to herself, a postcard from her mother, and another letter from Peter. She had opened the travelers check, cashing it at the grocery store. She had not read the postcard, nor opened Peter's letter, putting them instead into her navigation desk to open later, once she was again at sea.

#

She didn't once take the wheel that day, instead letting the self-steerer do the work. In order to complete her circumnavigation, she would have to give up the helm almost entirely, would have to break the habit of standing behind the wheel. Each day she had piloted a bit less, and had grown a bit more comfortable with the performance of the self-steerer, which operated by setting a wind vane that would ensure a consistent angle to the breeze. As the wind direction changed, she would simply reset the vane and sails and continue. The more her boat was hemmed in by shorelines and island chains, the more capricious the winds would be, and the more work for Davi. Today, however, she had sailed far offshore and was enjoying a steady west wind. She had just begun to think that her maneuver away from the lee of the coast had been a smart one, that even with the tacking out to sea and tacking back to land, she would log a hundred miles made good, much more than she imagined she would have made in the broken winds closer to shore. She was just praising herself, when she saw creeping across the surface toward her, the glassy slick of a calm.

She would be at least two hours, and long past dark, trying to run to land with the hint of remaining breeze. Motoring was allowed only into and out of anchorages, and sailing after sunset would not be allowed until after they'd gathered at Key West, after
they left the eastern seaboard. If a sailor could not make it back to shore, he must heave to at sunset, backing the jib and dropping a sea anchor. So Davi doused her sails with the setting sun and dropped off her bow the sea anchor, a small parachute that spread lazily open as the light current pulled the weighted line taut. Thus handicapped, she would spend the night.

In truth, she was not at all disappointed to be away from shore, and in the dusk of her cockpit she opened a bottle of red wine, celebrating her first night on the open sea. With a glass in her hand she lounged in her pajamas, listening to the lap and creek of her boat, and reading first her mother's postcard, and then her letter from Peter.

On the front of the postcard was a boat and a sunset. On the back,

Dear Davi,

I hope you're all right! I still don't see why you couldn't bring someone with you. I know, it's not allowed, I just wish ... Not much new here, everything is in bloom. I'm still waiting for Karl to put the dock in. Call me when you get this.

Love,

Mom

She would call her mother from Key West, she thought, though after leaving Providence she'd thought the same about Ocracoke. Peter's letter was thicker than his last, written on stone-gray stationery that she knew he would have bought just for these letters. She pictured a wooden box from which he pulled the paper and pencil, a cleared space of table, a cup of steaming coffee. Then the mug became solid and large in her mind, a
rough of lime on the inside, stained brown from countless cups of coffee, the steam rising into the warm air of Peter's apartment, his fingers hot on the pencil.

Dear Davi,

It's four a.m., and it feels like noon. I hadn't realized how long it's been since I've listened to the Brandenburg concertos. Put them on if you have them, and join me. I'm so awake. I even got into the darkroom this evening. More fussing with my eye—dodge and burn and dodge and burn, and even I'm not quite sure if I'm trying to shock people or if I'm trying to hide it. Just picking at a scab, I think. Why do we do it, Davi?

It's the new blood keeping me up tonight. You take your white cells for granted, I'm sure. I could have counted mine on my fingers and toes this morning. I'll tell you this, because I have to tell someone (I wouldn't dare tell Mom). Before my transfusion, I crawled down the front steps. I would have crawled all the way to the car if it hadn't been for my pride.

Fact: The average human being is filled with six quarts of blood. Just six quarts. I would have thought there were more. Still, spill that on your kitchen counter, and it might not seem like such a neat amount. It becomes a gallon and a half then, doesn't it? It takes eight hours in the transfusion room to pump out the old blood and pump in the new. After a day attached to that machine, I'm grateful that I don't have to catch someone in a back alley and drain him myself before sunrise. Would I do that, Davi? No, I wouldn't.
Now that I'm so gloriously up in these my vampire hours (would you think a vampire would listen to Bach? We're really not so somber, you see), now that I'm full (satiated?) I'll give you that story I hinted at, installment one.

The story starts at Grandma and Grandpa's house on Walloon Lake, the summer when you were seven and I had just turned eleven. Are you with me, Davi? I want to make sure—you're so hasty. I think you might assume you're following me, when really you're only waiting for my point. We can't arrive at the point, though, without taking the trip, so let's make sure we're back at the beginning of things.

Seventeen-eleven Lake Grove Road. A winding gravel two-track drive through trees to the mouth of a flat-roofed garage attached to a flat-roofed house. A new house, as modern as the year 1967 knew how to produce. Half Frank Lloyd Wright, half Brady Bunch. We float down the drive in Grandpa's enormous Buick. Slowly. Slowly. On tip-toe we wind toward the house, gravel crunching beneath the wheels. So slowly it becomes an adventure. We're sneaking toward the house. You and I are in the backseat. Grandma is in the front passenger's seat, watching the garage door ease up.

Now we're inside the house. Grandma is leaning against the kitchen sink, a green quilted robe wrapped around her distended belly. By now she's probably thinking about dieting, no one yet aware of the cancer that's growing in her liver. She's watching the birds through the window over the sink, complaining about the Blue Jays' bullying, and she's warning the squirrels. Now she's on the living room floor with us playing Kerplunk and playing pickup sticks. She's snapping pictures with her Polaroid SX-70, a wonder of technology that springs to life with the lifting of a latch, fabric bellows for a body, an accordion of a camera, from picture to print with the push of a single button. Her Nikkor
rig has by this time been put up on a shelf in her closet, just as it is at this moment in my own closet. Grandpa is in his recliner chair with a newspaper close at hand, and throughout the house rests the sweet blue haze of cigarette smoke. And Mom and Dad? They're on the Delta Queen, hoping the Mississippi River might save their marriage.

Add now to all this Grandma's eye patch that she's still wearing from the car accident, the reason she's using the Polaroid. Not because of the eye, the other eye works just fine, but because of the complexity of the Nikkor—shutter speed and aperture and a hand-held light meter and half a dozen fixed lenses. The Polaroid is a better fit for her now, one button and a square picture ratcheting out the front. Simple, almost crude, but honest. Being post car accident, the minister Burnside next door is dead. And his wife, the driver, who was talking through the mirror to Grandma while driving the car, is talking to no one now. You and I are the only two people who see what she's doing next door behind her pulled curtains, but we don't understand it until it's too late.

Finally, in the name of inclusion, let's flesh out this bumped and bruised family portrait with Mom's leg, stepping onto the Delta Queen, casted to the knee, her ankle broken in the bicycle spill she took when your front tire rubbed her rear tire two days before she and Dad were to leave for the trip that didn't save their marriage. Click. Whirrr. Wave it in the air. There we all are. The summer of nineteen sixty-seven.

This summer with Grandma and Grandpa is also the summer of our new vocabulary. It's the summer of Lola and Freddy and of their language. The summer of the davenport and the vestibule. Of the lavatory and having a B.M. Of the areaway where we will try to smoke cigarettes, and the twin bedroom where we sleep in identical single beds with identical brass cone reading lamps suspended above our heads. It's the summer of
now I lay me down to sleep for you, and for me it's Our Father, with Grandma on her knees beside me, filling in the words that I forget.

There is a nautical vocabulary here, too. At the bottom of the stone steps that lead down from the house, that small space of grass where the hill meets the lake, is the landing. There are the boathouse and the boat launch. There are towropes and tubes and skis.

And don't forget the words that fall out of our language here. Sucks is not allowed. Neither is blows. Nor is fool, and though I'm not sure why fool was singled out for elimination, I am glad of it. There is no chance of being a fool at Grandma and Grandpa's. And there's one more word that we cannot say when we're at Walloon Lake. Do you remember? Unless it's a matter of life or death, when we are on the water, we must not, under any circumstances, yell help. At play, in the lifeguard game, of which we are so fond, we are allowed only the acronym, S.O.S.

Finally, this is the year that I will go off to camp and return with a black eye and my arm in a cast. Remember? Summer camp, another of Grandma and Grandpa's lexicon, farther removed from the reality even than the initials, B.M. Let's not rush off to summer camp yet, though. It's too soon. We just got to the lake. It's still June. Mom and Dad are packed into the station wagon, heading south. Grandma has given us each a Dixie riddle cup to fill as we might from the candy drawer. And from dawn until dusk, you and I are inseparable, even in our sleep removed only by the brief space of floor between the twin beds.

Now let's look at another snapshot from that summer. On a lawn sloping toward the lake, rising from a perimeter of grotesquely overgrown cedar shrubs and freshly
blooming lilac bushes, a white building with a collapsing green roof, long and narrow and steep. The abandoned lake resort, a twenty-minute walk from our grandparents' house, through the woods along the yet unpaved, winding Lake Grove road. Our haunted hotel. There must have been rainy days that June, but I don't remember them. It seems like we walked there every day. Do you remember that you were the one who broke the glass pane on the kitchen door and reached through to unlock the dead bolt? You were, you know. I don't think I would have done it. I would have been content to sit on that long porch, looking at the lake and feeling the row of newspapered windows behind me, tickling my imagination. You had to see it for real. Your journeys, Davi, have always been literal.

And what was inside? Everything. Everything was still inside. A kitchen full of cast iron—stoves, pots and pans, six-foot-long griddles. And behind those papered windows, facing the lake, was the parlor. High-ceilinged, dry-rotted cushions on crumbling cane furniture. Lamps with tasseled silk shades and braided fabric cords. Magazines on end tables, but not once did we think of looking at the dates. We were still children then. The hotel had always been abandoned. (I can tell you now when it closed, though. Nineteen fifty-two. I went back, you see, and I read those dates). Upstairs were twelve tiny rooms, and a single bathroom at the end of the hall. I don't think you ever saw the bathroom. Inside were two rooms—in the first, four tiny porcelain sinks and four mirrored medicine cabinets, and in the second, a claw-foot tub and a toilet with a cracked wooden seat.

That shared bathroom, I'm convinced, was responsible for the death of the whole resort. By nineteen fifty-two, people wouldn't put up with the inconvenience. But more importantly, they wouldn't put up with the intimacy. By nineteen fifty-two people had
their picture windows displaying their living rooms to the streets, but they were no longer building porches. We would show that we had nothing to hide (this would have been the height of McCarthyism), but we would hold a sheet of glass between ourselves and our neighbors. Do you think I'm a hypocrite, Davi? Here I am, in a letter to which I've forbidden you to reply, bewailing our loss of community. But it's your plate glass that I fear, Sis. You would write me back and tell me about your rigging or your steering wheel or some damned thing. And I couldn't even complain. You'd pretend you didn't understand, and I'd only look like a fool. You know I love you with your boat, but it is your hiding place, isn't it? There are no fools at Meemee and Beepa's, though, no fools at Walloon Lake, and that's where I have you now, eight years old, breaking the glass pane on the door to the haunted hotel. And while you're rooting through the kitchen cupboards, I'm reading a message scrawled on the bottom step of the oak staircase in the parlor. Written with a piece of sandstone from the lake, this simple beginning, the start of my story: "Is anybody here?" I pick up the discarded stone, write, "Here I am," and now we've begun.

But the sun is about to rise, Davi, and so you'll have to wait. I must take my cue from Bach, who, even as I write these words, is putting his ensemble through their final notes, putting his children to bed, you might say, checking their teeth and giving them kisses on their foreheads.

Sit with that image of Walloon Lake. Let it ferment for a few days, and I'll put it into motion in my next letter.

May the wind fill your sails.

As ever,

Peter
Night had almost closed on Davi's boat, and she struggled in the fading light to finish Peter's letter. She lay in her cockpit trying to remember breaking the glass on the hotel door. She couldn't. She remembered being there, but it was an indistinct memory, a shifting image that moved between the hotel and their grandparents' house and the view through the window of Mrs. Burnside's dark house, through a crack in the curtains. Mrs. Burnside standing on her kitchen table? She couldn't remember. She remembered her grandmother so often in that robe at the kitchen sink. She remembered the candy drawer and games on the living room floor. The slight clarity she retained of that summer was, however, already in the process of being overshadowed, the bold colors of Peter's snapshot becoming the reality. She tried to push his picture aside, but it remained, stubbornly, and, before she could erase the smallest part, she was interrupted by a growing realization that her staysail was glowing a faint green.

She sat up, and saw the sea around her boat shimmering from a thousand tiny flashes of light in the water, a field of bioluminescent algae. She stripped off her pajamas, attached a tether to her ankle, and dove naked into the sea. She swam across the surface, the flashing green light clinging here and there to her skin. Then she dove, and the lights surrounded her. She came up for air and dove again, the wine heavy in her head, and then heavy in her arms and legs, forcing her to stop. As she swam toward the boat, she saw on the cabin deck the dim light of Alex's eyes, shimmering with the reflection of the glowing algae.

She tread water, ten feet from the side of the boat, and she cooed his name. He moaned, still just two reflected circles on the deck, moaning like a fussing baby. Then she
heard him spit. She splashed water toward him, and his eyes disappeared. She lowered the aluminum ladder at the boat's stern and climbed into the cockpit, where she saw that her dive had overturned her wine glass. From the spill there spread along the fiberglass the lapping marks of the cat's tongue, the track of his feet stamped roses down the companionway steps and into the air vent.

She dreamed that night about Alex' eyes on deck, one fading and the other falling into the marble that lay in the manger of Peter's nativity scene, the marble falling into Peter's clouded eye, in his eye the sea, and in the sea Davi's boat, Alex meowing on deck and Davi nowhere to be seen.
"Do you have plans for lunch?" Bill asked Mary. They were ten minutes away from the end of their shift at the thrift shop. The fringes of his shirt cuffs were dirty, the inside of his collar. He wore the same pants he'd worn the last time they worked together.

"Do you think your wife would mind you taking another woman to lunch?" Mary asked in a mock low tone.

Bill made a sound, not quite a word, not a laugh. His white shock of hair hung low over his eye, and he pushed it higher onto his head.

"An older woman," Mary said.

"How about your husband?" he asked.

"Oh, please."

They walked around the corner to Rose's Cafe, where they both ordered salads—Mary, the oriental chicken, and Bill, the Greek.

"A salad!" Mary said, when the waitress left.

"I'm just trying to impress," Bill said.

"Well you're too thin already."

Mary waved at Mrs. Kloosterman, who was sitting with another woman in a corner booth. Mrs. Kloosterman nodded and looked away.

"I wish Karl would eat more like that. Cooking would be a little boring, though, I have to admit. What does your wife cook at home?"

"Well, she doesn't really cook."

"I wondered. She's not much on laundry either, is she?" Mary asked, the question irresistible, squeezing out of her, that wringing desire to know.

"That's okay," he said, just as the waitress arrived with the salads, "She always insisted on starching my shirts anyway." The waitress set the Greek in front of Mary and the oriental in front of Bill, and the two traded after she'd turned her back. Mary was hoping to hear more, when Bill took a bite of his salad. His chewing stopped, and he looked at Mary as if he'd been rude, plunging into his food before her. She took a bite, and he tore into his salad. He ordered a glass of red wine, and when Mary looked surprised, he shrugged. "It's red," he said. "Antioxidants. Good for the heart."

"It's a little early, isn't it?"

"I told you I like to live a little."

Bill's wine arrived, and Mary asked, unable to wait for him to offer, "What's wrong with your wife?"

He took a drink, set down the wine glass and nodded, a nod that suggested to Mary inevitability, an awareness of the conversation that was about to occur, that had occurred, that would occur again. "Do you know Timberly Acres?" he asked.

She did. It was a nursing home, a 'nice' one, clusters of ranch-style buildings on a bluff overlooking Lake Michigan. "I'm sorry," she said.
He held up a hand and shook his head.

"Why is she there?" Mary was leaning forward on her elbows now, looking straight at Bill. She was inviting a long answer, was pulling at the frayed end of its thread, and whether he felt that or not, the answer came, unravelling as it so often did for Mary.

"I woke up one morning," he said. "I get up early. It was dawn, not even. My wife wasn't in bed, and that's unusual. I put on my robe, and I opened the bedroom blinds. We'd been twenty... twenty seven years? Twenty seven. I feel like in all that time she'd never gotten out of bed before me. I know that's not true."

The waitress asked if they were finished, took away the salad plates.

"I felt that way that morning," he said, "that I couldn't remember her getting out of bed before me, at least not without my noticing. I opened the blinds, and I straightened the bed—something I never do. I just didn't want to leave the bedroom. Somehow I knew that there was about to be a new reality for me, that it would begin when I left that room. I remember wishing I had something for her to do. A button that needed sewing. A missing car key to find. A dinner reservation to make. I thought if she were needed for something, then it would be okay. She'd always been there for me." He took a drink, and Mary imagined him fretting in his bedroom that morning, plaid flannel pajamas under his robe, his bedspread the color of the wine he was holding now. "All this without any evidence that anything had gone wrong. Just an empty bed in the morning. I was picking lint off the carpet, when I realized I was being ridiculous."

The waitress brought the check. "Dessert?" she asked. Bill looked at Mary, and when she didn't decline, they decided to split a brownie with ice cream. They were each spooning into the ice cream from opposite sides when Mrs. Kloosterman walked past.
their table. Her path was blocked by a man who was helping his wife from her chair, and she stood with her eyes locked on the door, so close that Mary could smell her perfume, White Linen.

"I found her in her chair," Bill said, when the traffic had cleared. He laid his spoon face down on the edge of the dessert dish. "She had her purse in her lap. She was looking out the window, and I hoped that somebody had died. I prayed for it. That the phone had rung, that I had slept through it, that she was okay, and that somebody was dead." He was blushing with wine, and he leaned toward Mary, grinning. "I didn't care who," he said. He put a twenty dollar bill on the check, shaking his head when Mary protested.

"Okay, I need to back up," he told her. "My wife was sitting in her chair with her purse on her lap. She was in her bra and underwear. Wearing her best shoes, heels that had not come out of the box since our son's wedding."

"Oh, Bill," Mary said.

"And then I'm not tired anymore. I'm not picking at the carpet, not being ridiculous. I'm lucid as can be. Wide awake. Awake, awake."

"I'm so sorry."

Bill waved her condolence away, as if it were something mildly foul in the air. "I slept that night by her bed in the hospital. She was heavily sedated. I spent the next three nights in the chair beside her bed at Timberly Acres. When they chased me out of there—it was for my own good, I know that—I sat all night on the couch in the living room. I just couldn't go back into that bedroom. I went back in long enough to get some clothes. I haven't been in that room since."
Bill put a hand on the back of Mary's chair as she stood, and he followed her from the restaurant. They walked together as far as the post office. "What are you doing for the Fourth?" she asked. "We're having people over to watch the fireworks down at our dock. Would you like to come?"

"I'll be at Timberly Acres for the day. Jane won't stay awake until dark, though. Jane. That's my wife. She'll be asleep after dinner."

"Well, you're invited. Come if you think you'd like."

"I'll think about it."

Mary felt light on her walk home. She felt flushed, as if it had been she instead of Bill who'd drunk the wine, and she at once denied the feeling, while also scolding herself for it.
Night's chill filled the cabin when Davi woke. She pulled on pajama bottoms, lit the single alcohol burner in the galley and prepared a percolator with coffee. She scooped a cup of dry cat food from a tupperware bin, dropped the hard pieces into a dish for Alex, and padded barefoot up the steps to the cockpit.

The sea remained calm. The landscape had the look of a moment before dawn, a depthless chrome. A freighter slid past portside, a mile or more distant, but too close, and Davi remembered that she'd neglected the night before to raise her reflector, a tin diamond that would increase her profile on a ship's radar screen. She wondered if the freighter had seen her at all. She watched the ship until it had passed, merging with the horizon, until even the mirage of the thing was lost to her. Then she was alone, surrounded on all sides by the sea, just enough haze over the water's surface to obscure the coastline, and though she felt nothing of the solitude, she felt acutely the loss of a point of reference. She felt that she and her boat, and certainly the cat, were almost not at all.

The world of Peter's letter seemed more real to Davi that morning than did her own blank page of landscape, and when her coffee had finished its percolation, she brought up to the cockpit the letter along with the the coffee pot and a mug. She poured herself a cup, opened and reread the letter.
As she read, Davi tried to reconcile the voice in the letter with that of Peter's presence the last time she'd seen him. She couldn't. Where was this bright voice coming from? How far in, and at what cost? This had been Peter's voice before his illness, and though Davi only vaguely recognized it, its return made her uneasy.

The sun rose above the horizon, burning away the damp air that had blanketed the water, but failing to produce a breeze, and Davi lolled in the cockpit, listening to a buckle on the halyard ringing against the mast, hearing once again Chanthavy's voice, and remembering the day that her student took her to the temple ruins at Angkor Wat.

Davi paid Chanthavy one dollar to act as her guide for the day, though Chanthavy vigorously resisted taking the money, Davi pushing until she accepted, taking the money like some dirty thing that Davi had picked up from the river bank. Mau lent Davi her motorbike, in exchange for returning it with a full tank of gas. Chanthavy insisted on driving, and Davi rode uneasily behind as the nine-year-old girl stood on the small floorboard, propped up by the tip of the seat, and maneuvered the bike around the ruts and potholes along the river to the paved road. They stopped at the market for water and a quick breakfast of amok, a fish stew with a base of coconut milk. A small boy appeared as they ate. He wasn't there, and then he was, standing motionless except for a slight swaying, the slow and heavy rocking of something much larger than this child. He wore only shorts, drab green beneath the rusty clay of the river. In his hand was a clear plastic bag, the amber sap of the glue thick in its bottom. He said hello and he held out his hand.

He saw his glue and he brought the bag to his face, his narrow shoulders rising as he inhaled. Then there was another boy, and then another, and then Davi and Chanthavy's table was surrounded, small brown bodies, as young as five, as old as ten, the clay of the
river in their hair, arms outstretched, a slow repetition of syllables—hello, hello, hello, hello. They seemed to Davi like wildlife, like the schools of golden carp that slipped around just beneath the surface of the river behind the school. She imagined that if she swam into the river with a mask and snorkel, the children would be there. In the river, however, they would be beautiful, the mud washed from their smooth skin, their watery eyes of the element, the slow motion of their bodies in perfect harmony with the river's slow current.

Davi looked to Chanthavy but she could not read her face, Chanthavy continuing with her *amok* as if the street children were not there. And then they were not. They were gathered around someone else, three tables down. In their hands dollar bills appeared, and with them the children filtered back into the crevices between market stalls, peeling away from the table until Davi could see the donor, the clean straw fedora, the black mustache and the sunglasses, the mirrors of the lenses flat on Davi as the last of the dollar bills went into the hand of the youngest child.

"We should go," Chanthavy said. "There are many temples to see."

Chanthavy pulled the motorbike into the stream of scooters that ran like a second river along the tree-lined boulevard, *Stung Siem Reap* flowing on one side, the market falling away on the other. She beeped the bike's horn almost continuously, joining the chorus of buzzing scooter horns that lit up the streets of Siem Reap. The ride to the Angkor Wat national park took twenty minutes. They paid at the gate, a one-day pass, and drove into the jungle, gangs of monkeys sitting idly by the road or screeching at them as they passed.

Chanthavy took Davi first to the temple that lay deepest in the jungle, Ta Phrom. Ta Phrom lay as it had for five centuries, slowly crumbling beneath moss and shade,
whole buildings wrapped in the grip of enormous tree roots, ancient hands that reached
down from the jungle canopy. "They are the strangle trees," Chanthavy told Davi, "the
fig."

"They're beautiful," Davi said.

"But they are not good trees."

In the center of Ta Phrom was a small building, still standing. Inside was dark, a
stone altar with a trough leading to a bowl that had been carved into the stone floor. A
middle-aged white woman stood with a small Cambodian man, her hair damp beneath a
white visor, her wide hips wrapped in a sarong. She might have weighed two of him, was
certainly twice his age. He told her how the altar was built for Vishnu, how it was carved
so that the blood would flow down the trough and collect in the bowl. As he bent for­
ward, pointing at the bowl, her hand slid into the back pocket of his cotton pants. He
flinched the slightest bit. She said that she was tired of temples, that the heat in Cambo­
dia was too much for a human being, that he should take her back to the hotel. "We'll
have a shower, love," she told him.

"What did they sacrifice here?" Davi asked, after the two left, he lost in the fold of
her arm.

"Maybe we don't know," Chanthavy said, after a moment's hesitation, after watch­
ing Davi's hand touch the stone, recoil, and touch the stone again. Even in the dim light
of the windowless stone room, Davi could see that the surface of the trough and the bowl
were darker than the stone around them. It might only have been centuries of dampness
collecting in the low places, ten thousand mornings of dew, ten thousand hot days pulling
the earth's moisture up through the rock, but even that seemed horrible to Davi. She didn't like to think about this much time.

Chanthavy thought the suggestion of human sacrifice was what had agitated Davi, but she was wrong. It was the thought of how little it mattered, of how many millions of lives came and went, how even those tiny few who noticed the passing of each, passed themselves just as quickly, and as she thought this the living and the dead piled up in her mind, crowding out all else, and Davi let the faces pile up, not like bodies so much as scraps of paper. She let them build because she was tired, and because despite the anxiety they caused, they still acted as a sort of mantra, for they papered over the thought that Davi would not let rise, the thought that as little as all these scraps of paper mattered, as little as Peter mattered, Davi mattered even less.

They finished walking Ta Phrom, emerging from the outer wall, Davi reluctant to look up, to follow the finger-like roots of the fig trees to the canopy overhead. From there they drove to some smaller Hindu temples, then to Bayonne, tall and clean, with the faces of the Bodhisattva emerging all over the temple walls and towers, the smiling faces of the hopeful, on the verge of enlightenment. "They aspire to be Buddha," Chanthavy told Davi. "The Bodhisattva is very close. Buddha himself was once Bodhisattva."

At Phnom Bakheng a guide was selling elephant rides up the steep slope to the temple. At Angkor Thom, a man handed Davi a flyer advertising a shooting field, where for five dollars, she could shoot chickens with an automatic machine gun; for fifty, she could fire one shot from a shoulder-mounted rocket launcher—her target, a cow. As they worked their way through the network of temples, Chanthavy told her about the ancient
Khmer, the Hindu and then the Buddhists, and of the sharing and transposing of gods and myths.

"How do you know all this?" Davi asked.

"I learn some in school. But every Cambodian child knows this. It is our culture. We know it just like you know your culture."

Davi didn't say that she really knew little about her own cultural history.

"Besides, if I tell these facts, it helps me sell to the tourists."

"You should have brought some things to sell today."

"But I am your guide," Chanthavy said, smiling up at Davi. 

"And a good one," Davi said. "But you could have taken a break and tried to make some money."

"It is okay. Tomorrow I will sell."

"Where do you get those things you sell?" Davi asked.

"They are not hard to get. I get them and I pay after I sell them."

"Who gives them to you? The people who make them?"

"No. Maybe it is more complicated than that. Maybe it is too complicated for me to say in English." Chanthavy grabbed Davi's hand and pulled her toward the motorbike.

"We have to hurry to see Angkor Wat before it is dark."

Angkor Wat, the main temple for which the complex is named, had been fully restored, and its triple spires rose high above an expansive lawn, a long, stone avenue crossing a moat at the outer wall, and stretching across the lawn. The avenue was filled with hundreds of tourists going and coming, to and from the temple. Inside, the temple was surprisingly open compared to the dark and claustrophobic labyrinths of the other tem-
pies. The main area of Angkor Wat housed four large pools, empty of water, the room bisected by a walkway, evenly spaced pillars holding up the ceiling. The reliefs in the walls, Vishnu in many forms, and more dancing women, were often in perfect condition, the surface smooth and polished, and Davi understood only now what the other temples must have looked like when they were young. Unlike other temples, Angkor Wat had never fully fallen into disrepair, used by the Hindus and then by the Buddhists as an active temple continuously throughout the centuries.

Davi stepped through arches onto upper ledges, outbuildings on the grounds, the jungle canopy below her spreading to the horizon in every direction. Monks dotted the temple grounds and ledges, shaved brown heads and match-flames of orange robe. Stepping out onto the west ledge, she found a monk whom she'd earlier seen sitting on the edge of one of the pools. He was somewhere in his teens, hunched, elbows on knees, sandaled feet splayed on the ledge. When Davi stepped through the archway onto the narrow ledge, he was only two feet from her. She could see a sheen on his skin, sweat and the oil of adolescence. "Hello," she said, not knowing if she should speak to the monks, but startled into saying something.

"Hello," he said.

Davi saw that he was making a halfhearted attempt to hide a cigarette in his far hand, holding it by his hip as he looked at her.

"I didn't mean to bother you," she said, and then to Chanthavy, "Tell him I didn't mean to bother him."

"You're not bothering me," he said. His voice was soft, and Davi wondered how much he talked. Until he spoke, she wondered if he was allowed to speak at all.
"Oh," she said, "I didn't know if you spoke English."

"I speak English," he said. A pause, and then, "Do you like our temple?"

"It's beautiful," Davi said.

"Thank you for saying so."

"I mean it."

"I know you do."

After these few words, the boy seemed to feel that he could drop the formality and bring out the cigarette. He put it to his mouth, inhaled, and let the smoke out slowly through his nose.

"I didn't know monks smoked," Davi said.

The boy smiled and put his finger over his lips. "Our secret," he said.

Davi liked his smile, and she stayed on the ledge. The sun was almost touching the top of the jungle canopy. "This is the best seat in the house for a sunset," she said.

The boy nodded, inhaled from his cigarette, exhaled, watching the sun, large and orange and not painfully bright.

"Is there anything you want to know about the temple?" he asked.

"Chanthavy's a good guide. She's already told me more than I'll remember."

"You have a young guide," he said, looking at Chanthavy.

"She's my English student."

The bottom of the sun touched the tops of the trees on the horizon, and the jungle canopy began to fade into silhouette. Davi heard monkeys screeching somewhere between the temple and the sunset, first a single call, then many, their cries rippling across the forest canopy below. "How long have you been a monk?" she asked.
"I came when I was about her age," he said, pointing to Chanthavy. "Many families send their boys to be monks. We are fed and educated. I have one more year. When I am sixteen years old I will leave."

"What will you do?"

He smiled, the same smile that had drawn her to him in their secret of the cigarette. "I want to buy a motorbike," he said. "I want to be a tour guide, like her." He nodded toward Chanthavy, and smiled again, this time shyly, blushing.

Davi tried to imagine him meeting the boat as it arrived from Phnom Penh, this soft-spoken boy jostling with the crowd of motorbike taxi drivers, tour guides and hotel workers, shouting and grabbing at the tourists as they came off the boat. She couldn't. She tried to imagine him on his motorbike, swiveling in his seat toward his passengers as he drove to their hotels at the end of the night, asking, You like the ganga? You like the women? The boys? You want boom-boom? She couldn't picture any of this at first, but as she sat with him and looked from his profile to the setting sun, it became easier, the sweat and oil that here seemed the glow of youthful health, of clean monk living, she could see this transformed in the dust of the back streets, the vaporous glow of street lights. The sun dropped below the horizon, and in the dim twilight, she could picture all this in his dark face. The smoke from his cigarette drifted her way, a wisp of it catching in her nose.

"We'd better get back," she said to Chanthavy.

"Thank you for visiting," the boy said. He stood and smiled and made a tiny bow.
A breeze stirred across the water toward Davi, the ripples breaking the sheen that surrounded her boat, and she pulled in the sea anchor and set her sails for a southward tack. The sun had been up for several hours, and though the wind had been almost non-existent, she knew that she should have pulled the sea anchor long ago, and raised her genoa, her largest foresail, in order to catch what little wind there was. She might have only made a few miles, but she might have found her way out of the calm and been underway. With no boats in sight, she had grown lax, had almost forgotten that she was in a race at all. The captain of the boat with the crimson sail would surely not forget, Davi knew, would not take his mind off the business of gaining ground, even if foot by foot.

Her next scheduled stop was at Doboy Sound, Sapelo Island, Georgia. She arrived at dusk, checked into the marina and again found three letters waiting for her. There were letters from her mother and Peter, and a postcard from Angus—South Shore Marina pictured on the front. She flipped the postcard over as she walked back to her dock slip, pausing to read in the glow of a street light.

Davi,

Second place! Congratulations. I'm posting your position in the lobby. You're losing ground in the strong wind. You can't afford that. Don't forget about the topping lift. Give her a few inches and tighten the boom vang when you get a good wind. Flatten those sails and go. Go, go, go.

Angus

P.S. I talked to the Daily Record, and they're posting your results every Saturday. We're all pulling for you, Davi.
Davi reread the postcard. She walked slowly down the planks of the dock, through the small circles of light that shone from bulbs hooded in thickly painted reflectors. There was no moon, and the sky was a thick, low mat of stars. She hadn't reckoned on anyone noticing her journey. She felt the eyes of the people looking for her position on the bulletin board at the marina, in the sports page of the Daily Record, felt them as if they could look through her name printed on those pages and see her there on the marina dock in Soboy Sound. A few high cirrus clouds moved across the night sky, the stars blinking as they passed, Angus winking as he said they were all pulling for her. She ducked into her cabin, grateful to be away from the eyes of that starry sky.

She read her mother's and Peter's letters the next morning at sea. Her mother had sent her a copy of the photograph they'd taken at Christmas. As Davi had remembered, she was mostly absent, only her face and one arm having made it into the frame before the timer expired. Contrary to her memory, however, Peter was standing with his arm around their mother, a smile on his face. She looked hard at Peter to see any sign of polite fakery, but found none. He was proud to be with his family for another Christmas, to stand for that photo. Judging from this photo, which Davi re-examined half a dozen times during that day's sail, he was not simply relieved to be alive, either, but excited for the fact. It would not be until that night in her cabin, when she again pulled the photo from the envelope that she would examine her own face, the thin pale ghost of Davi.

As if he were there with her in the boat, Peter confirmed the enthusiasm that Davi saw in that photo.
Dear Davi,

I'm writing you a little tired, very happy, after just returning from a walk around the neighborhood. A photo shoot.

I have a confession. I've been down with another pneumonia, discovered quickly thanks to Beth, but frightening all the same. Could you tell from my last letter, in my shaky lines? I was right about the pencil, wasn't I? It really does bring us closer. Do you know I've used the same pencil for all these letters. It's already noticeably shorter. I've had that much to say. I didn't know I had it in me. Now that I'm watching it shrink, I've begun to think of this pencil as a burning wick, and I wonder if there is a rocket attached. Will we see a sparkling umbrella in the night sky before I go? After? Maybe I'll buy a bigger pencil!

For a week after the doctor diagnosed my pneumonia, I added a second I.V. to my daily regimen, and I sat in this chair hour after hour feeling as if I were suffocating. It wasn't only a week, though. I don't know how many consecutive days I sat in this house before I got sick. I don't care to think about it. The fact is, I woke up yesterday, took my pills, and stood in front of my bookshelves, deciding which book I might take down to re-read. I was halfway through the stacks—tempted on your behalf by an ocean tale from Matthiessen, not quite sold on Maugham. I pulled out The Open Boat and Other Stories, by Stephen Crane, reciting to myself the line I know so well—"If I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned—if I am going to be drowned, why, in the name of the seven mad gods who rule the sea, was I allowed to come thus far and contemplate sand and trees?" These words ran through my mind, and I thought to myself, "If I sit down in that chair in this robe again today, I will drown. I'll suffocate all over again." So,
instead, I took Grandma's Nikkor down from its shelf in my closet. Writing about it has inspired me.

I spent all yesterday evening cleaning it. I have only one lens for it now, a fifty millimeter "normal." I don't know what happened to the others, but it's just as well. I'll be forced to honesty with this lens. I'll see the world undistorted. No fisheye. No telephoto. No macro. The real thing. Unadulterated. Normal. The glass was in good shape, but the aperture ring was stopped all the way down to f22 and stuck there, the iris all but closed. I worked for hours with paper clips and needles and a little eyeglass screwdriver. It was one a.m., the angular figure of me through the kitchen window, hunched over the table, when, "by the glimmer of the half-extinguished light, I saw the dull yellow eye of the creature open." It's Alive!

This morning I took my creature for a walk, and I shot two rolls. Color. I'll get into the darkroom tonight to see what I've got. And now another confession. My darkroom is a mess. I've hardly been in there, and when I have, I haven't cleaned up after myself. If I shot anything good, I'll send you a copy. I had hoped to send you a picture of Beth, but she wouldn't have it. In fact, it led to a fight. She said she had a "No Picture" policy, and I just wouldn't have it. She spends hours here every day. She was my cribbage partner! She'd already seen me in a dozen of the most unflattering poses that you could (and probably shouldn't) imagine. I kept raising the camera to my eye, and she kept saying, just sternly enough, "No." I would acquiesce, and she would relax. Then, I'd do it again, and she would say, a little more sternly, "Peter, I said no." This went on half a dozen times. I don't know why I kept doing it. The woman wasn't being modest. She really didn't want me to take her picture. And I was clearly making her uncomfortable. I
couldn't stop myself, though, Davi. I felt . . . I just felt compelled. It struck my dignity somehow. Why didn't she want me to take her picture? I thought we were becoming friends. Do I disgust her? I'm not good enough to take her picture? These were the thoughts that were running through my mind. At least as clearly as I can recall what I was thinking, as much as I was thinking at all. It was just this pride. This stubbornness. And the more she resisted, the more I felt I had something to prove. God knows what. It was as if I were reaching through that lens and wringing her neck. She finally got mad, truly angry, and she shouted at me. "Damn it, Peter, I said no!" And suddenly there I am, this AIDS patient, a hundred and ten pounds with an I.V. plugged into my heart. And she's suddenly this nurse. There we are, bang, complete strangers.

I won't be surprised if I have a new nurse tomorrow. A small part of me wishes I would, just to spare myself the embarrassment of seeing her again. The greater part of me, though, will be on pins and needles until the doorbell rings tomorrow. Do you think she'll forgive my foolishness, Davi? Will I get my Walloon Lake fool's reprieve? I need a reprieve now, to tell the truth. A nap anyway. When I wake up, I'll get us back to Walloon Lake.

Well, my nap turned into an all-nighter, but I feel great, really rested for the first time since I can't remember when. So let's get down to it.

"Here I am," on the bottom step of the haunted hotel staircase, my hopeful note scrawled in sandstone by my (very excited) eleven-year-old hand. Before you can see what I've done, I put down the stone, and I guide us away from the stairs. I exclude you.
Try not to be hurt, Davi. I was almost twelve, remember. Fourteen and high school were just around the corner. We were bound to diverge. Our divergences simply should not have lasted so long:

When we return to Grandma and Grandpa's from the hotel, I'm given a second writing task. I've sworn you to secrecy about our break-in, but I know you'll be bursting with it. Your first words when you run into the house, are "Grandma guess what." I stop you with a kick, but I know it's only a matter of time before you'll tell. Before you have a chance, Grandma guides us to the dining room table, where she has set in place for us pieces of stationery and pencils. Grandpa is asleep in his recliner, a cigarette in the pedestal ashtray, burned to the butt, ash intact. Grandma tells us that we are to compose and perform a play, and while you begin to draw, I start to write.

Do you remember the play, Davi? I do. I can quote passages of it verbatim. Not only from my memory (buyer beware), but because I have the script in my lap at this moment. I have it because after Grandma died, I took the scrapbook that began with the lake house in 1967. It had been tossed on top of a pile of things emptied from beneath the bathroom sink, just garbage. Already, newspaper clippings and photos were slipping out of the book. Dad took the older albums, his black and white past. I just wanted Grandma's Polaroids. If I can ever get myself to part with them, I'll mail you a few, pictures of you and me as seen through Grandma's one good eye.

We put the play on in the furnished downstairs, all glass on the lake side, subterranean on the hill side. Never called a basement, it is, in Grandma and Grandpa's language, "down below." The twin bedroom, the family room, and a deep storage closet beneath the staircase, in which we so often huddle with a flashlight to tell ghost stories.
The family room has been transformed. The fireplace is lit with a paper and crayon fire, a flashlight behind making it glow. Yarn spider webs crisscross the bookshelves that fill the wall behind the fireplace. A bench by the fire has been lifted open, emptied and lined with sheets. Our coffin. The curtains have been pulled across the wall of windows, and hidden behind a chair in one corner is a lamp burning a twenty-five-watt bulb. All other lights are extinguished. In the glow of the fireplace and the single hidden lamp, the stage is set. We usher Grandma and Grandpa down below, and sit them on the davenport against the wall opposite the fireplace. They each have a quarter ready, as per the instructions in our playbill. I collect and pocket the coins.

While I'm giving my welcome speech, you are offstage, awaiting my cue. Oh, yes, and what do I look like, Davi? What am I wearing? A black wig that Grandma has given me, and a red dress with white dots. And I'm wearing a bra, one cup filled with a pair of socks, the other with a Zip-lock baggie filled with ketchup and water, my ingenious special effect, and the sole reason I give for needing to dress as a female vampire.

After my welcome, I go into my Blahblah! vampire accent, and I give a long-winded story about how I live in this haunted hotel, and how years ago I scared away or killed all the guests, and how hungry I am, and, even worse, how lonely. How lonely I am, Davi. Do you remember the name of the play? I'll give you one guess. Got it? The Lonely Vampire, a Tragedy, by Peter and Davi Johnson. A widow-peaked vampire with a misshapen head and mismatched eyes drawn in crayon beneath the title. You drew the vampire. I have it here in Grandma’s scrapbook.

As I dole out my sad story to our audience, I lay a stuffed rabbit on the floor beside my coffin. A few feet from that, I place a Dixie Riddle cup filled with candy. Then I lay
one of the quarters we collected for admission (I was doing metatheater, Davi!). Beyond that I lay another trinket, and another, across the room and down the hall to the bedroom door, where you are waiting, impatiently by this time, I'm sure, for my cue.

I walk stiffly back to my coffin, climb in and address the audience. "Now, to see what my trail of bread crumbs delivers," I say. And then I say the lines I've spent so much time composing, and these I still remember now, without opening the scrapbook. My opus: "What will the fickle hand of fate have in store? Release I seek! Only that. But how will it come? In what form? O you hateful stars! One thousand years have I seen thee! And one thousand drops of blood have I shed. One thousand tears. My hands, I cannot bear to look upon. So many lives have they let slip through their fingers. My own long ago. O sweet death. Or sweet life! Are they not equal in my esteem? Is not one or the other better than both? For surely now and forever I am the living dead. Hark, but here comes one now. To hide!" Hide is your cue. As you open the bedroom door, I close my coffin lid, holding it only for the moment it takes to finish my thought, to say the line that is my pièce de résistance, "And to seek."

I had pored over Grandma's set of Shakespeare for children for days as I composed that soliloquy. The books had Shakespeare's great lines intact but between them couplet after couplet of nursery rhyme pudding. For years I thought Shakespeare had written, "In the closet I did hide / and on my mother from there I spied!" Hamlet's Yorick speech was intact, however, "Where be your gibes now? Your gambols, your songs, your flashes of merriment." Alas, poor Yorick! Alas, poor Hamlet! Of course I'm drawn to him now, five acts of a young man staring at death. And what did he see? "Alexander died, Alexander was buried, Alexander returneth to dust." Not exactly the mystery of faith, is it?
The baited trail to entice you to the vampire was my idea, and it came directly from life. A week had passed since our first visit to the haunted hotel, and we had returned almost every day. Without telling you, I had been following a trail, step by step up the oak staircase. My reply, Davi, my reaching out, my timid proclamation, my "here I am" had been answered. Upon my next visit, I'd found, on the second step of the staircase, the bleached exoskeleton of a crayfish, intact claws stretched over its head. Was it a gift? If so, I was unprepared to reciprocate. I checked my pockets and found only a butterscotch hard candy. I left that in place of the crayfish, which I put in a shoebox under my bed. My mind was on that shoebox all night. With only one piece of a puzzle, I couldn't tell much, but I convinced myself that I had been meant to receive the crayfish as a gift. And I induced that the person who left it was a boy. A girl might trade a crayfish skeleton, I reasoned, but not first. Her first gift would have been something a little less grisly, something cute or something more personal, a flower or a hair pin or a school merit ribbon. A clamshell, maybe, but not a crayfish.

The next time I visited the hotel, I went alone. I waited for your nap, and I slipped out of the house without a word to anyone. Oh how my heart pounded as I crossed the parlor to the staircase. It's perfectly clear to me even now, right down to the snowy flakes of dust caught in the window light. Yes, the butterscotch was gone, and on the next step up, the third, was a clear marble with a yellow cat's eye ribbon running through its middle. And what did I have in my pocket? What had I brought in anticipation of another exchange? A marble, Davi. A steely. Now this was a sign. Surely there were greater forces at work. Back at Grandma and Grandpa's, I put the cat's eye in the box with the crayfish, and I spent the whole night thinking of what I should leave next. The following
three exchanges were as follows: a pocketknife with the plastic broken off one side for a
tin disk that clicked when its center was pressed, a wooden slide-whistle for a raw chunk of
magnet, and a matchbox car (a Pacer) for a Dr. Strange comic book. On these first steps,
Davi, we were trading childhoods. I still played with these kinds of things with you, but
remember, I was nearly twelve. My thoughts and my desires were moving in other direc­
tions. My desires, Davi. How clearly did I know my desires that June? I knew I wanted
to try on a dress, but I wasn't choosing to try on an alternate sexuality. I wasn't that con­
scious of myself. I knew that I was exchanging anonymous gifts with a boy, and that
thoughts of him were keeping me awake, but I wouldn't have called it love. Not yet. Not
on step six. As I said, we were still sharing childhoods. For all I really knew by step six,
he was a child, and I was making an f-o-o-l of myself. I would later learn that he was not
a child, but on the night of our performance, this was as far up the staircase as I had
climbed.

"And to seek," I say, sitting stiffly in my dress. I shut the coffin lid as I lie down, and
you pick up a Weeble Wobble from the floor in front of the bedroom door. "Hmm," you
say, "what's this? A Weeble Wobble, eh?" You're dressed in pink shorts and a white shirt
with lace around the neck. We've put you in suspenders and green rubber boots, pulled
your socks up to your knees, and given you a shoulder bag that I insist on calling a satchel.
You look like a German schoolboy in lederhosen—in drag. What were we shooting for,
Davi? Some kind of investigator, I think. You pick up the next trinket, a block of Leggo,
and you say, "Hmm, what's this? A Leggo, eh?" You say exactly the same thing every
time, your announcement of what was there for all to see. Did you think we were doing
radio, Davi? Bless your little heart.
Now, this is where memory becomes more powerful than any present-tense reality. Sealed in my coffin, I couldn't possibly see you, yet today I can tell you exactly what you did, every movement. You turned the items over in your hands as if examining them as you spoke. You turned to Grandma and smiled incessantly. You crossed and uncrossed your feet. You occasionally jumped into the air, little hops with both feet together. I know you did, Davi. My memory is an eyewitness. It didn't stay confined in that coffin with me, but somehow, through the years, it has worked its way out of that box and up to the ceiling in the middle of the room. It shows me now how you worked your way through each item in the trail, until you came to the stuffed rabbit. You put that under your arm, squeezing it to calm your nerves. Then you said, "Hmm, a coffin, eh?" and you lifted the lid.

I can see myself lying in the coffin—my eyes closed, my wig spread on the sheet beneath my head, a bit of blood in the corner of my mouth—and I can see you, hesitant, unnerved by the distance that my acting has placed between us. You were beginning to wonder if this were safe. You had some lines here you were supposed to say, letting the audience know that you had discovered a vampire, and that you were going to put an end to the terror of the haunted hotel, but you were too nervous to speak. You pulled a railroad spike and a hammer from your satchel. Wordlessly, you placed the spike against the left cup of my brassiere, and you raised the hammer. Just as Grandma moved to stop you, you brought the hammer down. Davi, you hardly even tapped the spike.

I opened my eyes and my mouth, and I hissed at you in vampire agony. I grabbed the spike as if I would pull it out. I grabbed your hands, too, because I could see that you
were going to bolt and run to Grandma, and I helped you plunge that spike into the cup of my bra.

How long did we wrestle with my left breast trying to get that bag of ketchup to split open? I let go of the spike and squeezed my bra, and still it didn't pop. My wig fell off, and, seeing me—Peter, once again—your fear vanished, and you pushed hard as I squeezed the bag taut with my hands. It finally broke, and the watered ketchup soaked my breast, but by then we were both laughing. We'd made a comedy of our tragedy, and a complete absurdity of my final line, shouted over our laughter, "And finally, to sleep."

To sleep. I've overdone it with my walk and with this voluminous letter. I'm off to Mom's for the Fourth of July. I was planning on begging off, but I've decided to go. I'm excited about the fireworks.

I'll see you again in Key West. We're heading into open water, now, Davi. We're getting deeper, aren't we?

As ever,

Peter

P.S. Beth's back.

PETER: (in stage whisper) Yes!
Peter arrived at eight p.m., four hours after he'd phoned his mother that he was leaving for the three-hour trip. She'd been looking out at the driveway when he pulled in. She had called his house, had put on her shoes, about to drive toward the highway, not knowing what else to do.

"What took you so long?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. He walked around to the trunk of his car and fumbled with his key, having trouble finding the lock with his shaking hand.

His eyes looked wider than usual to Mary. He was frightened, and she wanted to know why. "Well, something must have happened," she said.

He lit a cigarette, held it in his mouth and tried the lock again, this time successfully.

"I guess I'm slow," he said.

"You must not have left when you said you did," she suggested.

He heaved a duffle bag out of the trunk, let the momentum carry it over the bumper and onto the blacktop. It was a small bag, and Mary carried it to the house. "I got a little turned around," Peter said, as the two stood at the door waiting for him to finish his cigarette.

"Coming here?"

"I wasn't paying attention."
"Your sense of direction is just like your mother's," Mary said, and when Peter stubbed out his cigarette, "I've got dinner in the oven. It'll be a little dry, but there's gravy."

"I can't wait. I'm starved."

When Peter and Mary came inside, Karl moved from the couch to the dining room, rubbing his hand impatiently across the table, while Peter used the bathroom.

"Will you stop scraping that ring?" Mary said.

"Hey, I'm hungry. You're the one who wouldn't let me eat. What is he doing in there anyway?"

"Just have a piece of bread," she said, and he picked one up with his left hand, his right cutting a thick slice of butter from the stick.

When Peter returned, Karl said a hasty prayer, ending in "lovedoneswherever-theybe, amen." A few minutes later, once his eating had slowed, he asked Peter what turn he'd missed.

"I just kept going up thirty-two," Peter said.

"Thirty-two? What were you doing on thirty-two? From one-fifteen you go north on thirty-seven. You shouldn't have even been on thirty-two."

"It must have been thirty-seven, then."

"But you can't go that far on thirty-seven. You end up at the bay."

"Whatever I was on, I went too far."

"Well it must have been one-fifteen."

"Okay, maybe it was."

"That's all it could be."
"Then I guess that was it."

"Unless you took ninety-six to one-thirty-one. But then you wouldn't have been on one-fifteen."

"Whatever it was," Mary interjected, "we're just glad he made it, aren't we?"

Karl grunted yes, a slice of bread hanging off his fingers. "Will you pass me the butter?" he asked Mary.

When dinner was finished, Karl went down to the lake to start a fire. Mary told Peter to stay put, while she cleaned up the kitchen. "How's your nurse working out?" she asked.

"She's actually really fun," Peter said. "It's nice to have someone coming over every day."

"Oh, I know. It's always just Karl and me here." She opened the dishwasher and dealt in a stack of plates. "It must cost a fortune, though."

"It's worth it. She does a little bit of everything. Makes the bed, sorts my meds for the week. She cleaned the bathroom the other day. That's not even her job."

"You're lucky, it sounds like," Mary said. "I've heard plenty of horror stories from patients who've been on home care."

"No complaints here," Peter said. "Maybe if I were bedridden it might be different. It's not like she can do whatever she wants with me."

"Do you have her phone number?" Mary asked, as casually as she knew how.

"Mother. We're fine. Don't worry. We're more than fine. I look ridiculously forward to her visits. If my I.V. is running, she always waits until it's finished, and we play cards or whatever. I've started timing my I.V.s for her visits. I'm sure she's noticed, but
she hasn't complained. She's talking about taking me out to dinner. She wants me to get out of the house more."

"Do you think that's a good idea?"

"Mom."

"Well, it's been so dry. There's a lot of dust. And the heat."

"Anything is better than sitting in that dark house all day, everyday. I've been doing some photography again. I brought a tripod in my duffle bag. I want to get some shots of the fireworks. I'd like to send one to Davi."

"That's a great idea," Mary said. The dishwasher was loaded, and she closed it and spun the dial to start the cycle. "You know that you're always welcome here, Pete. You know that, right?"

"I know."

"If you ever decide it's getting too hard."

"I know, Mom."

"You can have the whole loft. I talked to Karl about it—"

"Mom, I hear you. Let's just hope that day is a long way off."

But Mary couldn't hope that. She knew too well the stages of death. It didn't matter whether she was familiar with Peter's particular disease. He had reached a point in which it wasn't so particular at all. He might have had any of a number of diseases that ended in mass wasting. At this point, the differences lay largely in the field of chemistry. She could only hope that he hung on until Davi returned. Though he had never said so, she knew how much he wanted that, knew that it would be a goal of his. His first goal had been to reach thirty years old. He'd had the goal of seeing her retire and move up to
the lake. Then he'd had the goal of reaching the year two thousand. He no longer spoke of that New Year's Eve and what he'd do when it arrived, plans he had once spoken of so often, and so defiantly. "I won't mention it again," she said, pulling off the table cloth. "I just wanted to make sure that you know it's there for you. It's an option."

"I know, Mom," he said. He stood and hugged his mother, who tried vainly not to cry.

"You hardly ate tonight," she said, wiping her eyes. "You disappointed your mother."

"Maybe I'll get hungry later," he said. "You'd better be ready."

"Oh, I'm ready," she said. "I've got chips. There's Coke. Ice cream. Sandwich fixings, leftovers, popcorn, candy bars. We'll have finger food down at the lake, too. Cheese and crackers, grapes, chips and salsa . . ."

"I'm going to get my tripod and scope out the scene," Peter said.

"Put a jacket on," she said, rubbing his shoulders. "It'll be cold at the lake."

#

Lois and Clyde Royson arrived with Gabe after dark, the first test shot of the fireworks booming in the air, invisible, just the sound echoing over lake. Peter stood at the edge of the lawn, behind his tripod, eye in the viewfinder of his camera, guessing at the space of air that would frame the fireworks.

Mary waved the Roysons over to the fire, where she stood, a light sweater over her shoulders. Karl added a log and prodded the coals with a long stick. "Glad you could make it," he said.

"Nice fire," Clyde said.
Lois stood behind Mary and rubbed Mary's arms. "Brrr," she said. "You need to put that sweater on, girl. You're making me cold looking at you."

Gabe ran onto the dock, and Lois called him back. She crouched and held his hand. "The dock is dangerous at night," she said. "You could fall into the water, and we wouldn't see you. Let's make a promise. If you want to go out on the dock, you have to have an adult with you. Okay?"

"Okay," Gabe said, and he pulled his hand away and ran over to a patio table that was covered with food. "Can I have a pop?" he shouted, his gaze fixed on a cooler filled with cans and ice.

"Help yourself, folks," Karl said. "There's plates and napkins. There's beer in there, too, Clyde."

Mary found Peter behind his camera. "I want you to meet my son," she said. "Lois and Clyde, this is Peter. Peter, these are our friends Lois and Clyde. They run the Cedar General Store."

Peter waved, and Lois strained to see him in the dark, her eyes dilated from the fire. "Hello," she shouted, laughing. "Wherever you are!"

"And that's little Gabe," Mary said. "Just as cute as ever."

"Isn't he?" Lois said. "We can hardly stand it."

Another test shot thundered over the lake.

"Get ready," Karl said. He had lined up a row of folding chairs between the fire and the lakeshore, and he invited everyone to sit once they'd filled their plates.

"Get something to eat," Mary said to Peter, and the first firework spread over the lake, a sparkling green umbrella, the crack and fizzle of sound one second delayed. Peter
adjusted his camera, and started snapping pictures as the fireworks burst, their colors reflected on the water.

"I want to go on the dock!" Gabe squealed.

"It's too cold," Lois said. "Stay here by the fire. You can see just as well."

"I want to see from the dock," he said again.

Three rockets burst together, and the couples in their line of chairs oohed over them. An air horn blasted somewhere down the shore.

"Please," Gabe begged.

"Maybe for the finale," Clyde said.

"I'll take him," Peter said, lifting his tripod and pushing the legs together. "I'm getting too much ambient light from the fire. I'll get better shots out there."

Lois smiled at Gabe, who spun toward Peter.

"Hi there," Peter said, stepping into the light of the fire. A firework exploded, lighting the side of Peter's face, the cataract in his eye a ghostly white in the pale wash of electric blue.

Lois stopped smiling. "You heard your grandpa," she told Gabe. "He'll take you out for the finale."

"It's no problem," Peter said. "I can watch him. I don't need to look through the camera. I just have to press the remote. Fireworks are easy."

"Thank you, but it's a little cold for him," Lois said, surreptitiously clutching Gabe's jacket.

"Let the kid go," Clyde said.
Gabe twisted his body until his jacket pulled out of Lois' grasp. He stepped shyly toward Peter and leaned against his leg. "Come here," Lois said, rising out of her seat as she reached for him.

"Oh, let him go," Mary said. "For crying out loud, it's not that cold."

"Well excuse me, but he's not your grandson," Lois said. "Come here, Gaby."

"Lois," Clyde said, and she pulled her reaching hand back into her lap.

"It's okay," Peter said.

"No, it's not okay," Clyde said. "Take the kid to the dock and let him watch the show."

Gabe reached for Peter's hand, and Lois looked away, her eyes fixed on the next rocket as it whistled up, a wiggling trail of fire.

"What happened to your eye?" Gabe asked, as the two walked down the sloping lawn toward the dock.

"I had an accident," Peter said.

"Does it hurt?"

"Nope."

"Can you see out of it?"

"Not the way I see out of my other eye," he said, as they left of the aura of firelight.

"Really? What do you see with it?"

"Oh, all kinds of things. Fairies, gnomes. I can see if someone is a good person or not."

"How do you see that?"

Peter shrugged, "I just do."
"Am I a good person?"

"Let me see," he said, and he looked down at Gabe, who opened his eyes wide, as if that might help Peter make his determination.

"Definitely."

Gabe skipped alongside Peter. "Is that a camera?" he asked.

"Do you want to learn how to use it?"

Peter and Gabe disappeared completely into the darkness as they reached the dock, reappearing again in the flashes from the fireworks—Gabe on tiptoes, looking through the camera, then Peter helping him push the plunger on the remote shutter release, then both of them sitting at the end of the dock, leaning back on their hands, looking up at the show. Lois had quit watching the fireworks, looking instead at the dock. She fidgeted in her chair, then rose and walked briskly toward Gabe and Peter. "Gabe," she called, musically, "Gaby, here comes Grandma."

Clyde tipped back his beer, drank, and shook the last drops out of the can onto the grass. "I'm sorry about that," he said.

"It's not her fault," Karl said.

"Well it's not Peter's," Mary said. A moment passed, and she added, "It's nobody's fault." She quit watching the show, then, looking instead at the dock, Gabe and Lois a little farther from Peter with each flash.

A minute passed with no fireworks. "They're loading the finale," Karl said.

Mary heard a sound, turned and saw Bill standing in the grass a few feet from the shore. Before she could introduce him, the finale began.
Davi was passed by the boat, *Bellicose*, the day after she sailed from Soboy Sound, the boat passing close enough for Davi to catch its name through her binoculars. She noticed the flopping of her telltale ribbons only once she had been passed, hours from port. She adjusted her sails, increasing her speed by more than a knot, and she wondered if she had really slogged through the entire morning with sloppily trimmed sails.

When she stepped off her boat in Key West, a race official told her that she was in fifth place. For three days, boats continued to arrive in Key West, before the twentieth passed between the green can and the red nun, the navigational buoys denoting the mouth of the marina, the official finish line of the eastern seaboard leg. These twenty boats would continue on, in what the qualifying sailors all considered the real race, the open-ocean leg. They would stay in Key West for two more days, and then there would be another mass start, as there had been at Lunenburg and at Provincetown. In the meantime, racers inspected boats, scurried to find replacement parts, and drank at the marina's pub, swapping stories of failed rigging, equipment overboard, single-day made-good, and other triumphs and failures from Lunenburg to Key West.

Davi had been one of three women to enter the race, and she learned that the other two had also qualified to continue. She saw them their last night in Key West, the only night that she joined the racers at the pub. They were both older than she, both with the
keen eyes of sailors, the sinewy bodies that marked all the racers, the strength of sailors so like the ropes they commanded. The women were sitting together, and they called Davi to their table. Fishing nets hung from the ceiling over their heads, antique wooden block and tackle draped along the walls, nautical nostalgia in every corner of the bar. The taller of the two women introduced herself as Nadia. She was from Norway, and it showed, her hair light blond, nearly white, tied in a long ponytail. The other woman was named Anne, a Frenchwoman, dark-haired and dark-eyed, slipping into the qualifying pack in nineteenth place. "I'm just happy to be in it," she said. They both congratulated Davi on her fifth-place position.

"But you can't let those men continue to pass you," Nadia said.

"I didn't think I would be anywhere near the front," Davi said. "I just wanted to sail around the world." She felt small talking to this woman with her long Nordic frame and hard blue eyes. She had felt so strong on her boat, muscling the sails as she tacked across the wind, fine-tuning until she felt the hull surge forward. She never doubted her ability when she was alone, and she wished now that she hadn't come to the pub, that she had stayed in her cabin studying her charts, picking her route through the Bahamas to their next checkpoint at Port Au Prince.

"You don't need to enter a race to do a circumnavigation," Nadia said.

"I wanted to see how I would do."

"You're in fifth place. You should be in second. I met the captain of Bellicose. He's an ass. And the other two who passed you. You can't just shrug your shoulders about it. You're a competitor whether you like it or not. You're not just lucky to be here."

"This is how I feel," Anne said, "lucky to be here."
"You are lucky to be here," Nadia said. "I'm talking to Davison."

Davi shrugged her shoulders, and Nadia sighed and looked away.

"I'm doing okay," Davi said.

"I know the route you chose at Martha's Vineyard. It was smart. It was gutsy. The move of a winner. Do you even know that you were recorded in first place at the end of that day? For one night, you were the lead captain."

Davi hadn't known that she had been the lead captain.

"Do you even want to win this race?" Nadia asked.

Davi hesitated before saying, "Yes, of course," and Nadia was again looking away, shaking her head.

"Nadia," Anne said, "leave this girl alone. She's doing better than you, isn't she?"

"I've known people like her," Nadia said to Anne. Then to Davi, "You want something until you're in a position to take it, and then you sit on your hands. Check the miles against the winds for those last three days. Those captains didn't become brilliant. You slowed down. You tell yourself that fifth place is okay, when you know you might win. You can make fifth place, but it will be a tragedy."

"I'm not trying to lose," Davi said.

"How many times have you pictured yourself taking the trophy?"

Davi had never given a thought to the trophy, to crossing the finish line in first place. In fact, she had never imagined crossing the finish line at all.

"This is what I'm saying," Nadia said, touching Anne's arm. "Look at her. I don't like this woman."

"Nadia," Anne scolded.
Davi walked away, Nadia calling after her. "For Pete's Sake. I'm glad I'm not Pete."

Davi dropped down the companionway steps into her cabin. She had picked up Peter's next letter the day she'd arrived in Key West, and it lay unopened on her navigation desk, his neat handwriting on the envelope, his care evident in each letter of her name, each number in the address, his care so heavy on the envelope. The words from Peter's pencil piled up in Davi's mind, then, alongside them, rolls of film never to be exposed, developing chemicals growing stale in their plastic jugs, the thousands of slides and negatives arranged in his file cabinets according to some system he alone knew. She thought of his photo shoots now, wandering each day the same blocks of his neighborhood, the people that were so essential to his work crossing to the other side of the street as they saw him coming. So much of her brother had already died, she thought. Then there were the oil-slick pots of coffee and the ashtrays overflowing with cigarette butts, the iodine-stained recliner chair and the gathered dust filling the corners of the house. She struggled against these images, fought her mind to blackness, telling herself no, no, she didn't mean that blackness for Peter, only for her mind, only to take away these thoughts.

She crouched in front of the engine compartment and cooed Alex' name into the missing wooden slat, as if to prove herself not cold, not cruel, not wishing ill of anybody. She heard nothing, but the stillness within was palpable, and she was sure that the cat was near the vent. "Alex," she said again. She made a kissing sound, and heard in response a low rumble. She could not at first place the sound as the voice of a cat, the rumble beginning inaudibly low and resonating in the teak housing of the engine. For a brief instant she thought that he was purring, but as she whispered his name again the cat's voice rose to a throaty moan. It was a sound filled with warning, a sound that another person
might have heard as self-protective and hopelessly sad, but that Davi heard only as the
voice of accusation. "Screw you, too," she said. She banged the butt of her hand against
the vent, and from inside there came the startled sounds of the cat skittering away.

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davi put down fresh food for the cat before dawn. sun rise was the official start of
the next leg, the moment in which the sailors could cross south of the buoys that race or-
ganizers had positioned as the starting line. Until then the sailors would motor north of
that line, raise sail and tack back and forth, each trying to time his maneuvers to send him
speeding across the line exactly at 7:03, the official minute of dawn. Davi was among the
first dozen boats who timed well and hit their marks just at dawn, pulling across in sixth
place, the boat with the crimson sail crossing third, its sail dark and colorless in the early
half-light. The racers had a steady breeze, fifteen knots, just enough to pull Davi's boat to
hull speed. She loosened the topping lift on the main, as Angus had suggested in his let-
ter, and tightened the boom vang to pull and flatten the sail. Although she thought she
had been at hull speed, she gained half a knot with the flatter sail, and she moved up the
pack as the boats spread down the coast, each finding her favored angle. The sun lifted
above the eastern sea and shone on the sails, a sprinkling of white cones fanning over the
water, the crimson sail glowing warmly now, once again in the lead, Davi following again
in second place.

Once she'd cleared the peninsula, Davi reset her course southwest, raising for the
first time her spinnaker as she ran with the wind. That afternoon she brought Peter's let-
ter up to her cockpit, and read it as she sat in the shade of her sail.
Dear Davi,

Well, this is it, eh? You're off into the wild blue. Congratulations. I hope Alex isn't getting seasick. You know, I still sometimes think I can hear him. I'll wake up in the middle of the night thinking that he's pawing in his cat box, or scratching the leg of the couch in the living room. I scolded him the other night, shouting from the bedroom for him to leave the couch alone.

Now that Beth and I are back on track, she's positively taking over. It's a mutiny, Davi! On Saturday, she made me get dressed and take her out to lunch. With my money! She called me Mister, as in, "Listen, Mister," and she called our lunch a date, as in, "We've got a date, and, no, you're not getting out of it." Bless her, Davi. Bullied as I was, I felt like a human being again when I pulled those bills from my wallet.

Back to my story, though, back to Grandma and Grandpa's, you and I put on our play, and I was lost in daydreams about my secret correspondence on the hotel stairs. But while I'm disclosing secrets, I want to share another, more recent secret. I stole the family movies. And the eight-millimeter projector. And the old electric popcorn popper that had, unbelievably, been stored with them! The movies were in her basement. They were deteriorating, Davi. I couldn't let that happen. I took them when I went up to Mom's for the Fourth. How about that for flair, liberating the home movies on independence day? All this just seems so important to me now—the movies, the pictures, the letters. I have to rescue them. Save them. Save me. As if I might crawl into this loop of memorabilia and last forever. Keep me out of damp basements. Keep me out of direct sunlight. Keep me away from fingers that smudge (accidentally or not so accidentally). Keep me away from water, and I will ride my thirty-five years ad infinitum.
It was worth the thievery, too. Already, their color is going from being stored so poorly. In half the movies everything is now pink. I put them in the attic, where at least they'll stay dry. And there was a bonus, Davi. I found a gem among them, a reel that had never been seen. The canister was still sealed from the developer, and taped to the lid was a hand-written receipt. Paid. Four dollars and ninety-two cents. February 22, 1968. Picked up and paid for two months after Mom took us away in the station wagon to the apartment on Jackson Street. I'm surprised Dad picked it up at all. They must have been calling him. Have you guessed yet what's on this reel? Of course. Mom and Dad steaming down the Mississippi on the Delta Queen paddle steamer. Remember, this was the reason for our stay at Grandma and Grandpa's, this last desperate attempt to save a marriage.

The film opens with a lot of fumbling around—close up of the water, bubbles, a shoreline spotted with the smoking stacks of factories and of barges—coal and diesel all around. The beautiful Mississippi. Then in a streak, close up now, white columns and whitewashed wood, two shiny black smokestacks with fluting at the top, and a gingerbread cast-iron railing. It's the Delta Queen, a floating wedding cake. How could it not save a marriage?

Everything seems to move a bit too fast, though I don't think it does, not through a 1960s camera. It's the lack of sound that makes it seem so fast. It's disorienting. We're waiting to recognize the sound of the factories, the shudder of the ship, the whistles and bells that are surely going off in the port. We're wanting language.

Finally, the camera settles on Mom. She's wearing a green sheer scarf around her head. Her hair is auburn (not the orange we know today). Surprisingly, it is long and
straight and soft. It flows from beneath her scarf. Her left front tooth is, as in the old family photos, darker than her other teeth. I see this tooth for the half-second in which she forces a smile for Dad behind the camera. Then all I see are her eyes, and I see that she hates him.

For the next ten minutes, scenes of the river go by, a half minute or so for each town that the Delta Queen slides past. Everything drifting from left to right. Docks. Barges. Tree branches. Birds. A drowned animal—a dog, I think, though I can't be sure. And between these conveyor-belt scenes, again and again like a refrain, the paddle wheel, bright red slats circling like a carnival ride behind the boat.

Then Mom's cast fills the shaking frame. It's signed all over in different colors of marker and pen. I can't read the words, but people have drawn pictures. I can make out a bicycle and a martini glass. The camera backs away, and Mom is there in lavender terry cloth short-shorts and a matching tank top. As our father would say, she's a looker. And, Davi, she's smiling. Now she's even laughing. A crowd of people has gathered around, men with bottles of beer in their hands, women with drinks in highball glasses. They lean close to each other as they talk, and I realize by the exaggerated movements of their heads that they're shouting. Mom keeps looking down at her toes and back up at the people around her. She's shouting, too, up at the standing crowd, her hands now in the air and now smacking down on her thighs. I'm not sure of her words, but their content is something like this: I didn't ask to be in the hot seat, but here I am, nervous as hell and enjoying it. The camera jostles wildly, then Dad is in the frame, on one knee beside Mom, and they're both smiling. He's making jokes into the camera, miming the bicycle
ride. Someone hands him a pair of bolt cutters. They have a small steel beak and long wooden handles.

Dad starts his cut at the top of the cast, and he works his way down the outside of Mom's calf to her ankle. The plaster is thick and pliable, and the bolt cutters are clumsy. He's really putting some muscle into it. Mom is jumping in her chair, and cringing, and laughing and exclaiming. A woman beside her hands her a drink every now and again, and Mom acts surprised each time before she takes a good long sip. The cameraman discovers the zoom, and he gives a close-up of the cast, the jaws of the bolt-cutter tearing at the plaster. Then he backs the frame wide, and I see now why all the shouting. Behind Mom, his back to the camera, sits a man in a striped vest and a straw hat, pounding on the keys of a steam calliope. The organ is red and gold, and sticking up from behind are rows of brass pipes, bursts of steam popping like fireworks from little slits near their tips. What a production! Mom and Dad are the stars of the Delta Queen, the centerpiece statuary on that gaudy floating cake.

When Dad reaches Mom's ankle, he pulls the cutters out of the groove and starts again at the open toe of the cast, and in three snips, the two grooves meet. He's finished the cut. Two other men reach in, and together with our father, they tear open the cast. Mom's leg emerges lilly-white from its cocoon, and for a moment everyone stops shouting. The calliope stops, too, and the steam, finding no release through the pipes, rolls out from beneath the organ. Dad cups Mom's foot in both hands and rotates it in a slow circle. It's Cinderella in reverse, Davi, and the foot fits. Dad kisses her toes, everyone cheers, and the calliope bursts back to life.
Let's let the filmstrip thread out there, Sis. Let's have the tail flapping in circles on the take-up reel, and the lights coming on, and not a dry eye in the house.

How important is the happy ending? How much will I exaggerate? How much will I deny? Do you remember the lengths to which we went to keep Jim and me a secret from Grandma the year before she died? There was nothing to be gained by telling her. And there was no reason to tell Jim about my health. It was difficult enough as it was. You see how even now I can hardly go near that feeling. I'm miles away, at "difficult." He and I had made a home of this house. We had twice put out the Thanksgiving decorations (well, I had, anyway), twice left the kitchen a mess on Christmas eve, a spread of hors d'oeuvres and chilled white wine in front of a fire in the living room. Twice, New Years resolutions. Mine always about cigarettes and coffee, Jim's about the books he would force himself to read that year. He reminded me of you with his reading. He was so wise, just by nature, but he couldn't sit still to read unless it was something "practical," some kind of manual, self-help, home improvement. For over a year we joked about his little medical problems. I told him once that he was weaned too early, that he didn't get enough breast milk. "I knew myself at a young age," he said. "I preferred the bottle over the breast." He was nearly frozen for the two weeks that we waited for my test results from the clinic. When I returned and told him "negative," he swooned. As dramatic as he could be, I think it was real. He would be dead in six months, but that day you would have thought the test results had proven him negative. How much will I deny for the happy ending? How much will I change? The difference between + and - is a single vertical line.
We're far from the ending in our Walloon Lake story, though, and if I don't get it moving, then we'll never get there. Do you remember yet what Mrs. Burnside was doing next door behind her closed curtains? Do remember the bottle on the table? The broken glass all over the floor? She couldn't forgive herself. She was the driver of the car, the cause of Grandma's accident. She swerved into the oncoming lane and plowed head-on into another car while she was looking into the backseat, telling Grandma what kind of punch she'd like the church to serve for the party that would follow Easter service. She was lobbying for melon with sherbet and ginger ale, while her husband, father Burnside, who hated to vex his wife, was chewing agitatedly on the tip of a pencil, sure that for the sake of the children, who would be there for the egg hunt, they should serve straight fruit punch. This all from Dad, who finished with, "Poked that goddamned pencil right through his brain." All that Mrs. Burnside could think afterward was that three people died for that melon punch, including her husband, and it was never even served, the Easter party canceled that year. Do you remember how we used to toss pebbles at her window? Do you remember the day we knocked on the door and ran? "You little brats!" she said, leaning on the railing of her porch. "I'll kill you." Do you remember? "If I catch you, I'll kill you."

And there's one other scene from that summer that was part of our regular routine. Do you remember the little beach down the road? Between Grandma and Grandpa's house and the hotel? We used to go there to get a break from the rocky shore by our dock. There were usually a trio of boys there with a sunfish sailboat. They were older than me, three tanned skinny boys in cutoff jeans up for the summer. They would sail over, all together, piled on their little boat. They always had a frisbee with them. The
youngest boy must have been a few years older than me, probably not yet old enough to drive. He had light brown hair in a long, bowl cut, sun-bleached fringes. I remember him now as ribs and knees and elbows, always in motion beneath a sunburned nose and the largest and darkest eyes I had ever seen. Maybe the first eyes I had ever really seen. I used to sit with you in the sand, helping you build your little sand communities—your neighborhood, shopping district, school, hospital, church, optometrist! I'm surprised now that it always had to be these little villages. I would think that you'd prefer a castle somewhere on a precipice, someplace remote and nearly impossible to reach. I squatted behind you as I helped, reaching over you, pointing, guiding. I tousled your hair. I mimicked every parental gesture I could think of, looking always to see if those boys—if that boy was watching. I'm not playing with my little sister, I wanted him to know. I'm taking care of her.

As I was hovering over you, their Frisbee was flying over me. They liked to be reckless, to fling the Frisbee from one end of that small beach to the other, and if a mother scolded or a father threatened, they apologized and smirked at each other. I sat there with you feeling at once a state of complete dread and of utter hope that their frisbee would fly at us, and I'd be forced to catch it, or to dig it out of the sand, and throw it back to them. When it finally happened, I didn't see it coming. I was watching a line of ducks swimming by. I had been watching them for several minutes as they inched their way up the lake. It was a mother and four ducklings, three just at her tail, and the fourth floundering behind. That last one leaned to one side, which caused it to want to swim in circles. Every few seconds it corrected itself so that it made some slow progress, but by the time the mother reached the far end of the beach, it was far behind. She turned and
squawked at it, but the other ducklings crowded her and she swam on with them, leaving the little weak one farther and farther behind. I heard the shout of one of the boys, and I managed to get my hand up in time to avoided being hit in the nose by the Frisbee. It jammed my finger and careened off. When I threw it back, it wasn't to the boy with the eyes—I didn't see him right away, and I didn't dare to seek him out—but to the oldest boy.

You've seen me throw a Frisbee, Davi. Imagine me then, my heart pounding in my ears, wanting to throw it to that boy with the dark eyes. "Just throw the damn thing," the oldest boy shouted. I had already wound up to throw several times, afraid to let go. When I finally did, it wobbled toward him, before it veered off toward the woods in a pathetic little arc, just like that duckling I'd been watching. I remember the laughter of the oldest boy, the requisite, "You throw like a girl." But I remember also the dark eyes of the other boy looking down at the sand.

It was a week later that he offered to take me out in his boat. The other two boys were on the edge of the beach, smoking cigarettes, and he asked me if I wanted to go for a sail with him. I was reading a comic book that I dropped in the sand behind me when I saw him coming. I mumbled an acceptance, and I sat on the edge of the boat, while he shoved off shore and jumped in after me. We headed out into the lake. Then he turned and we angled back toward shore, moving up the coast. We sailed by the haunted hotel. I hadn't seen it from the lake before. The roof sagged in the middle to the point of collapse, but the porch was straight, and there was still something majestic about it. She was an old belle, victorian gingerbread and flaking whitewash like brittle silk and lace, and I decided then, as we slid past the hotel, that this boy, whose name I still didn't know, was my stairwell correspondent. I had been hoping, of course, but now I felt safe in my
hopes. He had invited me for this sail, after all, and had taken me past the hotel. The most obvious evidence, however, lay in his silence. After a half hour together on that boat, we hadn't spoken a word. I spent the entire time focused on my feet, mortified that one of them actually touch one of his, and desperate in the hope that his foot might touch mine. But there was no touch. He dropped me back on the beach, and ran off toward the other two boys, who were now throwing a football straight up into the air and stepping precariously over mothers and children as they maneuvered to catch it. Only once I was away from the dark-eyed boy did I think of things to say. My name is . . . I'm staying with my grandparents . . . I've seen you around . . . She's my little sister, I'm stuck with her all the time . . . I like your eyes . . . I've never been in a sailboat before . . . I want to touch you with my foot . . . Do you like [movie, song, television show] . . . I think I'm in love with you.

I almost forgot you that day, Davi. I was at the edge of the road when I remembered, so anxious was I to get back and choose my next gift for the stairwell. I dragged you home by the hand and you cried. Grandma served for dinner the spaghetti with mushrooms that we so detested, and I hardly even noticed. I ate, and as soon as I could be excused I was off for the hotel. It was dusk when I arrived, and so dark inside that I could hardly see. I stood in the doorway until my eyes had dilated, and even then I felt as if I were underwater, the dust blue in the deepening twilight, the parlor furniture silhouetted against the amber of the newspapered windows. We were halfway up the steps now, he and I, and I could see, before I began to climb, the outline of an object there on the ninth step. I had in my hand a drawing that I had done hurriedly in colored pencil after dinner. Two boys in a sailboat, the sun setting behind them, the hotel on the shore.
I could see by the pale glow on the ninth step that the thing there was skeletal. I thought maybe a fish, but two steps closer, I could see that it was too complex. I recognized a beak, and then the form materialized of a bird. Dead. In its mouth was the red petal of a flower. I unfolded my drawing, my face hot with embarrassment as I looked at the hash-marks, the colored pencils so much like crayons. I slid the skeleton across the step, as light a pressure on my hand as a breath of air, and onto my drawing. I pulled the flower petal from its beak and left that on the wooden step. I folded the paper around the bird, and as I did I heard a shuffling from the second floor. I thought immediately that it was a human sound, but within a moment's time I doubted myself. It could have been a squirrel, a raccoon, anything. I tried not to think that it was the boy, but I couldn't help picturing him standing stiff against the wall just around the corner from the stairwell. With that picture in my mind, I stood for a long moment—a moment that might have been courage, though I have difficulty defining the word—before I took several steps backward. Is it courage to stand strong in the hope of something wonderful? Or does the thought of the reward somehow stain the act? Every morning I take my pills, every noon and every night. I'm going again for my daily walk, snapping pictures of the neighborhood (I'm sure I'm a source of concern for many of my neighbors. Picture me, Davi, five-foot-ten, a hundred pounds, this gray hobgoblin aiming his aged camera at your picture window). Will I still take these walks when I've given up hope? Will I still write these letters? Will I even speak? Even then, will shutting down be cowardice or courage? I just don't know.

That day on the stairs, however you define my lovesick steadfastness, the feeling only lasted a moment, and then I was a child again, eleven years old, taking one step
back, then another, and one more, before turning and bolting outside, into the evening air. I ran along the road, all adrenaline, then laughter and a feeling of some victory, though I had no idea over what I had been victorious. It was almost full dark by the time I reached Grandma and Grandpa's. I came in through one of the downstairs sliding glass doors and I put the bird in my box with the other trinkets. Fantasy Island was on the TV upstairs, Grandma and Grandpa in their chairs, she in her quilted bathrobe, he in his cardigan, and you on your stomach on the floor, lying beneath the blanket of their cigarette smoke. Love Boat would be on next, I knew.

That's all for today. Beth just walked in. She says hi. She feels like she knows you. I wonder if you'd recognize yourself in her version, though, coming from her talks with me. You'd see yourself as some kind of hero, believe it or not.

Look for me next on Malpelo Island. I considered meeting you earlier, in Panama, but there's too much connotation to the place. These are meetings best suited for innocuity, for small pubs in back alleys. A strip-mall bar and grill somewhere might be even better. A Holiday Inn lounge off an interstate exchange, perhaps. Sail well, Davi.

As ever,

Peter

#

Davi folded the letter back into its envelope and stowed it below, in her navigation desk with the others. She did remember going to that beach. She remembered even that specific day at the lake, though she hadn't known that the memory existed until Peter conjured it for her. She didn't remember the events so much as isolated details. They had walked to the beach from their grandparents' house, in the shallow water near shore,
climbing over docks or swimming under as they moved from one property to the next. The pebbles beneath their feet were slippery, but worn flat and round and smooth from the water. She remembered the boys with a Frisbee, forceful and reckless, flinging it and jumping sunbathers to catch it. She had seen them often in the distance, sailing in their Sunfish. She would watch from their grandparents' balcony the Sunfish pick up speed, turn and capsize. She would hear their distant hollering, and the sail would bob back upright, two of them standing on the dagger board, and a third diving beneath the sail in order to push up the canvas and break the water's suction. Her grandfather watched with her once from the windows of the house. Little potlickers, he called them.

Davi remembered also having something in her hand as she built her little town in the sand that day on the beach, some child's treasure she'd found, nothing except to her. She was trying to show it to Peter, holding it in her open palm, when the boys' Frisbee fell onto the sand in front of him. She remembered Peter's weak slice of a throw, and the oldest boy running to the Frisbee, sand whipping from his feet. He snatched it up, and then they were off down the beach again, not people to Davi, then, but three coarse knots in the smooth landscape of sand and lapping waves. She still held out her prize for Peter, but he was watching the boys. The Frisbee flew near again, and this time a boy darted in to catch it before it came to Peter. Davi was saying something about the thing in her hand. She'd been saying something for a long time, again and again. As the boy arced by Peter in the continuation of his running catch, Peter grabbed the thing that Davi held in her hand, and he threw it hard into the woods. She ran after it, crying already, having been ready to cry ever since she'd seen the boys. She tripped, on purpose surely, and lay on her stomach, crying in the sand. She remembered, still, the feel of the sand against
her cheek, her nose running, the sand abrasive. For a moment, wet and hot and sand were everything. Then there was Peter at the water's edge, climbing onto the Sunfish with one of the boys. There was the comic he'd brought, open and face down in the sand, and then the red and orange sail, small in the distance, a piece of candy out on the lake.

Davi remembered something else of that day at the beach, too. After Peter had disappeared from sight, the boat slipping past the cedars that followed the contour of a point south of the beach, Davi had been approached by a girl her own age. The girl had asked Davi what was wrong, and when Davi didn't answer, the girl had introduced herself. Davi would not have done the same, would certainly have watched from a distance another girl cry into the sand. She felt warm with embarrassment thinking of it now, of how she would not have made that introduction, could not have, yet how easy it had been for Julianna, who had marched over and offered quite simply her name and the question, "Are you okay?"

When Davi told Julianna her name, Julianna said what all children and most adults said: "That's a boy's name." To this, Davi had no answer, had never worked one out, standing instead frozen as she always did until the new acquaintance let her off the hook with a followup. Julianna's followup was to drop to her knees and compliment Davi's work in the sand. "It looks like a whole town," she said. "I just make castles."

When Davi had nothing to add, Julianna asked her to tell her what everything was, and Davi pointed and labeled: school, post office, store, houses, church . . .

"Can I help?" Julianna asked, and Davi crouched beside her and said that they should make a gas station, that the cars needed gas or no one could drive. Julianna quickly bored of the gas station with its crumbling sand-column pumps, and instead be-
gan a flower shop. She followed the flower shop with a dress shop and then a bakery.
Davi added a hospital and a funeral home. They were standing back admiring their city,
thinking of a name for it—Pleasantville, Julianna suggested; Walloon, thought Davi—
when the oldest of the Frisbee boys ran through it, feigning a stumbling fall and wiping
out everything except the funeral parlor. He stood, looking down at his feet in mock sur­
prise at the ruin, before running to pick up the Frisbee that had sailed over his head. Juli­
anna cried, and Davi looked for Peter. When Julianna saw that Davi wasn't crying, she
stopped and bravely said, "We can build it again tomorrow." She invited Davi to her fam­
ily's cottage, and the two walked toward the road, Davi hoping Peter would fear that
something bad had happened to her, that she had drowned while he was on the sailboat,
or that she had wandered into the woods across the road and gotten lost. She looked
back toward the beach one time as they climbed up the slope to the road's edge. She saw
Peter and the dark-eyed boy sailing by. The sun was low behind them, and she couldn't
see if Peter was looking toward the beach or not. She told herself that he was, and she
ran ahead down the road.

The cottage was lined in a warm amber knotty pine, banks of loose double-hung
windows always open, a lake breeze trickling through the screens. The furniture was
mismatched, comfortable, the color worn from the fabric. The kitchen countertops were
enamed metal, the dining room table a picnic table, the cups plastic. The house was
never empty, never quiet, with Julianna's two brothers, her sister and her parents playing
board games at the picnic table, going to and coming from the lake with fishing gear, wa­
ter skiing equipment, inner tubes and styrofoam floats. Even on a lazy afternoon, when
people were just sitting around reading, there was conversation, the oldest sister reading
aloud a fact from Life magazine, her mother commenting, a brother challenging. Or her father would read aloud an excerpt from the book he happened to be reading—Davi re-
membered a passage about a boy named Nick and a fishing line stretched to the breaking point—Julianna's father following his recitation with a reminiscence, an anecdote about a time the family had been canoeing on the Pigeon River, or he had been fishing as a boy on the Sturgeon.

Davi listened intently to their talk, something about it seeming unbelievable to her. She would later realize that she had felt as if they were on a stage, speaking in the exag-
ergated manner of actors trying to project to the last row of the balcony. Listening to their conversations somehow thrilled her, but also made her uneasy, the threat ever pre-
sent of one of them turning to her and asking, "What do you think, Davi?" as Julianna's father did one day after reading aloud The Velveteen Rabbit.

"What do you think made the velveteen rabbit real?" he asked Davi, as she sat on the oval rug with Julianna.

Davi looked at her knees.

"The boy loved him!" Julianna said.

"Let's give Davi a chance to answer," her father said. "How did it feel to the rabbit to be real?"

"It hurt," Davi said.

"Really? How did it hurt?"

"The horse told the rabbit that it would hurt."

"Oh, yeah, I guess he did. Do you think the horse was right?"

"Yes," Davi said.
"Didn't the horse say that it would only hurt sometimes?"

Davi was still looking at her knees, thinking of the velveteen rabbit sitting in the ferns, being teased by the real rabbits because it didn't have any hind legs. If she were the velveteen rabbit, she thought, she wouldn't have said anything to the real rabbits. She would have played dead. "They teased him," she said to her knees.

"Were there good things about being real?" Julianna's father asked.

Davi was quiet, and he waited, while Julianna squirmed on the floor, wanting to answer. Finally, Davi said, "He got to sleep in the bed with the boy."

"Was that worth being teased sometimes?"

"He almost got burned up," Davi said.

"But the fairy saved him, didn't she? The fairy made him a real rabbit, not just real to the boy, and then he could hop and run. Nobody teased him then, did they?"

"There's no such thing as fairies," Davi said, looking up at Julianna's father.

He nodded and smiled. "You're right," he said. "There's no such thing as fairies."

"The skin horse was real," Davi said, more animated now, "and he got burned up."

Julianna's father put his hands in the air, his mouth drawn tight, an exaggerated expression of deep thought. "That's true," he said. "But he would have burned anyway, wouldn't he? Whether he was real or not, he would have been burned with the other toys. At least he had a chance to be real before the end."

"But if he wasn't real, he wouldn't have felt it."

Julianna's father was about to say something more, when his wife's hands appeared on his shoulders. She was wearing a green two-piece swim suit, her hair still wet from the
lake. She whispered into her husband's ear, and his shoulders slipped from beneath her hands. "But, Davi, don't you think—"

"How about some cheese and crackers?" the woman interrupted, looking at Davi. Davi declined.

"Don't you ever get hungry?" Julianna's mother asked, and, when Davi shook her head, she said that she would make her a sandwich anyway, and asked did she like mustard or mayonnaise.

The spinnaker was luffing now, the broad bow of its fabric collapsing and filling, a slow, dramatic pulse. As Davi doused it and raised the genoa, she thought about Julianna's father, shrugging off his wife's hands, the green curve of the swim suit soft behind him, the woman's fingers so clear. She remembered the exact look on the man's face, the consternation, the rise to challenge. This was a vision that had recurred to her often, though she only now realized it, only now became aware that it was a fragment of the broken flow of thought that cycled through her mind in idle moments. As she realized this, she realized, too, that the vision had stuck with her for one reason. She had always wanted to know, even there in that room at seven years old, what Julianna's father had been about to say.

#

The first bird to appear was an albatross. Davi had passed the previous day west of Cuba, which had that night disappeared, hull down, to her stern. The bird hung in the air all afternoon. By evening it was joined by a few friends, seagulls, suspended aloft in the force-two breeze. They circled the boat until they'd grown indistinct in the darkness, then they dropped into the slight foam of Davi's wake.
Davi awoke at dawn the next morning, the stillness of her boat a knowledge already with her when she opened her eyes. She had known the night before, by the intermittentness of wind, that she was sailing into a calm. Her body had understood the stillness as she'd slept. So quiet was her boat, that dawn, that she could hear a delicate mist as it fell over the deck. There was not even the slap of slack sails that would mark a lolling or a whisper of wind. The sea would be flat, she knew, glassy, the horizon losing its depth, a polished steel sphere around her.

She loaded her toothbrush and put it into her mouth as she crawled up the companionway into the silver din of morning, already working the toothbrush, trying to remember a dream that had still been with her as she'd lain in her bunk listening to the misting rain. Her bare feet came down on the cool, wet fiberglass of the cockpit, and her toothbrush stopped. The morning was as she'd imagined, depthless and indistinct, the blistered silvering of an antique mirror. But among the motionless dawn were birds, hundreds of gulls, perfectly still flotsam on the flat sea around her boat.

All morning the birds sat on the water, reluctant to fly with no breeze to carry them. Now and then one would rise up, circle and settle back again, joined occasionally in the air by a friend or two. But mostly they sat, waiting as Davi was for the return of wind. The albatross from the day before was there, too, a bulky silhouette far out on the perimeter of the gulls.

The day passed, the excitement that afternoon being the one-time flopping of the jib, a moment's rogue breeze causing the sail's reluctant shift from starboard to port. Davi read in the cockpit, working slowly through Moby Dick. Three times she jumped overboard to cool off, the reaction of the gulls less each time, until they hardly moved at all,
one or two scampering out of the way at the last moment, the rest bobbing on the radiat-
ing ripples of Davi's dive. The sun set, and the birds faded into the darkness.

Nothing changed the following morning, nor that day. The birds once again
blended with the evening darkness, and the next day appeared, not the light of dawn, but
a dim reflection of light, the same depthless silver of the previous two days. A steady rain
fell that afternoon, and Davi retreated to the cabin, where she continued Moby Dick, now
in the thick of the whaling-industry section. She dozed often that day, and woke often in
the night, reading Melville's novel in pieces as she slept and woke and slept again. When
she stepped into the cockpit on that third still morning, the birds were gone. She saw an
approaching shimmer on the water, the jib lifted and filled, and the boat slid forward.
She saw the albatross, then, like a bearded old man, stooped in the air, slowly moving its
ancient wings until it caught the wind high above Davi. The sky had some blue in it now,
the gray mass dissolving into the high wisps of cirrostratus clouds. There would be fair
weather that day, and the return of wind.

The albatross diminished to a tiny speck that Davi lost and found and lost again.
The breeze picked up in earnest, and her boat glided on a flat water at five knots. She
was trimming the sails in hopes of reaching hull speed, when she saw in the spreaders of
the mast a small yellow bird that had remained behind. It was not a sea bird, but a song
bird.

"How did you get out here, little guy?" she asked.

Its mouth opened in reply. No sound, just a stutter of beak.

"How are you going to get home? You don't belong out here."
The wind gusted, and the bird fluffed itself into a yellow ball. It turned its head away from her, looking now off the bow, as if it had determined to hunker down and ride the spreader until land.

Midday, Davi brought some crackers up from the cabin. She crumbled one on the deck and whistled up to the yellow bird. "Come on down here," she said. "You have to eat."

The bird looked down, its head flicking from side to side, showing Davi first its right eye, then its left. Davi moved back to the cockpit and sat still. An hour passed, her attention drifted, and when she looked again, the bird was scissoring through a bit of cracker, having dropped down and flown back up with its prize without Davi's noticing.

"Why you little bugger," she said. "How did I miss you." The next time it dropped down to the deck, she was watching. It stood frozen, one eye on Davi. Then, too quick to see, it snatched up a bit of cracker, keeping its eye on Davi as it crunched it up in its beak. It took another crumb, and another. When the bird had finished its lunch, it flew back to its perch on the spreaders, preened itself and ruffled up into a ball. Davi went back into the cabin, returning with a plate and a water bottle. She set the plate on the deck, filled it with water and crumbled another cracker beside it.

The wind picked up to force three by afternoon, a steady wind, not gusty, and the bird leaned forward to balance against it. It flew down once more for a few crumbs of dinner, finishing it off with a ten-second bath—a whirr of beak and feathers—before returning to its perch, one leg disappearing into its plumage as it settled in for the night.

It was still dark when Davi crawled up to the cockpit the next morning. There was no moon, and she could not see the bird, nor the spreaders, though she occasionally saw
the spreaders defined, a black bar blotting out the stars. She could not see the bird, whom she'd nicknamed "Let," thinking as she lay awake that night that he looked like a tennis ball perched on the top string of a net. She thought she'd made him out against the stars several times, but he vanished as quickly, and she was never sure if he were really there, or if she saw only the twinkling of the stars. The stars were weak, or she would have had enough light to see the bird. The layer of stratus clouds had thickened. There would be a good wind that day, a squall maybe in a day or two. The stars faded further as the black turned to a deep blue, and there was Let, round as ever, head tucked deep into his feathers.

Davi sat in the front of the cockpit that morning as she waited for Let to drop down from the spreaders for his breakfast. She put out fresh water, and placed a wedge of orange beside the crackers. Let circled once, uncertain, just above Davi's head before plopping down next to the cracker. With one quick sideways glance, he snatched up a crumb and crunched away.

"Hi, cute boy," she said. "Do you like oranges?"

A quick profile from Let, as if he were listening, and then he was standing on the orange. The fruit's stickiness surprised him, and he marched in place on the deck, drying his feet. He nudged the orange wedge with the top of his beak, then he pulled off a string of pulp and swallowed it. Davi warned him of scurvy, as she put an orange wedge in her own mouth.

At lunch, she sat on the edge of the deck, close to the orange and cracker. Let landed a few feet away, and moved closer in halting hops, until he was beside her hip,
nibbling his cracker. He bathed, and when he fluffed himself dry, a fine mist fell onto the back of Davi's hand.

When she thought it was time for Let's dinner, Davi put a cracker in the palm of her hand and laid her knuckles on the deck. Let landed inches away, and in one hop he was there, biting off nips of cracker, a sharp tug with each bite. "You're a strong little guy, aren't you?" Davi whispered. "You must be, to make it all the way out here."

When Davi woke the next morning, she worried that Let would be gone. She'd already prepared herself for his absence, telling herself that by getting lost at sea, he had probably already sealed his fate. It would take a miracle for him to have the patience and wisdom to stay with the boat for the week—give or take—that it would take her to reach Lemon Bay, at the mouth of the Panama Canal. And Miracles are not to be expected. Even so, she thought often as she lay awake in bed, maybe . . . She checked her chart, and decided to veer west. It would be a course change only of a few degrees that would bring her within sight of the isthmus where Honduras and Nicaragua met. He can choose his citizenship, she thought. A warm pull in her chest, then, and she dismissed the hope. Still, she would make the course-change. She fiddled around in the cabin for a few minutes before going topside. She managed to check the wind and reset the self-steering vane before she looked up at the spreaders, as if Let were no more than another item on the list of her diagnostic routine each morning—the wind, the rudder, the trim of sail, the Let in the spreaders. But Let was not in the spreaders. Let was gone.

After a breakfast of bread and half an orange, Davi read. She did not take away the bird-bath plate, however, nor the half cracker that lay, one edge ragged, beside the plate. She reread sentences and paragraphs. She skipped two pages, and never realized
the omission. She looked again and again at the empty spreaders, and told herself again
and again not to be so silly. The stratus clouds that had been thickening were undercut by
cirrus, a bank of cumulonimbus on the horizon ahead. The air grew heavy and warm,
and Davi retreated into the still-cool cabin for an hour, until the noon sun heated it
warmer than the open air. She would tie a tarp to the boom, she decided, rig up a bimini
to give herself shade in the cockpit. She dug a blue tarp from a locker, and brought it
topside. She was lashing lines to the corner eyelets when a quick shadow passed over the
tarp that lay draped over her knees. She looked up to see Let, landing again on the port
spreader.

For five minutes he complained. Davi listened, and she sympathized, though she
didn't let on to the bird. "You're stuck with me for awhile, Let," she said. "Get over it,
little guy."

Let continued to eat from Davi's hand. He stayed often in the cockpit, avoiding the
wind, hopping from the benches to the floor, standing on the winches. He continued to
complain, too, chiding Davi for her slowness finding land. When he was quiet for too
long, Davi would goad him, and he would start up again. And when he was particularly
frustrated, he would fly to the spreaders and lean stoically into the wind, a fluffy yellow
martyr.

With three days until landfall—by Davi's calculations, assuming no drastic change
of weather—Let took to riding on Davi's shoulder. He chattered softly into her ear, clicks
and scratches and squeaky whispers of encouragement. They had a good wind that day,
the storm that had been building having passed to the south, and the boat glided over a
smooth swell, surging beneath them like a galloping horse, Davi the knight on that horse,
Davi the hero. One hundred sixty miles from noon that day to noon the next. Another
day of reaching and another hundred-fifty-plus miles, Let's coaxing whispers in Davi's ear,
or his celebratory shouts from the spreaders. He knew. Davi suspected that he knew the
distance more accurately than she.

They saw land the following evening, the gray line of mainland, starboard, thirty
degrees off her bow. The day had been long for Davi, while also much too short. She
wished that she had not changed her course, that she had instead continued in open water
to Panama, Let aboard as her mascot—no, she admitted, as her companion.

Let would have flown off immediately upon seeing land, she thought, had it not
been so late in the day. There had only been just enough of dusk for them to see the thin
smudge of cloud that marked land, and then the dark gray line beneath. She would sail
parallel to the coast that night, and Let would leave at dawn. She would set an alarm,
wake before sunup and say goodbye.

She had not yet used the alarm, however, and somewhere she went wrong. She did
not pull a knob, or did not push one, did not test that the bell worked, or did not hear it in
her sleep. She opened her eyes to a low beam of sunlight through the port windows, not
more than an hour after sunup, and she jumped from her bunk and scrambled up the
companionway steps. Let was not in the spreaders. She searched the sky in the direction
of shore, a vain hope of spotting the tiny dot of her friend as he flew to his new home,
but she found no dot. She descended the companionway steps reluctantly, put water on
the stove for a bowl of oatmeal, and filled Alex' dish. The water boiled. The kettle
squealed, and she poured some over her dry oats and took them into the cockpit, where
she pulled her knees to her chest and stirred the steaming oatmeal. As she was lifting the
first spoonful to her mouth, a yellow feather blew itself against the dollop of oatmeal on her spoon. It stuck there, the soft down at its base fluttering in the breeze. She looked up, and another feather flew past her ear. A third drifted into the nape of her neck, where it lay in the hollow there, as in the eddy at the bend of a river. A fourth caught in her eyelash, broke free and paused for a moment to tickle her ear before trailing off behind the boat. She thought then that she must be dreaming, that the air would fill with feathers, a poetic goodbye from a magical bird. Another feather drifted toward her, and she saw that it was not coming from the sky. Yet another, and she saw that it lifted off from the deck at the base of the mast.

She set the bowl of oatmeal on the bench, dropped her feet to the cabin floor and worked her way up the starboard lifeline to the bow, and there she found the few feathers that were the remains of Let, glued to the fiberglass by dabs of blood and gore, a single fingerprint left behind, the rose of Alex' paw, stamped like a calling card into a smear of Let's blood.

For half an hour, Davi tore apart the cabin. She pulled off the engine housing, ripped her gear from the storage lockers beneath the bunks, opened the floor over the bilges, the sound of Alex scurrying away when she was close. "It's a boat, you little fucker," she told him. "You can't hide forever." She wondered if that were true, if she really could flush him out. She didn't have to wonder for long, however, for there he was, standing in a corner, back arched, a bottle-brush tail—his last stand.

She picked up a wrench. She raised it, and the cat braced itself, a resigned moan as it dipped its head in preparation for the blow. If it had run, she would surely have thrown the wrench. But it didn't run. She would have liked to believe that it was calling her
bluff, but she knew that this was absurd. It was simply waiting to be hit with the wrench.

"I liked that bird," she said. "We were doing a really good thing." She tossed the wrench into the sink and climbed out of the cabin, Alex bolting beneath her feet, back into the engine compartment.
"Let me guess," Jean said, as she guided Mary's head to the sink. "Just a trim. Take off the split ends."

"I don't know," Mary said. The sink felt cool on the back of her neck. "What would you do if I let you have your way?"

"Don't tease me, Mary."

"I have to be at the thrift shop at ten."

"You let me have these two hours, and I'll change your life," Jean said, rinsing Mary's hair, her hunched left shoulder curved over Mary's reclined head.

"I'm not sure if I'm willing to go blond, though."

"Trust me, I've got the perfect color," Jean said. She finished her rinse and held a box above Mary's eyes. It wasn't the platinum blond she'd shown Mary the last time, but something closer to the flaxen that tinted her light gray hair. "It's like your hair now. Only younger."

"Why do we worry so much about growing old, Jean?"

"Because this world has a bad habit of breeding younger women, Mar. I keep hoping it's just a phase, but they keep on coming."

"There must be more to it than that."

"Yeah, there's the men who can't stop chasing them."
Mary nodded.

"But then there are those rare men who go for older women," Jean said, her fingers pausing as she massaged conditioner into Mary's hair.

Mary rolled her eyes up to look at Jean. "What do you mean by that?"

"I'm just saying. And as long as I'm saying, I'll say that I don't make a habit of listening to blue haired old gossips, either."

"Mrs. Kloosterman."

"I don't listen to them. But some people in this very small town do."

"Oh, she's ridiculous. She saw me having lunch with another volunteer. Big deal."

"Like I say, I don't pay attention, and I don't pass along. It's just a small town and some people don't have nearly enough to do." She raised the back of Mary's chair to a sitting position. "Now, I'm only going to do this if you let me go all the way and match it with a little makeup. Nothing heavy."

"I'm in your hands, Jean."

"Karl won't be able to keep his hands away from you when I'm done."

"Why, is there gravy in that conditioner?"

"You know, that's not a bad idea. I might weave a couple beer-can cozies in my own hair."

#

Bill wasn't at the thrift shop when Mary arrived. It was five minutes to ten. She set a white box of doughnuts and two Styrofoam cups of coffee on the break table. No one had brought in doughnuts since Bill's first morning shift a month earlier. She flipped on the lights, unlocked the front door, and walked into the dressing room to look at herself in
the mirror. Her makeup was not as subtle as Jean had promised. It was Jean's makeup on Mary's face. She felt she should be chewing gum. She pulled a tissue from her purse and blotted her lips. A little better. She could wash the makeup off easily enough, but her hair— Why? How many years had it taken her to finally let herself go gray? She swiveled her head left and right, peeking out of the corners of her eyes at her blond curls. Jean had denied that they were curls. Just a little body, she'd said. Wedding hair, Mary thought. She stepped back, then forward. She smiled, a quavering embarrassed smile, the smile of a woman whose dance partner is stepping on her feet. "Oh, what did you do to me, Jean?" she asked of the mirror. Then, looking into her own eyes, "You old fool."

The bell above the front door rang, and Mary straightened her blouse, smoothed her hands down her hips, as if she might straighten away the curls in her hair, smooth the makeup off her face. She took a breath and stepped boldly from the dressing room. She'd make a joke of it. Tell Bill that she'd let Jean do it on a dare, that she didn't know Jean would go that far.

But it was not Bill. The man who'd come into the store was the owner of the booth at the flea market, in for his Monday morning perusal.

"Hello," Mary said, perfunctorily, as she stepped behind the sales counter, feeling the heat in her face of a deep blush.

The man made the slightest motion of his head and began a slow walk around the perimeter of the store. "Any new electronics?" he asked, his back to Mary, the ashen strands of his hair hanging wet across the back of his scalp.

"I don't think so," she said, adding flatly, "You know where we keep them."
He nodded, and though he didn't turn around, Mary thought he was smiling. "Silver?" he asked.

"A wedding cake knife."

"Put it on the counter."

He continued his round of the store, picking up an antique safety razor, a marble chess set, a pair of baby shoes, and a scientific calculator. He set them on the sales counter and walked away as Mary began punching prices into the cash register. He returned with a girl's confirmation dress, white lace and a yellow ribbon around the waist. Mary looked for a tag, found none and rang up the three dollars that was their standard price for a dress.

"Nine thirty-five," she said.

He put nine crumpled one-dollar bills onto the counter, and dug into his pocket for change, picking lint out of a palmful of coins, his fingers black with grease. He pushed aside the quarters, and laid down one dime and then another. He dropped a nickel beside the dimes, and he counted out ten pennies, laying them down one at a time and sliding them across the counter.

Mary sighed as the pennies made their slow journey from his hand, down and over to the rest of the coins. He paused at the sound, looked at her with no expression, and continued. When all ten had reached their destination, she pushed his bagged purchases toward him and waited for him to leave.

He stopped twice on his way to the door.

Another half hour passed before Mary pulled a doughnut from the box and pealed the lid off her coffee, which had cooled to an unappetizing tepid. She took two small
bites of her doughnut and left it on a napkin next to the cooling coffee. She returned to
the mirror, glanced again at her reflection, and decided it best not to look again. Then
she found herself at the front window, looking up the street. When she realized what she
was doing, she took out the vacuum cleaner and swept the sales floor. She had just put it
away when the bell over the door rang again.

Bill shouldered through the door, pushing his arm into the sleeve of his sport coat.
"I'm sorry," he told Mary, "I overslept. I never do that."

His eyes were bloodshot, dark and puffy. He hadn't shaved in days. "Don't worry,"
Mary said. "We've had all of one customer. Monday mornings are always slow." She
looked down as she spoke, and she looked to her side, past him toward the street, her new
face a moving target.

"Still, you shouldn't have to be here alone."

"There's coffee," she said, and she turned toward the back room, leading him easier
than facing him. "It'll be cold, but I can put it in the microwave for you." She poured his
coffee into a ceramic mug and put it in the microwave. When she handed the heated
mug to him, he was looking at remains of the doughnut she'd eaten. It sat on a napkin, a
plain fried ring, crumbs flaking off where she'd bitten into it. "Here you go," she said,
and she slid a doughnut onto a napkin.

"Angel cream?" he asked, and Mary nodded. "I'm sorry I wasn't here."

"That's okay. If you want to just sit back here, maybe take a nap, I'm fine out front
alone."

"I'll be all right once I get some coffee in me."
The bell above the door rang, and Mary watched the sales floor while a woman browsed the books. A few more customers came, and Mary stayed on the floor. When the customers had gone, Bill came sleepily out from the back. "I'm sorry," he said. "We had a rough night last night. Jane had a bad spell." He had gone to Timberly Acres in the afternoon, and his wife had accosted him over dinner. "Something about me and her father," he said. "She thought I had somehow caused his death, that I'd killed him for his money. Her dad died when she was twelve. I don't know what memory she's clinging to, if there's any ground there at all. Some thing from her childhood? Some harbored resentment of me?"

"You'll probably never know," Mary said.

"Probably not."

"It's not really her saying that, you know."

"I know. That's the hardest part."

Bill looked blankly out the window, and when he turned back to Mary, she could see that he'd pulled away from the night before. "But what am I going on about? You have your hardships. We all do."

"That doesn't make them any easier."

"Really? I think it does. It can."

"I suppose."

"Commiseration might not be an answer, but it sure feels good while it lasts."

"While it lasts," Mary agreed, seeing as she spoke that Bill was looking at her hair.

"It looks good," he said.
Her hand went to her head. "Oh, I wish you hadn't reminded me. Jean. She's been begging to make me over for months."

"Well, you look good," he said, adding quickly, "You looked good before, too."

"That's a fine political response."

"You know, I've seen Jean," he said, studying her. "I think she made you over as herself."

"How would you describe this hair?" Mary asked.

"Platinum curls?"

"That's just about what I thought when I saw it. How would you feel about lunch with a platinum blond?"

"You might be a little too hot for Rose's with that hair."

Mary laughed, but she thought seriously of Mrs. Kloosterman, and what would be said if she showed up escorted by Bill, with her new makeover. She told herself that it was the avoidance of this gossip that prompted her suggestion of Bill's house as an alternative. She tried to maintain her laughing tone as she spoke, but despite her best efforts, the words, "How about your place?" came out in all seriousness, four hot, dry words, so perfectly pitched from the mouth of this platinum blond that no passerby would ever confuse the offer for anything less than what it was.

"Yes," Bill said. "Okay."

They had two hours to work together before the afternoon shift would arrive, and they each spent those hours curiously busy with their own tasks, Mary in the back room pricing donations and ironing clothes, Bill on the sales floor, dusting the shelves and vacuuming the carpet that Mary had already vacuumed earlier that morning. They bumped
into each other once as Bill was backing up with the vacuum cleaner, Mary behind him hanging up some freshly ironed shirts, and they bumped into each other again, as Bill leaned over the garbage can, emptying the dust bag from the vacuum cleaner, Mary reaching past him to unplug the iron.

The afternoon volunteers were due at any minute, when Bill hung on the wall near Mary the feather duster he'd been using. "I have to stop at Timberly on the way home," he said.

"Sure, of course," she said, conscious that her hand had begun to shake. "Maybe we should make it another time."

"No, I'd like you to come with me."

"Are you sure?"

"Please. You don't have to come in. I'd just like the company on the drive."

The deadbolt on the back door turned, and Mary stepped away from Bill. She was folding up the ironing board when Mrs. Kloosterman walked in.

"I thought it was Cindy today," Mary said.

"She couldn't get a sitter," Mrs. Kloosterman said, looking at Bill.

"Well, we haven't been busy."

Mrs. Kloosterman nodded, looking at Mary for the first time, and Mary felt herself held by the woman's look, as if Mrs. Kloosterman had reached out and grabbed her under the chin to hold her still, while she sized up her makeover. She walked onto the sales floor without comment. The second volunteer arrived, and Bill and Mary slipped together out the back door.
CHAPTER FOURTEEN

August 12, 1987

09° 20' 60'' N, 79° 51' 17'' W

Colon, Panama, at the mouth of the Panama Canal

Off the coast of Nicaragua, Davi caught a steady wind from the northeast. She raised her one hundred-fifty-percent genoa and in three days raced five hundred miles, sleeping under full sail, to Lemon Bay and the Panama Canal.

She dropped anchor in the waterfront at Colon in the early afternoon, and rowed to shore in her dinghy, as would become her custom away from the marina docks of north America. At the marina office, she checked in with the race organizers, and picked up her mail—a poster tube filled with charts of the Pacific that she'd mailed to herself before leaving Erie, and a letter from Peter. She went from there to the market, where she spent the day buying provisions for the next two legs of her trip—from Panama to Malpelo Island, which had no permanent town from which to buy supplies, and from Malpelo to Clipperton Island, where she would resupply for the longest leg of her journey, across the south Pacific to Fiji.

A group of boys surrounded her in the market, and she offered them a dollar each to carry her food and water. She had not been in a foreign market since she'd returned to the states, and, though she had visited dozens in her year on Wanderlust, the experience brought back only memories of Cambodia, of going to the market with Chanthavy. As she stood in her sunglasses and hat, head and shoulders taller than the boys around her, placing one-dollar bills into their open palms, she wished that she hadn't made the offer,
that she had instead made alone the half-dozen trips it would have taken her to carry
supplies from the market to the dinghy and across the water to her boat.

The children fanned ahead of her, running from booth to booth, holding fruits and
breads in their hands, laughing and shouting back at her. They were full of energy, ex­
cited at this unexpected mission, this exotic lady sailor. They were boys, acting how boys
should act. These were not the street children from the market in Siem Reap. When
these boys disappeared around corners, they quickly reappeared. Davi had waited for the
return of the youngest boy who'd disappeared from the market in Siem Reap, the little
fish who went missing from that stunned school, poisoned by the fumes of the glue they
inhaled. She had not searched for him, however. Nor had she asked about him, not even
of Chanthavy. She had not asked about any of those boys, though she suspected that
Chanthavy could tell her something, could help her to understand, if only on the most
pragmatic level, the condition of those boys, and the community's apparent lack of action
to help them. She had not searched for the little boy, nor had anyone else even seemed to
notice his disappearance, though they must have. Neither did she see any stirring in the
community when the second boy disappeared from the group, nor when the third, the six
boys now three, huddled always so close, as if in the absence of their minds—gone to the
fumes of the glue—they operated only on a tactile level, through the touch of bare arms
and legs. They huddled tighter when they were only three, Davi thought, a tiny school of
fish, each hoping to find the center, the risk of being picked off too great on the periph­
ery.

These boys in Panama returned, however, and they loaded Davi's groceries into two
wooden skiffs and rowed them to her boat, all of them curious to peek into the boat's
cabin. "Go ahead," she said, and she waved her hand toward the companionway. When
they hesitated, she said, "Vamos," and she led the way down. After a few minutes of
them opening cupboards, pulling things from storage, and creating a general din in the
cabin, she shooed them out. "Andale!" she shouted, and the children laughed and jostled
each other up the steps. "Andale!" she called again. "Arriba!" As they pushed off in
their skiffs, Davi shouted after them, "Go home. Kiss your mothers. Stay out of trouble!"
She watched them until they were back on shore and walking together up the hill toward
the market. Then she rowed back to the marina office and arranged passage through the
canal for the following morning.

She spent the evening washing clothes and gear, laying them to dry on her cabin
deck, and stowing her new provisions below. She sifted through her new charts, sorting
them geographically from nearest to farthest, and by scale from smallest to largest. She
repacked the gear that she'd laid out to dry, and before turning into her bunk, she poured
out a bowl of food for Alex. Sometime late in the night, she heard the crunching of his
dry food, the kibble popping daintily between his teeth. "I don't know how many lives
you have left," she whispered. Alex answered with one long rumble, not a warning this
time, but definitely a purr, a single stroke of the motor.

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Davi motored fearfully into the first lock, hoping she was doing the right thing, pan­
icky about the freighter that slid in and moored just behind her. The water in the cham­
ber rose, and when it had nearly equaled the level of the next chamber, the massive door
ahead swung slowly open, a rush of water flowed in through the widening channel and
Davi's boat pulled back on its mooring lines. When the water level reached equilibrium,
she and the freighter moved into the next lock. In this way she would drift from chamber to chamber for ten hours while they filled and drained and filled and carried her boat fifty miles across the peninsula, and eighty-five feet up to the lip of the Pacific.

When she had completed the first set of locks, and motored through Gatun Lake to tie up in the first chamber of the second set, she opened Peter's letter.

Dear Davi,

I know I told you I wouldn't write you in Panama, but I couldn't resist such a perfect setting. Are you going through the canal now? How does it feel being locked into those locks? It must be difficult. Nowhere to run. I don't mean to be cruel. I don't. But you can't know what it's like to have you as a sister. You're just so stubbornly moving all the time. My problem is not with what you do with your motion, Davi—you do wonderful things, perfectly amazing things. I only sometimes wonder why you move so much. I wish you would sit still, if only once in a while. I wanted so much for you to relax and simply be with me while you were here, Davi. Not only for my sake, but for your own, just to be. It's really not so bad.

I'm sorry. I know I'm being aggressive, but I'm angry. Not at you. At Beth. I liked her. I still like her, but she's stealing from me, Davi. She's stealing food. I wish she would just ask. What does she want with Poptarts and pudding anyway? Maybe she has kids at home. I don't know what to do about it. I've liked having her here so much. I've been watching her, but I haven't caught her in the act. She has a key, and I think she's been sneaking by while I'm on my walks. It's frightening to think about. What if I stake the place out? Hide in the closet and jump out to confront her? I couldn't stop her. She
might be capable of anything. The two of us alone, and she worried about her job, the police. No thank you. I'm going to have to navigate carefully. If she even suspects I know, what might she do? She fixes my meds, Davi. And I like her. I don't want to lose that. For now, I'll buy a reprieve, escape to Walloon Lake again, to childhood.

Grandma has another task for us now, two neat arrangements of stationery and pencils again on the dining room table. We are to write letters to Mom and Dad. I have these letters here with me. They were in the same scrapbook as the brochure for the play. Your letter is four sentences.

Dear Mommy and Dad,

Peter and I love it here. The lake is warm and we swim every day. We found a haunted hotel and Grandpa sleeps a lot.

Love,

Davi

P.S. There is a woman next door who is an adult but she talks to an imaginary friend!

My letter is longer, and boring. I won't quote it. It talks about what we do everyday. Our routine. It doesn't mention the hotel, or the boy with the sailboat and the dark eyes. It is a completely unremarkable letter in every way except one. Toward the end, I write, "I wish Davi wouldn't bother me so much. Why does she always have to be with me? It's not fair." I remember cupping my hand over the page as I wrote that, so that you wouldn't see. I folded the paper and sealed the envelope right away, because I didn't want Grandma to see, either. But now, here my letter is, opened and taped into Grandma's scrapbook. It's amazing how, after all these years, I still felt the heat rise in my cheeks.
when I saw it again. One might argue that my betrayal was a small matter, as was Grandma's ploy to find out what was really on our minds that summer. Betrayal is not a thing measured in absolute terms, though. It is conditional, and in relation to your complete trust and utter dependence, this was no small matter. It was not unnatural, however, and this summer would probably have marked a healthy first few stumbling steps of adulthood for me. Painful for you, but inevitable, and necessary. That all may have been the case had the trajectory continued, my divergence from playmate to the parental figure I'd pretended toward on the beach. The trajectory didn't continue, though, did it? I went away to summer camp, and awkward child that I was, I didn't fit in, and I spent the next half dozen years of awkward adolescence taking my frustration out on you. Then we both grew up, and now it's water under the bridge. Normal childhood stuff. That's the story, isn't it? The bullet-point reality that we've all grown to accept. There is some truth there, Davi, but you and I know that there's more to the reality, and that we never really came back together, not fully. We couldn't, because we are separated by the elephant in the room, and all that we see of each other follows the contour of that round beast. He is the secret, and we draw his outline again and again, some part of it every time we see each other.

I knew the placement of everything in my box of treasures from the hotel stairs. I knew as soon as I opened it that you'd been into it. I took it from under the bed and I tucked it between two books on the bookshelf in the family room. I pinched a piece of paper in the lid, and when I found that scrap on the carpet beneath the shelf, I hid the box again. Where? You know, because you found it again. In the coffin from our play. Then I saw you on a rainy afternoon, the day of the twelfth step. You were in a red rain
parka, standing in the shelter of a tree by the road. I saw you slip behind the tree as I came out of the hotel, a bit of cellophane in my pocket. I thought if I scolded you, I would only be encouraging you. I thought that that's what you would want, any kind of attention from me, and I didn't want to give you the satisfaction. I walked home without looking back, even though I knew you were behind me, close enough for me to hear the tapping of the rain on your parka. At Grandma and Grandpa's, I locked myself in the bathroom and pulled from my pocket the bit of cellophane that I'd found on the twelfth step. It was an inch or so square, slippery, red with a green picture, the profile of what I thought was a Spartan soldier.

I spent that evening with Grandma's encyclopedias, looking up every subject heading I could think of that might talk about the Spartans. Imagine, Davi. There I was, flipping through Sparta, Greece, Rome, Chariot, Gladiator. I wanted to be prepared. I sorted out the Peloponnesian War from the Corinthian War. I learned that the Spartan state was ruled always by two kings, one descending from the Agiad family, and the other from Eurypontids. In my mind, the giver of gifts, the boy with the dark eyes, became Agiad. I liked the sound of it better than Eurypontids. I wasn't even sure how to pronounce Eurypontids. But Agiad. That was easy. Fluid. In my mind, Michelangelo's David. I know now, of course, that it was not a Spartan gladiator on that piece of cellophane. I know that it had been cut from a sealed package, the contents removed. In my journey through the encyclopedia, however, the word "colosseum" was as close as I came to "condom."

That twelfth step was the second from the top, and for three days I went to the hotel with a picture of David in my pocket, guiltily clipped from Grandma's encyclopedia. I
was hoping to find there some last thing to trade with, but when nothing appeared, I left
the picture. For two weeks, I went back everyday, and everyday the picture sat unmoved.
I grew from hopeful to anxious to despondent. Grandma thought I was coming down
with a cold, and she wrapped me in an afghan on the davenport, where she fed me hot
chocolate and taught me to play cribbage. You were good to me, too, Davi. While
Grandma and I played cribbage, you played Old Maid opposite a stuffed Curious
George, and when Grandma was doing other things, I was secretly grateful to play Old
Maid with you. It was so easy. I always knew what card to play. I knew what card you
would play. Grandma told me I didn't have to play with you if I didn't want to. I now
know that she said that because she'd read my letter. How could I not play with you,
though? How could I resist curling back into that world where Curious George gave us
just the cards we needed, where Mom and Dad would come back healed from the Missis­
sippi River?

I kept one eye on the lake for those two weeks, watching for the boys in the Sunfish,
but they didn't appear. Maybe they had gone home for the summer, back downstate, or
wherever they came from. All I could think was that I had come one step away from
something important. I didn't know what it was, but I was heartbroken over it, heartbro-
ken over not discovering whatever it was. It was the first time in my life that desire turned
to regret. If only I would have done this, said that. If only. How many times since have I
wrung myself out with similar aching retrospections? How many times, when love has
gone wrong, when a lecturing position has passed me by, when a gallery has mailed me a
form rejection? And how many times have I realized six months later, or a year, that I
had dodged a bullet? That the man with the smile is a rake, that the faculty is embattled
against the administration, that the gallery that I'd thought out of reach took my photos a week after a lesser one turned me down? Twice, I've persisted when I should have moved on. Twice I was hit with a bullet. The first time was that summer. But not yet. First, I would play Old Maid with you, lose myself again in our childhood, put on another play.

In this play, the setting was a cabin in the woods. We decorated the twin bedroom with a cardboard log pile, a fire made of construction paper laid in the footwell of the desk. We would put on "Three Knocks," our favorite ghost story, in which the babysitter disobeys the parents' warning about going outside of the cabin after dark. We again collect a quarter each from Grandma and Grandpa. They sit on the edge of one of the beds. We sit on the floor in front of the fire, talking about how cold it is. How nice the fire feels. You drop one of the cardboard logs behind the paper fire under the desk. We make brrr-ing noises. We rub our hands together. You drop in another log, and another. At the last log, we hesitate. "It's only midnight," you say. "We have to make the fire last all night."

"Don't worry," I tell you. I'm the babysitter, and I've found my way again into a dress, for, as I told you, everybody knows that babysitters are girls. "I'll go out to the woodpile and get some more logs," I say, stretching and yawning to show the audience how casually unconcerned I am.

"But you can't," you say, frightened. "Mom and Dad said not to go outside after dark, no matter what."

"Oh, they're just worry warts," I say. "I'll be right back." I don't see the trouble coming, as you do, you who have lived in that cabin, you who have heard the sounds in the night.
"Don't go," you say. "Something bad will happen."

I laugh and tousle your hair. "If it makes you feel better," I tell you, "you can lock
the door behind me. When I come back, I'll knock three times, and that way, you'll know
that it's me, and you can let me in."

When I exit the bedroom, you sit shivering in front of the fire, saying things like, "I
wonder where she is?" and "It sure is taking her a long time. The woodpile is just around
the side of the house." You wonder if I could have gotten lost in the dark. You wonder if
I'll be back before dawn. You wonder if you should call someone and tell them I've left.
You wonder if you should go upstairs and wake up Grandma and Grandpa. Nobody
would have found me, though, Davi. I was in a rowboat, paddling my way in the dark,
back to the hotel. I'm ahead of myself, though, conflating things with the following night.
Let's stick to the play. Now I am only outside the bedroom door, tying around my head
the yarn that will hold in place the cardboard axe.

We put on the play twice, because you, too, wanted to be the babysitter, and rap
those three slow knocks on the door, waiting to make your entrance, the axe embedded in
the side of your head. Knock . . . knock . . . knock . . . Then a pause, and then again,
scraping your knuckles along the surface, dragging as you pounded. Knock . . . knock . . .
knock . . . I could see the fear in your eyes, when I finally opened the door. I knew that if
I screamed, as the script called for, you'd scream, too. So I turned, instead, to Grandma
and Grandpa and calmly said, "The End." You stood frozen, trying to see the handle of
the axe, the whites of your eyes flashing, as I slipped the yarn from your head, releasing
you.
You were afraid the next day, also, when I took you with me back to the hotel. I hadn't taken you in weeks, and when we arrived, you didn't want to come in. You stood near the kitchen door, while I walked up the steps. You told me to hurry. You knew why I was there.

I saw as I neared the top of the staircase that my picture of Michelangelo's David was gone. I saw no sign of a trade, however, no trinket left in its place. A squirrel must have gotten it, I thought, or a rat, taking it to shred for a nest. Maybe the boy with the dark eyes had come, but the picture had already been gone! Maybe he thought that I had given up. That I had chickened out. Maybe he thought— Then I saw the chip of sandstone on the thirteenth step, the top of the staircase, and, my heart pounding in my ears, I read the two words scrawled there. "Midnight tonight."

Oh, the wait for that night, Davi. It was a Saturday, and Grandma was excited about a Disney movie on TV. She popped popcorn, and we watched Witch Mountain until it ended at ten o'clock. I yawned and said how tired I was and how we should get to bed. But you were too excited from the movie. You wanted to play Witch Mountain, and you started building a fort behind the davenport. We didn't get to bed until eleven, and Grandma sat on the edge of your bed talking with you about the movie. "When I grow up," you told her. "I'm going to go to Witch Mountain."

"When you grow up," Grandma said, "you'll go as far as you want."

All the way around the world. I bet she didn't think that. As Grandma tried to include me in the conversation, I rolled over and grunted single word answers. Goodnight? I kept thinking. Get out. Go to bed already. Hello? Goodbye. Ages later, she clicked out
the light, closed the door, and left us in the glow of the smiley face night light that stood
on the dresser in the corner of the room.

My impatience, then, became focused on the clock, a backlit electric alarm clock
beside the bed, the rolodex minute digits creeping toward the tipping point, hanging there
for an excruciating time before dropping into the eternal space of the next minute.

Eleven o' one became eleven o' two. Then, for what seemed ages, the soft hum of internal
gears, the hesitation of the next number on the precipice, and then finally the drop.
Eleven o' three. I thought of the first day I saw the boy, how I felt him watching me on
the beach, and then the Frisbee coming my way, and my wanting yet dreading to throw it
back to him. Eleven o' four. I thought of the space between his toes and mine in the
shallow well of the sunfish's hull. How slowly our boat had slid through the water that
day. Eleven o' five. I pictured him scouring his bedroom, his basement, the beach, looking
for the perfect gift to exchange. Eleven o' six. I thought of his knees, and how easy it
would have been in the boat to brush one with my own. Eleven o' seven. I thought of the
white stripe down the sides of his swim shorts. Eleven o' eight. I counted his ribs. Eleven
o' nine. I drew in my mind the contour of his shoulders. Eleven ten. I drew his shoulders
again. Eleven Eleven. I made a wish. Courage. At eleven fifteen, I slid from between
my sheets and pulled from under the bed the clothes that I had stashed there that
afternoon, knowing that I wouldn't want to open and close dresser drawers with you in
the bed beside mine.

I was just opening the sliding glass door that faced the lake, when I saw that you
were watching me. I put my finger to my lips, and backed out of the room, shaking my
head, my eyes locked on yours. I am in charge, I told you, without a word. Don't be
afraid, it's just me in the coffin beneath the blood and the makeup. Don't scream, the axe
is only cardboard, and you tied it around your own head. Close your eyes, I willed that
night as I slid shut the glass door. Close your eyes, and go back to sleep.

As ever,

Peter

Davi closed the letter. She'd hardly noticed that since Gatun Lake, floating through
the same locks as she, was a small, coastal cruise ship, its bow rising four stories above her
stern. Leaning over the railing, a group of children shouted down to her, "El gato!
Gato!" Davi looked over the top of her transom, seeing no sign of Alex on deck. "Gato!"
the children yelled.

"No gato!" Davi shouted up to the children.

"Gato!" they shouted back. "Gato! Gato!"

"Gatun?"

"Gato!"

Davi went belowdecks, anxious and hoping the children would be gone when she
came back to motor the boat into the next lock. She looked through the engine com­
partment vent. Alex' eyes shined back at her. She squatted and made a kissing noise at
him, scratching with a fingernail on the teak floor. "You should come out," she said. "I'm
going to start the engine again soon." Alex meowed. "Where do you go, boy? Where do
you go when I start the engine?" His eyes blinked out, and she couldn't tell if he'd closed
them, or if he'd retreated further into the engine compartment. She scratched the
wooden floor again, hoping he'd return and, just then, as her fingernail scraped the wood,
she remembered the wooden ornament on Peter's Christmas tree, her ornament, the little drummer boy, the texture of the pine. She didn't remember turning the ornament in her hand, but she must have, for she remembered the unsanded feel of it. And she remembered now seeing the unpainted back, and the word there, seared into the wood with the tip of a wood-burning stylus, spelled out in capital letters, not her name, but, PETER.

Why was she so sure it had been hers? Even now, knowing that it wasn't, it seemed as if it should be. It was a belief she'd held so long. She'd always remembered the little drummer boy as hers.

She wished Alex would come back. She wanted him to come out of hiding, wanted to carry him on deck in her arms, and show him to the children. "Se llama Alex!" she wanted to shout to them. But Alex was gone, and when she returned to the cockpit, the children were also gone. The doors to the next lock were opening, and her boat had begun to ease back on its mooring lines as the water from the next lock rushed into her own.

Davi thought again of the drummer boy, and with this thought came the remembrance of Peter that night at their grandparents' house, the remembrance of feigning sleep while he dressed. She knew he was going to meet that boy—she had some idea why, though it was a child's idea—and she knew that she didn't like the boy. Why hadn't he come to meet her? Why hadn't Peter introduced him? In her mind, it had been that boy who had caused Peter to take the thing from her hand that day on the beach, to throw it into the woods, to send her crying after it. It was that boy who had taken Peter away from her. And now, when he had just come back to her, it was that boy who was taking Peter away again, pulling him from their bedroom into the night. Don't do it, his look
had told her, as he slipped from the room, don't betray me. So began his trip to summer camp, and for the next two weeks, Davi was all but forgotten.

The last gate of the canal swung slowly open and Davi climbed to the bow, releasing that line from the wall, then the stern line, leaving only the spring line, the tail in her hand, ready to cast off. In the widening slit of the lock, she saw the Pacific Ocean, golden in the sunset. She saw also, nearly lost in that sparkling glow, the boat with the crimson sail, which she realized had traveled the canal one lock ahead of her. She snatched up her binoculars, put them to her eyes and read painted on the boat's stern, *Ex Culpa*. Then she saw above the name, looking back toward her, the captain of the boat, a black silhouette made thin against the sunset, arms folded, one foot on the port cockpit bench, the line of a hat brim parallel with the horizon. He's going to sail through the night, she realized, and though she had planned to anchor on the coast for the night in this heavy shipping lane, she ran up the jib, hoisted the main and gave chase.
The day was sunny, and Bill's car was hot, the trapped air thick with the smells that had coalesced over the years—perfumes, sweat, laundry detergent, damp feet, the vinyl dashboard slowly roasting in the sun. When Mary reached for her seatbelt, her hand fell upon a crumpled tissue fallen beside the passenger's seat. She left it where it lay. Hanging from the bottom of the visor in front of her was a translucent blue rectangle of plastic, extra protection against the sun, and Mary speculated that Jane had been short—is short, she corrected herself.

Bill pushed the buttons to open the windows, and a welcome breeze blew through the car. He left the windows down as they drove out of town and along the winding wooded roads up to Timberly Acres. They gratefully let the roar of wind fill the space between them, and they spoke only rarely and haltingly, clipped comments on the more picturesque farmsteads and vistas, until Bill pointed out the dryness of the bracken ferns, the brown already creeping down from the tips of their fronds. "It's the first sign of fall," he said.

"It's still August," Mary protested.

"By month's end you'll see the maples already starting to turn, just a branch here and there. The poison ivy will be bright red. It really is one of the most beautiful plants late summer."
"You can have it."

"The blackberry bushes will be dying off, too. Most people don't notice even when they're picking. They can't see past the berries."

"Can you blame them? Oh, they're so good." They stopped talking again, then, Mary embarrassed by her mouthwatering tone as she spoke of the berries, sure that Bill had interpreted the comment as metaphor. But they had been speaking metaphorically, certainly, this the most real autumn of both their lives.

They passed a sign for Timberly Acres, an arrow pointing left, and they turned up a long drive that ran up the center of a wide campus yard, groomed trees blowing in the wind that worked up from the lake, and over the bluff nearly every day of the year. The deep blue of Lake Michigan appeared over the edge of the bluff, clusters of ranch duplexes between Mary and Bill and the lake. They wound to the center of the compound, and Bill parked the car in front of a sprawling two-storey building, the same ranch style as the duplexes but unmistakable as a commercial building, as the central hospital.

"I'm afraid we're out of the breeze," Bill said, as he turned off the ignition. "It's going to be hot. You might want to wait in the lobby. It'll be cool there. It always is."

Mary agreed, and they walked together, the two wide sliding doors opening for them as they neared the main entrance. As the doors slid closed behind them, a woman walked past, escorted by a nurse. The nurse held the woman by the elbow, though the woman did not look frail or in need of assistance. In fact, the woman looked rather young, and when she turned her face toward Mary and Bill, Mary saw that she had beautiful, piercing eyes, unmistakably intelligent. Even as Mary saw the recognition in those
eyes, and the narrowing of hatred, even as she realized that this was Bill's wife, she thought that she would have liked Jane.

"Go away," Jane said.

"Jane," Bill said, "it's me. It's Bill."

"I know who you are," she said, and she pulled her elbow from the grasp of the nurse, who was already motioning to someone down the hall that she needed assistance.

"Please," Bill said, "Let's just sit down and talk. You're confusing me with someone else. I'm your husband, Bill."

"I told you I know who you are. And I know who she is, too."

"No, you don't, Jane. This is my coworker, Mary. You haven't met her."

"Is this what you're spending my papa's money on?" Jane asked, laughing at Mary. "This bleach-blond bimbo? The money my father earned at the cost of his life? This is what it amounts to?" The nurse tried to retake Jane's elbow, and Jane pushed her aside.

"You don't know what you're saying," Bill said. "You're confused. Your father has been dead for over forty years."

"I don't care how long it's been. He's dead, and you show up with her."

"I'm going to wait in the car," Mary said.

"Jane, please. Try to remember. Look at me. I'm your husband. I never met your father."

A male orderly arrived, a thickly muscled man in mint cotton scrubs. "It's okay now," he said. "Why don't you take my arm, and we'll go for a walk."
Jane looked at his elbow, which he'd gallantly offered for her to hold. She looked back at Bill. "I'm afraid I have another engagement," she said, the resentment gone from her voice, replaced with a proud dignity.

"Okay, Jane," Bill said, as his wife formally slid her arm around the orderly's. "Maybe tomorrow we can talk."

She nodded and turned.

"I love you," he said. "I've always loved you so much. You know that."

Jane looked back pleadingly as the man took her down the hall. She made a little face that he'd seen only on rare occasion during their decades of marriage. It was a tilting of her head, a raising of her palms. It was a helpless look that told him she wasn't sure what she was doing, but that she was just going to roll with it. She gave this look, and then she nuzzled into the orderly's thick bicep and was gone around the corner.

"I shouldn't have brought you," Bill said, as he drove out of the lot with Mary.

"You didn't know."

"She hasn't stayed like this before. She's had delusions, but they don't last. They haven't lasted. They will, though."

"Unfortunately, they will."

"I don't want her to hang on like this. She wouldn't want to hang on like this."

Mary wanted to say more—she won't hang on much longer; it's hard waiting, I know; it'll soon be over—but she couldn't say these things, not while she was struggling with the same thoughts about her own son, and certainly not while she was riding in his car to his house on a hot summer afternoon.

#
Bill lived on the opposite side of the lake from Mary, in a low brick ranch not much different from those at Timberly Acres, his green lawn speckled with maple and a few paper birch. He parked in the drive and held open the door that led to a small entryway, which opened into the junction between his living room on the left and a dark hallway filled with closed doors on the right.

The house was hot and smelled of dirty clothes and dirty dishes. A tangle of sheets covered the couch, a blanket in front on the floor. Glasses and plates lay scattered within arm's reach of the couch. The rest of the living room looked unused, a quiet dust collecting on the glass tops of end tables, on the faces of people in the dozens of framed photographs that adorned the room.

"Can I get you something to drink?" Bill asked.

"What have you got?"

"Water, lemonade. I've got some vodka, if you're so inclined. Brandy."

"Lemonade sounds perfect," Mary said. She followed Bill into the kitchen, and stood in front of a sliding door that overlooked the lake. "Can we sit on the deck?"

Bill brought out two lemonades on ice. "You should have let me wipe off your chair," he said, looking at the rings of dirt in the chair beside her, sediment left behind from spring rains.

"I don't mind," she said. "A little dirt never hurt anybody."

As they drank their lemonades, Mary tried to find her house across the lake, looking for the yellow dock that Karl had taken so long to put in this year.

"How's your son doing?" Bill asked.
"He's getting worse, I think," she said. A gnat walked along the rim of her glass, and she blew it away. "He used to have his ups and downs, but lately I don't see him rebounding. I'm afraid he's going to lose his sight completely." The gnat had reappeared, and Mary pressed the tip of her finger over it, the tiny crush of its body stuck to her finger, and she unsure what to do with it. "At the same time, I'm afraid he's not going to live long enough to go blind. Isn't that something?"

Bill nodded and drank, and they both looked out at the lake.

"Do you think he'll hang on until your daughter gets back?"

"No. I think that's why she left, too. Partly, anyway. I could ring her neck, when I think about it."

"How are you holding up?"

"You know I was a nurse before I retired. I've helped a lot of people die."

"But not your son."

"No, not my son. It's not the same, I know, but as a nurse I learned to wait. That's what I'm doing, I guess. Waiting. I'll have all the time in the world to grieve once he's gone."

Bill finished his lemonade, wrapped his hands around the ice-cold glass. "Grieving is all I've done since I found Jane in that chair."

"I know," Mary said. "Maybe it's time to stop for a while. Give yourself a rest. Get off that couch."

"I still don't think I could sleep in our bed. I really don't."
Mary stood and wiped the remains of the gnat on the hip of her dress. "Come on," she said, her hand extended. She saw her dock, a yellow spark in the sunlight on the far shore, just as Bill took her hand.

She led him to the mouth of the hall. "Which door?" she asked.

"The one at the end," he told her, and she walked ahead, her arm behind her, her hand still in his.

"You open it," she said, and she stood aside.

Bill stood in front of the door at the end of the hall. He put his hand around the knob, twisted and pushed the door inward. The blinds were open, dust in the slants of afternoon sunlight. The bed was made, just as he had left it, the spread not the color of wine as Mary had imagined, but a forest green. On the dresser, beside a picture of Bill and Jane—an anniversary, or a birthday—lay a small pile of shredded fibers, the lint he'd picked up that spring morning from the carpet. Mary waited at the door as he walked into the room. He stood at the foot of the bed, looking into the corners. "It's not here," he said. "I guess I knew it wouldn't be. I wanted to believe it was, though." He made a slow round of the room, shut a drawer, clicked on and off one of the bedside lamps. "I wanted to believe that I'd sealed something in. That our past, the reality that was still mine that morning, was trapped in here. I had it in my mind that I'd created a time capsule. And even if I could never come back, could never join it, I could take comfort in the knowledge that it still existed somewhere." He looked at Mary, who stood in the doorway, leaning against the jamb. "But I knew that wasn't true. That's why I couldn't come back in. I'd give myself away."
"It does still exist," Mary said. "They'll still exist. Somewhere. But no, not in a room. Not in a room without us."

"You can come in," he said.

"Should I?" she asked.

"I can't answer that. But you're invited."

Mary pushed away from the jamb, and walked toward Bill. The white shock of hair hung low on his forehead, obscuring his eye. She stepped into his arms, and they kissed once, awkwardly, and once again more confidently, and finally without thought, a pattern of motion unfolding that brought them breathlessly onto the bed, where they made love, now desperately and now so lightly that it was as if they were trying not to touch each other at all. When they finished, Bill said only, "Thank you," before he fell into a deep sleep.

Mary lay for a while in the late-afternoon slats of light that shone from between the louvres of the window blinds onto the bed. She didn't think of what they had done, nor of the ramifications. In fact, she hardly thought at all, and that was the greatest luxury she had allowed herself in many, many months.

When she finally dressed, Bill sleeping soundly through her motion, she closed the bedroom door behind her, and went into the living room, where she stacked plates and bowls, brought glasses and bottles to the kitchen. She found the washing machine and started the sheets from the couch. She washed the dishes, and when Bill still didn't stir from the bedroom, she folded the clean sheets and placed a note on top of them, written on a page from a grocery-list pad, the only thing she could think to say, the same two words he had said to her: "Thank you."
It would take her an hour to walk the half-circumference of the lake. For the first half hour, she felt acutely aware of everything around her—every black squirrel, every robin, motor-boat whine, sprinkler, jumping grasshopper—but by the time she turned onto her own road, she was lost in thought about what she would cook for dinner, unaware of a mosquito biting her cheek until it had drunk so much that it couldn't fly away when she brushed it off. It spiraled to the road, hit the pavement, and burst.
Davi's stop on Malpelo Island would be brief. There would be nothing there except a Panamanian ranger's station, a few dozen men, and a clipboard to report her stop on this leg of the race. The next stop would be the island of Clipperton, another thousand nautical miles west, home to a single fishing village, its ownership disputed between Mexico and France.

She did not see Ex Culpa at the long dock in front of the ranger's station. She had kept track of the boat for several hours after entering the Pacific, as they sailed from Panama, at first following its silhouette, and then its lights, green and then the red, as it tacked once before the space and waves between them separated it from her view.

She walked through the open door of the ranger's station, which was nothing more than a weathered stucco house, shutters clapped against paneless windows. She found no one at the scarred little desk. The race log lay on the desk, and, after a fruitless struggle to decipher the signature of the lead captain, the only name so far on the form, Davi signed and dated it on the line beneath. She certainly did not expect a letter from Peter here, and she almost didn't see it among the race bulletins and weather reports that were tacked to a cork board on the wall beside the desk. Her hand shook as she pulled the tack from the envelope, the face of which was stamped half a dozen times in red and blue ink, English and Spanish postal dates and routing information. After a brief wander around the
sagging outbuildings of the ranger's station, she cast off from the pier, raised and set her
sails and found herself in a good wind, Malpelo Island melding quickly with the horizon
at her stern.

She set her self steering vane and climbed belowdecks, her mind on a meal of
canned tuna fish and the last mango that she'd bought in the market at Colon. In her gal­
ley, she stepped on something soft, the crust of a piece of toast she'd eaten that morning.
She picked it up, and found the edge jagged, serrated into small crescents. She imagined
Alex on the counter, touching the crust with his paw, watching it move. Touching it
again. Looking down at it when it fell to the floor, hoping it would get up and scurry
across the teak so that he could give chase. She imagined his tail twitching and then the
pounce to the floor. Then she heard his meow from the other side of the air vent. "Hey,
boy," she said. "Do you want to come out?" He meowed again, and she heard a soft
thump as he fell onto his side, the light scratch of his claws as he pulled himself some­
where in the engine compartment, using the surfaces around him as petting hands. Then
his side was at the vent, smoke-gray hair poking through the wooden slats, the soft rumble
of his purring. She ran a finger between two slats, along his fur, and he meowed again.
She told him again that it was okay to come out, but he retreated, and the boat was again
quiet, only the petting hand of water sliding along the hull, a sound that Davi had grown
immune to long ago. She opened a can of tuna fish, took Alex' food bowl up from the
floor outside the vent and flaked a bit of the fish onto the surface of his food. She
dropped a dollop of mayonnaise on top of what remained in the can, and ate that herself.

She waited until evening to read Peter's letter, not because she'd been avoiding it,
but because she'd been savoring the experience. Since she'd begun these longer passages
away from the coast, her life on the boat had taken on a routine of arranging small events—meals, navigational sightings, logbook recordings, making the bunk, scanning the horizon with binoculars—and using those events as rewards for having passed the time between. Peter's letter was the reward she'd been building to that day, and at sunset, she brought a pillow into the cockpit, lay back and read.

#

Dear Davi,

Life is not always easy, is it Davi? It seems I have nothing but bad news to report since last I wrote. I'll save it, though, until I finish our story. I want to get away from here, so let's go back to Walloon Lake.

It was eleven-fifteen, and I was outside the glass door of the twin bedroom, waiting to see what you would do. I waited until I was sure that you weren't going to run upstairs to wake Grandma and Grandpa. I don't know why you didn't. I used to think it was because you were still trusting me implicitly, obeying, but I think now that this was not the case. You didn't keep quiet because of me, did you? You kept quiet for me.

There was no moon. The road would have been pitch black under the trees, but I wasn't planning on taking the road. I walked down the slope to the landing, where the rowboat was pulled up on shore, a backpack with a flashlight and my box of treasures tucked under the front bench. I pushed the boat into the lake, sat backward in the bow, unfolded the waiting oars, and spread them like wings. I dipped into the lake, the trinkle of the whirlpools that the oars made the only sound at all, fading away behind the boat.
The night was clear, a million million brilliant stars against a perfect black pitch, the milky way like a ghost, and a single dim point of light running contrary to everything, that point the most solid thing in the world as I bobbed along beneath the stars. That was my first satellite, Davi, and I followed it with my eyes from one horizon to the next. I was sure I would fall up into that sky, and I held onto the oars for dear life. I held on for my life, and I loved every minute of it. Crossing the sea in the dark of night beneath those stars to find my true love. What could be more romantic? What is that worth? If the price were too high, should I forget it? But I've paid the price already, so why must I edit? How else am I to remember? I'll edit enough later in the story. Let me have the memory of that little boy's profound appreciation, the dim flick of it now in this borrowed blood. To have fallen into those stars that night... Have I done anything since that I wouldn't trade for it? The trade, Davi, when all the years between can't match for clarity a single point of light: those stars for this worn mattress. For this faded blanket. This flat pillow choked with sweat. Let me have that ride, and let me share it. Take it out of context if you must, but take it. Appreciate it. For me, Davi. This is only what happened to me once upon a time.

The ride did have to end, though, and I saw the end in the form of a pale white grin. The picture: the hotel emerging from the darkness, the blue-black cedars that lined the shore parting at the edges of the lawn, fireflies slow in the chill of the late night wandering among scattered stalks of thistle and queen anne's lace.

I pulled the boat onto shore, and I walked toward the porch, seeing even from the edge of the lake the black rectangle of the open front door—a missing tooth. As I walked across the overgrown lawn, the fireflies blinked out, waves of extinguished points of light...
rippling away from my steps. The romance I'd felt in the boat flickered out with the fireflies, and I stood in front of the porch steps unable to move. The sweet musk of termite-eaten wood pooled around the porch, the pungent scent of rotting fabric seeping out the open door, the collective odor of the throw rugs and the upholstered couches and the tasseled lamp shades and the two dozen decaying beds that I hadn't yet seen in the forgotten rooms at the top of the stairs.

I was supposed to turn back then. There was something wrong, and I needed to get away, to row back to Grandma and Grandpa's, to crawl into the twin bed across from yours, and to tell you that you'd only been dreaming, that I'd been there the whole night. What I wished for was not in that hotel. There was no dark-eyed boy waiting for me in his striped swimsuit. There would be no show and tell of our treasures. No confessions of feelings, no Greek sage to tell me that my love was okay, that I should embrace it, that it was beautiful, that I was beautiful. There was something in that hotel, but it had nothing to do with love.

Now this is the place in the story where I turn around, where I quick-step back to my boat, where the thistle claws my bare legs, where I am about to shove off, when a hand grabs me from behind, another clamps over my mouth, and I'm pulled backward into the hotel, smelling rotting fabric and hand soap as I struggle to scream.

That picture would make life a lot simpler. You see that I've thought about it, that I know it right down to the smell. This is not my promised edit, though, this rewrite. In fact, I didn't turn. I didn't run. I wasn't pulled into the hotel. In fact, I took a deep breath and I walked in.
I pulled the flashlight from my backpack, and I shined it around the parlor, fantasizing that my light would come to rest on the dark-eyed boy. I pictured him sitting on the crumbling cane seat of a rocking chair. I pictured him the only way I had ever seen him, shivering and wet from the lake, the frayed hem of his cutoff Levis stuck wet to his goose-bumped leg, a ray of sunshine reflecting in the beads of water on his bare chest. This sunny picture despite the dark hour, despite the decrepit room around us. I pictured him there, as scared as I, and as full of hope. But I saw nobody, as I had expected. I thought maybe there would be another gift left for me on the steps. I thought so with great relief, telling myself that this is what I should have expected, that there would be another clue there, a direction in this treasure hunt. I stood at the base of the staircase and ran my flashlight up the oak steps. I saw nothing. Maybe another message on the top step?

I was halfway up the staircase, when I saw that the wall of the upstairs hall was flickering in the glow of a distant candle. I heard only the faintest lapping of water on the stone shoreline outside, a tired creak as a gust of wind hit the hotel. At the top of the stairs, I saw that the candle was behind the nearly closed door at the end of the hall.

I passed a dozen open doors on my walk down that hallway, and I turned my flashlight toward each as I passed. The rooms were still furnished as they had been the day the hotel closed, each a world slightly different from the next. Two beds in this room, one in that. Yellow striped wallpaper here. Mint-green vines there. In one room, the ceiling had collapsed, and plaster and lath and shredded newspaper insulation covered the bed and dresser. In another room was an elaborate vanity with a marble top and an oval mirror framed in oak and gold leaf, a single crack running diagonally through the glass. In still another, a clutch purse of rusted sequins on a neatly made bed. And in another the
body of an animal, a raccoon, perhaps, decomposing on the wood-plank floor. My flash­light flickered, and I beat it against the palm of my hand until I regained a pale orange glow. Outside the door at the end of the hall, the communal bathroom that you've never seen, I stopped.

Let's take a snapshot: a high shot, top down, camera on a boom. We can see the entire second floor, all except the small black square of the room ahead. There I am, eleven years old, backpack over my shoulders, nickel-plated flashlight in hand, standing in front of the door at the end of the hall. The door is ajar, and a wash of candlelight drifts down one side of the hallway. All the other rooms are behind me now, rooms for families and for lovers, sparse rooms for bachelors, and rooms for those who like to look at themselves in gold-leaf frames. A room with a collapsed roof, and a room where something valuable had been left behind.

I don't know why I pushed open the door to that end room, why I walked in. I re­member feeling as if the act were already done, as if I were somehow fated to go in there, as if whatever was waiting for me inside had always been waiting there, and would con­tinue to wait, knowing that I would be back. I remember feeling this before I opened the door, but in truth the feeling may have come after. My flashlight flickered again and died as I stood in front of the door, hearing now the sound of breath on the other side. I knew that I should run, but I couldn't make that a reality, so I continued with the inertia that had been pushing me, and I walked into that bathroom.

Now, here the edit I promised. What happened to me after I entered that room isn't really what's at stake. Who was waiting for me there isn't the point, either. It doesn't mat­ter, because it was beyond my control. What mattered, what I have returned to so often,
is not the violence that took place in that communal bathroom, but my decision to step in, my need to know. I had become something more that summer than the child who played games with you, Davi. Puberty was upon me, and with it, something that I hadn't been prepared for, that I didn't understand. Something that had only one time in my life felt right—the hour that I sailed with the boy in the Sunfish. We had something in common, a secret, our greatest secret that we kept even from ourselves. I had learned all I could from Grandma's encyclopedia set, a single-column entry under Homosexual, the first words as clear in my mind now as the day I read them: "A disorder by which . . ." A disorder. I didn't feel disordered that day in the sailboat, though.

I was back in the twin bed beside you before dawn. I walked home. I couldn't row. I slid the glass door shut as softly as I could, and I slipped into bed beside you, hoping that what was happening wasn't real, that it was only a nightmare, that the pulse I felt banging across my swollen face was only the race of my sleeping heart, that when I woke both my eyes would open, my jaw would move, my arm. Hoping that I could swallow, that Grandma would have put a glass of water on the nightstand, and I would roll over, warm and suddenly safe, and take a long, cool drink.

I don't know where you were when Grandma did wake me up. I couldn't see then, I could only hear her scurrying up the stairs saying no no no, and yelling Freddy, Freddy. I think you must have gotten up early and gone off with your little friend. Maybe you didn't see me. Maybe I was facing away from you. It's okay if you did, though, Davi. There was nothing you could do, Batgirl Underoos or no.

Summer camp. Two weeks in the hospital sucking Jell-o and baby food through a straw, grateful that I couldn't talk. I didn't need to, really. When the police found the
rowboat pulled up in front of the hotel, they also found the crime scene. A mildewed sleeping bag. Some lengths of twine that the detective traced back to the barn across the road. Half a dozen jugs of water. A scattering of canned goods, some full, some pried open with the opener of a swiss army knife—Dinty Moore stew, Mary Kitchen corned beef hash, Freshlike green beans, Armour vienna sausages—by candlelight I remember them.

Mom and Dad came back, of course. This time it was my turn to bring them together again, for a little while longer. Dad didn't know what to say at the hospital, didn't know how to look at me. Mom asked him to go find me a 7Up, and he left the room, relieved to be of use, to do something rather than having to say something. Mom put her cheek against my forehead, and I cried. I cried as hard as I could with my jaw wired, and the pain of five broken ribs. Mom ran her fingers over her eyes, but I didn't hear her cry. She would wait until she was out of the room, though that wouldn't be until the next morning. Dad came back with the 7Up in a Styrofoam cup. He said some things to me, but all I remember was the word, Son. Mom took over the nursing from there. I was her first patient. She would enroll in the nursing program at the community college the next winter, after she moved us into the apartment on Jackson Street.

I want to write more, but you know the rest of the story. My jaw healed. My arm mended. My black eye hung on for months, but it faded to blue to green to yellow and then it was gone. My body healed, but it would be years before I healed.

For years I told myself the version of the story that I told the police, the version in which I was grabbed in the dark and pulled into the hotel. The version in which I'd gone there not to meet anyone, but on a dare. I told myself that version because I felt that
there was some deep shame behind what I'd done. I thought I'd been such a fool. But remember, there were no fools that summer at Walloon Lake. I told myself that version of the story through all my puberty. When my eyes wandered in the gym locker room, when I squirmed under the hand of a girl who'd cornered me at a party, when I found myself the subject of another boy's gaze and knew that without a word I had attracted him. Each time I grazed the edge of my sexuality, I turned back to the time that that hand reached out of the darkness and dragged me into the abandoned hotel. I turned again and again to that abduction that never really happened. I lived as a product of that fantasy for too many years, until I moved to Detroit, until I met Jim. That's when I found my dark-eyed boy. Not in a decrepit old hotel, Davi, but at a used bookstore on Woodward. We were in the mystery section, but I saw nothing but light when he asked me about the book in my hand. I didn't know what title I was holding. I had just grabbed one when I felt the force of him there beside me. Turns out the book was by Doyle, and he'd read it. Everything that I had attributed to the man at the end of the hall suddenly became my own that day. All that darkness had become light. Until that moment, the man in the hotel had been my maker, and just that quickly my maker was gone.

That's the end of the story, I suppose. Though I feel like there's more to say. An epilogue? Are we the epilogue? Me fading away in this chair, and you running in circles alone on your boat? Tell me it's not so. Let's not let that be the end.

I'll try to think of another chapter while I'm on my walk. I'm forcing myself to go. Although, to be honest, I ache with exhaustion. I'm walking to the hardware store today. I'm changing the locks. My problem with Beth has escalated, and I have to make sure that she can't get in. She's stealing me blind. I'm certain that she's coming in while I'm
on my walks. My film cabinets are all mixed up. I can't find anything anymore. I don't want to think about what slides I've lost to her sticky fingers. She'll sell them once I'm gone, I suppose. I wouldn't mind if she'd just ask. I'd love it if she'd ask, but instead she steals from me. I'm worried about what she's giving me with my meds, too. I take my pills and the next thing I know it's dark and I'm waking up in my chair. I don't want to think that she would go so far as slipping me downers just to get me out of the way for her petty thievery, but I can't put it past her. I'm going to Mom's for the weekend. I want to see if I feel any better, to see if I'm right about the medication. The hardest thing about it is that Beth is so pleasant to me. How do people do it, Davi? You know that I color my worlds, that I compose—I'm an artist—but I'll never understand this kind of deceit. My compositions may not follow the exact contours of their subjects, but my intent, always, is to illuminate. If I soften a line, if I darken a corner, or dodge an extra bit of light onto someone's face or onto an empty chair . . . well, I do it for the sake of some kind of love or compassion. At least for understanding.

Is it goodbye? Is that what I feel is left to say? If it is, I'm not prepared to say it just now. Does goodbye ever come simply? Does goodbye ever occur without that nagging feeling that there's just one thing more to say, one perfect word? I'll think about that word. I don't have high hopes of finding it, but it gives me an excuse to write again.

Ever your brother,

Peter

Night had closed on Davi's boat, darkness on the ocean coming swiftly after sunset. She had read the end of the letter by flashlight, and when she'd finished, she lay on her
back and looked up at the sky, head soft on the pillow. The night was clear, no moon, the stars a brilliant animation, too vibrant, too colorful, as if they'd floated up from Peter's story—his sky, doctored in his darkroom.
Mary set a casserole dish of scalloped potatoes and ham on the center of the table, between Karl and herself. She pulled off the quilted hot-pad mittens she'd been wearing, took them to the kitchen, and brought out a serving spoon, which she stuck into the potatoes so that its handle faced her husband.

"Did you add extra onions?" he asked, leaning forward, his stomach pushing against the table's edge and halting the progress of his nose just short of the steam that rose from the dish. "I can smell them. Thanks, babe."

Mary filled her glass high with white wine, and she took a long drink as soon as Karl had finished saying his grace, thanking God for cooking the potatoes that were placed before him. He scooped out a mound of the casserole, and Mary watched him eat. She took a drink of her wine. "Karl?" she said. "What's the most important thing to you?"

"I don't know," he said.

"I mean, I know it's hard to answer. But what comes to mind?"

"You," he said, after a moment. "Us. This. I don't know."

"I don't think I really knew either, not until Peter got sick."

Karl's chewing stopped, then started, faster than before. "Eat," he said. "It's going to get cold."
"I thought it was all this, too," she said, looking into a ray of sunlight that angled
down from the high chalet windows, dust creeping slowly from left to right, as if the air
were water in a stagnant pond, and the dust not lifeless, but a colloidal mass of life,
clumps of cells holding onto each other. "I would have been scared to death if someone
tried to break up what we have."

"I wouldn't let them," Karl said.

"But what do we have, Karl?"

"What's with these questions? Who can answer these?"

"I know they're not fair," she said. "I've just been thinking."

"Well, dinner's great. The weather was gorgeous today. I know that much. I still
want to get some more done on those planter boxes on the dock, though, before it gets
dark."

"When Peter comes this weekend, I want you to really try with him."

"Sure. Okay."

"He's always been so sweet with me. Think about that when he's here. Think
about how good he makes me feel."

"Okay," Karl said, as he scraped into a mound the last of the potatoes on his plate,
and scooped them onto his fork. "I will."

"Really?"

"Yeah," he said, and the potatoes disappeared into his mouth.

"Because he's the most important thing, Karl. And all this," Mary waved around
the room, "it doesn't mean a damn thing to me right now."

"Hey," he said, through the potatoes. "I said I would. Don't threaten me."
"I'm not threatening. I'm telling you what I need, and I want you to hear me."

"I've heard you before. That's all I hear from you. It seems like the only thing between us anymore is Peter."

"He is between us. That's the problem. He shouldn't be between us, he should be with us."

Karl stopped scooping a second helping of scalloped potatoes. He dropped the spoon back into the casserole dish. "I knew this is where you were going."

"You shouldn't just know. You should be offering this to me. You should want this for me."

"I can't have him living in this house."

"Why? What's so bad about having him here? What's so hard that you can't do this, for me?"

Karl opened his mouth, and then he closed it, the muscles of his jaw working as he hesitated. "I can't explain it," he said. "He just does something to me. I don't know how to describe it. It's like . . . You know how I hate cats, right? Even when I just see a cat, the way it walks, the way it looks at me. Like it's judging me."

"Feeling judged a little more often might not hurt you."

"And how about yourself? What's going on with you?"

Mary's hand went to her hair. She pulled her hand down, picked up her wine glass, and took a long drink. Karl shook his head.

"We're talking about Peter," Mary said.

"I thought we were talking about us."

"Well, we are."
Karl shrugged. "No," he said, and he reached for the handle of the serving spoon.

"What do you mean?"

"That's my answer." He pulled out a scoop and dropped it onto his plate.

"We're not done, Karl. We're still discussing this."

"No."

"This is not your decision."

Karl drank from his glass of milk, and as he slid his fork into his potatoes, Mary stood and flung her wine at him. Having drunk most of it, however, all that remained was a little splash, the majority of which landed on his food. He stirred in the wine, as if she had done him a favor, and she grabbed her purse and was gone.

#

The humidity had been growing all afternoon, and as Mary walked around the lake, the heat of her anger mixed with the muggy evening air, and before she had walked for ten minutes, she was sweating.

The thoughts most immediate in her mind were as simple and cyclical as her walk around the lake. There was the thought of defying Karl, of bringing Peter up to stay, regardless of what Karl might say or do. Then there was the thought that Peter wouldn't stay where he wasn't welcome, that even if she could force Karl to allow it, she could never make Peter accept it in the face of Karl's reluctance. This thought led to the thought of leaving Karl, of staying with Peter until . . . But this thought never truly resolved itself, hanging somewhere between the unmentionable, 'until Peter's death,' and the frightening prospect of an indefinite future alone. Faltering in the void that this vision of
the future opened, Mary's mind returned to the thought of Peter, safe and content in the loft bed of the cottage.

These visions turned in Mary's mind as she took her turn around the lake, flowing uninterrupted until she had gone a third of the way around. Then there came the spike of knowledge that she would soon be passing Bill's house. The thought had hardly registered, however, before Mary buried it, and was back to the loop that she'd been riding. Then came the interruption of a clearing in the lake, and of her spotting immediately her own yellow dock across the water, her eye knowing its location, trained from the day she spotted it from Bill's deck. When finally she saw his mailbox down the road a stretch ahead of her, she was forced to articulate in her mind a determination to pass his house without stopping—'It wouldn't be right.'

Bill's property was not wooded, unlike his neighbors' lots, in which winding drives disappeared into maple and beech and paper birch. His house stood back on a wide grassy break in the forest, half a dozen large trees shading the lawn, the brick ranch house visible beneath their lofty branches. Mary watched the house as she approached the edge of Bill's property, but then she forced her eyes away. She continued ahead for what seemed a long time, looking straight down the road. But the front of his open lawn was wide, and when she looked again she had not yet even reached the driveway. She once more forced her eyes ahead, and she continued until the mailbox drew her eye back toward the house. At the mouth of the drive, she stopped. Then she found herself walking up the drive, and then she was at the door, with her finger on the bell.
When no one answered after the second ring, she walked on weak legs back down the drive, her pace quickening until she was past his open lawn and out of sight of his brick house.

#

"I need you to put me back the way I was, Jean," Mary said, the screen door of Jean's beauty parlor slapping shut behind her.

"Sit down," Jean said. She was leaning back against the counter, her head tilted down, succumbing to the curve of her spine. She pushed herself forward, placed her hands on the small of her back and stretched as straight as her scoliosis would allow. "It's the weather," she said. "It's killing me. This back is the best meteorologist you'll ever meet. If you want to know if a storm is coming, just give me a call."

Mary sat in one of the salon chairs, and Jean's fingertips came down on her head, smoothing back her hair as Mary looked at the lake through the porch windows. "I appreciate what you did," Mary said, "but it's just not me."

"Well, I can't really undo it completely, you know," Jean said, pulling straight a curl and letting it bounce back. "The color is there to stay for a while. Best I can do is cut it short. But are you sure you want to do that? I think it suits you."

"It may look that way to you, but I don't feel like myself in it. Why don't we just go back to the red that I used to do. That and a cut, and then I can decide if I want to go gray again."

"You're the boss," Jean said, and she began to wash Mary's hair. She talked about George and about Lacey, and then she mentioned that Mrs. Kloosterman had been in. "I
have to tell you, Mary. The woman is running her mouth. I think you have a right to know."

"Oh, let her talk."

"Well if there's nothing for her to carry on about then you should stop her."

"I don't care what she says. I don't care about her."

"I'm just saying. If there's nothing going on . . . " Jean's scissors stopped.

"Jean, are you asking me if there's anything going on?"

"I'm just saying. That's all."

A sailboat tacked on the lake. It was a small daysailer, the jib flapping as the bow crossed the wind. A man was at the tiller, a boy grabbing the sheet and pulling the loose sail across the mast, holding tight as it caught in the wind.

"Have you heard from Davi?" Jean asked.

"No,"

"That girl could use a kick in the ass. How dare she not write her mother?"

Mary grunted dismissively. The boy on the sailboat lost the jib line, and the sail flailed loose off the bow, waving like a white flag.

"How's Pete?"

"He's coming up this weekend."

The boy crawled to the bow and tried to pull in the sail by the handful, gathering it to his chest. The man at the tiller yelled and poked his finger in the direction of the boy.

"Good. Every boy needs some time with his mom. I don't care how old they get."

"I want to bring him up here for good."
The sail broke free from the boy’s grasp and flailed again before the boat, and the man lunged forward to help. His movement was clumsy, however, an angry thrusting leap, and his foot caught on the tiller, knocking it to one side and turning the boat broadside to the wind. The boat turned and when the wind caught the mainsail from the side, the boat capsized, tossing the man overboard. As quickly as it had gone down, it popped back upright, luffed up into the wind and sailed on, the boy shocked in the bow and the man treading water in the boat’s wake.

"Do you think they need help?" Mary asked.

Jean squinted toward the lake. "No. It's just Dean. He's been trying to teach that boy to sail all summer. The kid hates it. He doesn't like to get wet."

"I want to get Pete up here, but Karl is completely against it, of course."

"Why 'of course,' Mar? Why is it always 'of course' with the kind of men we end up with? Why do we act like it's so matter-of-fact? George is drunk again, of course. He's in front of the TV, of course. If you want Pete up here, you should have him move up here. Tell Karl to go screw himself."

"A lot of good that will do. There's nothing I can do. If he's going to throw a tantrum, I can't bring Pete up. Pete will just turn around and walk right back out the door. He won't stay with Karl acting like that. Oh, that man."

"You need to let Karl know that you can always turn around and walk out that door, too," Jean said, pointing her scissors toward the screen door. "Follow Pete right out."

"I know," Mary said, nodding, a pull on the lock of her hair that Jean held pinched between her fingers. "I'm thinking about it. I really am. But right now, I just need to focus on Pete. I'll sort the rest out after."
"Just don't let that man walk all over you in the meantime. You can send me his way if you need. I might not look like much, but I know more ways to use a pair of scissors than you can imagine. It's not just hair I can cut off with these." She snipped the scissors in the air.

When Jean was finished, she waved the mirrors around Mary's head, and Mary saw something of her old self in the reflection.

"Mary," Jean called as Mary was walking down the porch steps. "Just don't wait too long, okay? You might miss your chance."

The sound of breaking glass came from the door behind Jean. Then a man's voice, "Jean! Jean, goddamnit."

Out on the lake, the father was pulling himself back into the sailboat, the boy huddled crying in the front of the cockpit, as far away from his father as he could get.
Davi discovered that she was nearing Clipperton Island, not by sight of land, nor by a welcoming dove with an olive branch in its beak, but by the buzzing in her ear of a mosquito. Though it was not yet dawn, the sky had risen from a starry black to a deep bruise of purple and blue. Before the light had grown strong enough for her to see the thin strip of the island, she saw the lights of fishing boats twinkling through a haze of fog that lay on the water.

Leaving the cabin that predawn had been difficult for Davi, but she had known that the island lay within fifty miles, and so she’d had to go topside hours before sunup to keep vigil. The move from belowdecks had not been made difficult by the early hour, however. So many sunrises had she seen since the beginning of her journey, that she had begun to look forward to them, to the many faces of dawn, so important to reading the weather conditions when she was out of radio range of a NOAA forecast. Neither had the temperature been the dissuasive force against Davi going topside, though the air was cool this morning—the growing red in the sky confirming her barometer’s steady decline, a storm moving in—for she would wear a skull cap, brew a kettle of coffee and wrap herself in her mummy bag. The cause of her reluctance had not been anything outside her bed, but had instead been a presence there with her in her forward berth, Alex nestled asleep in the pocket of space behind the fetal bend of her knees.
For an hour she had lain still, attentive to the pool of his warmth, to the slow pulse of his breathing, to the flutter of his somnolent purring. Countless times she had made the decision to rise, and had lacked the followthrough, a long draw of warm rumbling from the cat stilling her straightening legs. She spoke to him, "I've got to get up, little boy," feeling the tightness in her voice, so little used in recent months. "You can stay here," she told him. "You can sleep. I'll come back." When she finally pulled her legs away from the cat, he stood and arched his back in a sleepy stretch. He jumped to the cabin floor, the soft thump of his paws against the teak, and he slipped through the slats of the vent, his hind legs for a moment reaching behind in a final stretch, before disappearing, first one and then the other.

As Davi sat wrapped in her sleeping bag, hands warmed around a mug of coffee, the mosquito buzzing occasionally past an ear, she tried not to think of whether or not there would be another letter from Peter awaiting her at Clipperton. Although he had managed to find his way to Malpelo, she didn't want to raise her hopes that she would get his next letter here, only to be disappointed when no letter had arrived, knowing that she would have to wait several weeks, until she crossed the longest leg of her journey, the width of the Pacific, to Fiji. In the days since reading his last letter, scraps of memory from the two weeks that he was away had returned to her.

She remembered her grandparents asking her questions about when she had last seen Peter, was he in bed when she'd awoken. She had told them no, he hadn't been there in the morning, and that she'd last seen him when they'd gone to bed. She remembered this as her first act of secrecy, not a childhood lie, but a secret held as an act of loyalty. Hurt though she was by Peter's estrangement, she did not betray him. A month earlier,
she would have. But along with his growth, with his pulling away from their childhood, she had been pulled, too, if not as far as she'd wanted, if not out the sliding glass door the night before, then at least far enough to place loyalty above spite.

She remembered also the following:

She remembered looking in the window of the widow Burnside, of seeing now broken glass on the kitchen floor, something spilled there and not mopped up, Mrs. Burnside at the table as usual, but looking now dangerously imbalanced, even to young Davi, who could not have said such a thing, but who felt it all the same.

She remembered being again with Julianna, telling Julianna about the play, and Julianna seeming not to understand. "An axe in your head?" she'd asked, and then she'd suggested, "Let's play house." Davi had felt guilty for abandoning Julianna when Peter had accepted her once again into his world, but Julianna seemed to think nothing of it. They returned to their playing house and to raiding the candy drawer in the kitchen. She brought Julianna one time to Mrs. Burnside's window, but Julianna would not walk up to look. Davi had entreated, but Julianna began to cry, and Davi relented.

She remembered her grandparents on the telephone, call after call. She remembered her grandmother crying. She remembered men in the house, the heavy tread of polished black shoes, the smell of aftershave, a watch with a steel band on a wrist dark with hair, meaty fingers wrapped around a wooden pencil, pushing into a small writing pad. A man asking her questions, his voice unused to softness, struggling to find a key that didn't frighten. But it did frighten, and she only looked at her feet.

She remembered police cars, their red and blue lights flashing the undersides of tree branches that enclosed the driveway shared between her grandparents and the Burnsides.
She remembered Mrs. Burnside, a gray-white nightgown in the dark of her kitchen, standing now on the table where she had for so many days been sitting. She remembered a cart going into the back of an ambulance, and the ambulance creeping up the drive, its flashing lights now unlit.

Then there was her grandmother, sitting on the twin bed with her, telling her that Peter had gone away to camp. Her grandmother's eye patch was off now, and Davi stared at the bright red penumbra that encircled her cornea, as her grandmother told Davi the lie that Davi had since embraced, had used to render first to the point of dream, and later to complete obscurity, the image of her brother backing out the sliding door, while she lay in her Batgirl Underoos, knowing that she should stop him. He's gone away to summer camp, her grandmother told her.

By the time Davi neared Clipperton, the morning had gone, the fog burned off the horizon. The sun had seemed to rise slowly, however, dark and red, flat and wide through the heavy damp air, the eastern sky a smudge of burnt sienna. She doused her sails and ignited the Yanmar diesel, its pistons lazily banging, their sound the only sound, increasing their pace only grudgingly as Davi pushed forward the throttle, hoping for five knots on the morning sea, smooth in the lee of Clipperton Island. In half an hour she had her boat anchored in a shallow bay, surrounded by wooden fishing skiffs, green and red and yellow paint thick on their hulls. She shifted the engine briefly into reverse in order to set the anchor, and then she pulled the kill switch. The mosquito that had been buzzing her that dawn had persisted, and she heard it again after the engine had choked and quit. She waved it away, and lost sight of it. So many boats were there in the bay, and so
tightly packed, that she felt she could walk to shore across their hulls without getting her feet wet.

At the far end of the mat of skiffs rose a single mast, polished black, its crimson jib doused and lashed to the bow. As Davi strained to see if the Ex Culpa's dinghy was still on deck, she felt a light prick on the side of her neck. She clapped her hand to the spot, and when she pulled it away, a flattened bead of her own blood was spread across her palm, the wet body of the mosquito twisted in the center. She wiped it on the leg of her pants, unleashed her dinghy from the deck and rowed herself to shore.

She was met by a crowd of children, and half a dozen old women, one of them poking her forearm, feeling her skin and shouting descriptions that Davi couldn't understand to the other women, who stood farther back, shaking their heads and asking questions of the one who poked her. Clusters of men stood along the street's edge, cleaning the day's catch, slitting and gutting the fish in two fluid motions, dropping the guts onto blue tarps, the bodies into rubberized tubs.

Davi's race packet had instructed the sailors to check in at the police office, and Davi said to the woman who poked her, "Por favor, comisaría de policías." The women looked at each other, confused, and Davi suspected that Clipperton must have a local dialect. One of the children chatted wildly to the women, and then everyone began to shout a word, chanting and pulling Davi away from the docks, down the single road of broken cement that ran along the shore, the bay on one side, a line of one-and-two-storey cement buildings on the other. The faces of the buildings had no walls, but iron gates that accordioned open during the day, and could be pulled closed at night. Inside were dry goods stores, a hardware store, bicycle shop, fishing supplies. There were several darkened
buildings where two or three arc welders sparked among piles of rusting iron—chains and engines, propellers and fish cages. They passed a toy store, where two children stood with a red kite, and they passed a bakery that Davi smelled before she saw; the warmth of yeast in the bread oven cutting through the cold smell of fish and low tide that filled the street. Outside the police office there flashed a blue light on a rusted metal pole. The building was an open-front concrete stall like the others. Inside was a tattered flooring of mint-green linoleum, a line of plastic chairs, and two desks in the back corners. Behind one, a hatless man in a beige uniform sat smoking a cigarette, his desk chair careened back, his feet on the desk.

"Hola," Davi said.

The man looked at his watch. "Buenos dias," he said, nodding. He said something to the people who had followed Davi into the station, and they backed into the street.

"We don't see many foreigners on the island," he said in English. "Scuba divers. Hippies with their wet suits. The fishermen take them out to the reefs."

"I'm with the race," Davi said. "I've come to sign the sheet."

"I know. You'll stay the night?"

"I'll sleep on my boat."

"But you'll need water, no? Food?"

"Yes, I will."

"We can bring the water to your boat. If you buy food, that can be delivered, too. It is no problem. The people here are excited about the race. You will need the food, no?"
"I will need some things," Davi said, anxious to see the check-in form, hoping that the lead sailor's name would be legible. "I am segundo?" she asked.

"No," the man said, and until he finished, Davi thought that there must be another boat ahead of her, that she must be third. "You are the first," he said.

"But the other sailboat," Davi said.

The police officer shrugged, still reclining in his chair. "You are the first," he said again, and motioned to the other desk, where Davi saw the race form, a sheet of empty lines. As she signed the top line—her name, the date and time—the officer told her of the market at one end of town, and the cantina at the opposite end. "Women don't often go to the cantina," he said, "but foreigners do."

"Where is the post office?" Davi asked.

"Ah," he said, and his feet came off his desk, his chair tipping down to all fours. He read her name on the race form. "It's good that you said something. I have letters for you. They give me the mail for the racers. Their English is not so good." He sifted through a plastic carton behind the desk and handed her three envelopes, which she slipped into her backpack, having already glimpsed Peter's handwriting on the address of one, and not wanting to read the addresses of the others, deciding instead to savor the anticipation. Although it should have been obvious for a long time, it was really only in that moment that Davi realized she was lonely.

The women outside the station guided her to the market at the end of the street, and as she browsed the stalls, tasting the fruits and vegetables that were offered her, she thought that the lead captain must be asleep in his boat. Then she began to wonder, al-
most contemptuously, if his failure to sign in hadn't been purposeful. If he had waited intentionally, wanting to see her name when he signed in.

Davi bought more than she needed in the market and in one of the many tiny grocers that dotted the main street. She rowed back to her boat, where she cooed for Alex to come out, while she waited for the boats to come with her deliveries. Two boats eventually came, fishing skiffs, their diesel engines chugging almost identically to her own. Four men formed a sort of bucket brigade, passing cardboard boxes of food and water down the companionway, into Davi's boat, as she stood out of the way in the cockpit, the merchants refusing to allow her to help. A woman had come with them, and she stood aside with Davi, smiling at her, and saying things that Davi did not understand. As the food went in, the men traded positions, each curious to see the inside of the cabin, where the lady captain lived. She tipped them fifty pesos. "Thank you and come again," one of the men said, and the group broke into laughter.

The skiffs left, chugging slowly away, a rainbow of oil clinging to the water around Davi's boat, and after an hour of stowing the new provisions, she lay down for a nap. At some point, Alex returned again to the space behind her knees, she aware of his presence as she fell into a fitful sleep that would last until evening.

#

She sat up, and the triangular shape of the berth brought her back to her boat, just enough of the early dusk pushing through the portholes to reveal beyond her feet the dark outlines of the salon's bench seats, the galley counter top, the jumble of empty cardboard boxes that she would need to break down and row to shore. She remembered Alex, and discovered that he was no longer with her. Had she not woken when she did, just before
full dark, she was sure that she would have slept the night through. Her body was stiff
with sleep and fatigue, but she knew that *Ex Culpa* would sail with dawn, and she was de-
termined that, for once, she would start ahead of her, rather than chasing her as she had
been doing for so many weeks, and for so many hundreds of miles.

Her head was still fogged with sleep as she dressed in a hooded sweatshirt and cot-
ton pants, lit her alcohol stove, and put on her coffee kettle. She was chilled, and the stiff-
ness she had felt when she woke didn't dissipate as she flattened the cardboard boxes. She
had pushed herself too hard that last leg, had spent too many damp nights awake in the
cockpit, too little time asleep in the cabin, she thought, and now she was paying the price.
She felt the fatigue all the way into the joints of her knees and elbows. If she could have
one extra day, just to sleep, she thought. Then she would feel better.

She sipped on her coffee, but it tasted acrid, unsettling on her empty stomach. Be-
cause she had to row the boxes to shore, she would eat at the cantina. The row would
shake off this haze of drowsiness, work the sleep out of her muscles. She would bring
back a bit of leftovers, a little morsel for Alex. Soon, she thought, he will wander freely in
the cabin.

Outside, Davi's chill increased, the temperature dropping with the leading edge of
the storm that she knew was coming, that she had seen in the dark red sky that morning.
A breeze had already begun, an evening wind that she was sure would only increase. An-
other reason to push off early in the morning, to be away from land, free to maneuver in
the storm without fear of running aground, of breaking up on rocks or reef. Her boat sat
alone now, hers and *Ex Culpa*, swaying in the bit of current that was able to make its way
into the harbor. At sea were the lights of the fishing skiffs, a hundred or more, dancing on
the rough waters, their bulbs shining into the churning waves, luring fish to the surface.

The row to shore was against the wind, and the work first warmed her, then chilled
her more as the cool air washed over her sweat. Twice as she rowed, flattened cardboard
boxes blew out of her dinghy, and she had to back paddle, maneuvering so that she could
grab them from the water. She lay on her side, her legs acting as counterweight as she
pulled the already waterlogged cardboard, dripping, into the boat. Chilled water soaked
one arm, poured from the cardboard onto the thin cotton of her pant legs. She swore as
the water dripped across her thigh. Goddam fucking cardboard son of a bitch, she said.
When it happened again, she tore the wet flattened box in two. She slapped the leathery
pieces together, tore them in two again, slapped them together four thick and couldn't
tear this. She said nothing, relaxed, then pulled suddenly at the cardboard again, as if to
surprise it. Still it wouldn't tear, and she laid it softly on top of the pile, softly as if some-
one were watching, as if maybe they had just started watching, after her tantrum, as if
there had been no tantrum. She centered herself again in the boat, and drew long pulls
on the oars. The wind was already stronger than she had thought it would be so soon,
and she made slow progress to shore, inching forward only when she bent into the oars
and pulled hard, pulled with her back. She stared at the boxes as she rowed. She dared
them to blow out of the boat, but they were wet and heavy now, and they stayed where
they were. On shore, the boat tipped as she stepped out, its prow balanced on the sloped
cement that receded into the bay, and she stepped into the water instead of onto the dry
pavement. She pulled the boat up, piled the cardboard beside it and walked down the
dark street with her left pant leg clinging wet to her ankle, her hands together in the single
pocket of her sweatshirt, clinging to the laminated rectangle of a folded nautical chart that she had brought to study as she ate. The street was empty, the iron gates closed over the store fronts, locked with chains. An orange glow at the end of the street marked the cantina, a latin-folk rhythm tinny from overworked speakers, growing loud as Davi neared.

The cantina was separated from the street by a waist-high cement wall, but otherwise it was open to the weather, its roof held up by supporting columns. Two men in thin blue shirts stood outside the door, talking, watching Davi without surprise as she passed them. Inside, a dozen people sat at tables, drinking beer in the dim light of white Christmas bulbs strung overhead, the men's faces emerging and retreating with the flickering glow of candles that sat on the tables in red and green globes. Davi sat at an empty table in a corner. A thin man, middle-aged, in a white shirt and faded black vest, offered her a menu. She looked at the words, but the names of the foods were not names that she recognized. She put up her hands in a gesture of helplessness, and the man smiled pleasantly, pointed to an item on the menu, spoke its name, and looked for her approval. She nodded, and said, "Y una cerveza." The man nodded. He returned with a squat brown bottle that had no label. She took a drink, the cool bitter of beer triggering a convulsive shiver that lapped up her spine. She unfolded the nautical chart on her table, a large-scale map, the tawny crescent of the island lying on its back, reefs trailing off the northern and eastern tips. She would head north from the bay, bear west and shoot for a narrow break in the reef there, her keel drafting six and a half feet, safely needing twelve in the waves that would likely be rolling in from the east the next morning.
When her food came, she ordered a second beer. There were fried beans, rice, and a fish, head attached, the eye an imploded creamy blue bead. She pulled a few flakes from the side of the fish, something tasting wrong to her. She ate a bite of the beans, and these too tasted somehow wrong, and the rice, leaving a residue in her mouth that reminded her of the days she'd spent varnishing the teak of her cabin, the nights she'd spent sleeping in the cockpit, the fumes washing up through the companionway. Her head hurt, and this too reminded her of the days spent in the fumes of the varnish. She wished that she'd taken some aspirin before leaving the boat. She took a long drink of her beer, hoping to wash the taste from her mouth. She returned to the chart, used her square coaster as a straight edge, roughly triangulating points on the map. She found that a line ran from a point north of the bay, up through the tip of the crescent, to the fifty-foot-wide break in the reef. She had seen a lookout tower on the north edge of the bay. She closed her eyes and put herself in the cockpit of her boat, looking toward port, the sun rising behind her. When the tip of the island slid into line with this tower, she would be pointed at the channel through the coral reef. She would have to get it right, or abort early and come about. Too late, and she would risk breaking up on the reef.

"There is a red nun on your left."

Davi looked up, her eyes following the voice. It was the police officer. He stood over her table, pointing to the tip of her coaster that marked the narrow channel. His thick hair was swirled around his head from the wind, his uniform shirt untucked, a bottle of beer in his hand. "And a green can on your right."

"Thank you," Davi said. "Gracias."

"De nada."
"Do you have a pen?"

The man pulled the short stub of a yellow pencil from his shirt pocket and handed it to her. He took a drink from his bottle. "But you won't see them tomorrow," he said.

Davi looked up from her chart, where she'd been drawing the missing marker buoys.

"There's no use going there. When the wave rolls over, the markers will be drowned. And when the wave passes, they will lie down on the reef." The policeman chuckled. "They will lie on their backs like spent lovers, the red nun and the green can. You will not see them from your boat."

"If the weather isn't too bad, I think I can make it."

"The weather is too bad already for that channel," he said, waving the butt of his bottle toward the spot on the map. "It's only there for the fishermen in the skiffs. You'll have to go east."

Davi looked at the map, the small gap to the north of the island, the reef running east in a solid mass to the map's edge. "It's too far back," she said. "It would take too long."

The policeman drank from his bottle. He swallowed and laughed again, a soft laugh, a shrug of his shoulders. He had said his peace; he was a man with a clear conscience. He would have let it go at that, had Davi not pushed her point. She showed him with her finger the line from the tower to the tip of the island to the gap. "I'll know when I'm here," she said. "I'll see this line. If I can't see the channel, I'll come about."

"Or maybe you'll run aground."

"I'll bear north if I think I'm going to miss it. How far does the northern reef run?"
The policeman was once again amused. He waved his hand for two more beers. When the waiter brought them, he handed one to Davi, and put the other on the table. He held his finger on the chart, where the village sat on the edge of the bay. "We are here," he said. His finger traced north, off the tip of the crescent island and along the reef. It continued off the chart and across the worn varnish of the table. It slid northeast, then east, continuing the arc of the crescent island. "Our home," he said, as he drew the circle that eventually joined the coral on the eastern tip of Clipperton, "is part of an atoll. A circle of coral. It is the outline of an ancient volcano. Volcano, in English?"

Davi nodded. Volcano. She hadn't even looked at the smaller-scale chart when she'd approached the island, and she felt foolish now, realizing that it was only dumb luck that the eastern ridge is further submerged, too deep there for a coral reef to grow, luck that she didn't break up that dawn ten miles from shore.

"This was once a very large island," the policeman said. "What is left is this ring of reef, the outline of the volcano. It is like in a detective show, a white line drawn around a missing body. This little island moon and the coral reef are all that is left after the eruption." He grinned and lifted his bottle. "This, and a lot of fish," he said. He drank again. "And hippies," he added.

The wind would be east by dawn, Davi was sure, which meant that she would be beating into it if she were to backtrack. Depending on the size of the waves, she might be several hours getting out of the atoll. Then half an hour bearing south, then an hour or more west before she would be back to the same longitude as the bay. Half a day. Maybe more. If she were to sail north, she would have the wind off her beam, the best kind of wind.
"I can see that I have not convinced you," the policeman said. "But anyone in this room will agree with me, and these people have lived their entire lives inside this atoll. They are out there in their boats every day."

Davi said she would think about it. She told him that she wouldn't risk it if the wind was up, and he shook his head. He asked her where she was from, told her he had been to Chicago once, years ago. She finished her second beer, her head dull and pounding now. Her chill had increased, and she shivered in her corner chair as he told his story of Chicago, and of Panama before that, and Rio de Janeiro, and Mexico City, of growing up on the Baja peninsula, and of joining the police academy, only to be stationed here, on Clipperton Island. He ordered another round of beers as he told his stories, and then another.

"I brought a wife with me to this island," he said. "She was foolish enough to follow me here, but not so foolish to stay. There are a few wives on the island, a few old wives who have known nothing but work and the weather."

The policeman talked about a love affair after that with the only young single woman who had ever graced the island. "This island has had one love," he said, "and that was Mariquetta. But an island like this is not made for love. It is a man's island. It was a terrible time when Mariquetta was here. There was an old woman on the island, long gone now, who used to sell flowers. She did well when Mariquetta was here. She did well, and the blacksmith did well. People began to carry knives. You should have see this cantina in those days. Everybody with a knife. Every man the defender of Mariquetta's honor. It is a marvel that only two men were killed. The woman who sold the flowers became rich. She closed up her house, and moved to the mainland. Mariquetta went
with her. She left a house full of flowers. I have always suspected that it was not the vio-
ence of the men, but the thought of life without those flowers that drove Mariquetta to 
leave with the old woman." The policeman finished his beer, ordered another. "Then the 
whorehouse came," he said.

"The fishermen pick up their paychecks four times a year from the company in 
Panama. They stay a week on the mainland. The young ones spend their entire pay-
checks in that one week at the whorehouses. The young don't need so much sleep. One 
of the madams in Acapulco wised up. She took the women who weren't earning on the 
mainland, and she brought them here. You can imagine the kind of woman who would 
come to live here. For that." He took a drink and looked into his bottle. "I went there 
one time," he said, a distant ember from the candlelight glowing in his eyes. "Maybe 
twice. My pesos disappeared into the bosom of the madam. I think she, too, only cashed 
it in four times a year. There was room in that bosom. I followed her directions up the 
stairs to the last door on the right. In the air, a smell like the sheep I used to herd as a boy 
with my father, when we would bring them down wet with dew from the mesa in the 
morning. I thought the madam was sending me to a sheep. I worried that I had haggled 
too deeply. I should have offered another fifty pesos, I thought. But that was years ago. I 
was young." He tipped the bottle and nodded thoughtfully.

Davi was looking now across the cantina. The policeman waved his hand for two 
more beers, but Davi already felt drunk. The room seemed darker than when she had 
entered, though the Christmas lights still glowed from the ceiling. She thought that 
maybe the candles had burned low. She was looking across the room at a man in the op-
posite corner, his chair leaned back against the intersection of the walls, his feet on the
thick wooden table. The room between them swayed, the effect of so many days at sea, her body anticipating the motion that was no longer there. But it was not only that. She had to strain to see across the bar, to see anything clearly, and then strain to remember why she was looking at the man who sat there.

"Maybe you don't need another beer," the policeman said. "Maybe you've been too many days at sea."

A wide-brimmed straw hat shaded the face of the man in the opposite corner. Davi looked at the bottoms of his sandals propped on the table, at the glow of his golden sombrero. The breeze blew cool around her neck, and she wrapped her arms around herself.

"You should eat," the policeman said. "Then you should sleep and don't worry about sailing until the storm passes." But Davi didn't hear him anymore, his voice had become something twisted and far away, at the far end of a pipe. "You should eat," dribbling down that pipe from so far away, so far and so long, from her grandparents' dining room table, a storm churning Walloon Lake outside the bank of windows, her grandmother giving a stagey shiver as she closed the floor-to-ceiling curtains, one by one, from this corner to the next. "And get some sleep," the knuckled hand of her grandmother stroking her hair, the weight of her hip on the mattress pulling Davi toward her, the twin bed beside her neatly made in the shadow of the unlit brass cone reading lamp. Her grandmother's hand, and then her mother's, the voice of her father outside the door, "She's been through so much. She's just shut down for awhile." Comforting words. Hush and Now now. Now there. It's only natural. Wait and see, Ma. She's young, she'll bounce right back. Children are resilient that way. They bounce back. Then her mother's hand was gone, and Peter's name was in her father's mouth. We need to focus
on Peter now. Let's just worry about one thing at a time. Make sure Peter comes through this. She lay in the left twin bed, not looking at the right, feeling the darkness there, and knowing that if she looked she would see Peter, only it wouldn't be Peter. It couldn't be. Not like that. It wasn't a real boy at all. A dummy, a balloon where his head should be. The dummy he left when he went out the window. A balloon-headed dummy boy in the bed beside her, and she wouldn't listen to its wet sounds. "Are you okay?" and this time it was her father's voice. "Poked that goddamned pencil right through his brain." Mrs. Burnside beneath the sheet on the stretcher that slipped into the ambulance; Mrs. Burnside hanging from the chandelier above her dining room table, the fogged glass of the windowpane between Davi and her still body.

The policeman looked taller now, taller and farther away. The man in the straw hat across the room looked like always, too far away to catch, the dark expanse of the room between them, the sea between their boats, and now it was not her chasing him, but him baiting her, his crimson sail always on her horizon, luring her forward, coaxing her out. She could see the dark shadow of his mustache, blacker than the shadow cast over his face.

"Do you know him?" the policeman asked.

Davi managed to shake her head. No, she didn't know him. She didn't know what he wanted from her. Only to gloat, she thought. To be in her sight. To remind her. The bottom of his flipflops on the table, wiggling at her. A smile on his cracked lips, veiled behind his oily black mustache. A flipflop was the only thing that got away, and it was funny to him. The pink foam-plastic in the dust of the road beside the market, shining in the sun after the van sped off, the driver stepping on the gas while Chanthavy was still
stepping into the rusted side door, the flipflop falling from her foot, the soft brown of her calf, her leg naked to the hem of her cotton dress. Close enough for Davi to lunge for, close enough for her to reach. Close enough if she had lunged. If she had only reached. Davi remembered, and she rose from her seat, surprised even in her stupor at the difficulty.

"You've had too much to drink," the policeman was saying, beside her, now behind her as she crossed the cantina floor. "You are not used to the local beer, perhaps. Too much time at sea."

"Sick bastard," Davi said, softly as she walked toward the man in the hat. Only she could hear these words, but even though they were secret words, they raced through her, and she felt committed to them. She said them louder, "Sick bastard," and then they were real and there was no turning back.

Closer, she could still see only the mustache and the dark outline of the man's jaw. His feet came off the table as she neared, and Davi saw this as a sign of guilt. He was going to run, as he always had. He would make it to his boat, and she would lose him again, until he chose to return, to taunt her again. Closer yet, and the man stood. The floor felt uneven and Davi stumbled as she crossed the cantina. She felt herself smiling, her hands battened into fists. The man's hat swiveled from side to side, as he looked for an escape. He moved to one side of the table. Davi let her weight carry her toward him. She was falling down, but she was walking. He moved to the other side of the table, and she staggered that way. No thoughts about the beer anymore, about exhaustion, about why the room was so unsteady, why the ache deep in her joints. The man's hand went to
his mouth, wiped downward, reflexive, as he made a choice, left or right. She lunged. He chose left.

Davi thought she must have closed her eyes as she grabbed. She felt denim cloth in her hand, some part of his open shirt. She felt jostled, but she didn't feel the pain of her head striking the wall, or her ribs on the corner of the chair. The man's shirt was no longer in her hand. Someone pulled the back of her sweatshirt, and she was standing again. The policeman was shouting at her, hollering again from the end of his tunnel. Too much time at sea. Go back to your boat. Go back to your boat and sleep it off. Then words in Spanish, farther back in the pipe, consoling rhythms of words, spoken close to the ear. Not in Davi's ear. No one was consoling Davi. The response of de nada, de nada. The domed lid of a straw hat facing her as the man looked down, wiping spilled beer into his shirt. The waiter maneuvered Davi into the street, and then she was walking toward her boat, then rowing, then crouching unsteadily in front of the vent, pretending everything was all right as she cooed for Alex.

She woke sometime in the night, to the rocking of the boat, the waves rolling now steadily into shore from the northeast. She remembered lunging for the man in the hat, but the thought of it was too horrifying for her to process in her half-sleep, too much like a nightmare. She let her mind follow the thought far enough to reveal that it made no sense, and then she covered it in darkness, pulled her sleeping bag higher around her neck. Still, she was cold, and her body convulsed with shaking. She forced her muscles to relax, but they seized again, and shook harder than before, relaxing only for the brief moments that she drifted back into something like sleep, dreaming then of the man with the mustache and straw hat, his mirrored glasses pointed at Peter, watching Peter as Peter
watched the boys flinging the Frisbee at the beach by their grandparents' house. In her

dream, she had the thing in her hand that Peter had taken from her and thrown into the
woods. She uncurled her fingers and found in her palm a baby bird, its head folded on
the broken stalk of its neck. Then there was the man's face, filling her mind, the cracked
lines of his dry lips, her own face bulbous in his glasses, the single black wires of his
whiskers poking from the wide pores of his skin. His mouth opened and he pushed in the
bird, the hair whorled on the backs of his fingers. He pulled it smoothly out, sucking the
meat from the bones, the skeleton like a tiny dinosaur, bleached white in the shoreline
sun. He held it pinched by the skull, its dangling body rattling beneath, and he pushed
with the meat of his fingertip a rose petal into its beak. So Davi passed the night, the
waves banging into the prow at her head, the wet halyard slapping against the mast.

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When Davi woke before dawn, she rose immediately from her bed, ignoring the
thick resistance of her arms and legs, her neck stiff from sleep or from the fall at the can-
tina. She remembered lunging for the man in the hat as something that had happened
once upon a time, not as something she had done the night before. She did not question
the logic. She thought only of hoisting her anchor, of raising her sail, of setting a course
west and racing away from Clipperton and Ex Culpa.

She slipped into long underwear and hoisted the suspenders of yellow rubber rain
pants over her shoulders. She zipped on a matching rubber jacket and went topside.
Rain pelted her face, loud against her wet-weather gear, as it blew in whipped by the
wind. The storm had not yet fully arrived, but it was close, blowing hard from the east.
The sky was not black, but neither was it lit. It had none of the translucence of air, look-
ing instead like a stone wall, rising at some unknown distance behind the rain, not too far away; everything seemed close now. Davi started the engine. It plugged away in neutral, a soft popping over the din of the storm's edge. She threaded her way along the port lifeline to the pulpit, where she bent down and pulled hard on the anchor rode. A long draw, and the boat began to plow through the waves toward the anchor. The chain felt warm in her hands as it rose from the sea, so cold were her fingers. She pulled again and again, and the warmth of the iron links helped the blood flow into her hands. But not into her shoulders, nor her back, which felt like the wall of stone she saw around her. She pulled until the rode ran straight down, vertically into the sea, and then the anchor broke free, the bow pivoting with off wind as she reeled in the last twenty feet of chain. She dropped the anchor into its locker and scurried back to the cockpit, her bow having already swung toward land. Only when she saw the boats piled on shore did she realize that the fishermen were not at sea, that they had not gone out because of the weather, but had instead pulled their boats from the bay. *Ex Culpa* was still anchored, pointing toward the open water, as if it wished to sail with Davi. She pushed the throttle forward until it was flat, turning the wheel four revolutions to the right, waiting for the boat to pick up enough speed to gain steerage, growing anxious as it drifted toward shore, helpless in the inertia of the waves. The alarm sounded on the depth meter, a pulsing blare warning of a nine-foot draft of water beneath the hull. Then of eight feet. Then seven. The boat began to turn. Six-point-eight, and the boat had swung almost parallel to shore. Six-point-five, and Davi felt the gritty vibration of sand scouring the bottom of her keel. The boat picked up speed, but not enough to force the bow into the wind. Six-point-three, and the mast began to lean toward shore, the grinding on the keel growing louder. Then a bit of
luck, a dropoff, and the boat righted. She made two and a half knots and the bow crept toward the open sea. But it was not enough. The boat slowed as it turned into the force of the wind, and the bow blew back toward shore. She picked it up to three knots and tried to turn toward sea again, but again the boat blew back around. She had crossed the bay now, toward *Ex Culpa*. She would have room for one last attempt before she would have to abort, to run to the bow and throw over the anchor. She angled slightly toward shore, off the wind, and worked back up to three knots, then four, and when she felt the bottom of the bay once more against the keel, she spun the wheel in her hands, smoothly, allowing the turn to begin, easing around the line of circumference, holding her momentum as the bow swung into the wind. *Ex Culpa* was two boat-lengths away, and then one. Her bow slowed, and she realized that if she didn't have enough speed, it would swing back, and strike the side of *Ex Culpa*. She saw a light glowing through *Ex Culpa*'s starboard portholes, and then a shadowed face. Her bow pointed now directly into the wind, but the wind pushed back and her boat stood frozen, balanced on the point of the incoming storm. Another second and she would swing back toward shore, her steerage lost again with the loss of her momentum. But as she watched *Ex Culpa*'s shadowed porthole, she saw that it was sliding aft, ever so slightly, and she knew that she was moving forward again. Her gauge showed half a knot, and then one, and then two, and then she was chugging out of the bay at two and a half knots, her bow rising on the face of the chop, and banging down into the troughs.

As soon as she cleared the bay, she locked the wheel and ran her storm jib, her smallest sail, up the forestay. Then she hoisted the main partway, its fabric flapping violently in the wind, the tethered boom shaking so hard that she thought that it might break.
free and knock her overboard as she tied the lines that would cripple the sail into a double reef, shrinking its surface so that it wouldn't overpower the boat, wouldn't heel it to the point of capsize. She worked as fast as she could, desperate for the bow to stay pointed into the wind until she'd finished, her shoulders aching, her arms numb and then burning, empty of blood and beginning to fail. She sweated as she worked, and the sweat lay trapped beneath her rain suit, the rain spitting down from the east, threatening to break into a blinding downpour. She would have to make it beyond the coral reef before the sky let go. She winched the sail taut, then released the steering wheel into her hands, turning it a quarter turn to the left, and letting the push of the wind bring the bow around, braking the spinning wheel with the butt of her palms when her compass reading bore north-northwest, a line just past the crescent island's tip, the line to the break in the reef.

For twenty minutes she sailed this line, the sweat cooling against her skin as she stood behind the wheel, pelted by waves of wind-driven rain, her body ossifying until any movement at all required great effort and resulted in great pain. The clouded ache in her head she attributed to the beer in the brown bottles. Her aching joints, to the exhaustion of the journey. Her confusion, to lack of sleep. She attributed none of these symptoms to the mosquito that had bitten her neck as she dropped anchor the day before, neither did she attribute her feverish sweat to this mosquito, neither the delirium that the fever increasingly brought with it. She knew for those twenty minutes only the pain of her body and the single thought that there was something that she had to understand. If only she could figure it out. There would be no realization, however, because the thought stopped there, where it rewound and repeated, her left hand clenching and unclenching.
with the rhythm of it. There was that pulse of thought, and there was her head turning aft every so many minutes to check her line. There was the leaning to port to look around the bow for the reef, until at once she was close enough to see the waves striking it, the fluid rolling of their submarine current broken and scattered into the air. Closer, she looked for the red nun and the green can, but the policeman was right, she saw only the splash and then the bulk of the wave passing over the reef. Occasionally, when a wave more massive ran over the reef, it left in its wake the bare coral, exposed to the air, a white flash passing away from her. Then Davi had a bit of luck for the second time that morning. As one of these large waves sucked the reef dry behind it, she saw the channel. She saw lying on the coral to the left of the gap the red nun, the green can to the right. She stood, despite the pain of the dengue fever that she did not know she had, and she adjusted her course north to the channel.

Parallel to the waves, Davi’s boat rocked from side to side, up and over the crests, down into the troughs. She saw now and then another glimpse of the bare reef, but was unable to see the channel or the marker buoys, and as the minutes passed and the spot she’d marked grew closer, she began to doubt her reckoning of its position, as she had no point of reference with which to compare it and to hold it still. A few boat-lengths from the reef, she adjusted her course to follow the reef’s contour, hoping to see the channel or the markers before she’d passed them. She was about to give up, knowing that the atoll would curve east and that she would have to tack across the wind and turn back south. She had already pulled the winch handle from its pocket, ready to reset the sail, when she saw the rusted conical tip of the red nun peeking above the water directly to her port. She released the mainsail and spun the wheel left, the boat turning, the main swinging out
to her port like a wing. She locked down the mainsheet, and ran toward the nun. A dead run in a fast sea being the most difficult point of sail to hold on course, however, the boat began to wander beneath her, sliding around on the tops of the waves that passed faster than the boat, pushing backward on her rudder, and her bow swung from side to side as she drifted in a sloppy line toward the reef.

She was only a boat-length away when she saw the red nun again. A tall wave had passed beneath her, had lifted her high and moved on ahead of her, obscuring the horizon for a moment as the next wave had begun to lift her from behind. The trough between the waves passed over the reef directly in front of her, and the tip of the red nun appeared as the water receded, appeared to Davi's horror on the starboard side of her bow, rather than on the port where it would have marked open water ahead. Instead, it told her that the channel was to her right, beginning with the red nun, and that ahead lay the reef, which, even as she processed her circumstance, opened in front of her, a white shelf of bone risen from the sea, so close that had she been standing in the bow pulpit, she could have jumped forward and stood on it.

Given no recourse, Davi remained in the cockpit, her mind turning back to the pulsing question of what she should understand, feeling that she had only seconds to understand it. But again there was no understanding, no flash of the epiphany for which she strove heedless of the fact that the epiphany could not be induced by physical crisis alone, could not be pushed into being by some outside circumstance. And so her mind simply pulsed faster, the fist-clenching need to understand, understand, understand, pulsing in a nonverbal, wringing way, as the wave behind her continued to lift her boat up and over the reef.
She was still trying to squeeze from her mind some great point of meaning ahead of the collision, when she realized that there would be no collision, that so massive had the wave been that her keel had carried cleanly over the reef. She watched the great wave roll across the open sea in front of her. She watched, and all the tension in her mind evaporated, the white-knuckle concentration collapsing with the end of the crisis. She felt again only the wracking pain in her joints, the throbbing of her head, the convulsive shaking of her fevered body. She set the steering vane and climbed achingly onto the bow, where she tied a dock line from the mainsail boom to the chrome railing of the port lifeline, a safety measure to guard against the boom swinging aft, if the wind were to wander to the lee and back the mainsail. She stumbled down the companionway steps, glancing once behind her at the blue-black mass of the storm, before inserting the three wooden boards that would seal her inside the cabin. Lightning arced through the clouds every few seconds, but the storm seemed otherwise solid, almost motionless, its unimaginable mass creating this deceit as it raced toward Davi and her thirty-foot sloop.
The ceiling of clouds had been dropping steadily, the high light-gray of morning descending into a swirling low mass of charcoal and smoke. The rain came just as Mary took off the stovetop the dinner she'd cooked, putting it into the oven to keep warm until Peter arrived. He should have been there by now. But then he probably hadn't left when he'd said he would. He'd sounded tired when Mary had called. He'd been asleep, she was sure. When she asked hadn't he left yet, he seemed at first not to understand. "No," he said, finally. "I'm leaving now."

"Are you feeling okay?" she asked.

"Yeah. Fine."

"Just tired, huh?"

"No," he said, and she could feel the resistance in his voice, the irritability."

Okay, sweetie. I'll see you around seven, then. I'll have dinner ready."

"Okay," he said. "I just need to pack my meds. They're all mixed up."

"Why?"

"I don't know. I wasn't doing them. Beth was."

"Isn't she still doing it?"

"She's not here."
"Well just bring them, and bring your weekly containers. We'll sort them out here. We're supposed to get a bad rain tonight, and I don't want you to get caught in it."

"Okay."

"I love you," she said before hanging up. And he said he loved her, too, the automatic response she'd heard so many hundreds of times from her children. She was sure that even if Peter had been asleep, he would have said those same words, in that same quick tone, a pavlovian response that she had nurtured in her children ever since they had begun to talk.

At seven-thirty, Mary called Peter's house, foolsed only for an instant by the clear tone of his hello on the answering machine, fooled for that moment into thinking both that he was safe at home, and that he sounded great. "Pete, this is your mother," she said. "I'm just getting worried. Call me if you're still there."

At eight, Karl was setting bread and sliced ham on the counter. "I'm hungry," he said. "You said we'd eat at seven." Mary and he had hardly spoken in the last two days. She had been out of the house, glad to have two shifts in a row at the thrift shop. On her first shift, she'd been scheduled with Cindy, on her second, with Bill. She arrived early on that second morning at the thrift shop. She turned on the lights and put the starting cash in the register. She was about to make coffee, when she had the thought that Bill might be bringing coffee and doughnuts, that this might be why he wasn't there yet at five minutes to ten. She was standing in front of the dressing-room mirror, her hands on her hair, when, exactly at ten o'clock, the bolt clicked on the back door, and Mrs. Kloosterman walked in.

Mary's hands fell to her sides, and she stepped away from the mirror.
“Mr. Collins asked me to cover for him,” the woman said.

“Oh, okay,” Mary said, as if she had hardly noticed with whom she would be work­ing, as if she hardly cared.

“He's at Timberly Acres,” Mrs. Kloosterman said, "with his wife."

Mary nodded. She had put the sales counter between herself and Mrs. Kloosterm­
man, and she slid open the showcase door and fussed with the jewelry—tarnished silver, cracked turquoise, watch movements with no bands, bands with no watches.

Without discussing it, Mrs. Kloosterman left Mary on the sales floor, while she worked in the back. Sales were slow, and Mary stood behind the counter and watched the clock, while Mrs. Kloosterman carried loads of autumn clothes up from the base­
ment, summer shorts and skirts down. She steamed and folded and priced, changing nearly the entire seasonal inventory in her three-hour shift. When the afternoon volun­teers arrived, she instructed them how to finish the job. Mary walked out behind her, and when Mary said goodbye, Mrs. Kloosterman continued across the parking lot, only rais­ing a hand by way of acknowledgement, its back toward Mary.

At eight-thirty Mary told Karl that she was calling the state police.

"They're not going to do anything. You did this before, down at Pete's house. Re­member?"

"They can tell me if there have been any accidents between here and there."

Karl carried his sandwich into the living room, and Mary dialed the state police. Ten minutes later they called her back with no reports of injuries or stranded motorists on the highways.
"Well this is ridiculous," Mary said to Karl. "We need to look for him. Let's drive to the freeway exit. Maybe he's broken down between here and there. You know that car he drives."

"I'm eating a sandwich!" Karl said. His feet were up on an ottoman, the television turned on in front of him. "You're not going to find him on the side of the road. If he breaks down, he'll get to a phone."

"Listen to it out there," Mary said, the din of rain rumbling on the roof and running off the eaves. "If you're not going with me, then I'm going alone."

Karl didn't respond, and Mary put on a raincoat.

"Okay," he said.

They drove slowly, the wipers on high, Karl behind the wheel, and Mary straining to see through the downpour. By the time they reached the highway, the dusk had turned to night.

"Just go slow on the way back," Mary said. "If he's in the ditch, we might miss him."

"We're not going to miss him. Do you know what the chances are that he ran off the road on this stretch between us and the freeway?"

"I don't know the chances. I don't care. I have to do something."

Mary's heart thrummed at every mailbox reflector. She saw the shape of Peter's car in a fallen tree, in a cluster of garbage cans. She looked away from the bloated carcass of a deer, its legs twisted into impossible angles. When they reached the house, she tried to talk Karl into continuing. "Maybe he passed the house, and something happened before he realized he'd gone to far."
"This is crazy. We're not going to find him. We're just going to have to wait until he shows up, or until we hear something. You can call the hospitals, if it'll make you feel any better, but you're not going to find him by driving around all night in the rain."

"Well he passed the house last time he came up."

"We don't know that. He went too far somewhere, but I sure couldn't figure where the heck he'd been. He said he went too far on thirty-seven, but that doesn't make any sense. Thirty-seven ends at the—"

"Do we really need to rehash this? If you won't go with me, then fine. But I'm going."

"Suit yourself," Karl said, putting the car in park and leaving the engine running. "I did come out with you, though. I just don't think it makes sense to go looking in the wrong direction."

"Fine. I know. You went with me. Just stay by the phone, okay?"

"I still think you're wasting your time."

"Please," Mary said. "Just listen for the phone."

Karl opened the door and lumbered through the rain toward the house, a long-stride gait, as close to a run as his physique would allow. Mary slid over to the driver's seat, backed out of the drive and headed down the road away from the village, in the opposite direction from the highway.
Davi shed her rain coat, heavy with water, and dropped the pants' suspenders from her shoulders. She pulled her feet from the rubber pile around her ankles and left the suit where it lay. Her long underwear were soaked, despite the foul-weather gear, and she stripped them off, too. She lit her alcohol burner and put on a kettle of water for tea, the hinged stove rocking as the waves rolled under the boat. She took several aspirin and pulled her sleeping bag from the fore birth to the salon bench, where she lay when her tea was ready, hoping that she would soon find warmth. After half an hour, her shaking stopped, but the penetrating chill changed just as quickly to profuse sweating. She could feel the slick of sweat between herself and the sleeping bag, which dampened and clung to her skin. Still, she didn't think that she needed medical help. She thought very little now beyond the fact of heat and cold and pain. The sole thought that penetrated these—the thought of sleep. She only needed rest. She would feel better after a nap. Then the thought appeared that she was now the captain of the lead boat. But that drifted from her mind as quickly as it had come, and she was back to the pain of her fever.

Twice, she saw the cabin around her as if it hadn't been there a moment ago, as if she'd been somewhere else, though she had no recollection of where she had been.

Although the tea did not warm her, it kept her awake. She remembered the storm behind her, and though she knew that it was a problem, that it must be addressed, she
could not conceive of going back topside, of reading the conditions, of making a decision, choosing a course and sitting at the wheel to see it through, as she would have to if she turned her boat broadside to the waves. Because she could not conceive of taking this action, she relegated the problem to something theoretical. It read in her mind as a story problem, an equation that she could sit down and figure out if she decided to, but that she could set aside for later, or for never, if she wished. She remembered Peter's story then, his letter tucked into her backpack. She sat up, reached painfully for the bag and pulled from it the envelopes that she'd picked up the previous day in the police station at Clipperton.

The top letter was from her mother. This, she set aside. The other two were from Peter, one slightly larger than the other, a padded manila envelope bearing a stamp on its envelope: PHOTOS, DO NOT BEND. She could feel the soft thickness of bubble wrap padding. The third envelope was his standard stationery. The postmark date showed that the photos had been mailed on the same day as his previous letter. The new letters—both Peter's and her mother's—had been mailed more recently. She didn't care about the order, however. She only wanted to hear what Peter had to say, and so, as the boat rose and fell along the contours of the growing waves, its hull creaking, gear clattering in the hanging lockers, she tore open the letter and unfolded the stationery.

Davi,

How could she do it, Davi? How could she? She took him from me, Davi. He's gone. Alex is gone. She came again while I was out. I don't know how she still gets in. I changed the locks. She must have come through a window. What am I going to do? I
don't even know if she has him, or if she just let him out. I looked for him all night. For all I know, she scared him half to death, and he's hiding in some dumpster. I can't stand thinking about him out there. He won't know what to do. I'm going back out tonight. I just can't believe it. How could she do it, Davi? What have I ever done to her?

I'm going back out to look. I'll write again.

Peter

Davi refolded the letter. She could hardly breathe. She slipped the letter back into its envelope and stashed it in her navigation desk, where Peter's other letters lay in their opened envelopes. The waves had grown so tall that now her boat rose for great lengths of time sideways up the front swells, turning at the top and sliding backward down the wave's back, the stern digging into the sea at the bottom. She could hear the water breaking over the cockpit, washing over the boards that sealed the companionway, and sliding back out the rear of the boat. In another ten minutes, she thought, her boat would capsize, would dig its stern deep into a trough and pitchpole backward.

As she read the letter, however, she didn't care about the boat. She didn't think to care. The muscles of her jaw ached from convulsing with fever. Her body ached from the virus, which burrowed deep into her joints, cemented. She rolled onto her side and curled her knees to her chest. She closed her eyes. And there was Peter, more clear than the cabin around her, shifting as it was with the motion of the storm and the hallucinatory effects of her fever. He was in the twin bed at their grandparents' house, lying just as she lay now, looking at her through one eye, the other swollen shut, not recognizable as an eye, his face not recognizable as Peter's face, only his right eye proving what she'd hoped
wasn't true, proving that Peter was behind that mask. She opened her own eyes, moved sluggishly back to the reality of the boat. A cabinet door burst open and canned goods fell sideways across the tipping cabin. She closed her eyes again, back to the vision of Peter, hearing now the wet sounds of his breathing, the water squeezing its way between the companionway slats, the rain falling, pelting an emaciated Peter as he stood dripping in the amber glow of a streetlight, shaking a can of cat treats and calling for Alex.

Davi opened her eyes and reached for her rain gear, crying out as she extended her resistant arm, the pain so great after having allowed it to curl against herself. She straightened her other arm, her legs. She worked her feet into the wet rubber of her rain pants. She pulled on the jacket, each move more endurable than the last, not for an easing of pain, but for the foresight to expect it, and for the knowledge that she had to act in spite of it, that she had to turn the boat around, had to get back to Clipperton, to a telephone, to Peter.

Over her rain suit, she strapped on her harness and lobster claws, the two three-foot lines tipped in carabiners, and she waited at the companionway for the next wave to crash backward over the boat. As soon as it happened—three lines of spray pushing through the cracks—she pulled away the boards and heaved herself into the cockpit.

Even knowing what to expect, having felt it for the past half hour in the cabin, Davi was overwhelmed by what she saw. The waves rose far taller than her mast, and steeper than she had imagined, not the low humpbacks that she thought she'd find, but folds of water, one of which was just now hitting her stern and pushing her boat sideways as it lifted it from the bottom of the trough, the leaden sheet of cloud overhead so low that it seemed suspended on the tips of the swelling sea.
She clipped one of the lobster claws to the port jackline, as she stepped onto the deck and untied the safety line that she'd attached in order to hold the boom out to the boat's side. She unclipped the lobster claw, slid back to the steering wheel and attached the claw to the binnacle that held the wheel. She disengaged the now ineffective autopilot, turning the wheel until the rudder was straight. She turned toward the wave, but her boat would not come about, the wave pushing her sideways, her mast heeling away and tipping toward the sea. The sound of the sea was the sound of madly rushing water, of a waterfall, of a passenger train, but as loud as it was, she could hear, overhead, the roar and scream of the easterly wind, unbroken above the crests of the waves. She locked the steering wheel, and winched in the limp mainsail, restricting the movement of the boom in anticipation of the wind that would catch it when she crested the wave. Then she waited, climbing slowly higher, the wave's downward force pushing now on her keel, her boat righting itself as it rose. The tip of her mainsail reached the summit, and the wind funneled down, filling its loft. She rose higher, and the sail caught the wind in earnest, the crack of a whip as the fabric snapped taut. Forty knots or more, she thought. Fifty. Her bow fought against the push of the wave and the drag of the rudder, as the overpowered mainsail pulled the stern around, pivoting the bow toward the storm, back toward Clipperton. By the time she reached the top of the wave, she was pointed directly into the wind, in irons, her sails flapping madly, the boom banging against the vang that yoked it to the transom. Atop that wave, she saw the sea, and it was dreadful.

There was no recognizable horizon, only banks of pulsing waves, rising and subsiding in front of her, one reaching high above the others, only to disappear behind the mass of another, which rose up in response, the howls of wolves bawling up at the low sky. The
waves further into the storm ahead darkened, broke into spray. Hundreds of swells of water, too big to be called waves anymore, each one a mountain that she must scale. It was too much, the burning in her muscles, the pain in her joints, the confusion of everything around her, reaching through the veil of her fever in isolated pieces. There was the wheel in her stiff fingers. There was the roar of the wind and sea. There was the ache in her shoulders. There were all these shards of reality slicing her, death by a thousand cuts. And there was the storm between herself and Clipperton, this the knife that might at any moment mercifully cut a critical artery, roll her into the sea and end the torture. She should sit down there and wait to be drowned, she thought, spare herself the pain of the fight.

As the bow dipped, however, and the boat charged down the slope of the wave, she gripped the wheel tight and guided it straight. The prow would burrow into the water at the bottom, she knew, but as long as she was able to keep the boat pointed straight into the weather, as long as she didn't let herself get broadside, it would pull itself up and out of the sea. The bottom came fast, her gauge reading twelve knots, and when she reached the trough, the bow crashed into the sea, the boat froze for a moment, and then the bow threw back its head, sending a wash of water over the deck and into the cockpit, where it overwhelmed the aft drains, a wave of it sloshing forward again, through the companionway and into the cabin.

In the trough, Davi was once again out of the direct wind, and she took advantage of this half-minute in the lee of the next wave to veer back off the point, out of irons, and her sails filled erratically with the swirling wind. If she could go north, she thought, she might ride out of the worst of it, and then tack toward Clipperton. But she couldn't
imagine the ride, the half-minute intervals of progress north between the waves, between
the epic struggle that was the cresting of a single wave in this storm. How many times
could she endure it? But before she could think long enough to make another plan or to
give up altogether, the next wave was upon her. She crested this, the sails once again tearing
at their lines, flapping wildly, and she saw once again the howling landscape of the
sea. She fell down the back of that swell, buried her nose again into the trough and
scooped up another prowfull of water, this time enough to knock her off her feet, the
static line of her lobster claw halting her as the water washed her backward, her legs sliding beneath the railing of the stern pulpit, her shins scraping across the boat's edge, her
feet dipping into the ocean. The boat turned sideways then, the wind shifting into the
sails, and the mast dipped down, so low that its tip threaded across the rising water that
she'd just descended, the force of the current resonating in the mast and in the shrouds, a
harmonic moan that sounded to Davi like the voice of the sea, raised above the surface by
the stylus of her mast, resurrected like Edison's voice on his tin cylinder, like Peter's
through the graphite tip of his pencil. It was not the shrill shriek of the wind, but a deep
and powerful hum, a sound that she felt as much as she heard, that entered her body
through the palms of her hands as she pushed herself up from the fiberglass floor. Still on
her knees, bracing against the bench in the heeling cockpit, she spun the wheel to port,
windward, and when the boat straightened, the mast breaking free from the sea, she
heard that Alex had joined the moan, yowling in long pulls from somewhere deep in the
cabin.

She rode two more waves, slowly up the faces, skidding down the backs and swamping in the troughs, bracing herself now for the backlash of water. She knew already that
she could not keep it up, that if she didn't capsize and roll, she would fall where she was, tethered to the pulpit and slowly drown, one choking wave at a time. She began then to decide if she would martyr herself in this way; this slow death as she tried to get back to Peter, to tell him that she had his cat, that Alex was fine. It seemed somehow appealing to her, staying at the wheel, fighting with the sea, her mind thoroughly occupied on the task at hand. But there was something even more seductive about this martyrdom. It was not just movement, not just stimulus, not even just action happening around Davi, but it was Davi acting, Davi rushing to help, Davi to the rescue. When she surfed down the next wave, she swamped again at the bottom, deep enough to send once more a force of water great enough to sweep her feet from beneath her, her legs once again scraping across the edge of the boat, the tether of her lobster claw catching her as she slid out the back. She might have thought that she couldn't do it then, that she would seal herself back into the cabin. She might have done that had Alex not decided that this swamping of his hiding places would be the last, that his time had come to leave the cabin.

Davi heard Alex yowl, not in fear this time, she could tell, but from the shock of being soaked with the last wave. Then he was scrambling out the companionway, Davi still on her stomach, halfway out of the boat, eye-level with the cat as he lost his footing and swirled with the remaining water around the cockpit floor. He caught himself, desperate enough to find purchase with his claws even in the hardened fiberglass. He looked frantically around for help, saw Davi, and cried once, a hopeless question of a cry. He looked up at the mainsail, and before Davi could try to reassure him, to coax him toward her, he leapt.
He caught the loose folds of the reefed sail in his front claws, pulled himself up, dug his hind claws in and bounded up the thin fabric. The boat pivoted once again, turning sideways as he climbed, the force of the broadside wind tearing the needlepoint perforations of his trail into long vertical slits, the fabric shredding into ribbons behind him as he raced to the head. He cried once at the tip of the shredded sail, and then he pulled himself up the mainsheet, climbing that rope until he reached the pulley at the tip of the mast. There, he opened his mouth, the tiny white points of his teeth visible to Davi, but the sound of his screams washed away with the wind.

She had been shouting no from the moment he leapt for the sail, and she shouted it still. She grabbed the wheel and pulled herself to her knees, squeezing hard on the curved metal, hoping to break it, wanting to break something, furious over the stupidity of the cat. Such a stupid thing to do, she thought. So stupid and self-destructive. "How could you?" she shouted at him. "How could you do that to yourself? How could you do that to me?"

The next wave was beginning to lift the boat, and with the halting of the hull's momentum, Davi could not point the bow into the wave. Neither could she gather any wind into the tattered sail to help pull the boat into line. Instead, the boat once again rode the wave sideways, but as large as the waves had been when she'd emerged from the cockpit, they had grown larger yet. The wall of water pushed the boat over, and the tip of the mast dipped once again into the wave, Alex disappearing with it into the sea. It happened so easily, such a smooth matter-of-fact motion that Davi could hardly believe that he had really been on the end of that mast, that he must still be belowdecks, hiding somewhere in the bilge and waiting for the storm to cease, waiting for Davi finally to rest, for her legs to
curl into a little home for the night. Then there was again the booming voice of the ocean transferred through the mast, not the angry sound of the storm, but a steady moan, a yawning stretch made frightening only by its size. The boat's keel succumbed to the downward pressure of the wave, and the boat righted, the mast breaking free from the water, Alex still there, blinking his eyes, his arched wet body hardly thicker than the mainsheet to which he clung, a living comma penciled into this frozen moment, no more yowling, all his concentration put to the task of staying alive.

Now Davi did not contemplate the role of hero, did not hesitate, did not tell herself that there was nothing she could do, that it wasn't her cat, wasn't her child, wasn't her life. She unclipped the lobster claw from the pulpit, scrambled to the mast, and with a carabiner in each hand began to climb, clipping onto every other rung as she rose. By her calculation, she had only a minute to get to Alex before the next wave pushed him into the sea for keeps.

When she reached the halfway point on the mast, the boat was careening down the back of the wave they'd been climbing, the ribbons of the sail flailing in the wind. When she was two-thirds of the way up, at the head of the reefed sail, the bow crashed into the trough. She had just been reaching to clip her untethered lobster claw, when the boat slammed to a halt, flinging her from the mast. The other claw was clipped to a rung at the height of her knees, and the attached static line halted her ejection from the mast and snapped her back, the left side of her chest striking the triangular point of a rung. Ignoring the pain, knowing that if she allowed herself to feel it she would be unable to continue, she pulled herself again up the ladder, as the boat pitched back up and out of the sea, tossing a swell of water over its back. She attached and released the claws as she
climbed, while beneath her the boat pivoted sideways and rose up the face of the next wave, heeling as it went, the mast ever closer to the sea.

Three rungs away from Alex, she could hear him spitting at her. Two rungs, and she could hear a growl, full from his chest. One, and his wet fur stood out, his tail a bushy mass. She grabbed him, feeling the force of his claws tearing free from the mainsheet, feeling as well a sudden downward pull of the mast, and knowing immediately that the side rail had been overrun, that the boat was being swamped. She pulled Alex to her chest, his claws digging home, and together they crashed into the sea.

There was sound beneath the surface, but not the raging violence of the storm. Neither was the sound the harmonic moan that Davi's mast had reproduced above the surface. The sound was like that moan in its steady push, unmistakably the progenitor of that reproduction, but as different from that as falling through the sky is from looking at a picture of the sky. Davi felt the pressure in her ears of all the oceans in all the world. She felt the push of it on her chest as the boat rolled, and she, on the end of the mast, rolled around it, deep into the sea. She felt also the tiny pressures of Alex' claws puncturing her flesh, until she felt first one and then another of his claws break loose. She was off the mast then, dragged along by the umbilical cord of her harness. Her arms were wrapped around Alex, but as his claws tore loose, his limp body slipped free. The last of his claws let go, and she saw, through the darkening haze of water, his small gray form sliding away from her, a shadow disappearing into the sea. Saltwater filled her mouth, and she swallowed it, too exhausted to resist. She breathed it into her lungs, her body filled with fluid, and she closed her eyes. Her mind failed to register hope or despair, of no concern now the possibility that the boat might right or might not right. One thought only occupied
the remaining fragment of her consciousness, this single small thought making all the difference to Davi—I tried.
CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

August 23, 1987

44° 43’ 29” N, 85° 50’ 53” W

Reynolds Road, Cedar Lake, Michigan

Even with her wipers on high, Mary had a hard time seeing the road. There were no lines on the shoulder, and she hugged the yellow dashes in the center. The broken line was badly faded, however, and she struggled to keep sight of it, while also searching the ditch and the forest's edge. Again, the reflectors on the mailboxes tricked her. A car sped toward her and blew past, driving much too fast for the weather. She squinted into the rearview mirror, trying to determine if its taillights resembled those of Peter's car. She wished now that she had forced Karl to come with her, so that she could concentrate on her search, while he drove.

The road Mary was on covered a five-mile stretch, where it T'ed into another country road. Once she reached that intersection, she would have to give up and turn around, hoping that Peter had arrived while she was out. She was halfway there when the taillights of a car, parked on the shoulder, reflected in her headlights. She gripped the wheel tighter and hunched forward. It's a wagon, she thought. It can't be Peter. As she crept toward it, however, she twice convinced herself that it wasn't a wagon. But it was. She drove on, seeing nothing more until she saw ahead, outlined in reflective white, the red octagon of the stop sign that marked the end of the road. She was unsure whether she should feel disappointed or relieved, when she saw, past the stop sign, on the far side of the intersecting road, a pair of taillights poking up over the lip of the ditch.
She felt that she was floating out of her seat then, and the steering wheel seemed to disappear from her hands. She felt as if she'd been wrapped in gauze, disconnected from the scene, buffered. She didn't feel as if she were driving, but she must have been, for she found herself parked on the shoulder behind the other car, whose taillights might be Peter's. Its nose was in the ditch, the headlights still on, lighting the undersides of the bracken ferns, the ends of their fronds clear silhouettes, curling back into themselves as they died.

She opened the door and stepped into the rain. Without the distortion of the wet windshield, she could see that it was Peter's car. She ran to the lip of the ditch and saw that the driver's side door was open, and that Peter was lying half out of the car, his head propped on the armrest of the open door. She ran forward, slipped in the mud and slid feet-first toward her son. Her legs slid under the car, and she lay in the mud beneath him. She grabbed him, and his weight fell upon her—such a small, small weight. "Peter," she said, "can you hear me? It's Mom."

"Close the window," he said. "It's raining."

"I'll close the window, sweetie. Just hang on."

"Close it now. The cat will get out."

She saw then the gash on the top of his head, the blood, black in the shadow of the night, welling up and thinning in the rain as it spread through his frail hair. She clamped her hands over the wound. "Oh no you don't," she said. "Do you hear me? Not like this. Not in this muddy ditch. Not in this broken down old car." The light shifted then, and she heard the popping air brakes of a tractor trailer pulling onto the shoulder of the road beside them.
A beam reach describes the point of sail in which the wind is approaching the boat from a ninety-degree angle—off the beam. For most modern sailboats, the beam reach is the most efficient point of sail.
Pain woke Davi, and when she opened her eyes, the world was upside down. She didn't know how long she'd been unconscious. It seemed like a long time, but in fact it had only been the moment between one wave and the next. The pain of the dengue fever she still felt, but this had not been the pain that had awoken her. Rather, it had been a pain that emanated from her lower back, where the webbed harness bit into her spine and hips, a fulcrum from which her legs balanced on one side, and her torso on the other, heavier and dipping toward the sea, the hills of water now valleys, the troughs now jagged hollow hills. Her stomach convulsed, and a wash of seawater poured from her mouth, one time weakly, then more violently, a taste of blood, but only that, a taste, not a death. This was not dying, she knew. This was something else. She reached for the static lines and pulled herself up, a shot of pain in her lower back as she rose, and then she knew where she was, dangling from the tip of the mast, the waves still coming, another roll imminent.

She found a rung with her right foot, but she could not yet stand, her leg numb and clumsy, tingling with the return of circulation. The next wave was pushing the boat broadside, and she knew that she couldn't wait for the blood to return. She put her left foot on the rung below her right, the static in her feet turning to needles where the rungs traversed their soles, and by the marker of this pain she worked her way down the mast,
finding one rung and then the next, clipping and unclipping the lobster claws, until she stood on the deck. She waited until she crested the wave, still upright, and then she unclipped from the mast, stumbled into the cockpit, and pulled herself through the companionway hatch.

The cabin was flooded knee deep, charts and papers and canned food and plastic dishes, flotsam on the surface. She scrambled to find the wooden slats among the debris, and she fitted them into place. She found a spoon still in the silverware drawer, stuck the handle in the hasp and bent it to hold it in place. She flipped the switch that opened the battery current, and though the lights did not work, the bilge pump did, the small pump beating fast as the one-way valves opened and closed, pushing the seawater from the cabin. She pulled the wet cushions from the fore berth and lay on the plywood, convulsing with fever until her consciousness left her, and her body relaxed.

She did not know how long the storm raged outside. The boat rolled two more times, and each time she huddled closer to the tip of her triangular berth, where the commotion was the least. The cabin darkened, and the motion eased, and though Davi was not capable of realizing that the storm had passed, she did know that she could relax, that there would be no more rolling. She didn't think that she would live or not live, only that she could sleep.

#

Davi heard the crack of splitting wood. She heard voices, though she could not make out words. There was motion, and then there was the light of day, as she was pulled from the cabin, laid on the cockpit floor. From her back, she saw above her the green uniform and thin body of the policeman from Clipperton. She saw another man
standing opposite him, in conversation, the dark tan of his raised arm pointing across the
deck, a clean khaki shirt, pleated pockets on the breast, the angular line of a strong jaw,
black stubble and a mustache, the round brim of a hat. The man was shouting now at
the policeman, and Davi tried to speak, to tell the policeman to arrest the man in the hat.
Her mouth was moving, but she couldn't hear herself. The man in the hat continued
shouting, and the policeman was shaking his head and shouting back. Then Davi was on
another boat, lying beneath a blanket in the open bow, the whine of a modern engine and
the boat moving fast, slapping the tops of the waves.

#

Davi knew she was alive. She knew that a sheet was tucked to her shoulders, knew
that the clear plastic tube connected a bag of saline fluid to a vein in her forearm. She
didn't know where or when she was. Sound came to her, and she sorted it into the sounds
of a street, of a harbor. The room around her was mint green, an open window with
white curtains fluttering in a warm breeze. She had not been warm in so long that she
could think of nothing more that she wanted.

She deciphered from the sounds of the street that the language was Spanish, that a
market was nearby, even that fishermen were cleaning their catch outside her window,
and she knew that she was back in Clipperton. She lay in the bed for half an hour, aches
and pains only slowly nibbling away at the contentment of being warm and dry. Her
lower back gained her attention first, throbbing, then her ribs and her neck. One of her
fingers, surely broken, was in a splint. A bandage covered a pulsing pain in her jaw. But
it was thirst that caused her to call out for someone, a raspy voiceless groan, just loud
enough to bring the nurse who sat at a desk in the open-air lobby beneath Davi. When
she saw that Davi was awake, the nurse hurried from the room, and returned with a man in a white jacket.

"I am Doctor Pelaez," he said, touching the inside of her wrist. "Don't move. Wait." He put the ends of his stethoscope into his ears, touched the disk of it on her chest and stomach. He pressed his fingers against her ribs, pushed on the sides of her abdomen. He tickled the bottoms of her feet, asked her to squeeze his hand. He told her about her dengue fever, that she could expect to feel fatigued for another several weeks, but that there should be no lasting damage. He told her that she had two cracked ribs and a broken finger. "You've had a very bad experience," he said. "You're lucky to be alive."

Davi's next visitor was the police officer. He had a single flower in his hand, which he dropped into the glass of water by Davi's bed. "That's quite an eye," he said.

Davi's fingers lifted to her eye, a thousand needles of pain as she touched it. The policeman held up a steel medical tray as a mirror, and she saw the damage, the tissue around her left eye red and swollen, a network of broken blood vessels covering it like a fine blue spiderweb. He put the tray back down. "This is a nice room," he said. "You have a good breeze here. Sea air. An islander's secret."

He pulled a metal chair to her bedside and sat. "So. The fisherman are not stupid, no? They are old men, you see. The stupid fishermen are long gone. Lost at sea. Like you should be. You are a very lucky lady."

Davi wanted people to stop calling her lucky. She wanted to say that she didn't feel lucky, but that wasn't true. She did feel lucky. Only the feeling made her uneasy, something unfair about it, something wrong. Peter. "I need to make a phone call," she said.
"Yes, you do. You must call your mother. She called here yesterday morning, after you left. I think she is a nice lady, but she sounded very upset. She was shouting at me."

He leaned back in his chair, his face turned toward the window. "I didn't mind. A woman has to shout sometimes."

For several minutes, the policeman sat in the chair, eyes closed, taking in the breeze that came from the window. Then he stood. "When you feel strong enough, come to the station, and we'll put a call through to America."

"Thank you," Davi said. "For coming after me."

"Don't thank me. Thank your mother. She's a hard woman to say no to. She would not let me off the phone until I promised to look for you." When he was at the door, he turned. "And for your boat, you can thank the captain of Ex Culpa. I would have let the sea have it. It's anchored in the bay," he said, pointing to the window.

"Is he gone?"

The policeman nodded. "Come to the station when you're ready. We'll call your mother."

#

Two days later, Davi was on a four-seater Cessna, lifting off from a crumbling airstrip on the ridge of the island. As the plane rose and circled toward the mainland, she saw the entire atoll, the green crescent of the island trailing into a perfect circle of coral, an opal ring just beneath the ocean's surface. She saw the tiny break on the western edge, the channel where she had slipped out two days earlier.

At the airport in Panama City, she booked a ticket to Detroit, and six hours later she was flying over the Gulf. There had been a window seat available—one more stroke of
luck. The flight was crowded with tourists returning from cruises, and the atmosphere in the plane was loose and friendly, passengers talking across the aisles and seat backs, sharing stories of fluorescent reefs and barracuda. Davi breathed shallowly, a hot pain in her ribs with each breath, more painful with every hour that she sat in the upright passenger seat. She kept her eyes out the window, even after the sun had set and there was little to see, the blinking light on the wingtip drowning out the stars.
Rudy held the side of Davi's face when he saw her at the airport, turning her head so that he could better examine her eye, which had darkened from the swollen red that she had awoken with in the hospital, to a deep, shiny black. “Holy shit,” he said. “Now that's a black eye. You don't mess around, do you, kid?”

“If you're going to do it …” Davi said.

Rudy took her backpack from her, loaded it into his trunk and they drove north, toward his house, a condominium on the edge of the harbor in Davi's hometown, a small town on a bay of Lake Michigan. "Christ, it's strange having them there," her father said. "I thought it was crazy when your mother and I greeted you at the door for Christmas! Did you ever think we'd all be together in one house again? Hell, I'm not even in that house six months out of the year." The drive was four hours, and he offered a brief update on Peter, letting Davi know that her brother was bedridden, and that he'd stopped eating and drinking two days earlier. "He's not really there anymore," he said. "Your mother talks to him like he is, but I don't see it." They spent the next hour talking about Davi's sailing, and as usual about the places around the world that they'd both visited. When they ran out of places, Davi watched the countryside change from an urban landscape, to the farmland of southern Michigan, to the northern forests. In the past, her anxiety had always increased as she moved through these stages toward home, but now
she felt something else, a heat that moved her just as much, but that drew her in instead of repelling her.

"I wish you wouldn't have come back," Rudy said.

"Why?" Davi asked, turning from the window to face her father.

"He's not going to know you're here. You know that, don't you?"

"I don't care. I had to come back. Pete's dying, Dad."

"You knew that when you left," Rudy said, lifting his hands from the steering wheel.

Davi looked again out the window. "I know," she said.

"You weren't planning to come back for this."

"I know."

"You were doing damned well in that race."

"I know, Dad."

"I just hate to see you give that up."

They'd been passing through a town as they talked. It was just a slow spot in the road, two blocks long, one blinking yellow traffic light. There was an event going on at the firehouse. The two trucks had been pulled from their bays, and a crowd of people milled around cafeteria tables that had been set up for a lunch. A fireman in full gear was on one truck, conducting a tour for a group of children.

"I didn't know why I was out there," Davi said.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that. I've just been running, you know?"

"That's a hell of a lot better than sitting still."

"Maybe. I'm not sure."
"Well I am. Look at those people at that fire station. That's probably the big event of the year for them."

"It looks fun."

"You don't really believe that. You think you do right now, but, trust me, you're better off running."

"Not if I don't know why."

"No one knows why, Davi. You just live. You go." They passed the blinking yellow light, Rudy sped up, and the town fell away behind them.

Davi had never been to her father's condominium. It was in a complex of gray buildings on the edge of the marina, carports in the back, small decks overlooking the water on the opposite side. The condo had come furnished, and it looked to Davi more like a hotel suite than a home.

Mary came in from the deck to greet them. "Oh, that eye!" she said. "You're going to give your mother a heart attack. Do you know that?"

"I don't think so," Davi said. "By the time you find things out, they're already over."

"Your brother will be surprised to see you," Mary said.
"Doesn't he know I'm coming?"

Mary shrugged. "He forgets things."

A bouquet of flowers stood on a coffee table in the living room, another on the small round dining-room table, a helium balloon suspended above it, "Get well soon" stretched across its skin.

Rudy sat on the deck, reading a magazine article about Bulgaria, his next destination, while Mary fixed Davi a sandwich and sat with her as she ate. Four chairs ringed the dining-room table, but Davi couldn't imagine four people's place settings fitting on its diminutive round top.

"So how does it feel to be back on dry land?" Mary asked.

"It's okay, considering I ache all over. I still feel my sea legs, though. When I'm not moving, everything sort of slides around beneath me."

"I feel that way lately, and I haven't even been on a boat!"

Davi took a bite of her sandwich, a slice of cucumber cold on her tongue. She hadn't had a sandwich with cucumber since the last time her mother had made one for her. She even tasted a hint of the black pepper that her mother knew she liked. "How is he?" Davi asked.

"Oh," her mother began, drawing out the sound as she thought of what she might say.

"Really, Mom. How is he?"

Mary shook her head. "Maybe a day or two," she said. "I don't think he'll last much longer. Why don't you go in and surprise him when you're done eating."
"I will," Davi said, the cucumbers not so cool now, not so crisp, the soft center of a slice disintegrating on the tip of her tongue. "Why didn't you bring Peter to your house?" she asked, already knowing the answer, only wanting to hear how her mother phrased it.

"You know Karl. I just thought it would be easier if we weren't there. I can have more time with Pete this way." Davi could see the lie in Mary's wide eyes. She shook her head, and Mary shrugged. "What can I do? He is who he is."

"Holy shit," Rudy said, turning toward the screen door. "Did you know that in Bulgaria they eat goats' testicles on pizza? Now that's truly a meatball."

"Go see him, Davi," Mary said. "He's in the room at the end of the hall."

Davi nodded. She stood and breathed deeply. "My sea legs," she said, and she kissed her mother's forehead. "They don't like this."

"I know," Mary said.

Considering the efficient floor plan of the apartment, Davi's walk down the hall seemed to her very long. She passed her father's bedroom on the left, a suitcase open on the floor in the corner, clothes spilling over its lip. She passed the guest bedroom on the right, her mother's suitcases closed and lined against the wall, her clothing tucked away, Davi knew, in drawers and on hangers in the closet. She passed a bathroom, and she passed a third bedroom, unused, not even footprints disturbing the tracks of a vacuum cleaner that had run over it however long ago. At the end of the hall, outside the room she'd never seen, Davi stopped. Had Peter been behind the camera, he would have taken the shot from above, top down, camera on a boom, parents frozen in stage pantomime behind her, and the black square of the unseen room ahead. There was Davi, twenty-
seven years old, standing on uncertain legs, eye already black, hand around the cold
brushed steel of the doorknob.

She thought of her boat then. She put herself at the tiller, riding on a beam wind,
encircled by an unbroken horizon. But she found in that place no comfort, and she real-
ized then that she was already where she wanted to be. She knocked softly on the door in
front of her, whispered her brother's name, and stepped inside.

Had Peter pressed the shutter one last time, he would have taken the shot through
the crack of space between the jamb and the not-quite-closed door: a snapshot, Ektacolor,
Davi's hip on the edge of Peter's bed, her head on his damp chest, pressing against
the small wound where his catheter had been, the canal that now connects her ear to his
heart. Do we need words? How about an epigraph? Only that, and only because it
would have pleased Peter. Flip the picture over. On the back, written in pencil,

Oh ye legions of hope and pity—of sorrow and pain! She was rocking, and begin-
nning to see.

—Theodore Dreiser
The day Peter died, Karl was at home, raking leaves. Mary had called him the night before, asking him to come in the morning. "Peter won't make it through tomorrow," she said. "I'm sure of it."

"I'm taking the dock out," he told her. "I've got Don's son coming to help."

Mary closed the door of the guest bedroom. "Karl," she said, "I'm asking you to be here with me tomorrow."

"I'm paying him, Mary. I've been planning this for two weeks," he said, and when Mary offered nothing in reply, "We're starting early. We'll try to go quickly, and I'll drive up after."

Peter died in the evening, just after Mary and Rudy and Davi had finished dinner, fried chicken take-out at Rudy's insistence. "The hell you are," he'd said, when Mary had told him she was doing a roast that night.

When Mary called her husband again, Karl didn't answer the phone. She left a message, two words, "He's gone." A nurse from Hospice arrived to verify the death, and Mary helped her wash and dress Peter, while Rudy called a funeral home. When the nurse had gone, Rudy put a vodka and grapefruit juice in Mary's hand. He and Davi were already drinking Coronas. "The morgue said they'd be here within the next three hours," he said.
"It's not the morgue," Mary said.

"Well, whatever they call themselves, they'll be here within three hours."

Mary took a long sip of her drink, the rim of the glass bumping her teeth as her hand shook.

"All right," Rudy said, "I'm switching to whisky. I need a little home remedy. Are you with me, Davi?"

"Rudy," Mary protested, "she doesn't want whisky!"

"You can handle it, can't you Dav?"

Davi nodded to her father. "Well?" she said to her mother. "I am a sailor."

"See Mar, our daughter's a sailor. Of course she can handle it." He poured whisky into two glasses and dropped an ice cube into each glass. "Sorry," he said, handing one of the drinks to Davi, "I'm out of rum."

Rudy and Mary sat on the gray tweed couch in the living room, Davi on the matching chair.

"Could you at least take these hotel-room prints down from the wall?" Davi asked.

Rudy looked at the framed landscapes as if he hadn't really noticed them before.

"Yeah, why don't you put up one of Pete's photos?" Mary suggested.

"I've got some somewhere," he said. "In my closet, I think. I haven't really set up house yet."

"Yet?" Mary said. "You've been here for how long? Two years, at least."

"I told you, I'm never home."

Mary was looking toward the hall then, toward Peter's door.
"I'll dig them out," Rudy said. He went into his bedroom and came back with several framed photographs. Davi's favorite was there, the girl on a bicycle, coasting toward the brink of a drop-off. She kept her eye on the girl as Rudy and Mary handed the photos back and forth. She could feel her own arms flexing, as if she held the handlebars, could feel her feet wanting to spin the pedals. Go for it, she was thinking.

"She looks like you," Mary said.

Davi nodded.

"Do you remember what Davi did to my leg," Mary asked Rudy, "when she knocked me off that bike?"

"Of course. We went on our trip with you in that cast."

"It was so hot in there. Here we were in Mississippi. Oh, and did it itch!"

"Kids'll hurt you," Rudy said. "Do you remember when I used to wrestle them before bed? That time Pete kicked me in the balls? He must have four or five. Christ, I thought I'd piss blood. I remember that like it happened yesterday. And you want to know what? He did it on purpose. I swear. I can still see his face when he wound that leg back." Rudy clapped his thighs together, grimaced, shook it off, and took a drink.

"Do you remember when I caught Davi racing the Burnett boy across the barn rafters?" Mary asked. "She was six years old! How did she even get up there?"

"Remember when you caught her with the Burnett boy in the basement?"

"Dad," Davi said. "That was long after you were gone."

"That was the first phone call I got from your mother in a year. The way she yelled, you'd have thought I put you two together in there."

"As if I knew where to call you," Mary said.
"Oh, come on. I've always been there when you really needed me."

"I suppose you have."

"Besides, you did all right without me."

"Okay you two," Davi said. "Let's not dredge up the whole divorce."

"Oh jesus, Davi," Rudy said, "don't be so dramatic. You have no idea what twenty years washes away."

"Twenty years," Mary said. "Can you believe how young we were when we got married? I didn't know anything."

"I'll show you how young we were," Rudy said. He pulled his wallet from his back pocket and handed Mary a photograph. "Here."

"Look at your hair," she said.

"My duck's ass. I spent twenty minutes every morning with two mirrors getting that just right."

"Twenty minutes and how much grease?" Davi asked, looking at the picture.

"Hey, that was cool, man."

The picture was taken outside a tiny white house, a driveway shoveled of snow, high banks rising in rows around the perimeter. Rudy wore a black leather jacket and blue jeans, Mary a thigh-length wool coat over a short red skirt, green stockings covering her legs, her hair cut straight at the shoulders and bangs. She had a baby in her arms, his nose and eyes peeking from between a knit hat and scarf. "Peter," Davi said. "Was this in Montana?"

Rudy nodded, and Mary looked again at the picture. "That house. Have you ever seen anyplace so small? The three of us. And Suzie."
"Oh, I hated that dog," Rudy said. Mary handed him back the picture, and he opened his wallet, sliding the photo into a pocket all its own. "I liked that house, though," he said. "We didn't have it so bad."

"We were poor as dirt."

"Yup. But we didn't know it, did we."

"No, we didn't. We were so proud when we rented that house."

"We should have been. We were on our own for the first time. No more sneaking you out your parents' window——"

"Dad."

"No more cold nights in the back of my old man's car."

"All right already, Dad."

Mary set down her empty drink and looked out the sliding glass door, the lights of Harbor Springs across the bay. "Red and white vinyl seats," she said.

"You're damned right. Fifty-nine Ford Fairlane."

"My butt used to get so cold."

"It didn't stop us, did it?"

"No, it didn't."

"Okay, you two," Davi said. "I've had enough details. What happened to twenty years washing this away?"

Rudy sipped his bourbon and smiled at his ex-wife. "You know we conceived Peter in that car."

Mary nodded.
"You were pregnant when you got married?" Davi asked. She was standing now, collecting the empty glasses.

"Barely," Mary said.

Davi poured two more bourbons and another vodka and grapefruit juice. "I can't believe I'm just finding this out now," she said.

"Your mother swore me to secrecy," Rudy said. "She told everyone he was early, and she stuck to her story."

"It was easier that way," Mary said. "I can't believe you did that to me a month before our wedding. I was sick all through our honeymoon."

Davi handed back the filled drinks. "You know," she said, "this family could be a little more open about what went on twenty or thirty years ago."

"Some honeymoon it was, anyway," Mary said.

"I took you to a foreign country. What more do you want?"

"Canada. You took me to Canada."

"Oh, you loved it. You'd never even been outside Chippewa County in your life."

"I had, too."

"You'd never been out of the state."

"Those were simpler times."

"Toronto," Rudy said.

"And the car overheating every half hour."

"We weren't in a hurry."
"We carried half a dozen gallon jugs in the trunk," Mary said to Davi. "Every half
hour, like clockwork, steam would roll out from under the hood, and we'd pull off and
wait until it was cool enough to take the radiator cap off so your father could top it off."


"And those motels we stayed in."

"Hey, I miss those old mom-and-pop places. They don't make them like that any-
more."

"There's a reason for that," Mary said.

"There's no romance left in this country."

"There's a reason we stayed there, too," Mary said, looking at Davi. "Because they
were cheap. Your father would search for hours trying to find the cheapest place to stay.
Then that's all he'd talk about the next day, how cheap we got off for a room."

"Pete should have taken pictures of those old places before they're gone altogether,"
Rudy said.

"I think other people have done that, Dad," Davi said.

"Well, good," he said, and he tipped back the rest of his bourbon and waved his
glass toward Davi. "How about getting your old man one more?"

Davi took all three glasses once more into the kitchen.

"We were poor, and we were ignorant," Rudy said. "But we sure knew how to have
fun."

"We were easily amused," Mary agreed.

"Remember when we would put Pete on the living room floor on a Friday night and
fire up the record player? Rudyny Cash. Jerry Lee Lewis."
"Bobby Darin," Mary said. "Paul Anka."

"Phil Phillips and the Twilights!"

"Oh, don't remind me."

"Jackie Wilson?"

Mary smiled. "Jackie Wilson. 'To Be Loved.' I don't know who liked that song more, us or Peter."

"He went into a trance, didn't he? Lying there on his back, looking up at the ceiling. Fat little legs just as limp . . . ."

Davi dropped an ice cube into her father's glass.

"We didn't know what was going to happen, did we?" Mary asked.

She dropped a cube into her own.

"We didn't know a lot of things," Rudy said.

She poured the bourbon, filling both glasses without pause, the amber stream continuous between her father's glass and her own.

"It's a good thing we didn't," Mary said.

A splash of grapefruit juice with her mother's vodka.

"Our baby boy is gone, Mar."

She clamped the three glasses between her hands.

"I know," Mary said, "I know," and she cradled Rudy's head as he leaned in.

Davi was walking back with the drinks when the front door opened. "Mary," Karl cried, and he stumbled forward, face red, blubbery, "Oh, Mary." He almost latched onto Davi as she passed in front of him, but she slipped away, and he fell into Mary's arms as she stood up from the couch.
Davi handed her father his drink, set her mother's on the coffee table and sat again in the gray tweed chair. Only Mary's face was visible, peeking over the soft roundness of Karl's shoulder, the muscles of her jaw clenched and her eyes fixed on the lights across the bay.

#

The cemetery was on a bluff overlooking the bay, some of the best real estate in town. There was a breeze, as there always was along the coast. The sun shone, and Davi could hear people talking about the nice weather, just enough cloud cover to add a bit of beauty to the scene, a bit of weight, not too much. Davi wore a black dress, knee-length. She had bought it the day before, along with a pair of sunglasses, dark, wraparound, sailor's glasses, behind which she hid her black eye. Her mother had given her a pained smile that morning, when she'd seen Davi in her dress. “Don't get used to it,” Davi had told her.

The Johnson plot was marked with a large granite slab bearing the family name. Davi's great grandparents' stone lay in front of the family marker, her great grandfather's birth and death dates on the left, her great grandmother's birthdate beneath her name on the right, a long dash and a blank space of granite. Davi didn't know where she went after her great grandfather died. She remembered being told that she'd remarried. Her grandparent's stone lay beside her great grandfather's, and a final stone marking her spinster great aunt. This was the whole of the Johnson ancestry, as least as far as Davi knew. She walked behind her father, little weight of the casket borne on her middle handle. Her mother walked beside her, Karl on the opposite front corner, two funeral employees taking up the rear. These four front pallbearers were nearly all the living family that she
knew—these and a distant aunt, her father's sister, unmarried, living in New Mexico. A reincarnation of aunt Beatrice, Davi's father had once told her—same hypochondriac tendencies, same prescription drug habit. Davi's living family could each choose an alternate persona, Davi thought as the procession moved forward, lie down in those graves—her father falling into Jacob's lonely spot next to the absent Willametta, her mother and Karl into her grandparent's graves, aunt Jess for aunt Beatrice. The casket hovered over an aluminum scaffold, the pallbearers pausing solemnly before lowering it onto its temporary stand. Davi would take Peter's place in this ancestral swap, and she wondered then why not, who would notice.

This was not as self-pitying a rumination as it sounds, however. She was not decrying some slight, nor wallowing in her loneliness. This was an admission of the reality of her life, a life that was imperative to no one. This had always been the case, Davi knew. She knew even that she had created this condition, that she had so often hidden until the wave had passed, or that she had run in front of it, running before the pursuit. What she had realized only recently, however, what allowed her to think it more fitting that she should lie in that ground instead of Peter, was the fact that her life was not imperative even to herself, that in fact she had sought for so many years a state of nonexistence, some flickering rusty bulb of a thought telling her that her life would happen, that she was moving toward it, and that same dim bulb flashing blindingly whenever life came near. But the sun glittering across the bay on this day was not blinding, but beautiful, and the breeze that found its way under the black hem of her skirt and that touched the back of her neck felt wonderful, coinciding as it did with the sight of Angus, who stood with the small group of people at the gravesite. Davi felt then, without guilt, a gladness that it was
Peter and not herself going into that grave. As this knowledge passed through her unchallenged, it left in its wake a vision of her brother, so clear that she could see the childlish dimples that he'd carried even through his illness, could smell him—a scent now of paper and graphite pencil—could feel the light touch of his wry smile, a touch she had so often brushed aside while he'd been alive, had so often responded to with feigned ignorance, refusing to be engaged, to reciprocate. She felt light now as she let go of Peter's casket and acknowledged Angus' smile, that quick glow before he remembered himself and looked solemnly again at his hands, which he held locked in front of him. And as she had when they'd met, Davi was again impressed by Angus' strong hands. She watched the sails inch across the bay as she listened to the priest's short sermon. Karl murmured ascent at every beat in the priest's commentary, and he said the loudest amen upon its conclusion, unaware of the look on his wife's face as Mary's eyes rolled toward him.

When the priest had finished, Rudy and Mary each spoke, anecdotes pulled from their recent conversations—a ripple of laughter from Rudy's story of the rabbits, a nodding of heads as Mary related Peter's early obsession with design, his compositions of toys and household nicknacks.

After the service was complete, and condolences had been spoken, Mary stayed near the gravesite, while the congregation moved down the grassy slope to their cars. Davi stood a ways away, watching the a catamaran sailing into the bay.

"Up from Chicago," Angus said. "That's my guess, a yacht like that."

"I didn't expect to see you here," Davi said.

"Your mother called me," Angus said.
Davi looked toward her mother. She was standing with a man whom Davi did not
know, his shock of white hair catching her eye, his tweed blazer out of place among the
charcoals and blacks of the other funeral guests. Mary's hand was on the man’s elbow,
and as Davi tried to place him as a relative—cousin once removed, if there were such a
thing in her family—Mary's hand was on his mouth. Then she was kissing him. Not a
kiss between cousins, not even second cousins.

"Is that your stepdad?" Angus asked. "I thought—"

"You thought right," Davi said.

Angus looked toward Karl, then back toward Bill and Mary. "I'm sorry about your
brother," he said.

"I know," she said. "Thanks." Mary's hand was on Bill's chest now.

Davi took off her sunglasses.

"I heard about it," Angus said, looking at her eye. "Does it hurt?"

"Yeah," Davi said, "it does. It hurts a lot."

Mary took a step away from Bill.

"Do you want to get a beer somewhere?" Davi asked Angus.

"Sure. Can you? Sure."

Davi hooked her arm around Angus' and they walked together across the grass, past
Karl who pretended not to watch his wife.

They ordered draft beers and drank them on the deck of a pub at the water's edge,
and when they'd finished, they walked in the sand along the slow crescent of the bay. At
sunset, they sat in the hollow of a small dune, a blown out bowl surrounded by sawgrass.
Just after the sun dipped beneath the horizon, Angus kissed Davi, and she let him. When he pulled away, she said, "I'm going to finish the race."

"You should," he said.

"I'll have a lot of repairs. I'll be weeks behind. I won't win."

"So what."

"I might have won, you know."

Angus shrugged.

"I'm serious. I was in second place."

"I know. At least you'll finish." A sliver of moon shone behind the two, plum sky creeping over their heads toward the deepening sunset. "When do you fly out?"

"Tomorrow afternoon."

"Detroit?"

Davi nodded.

"I'm going your way, if you need a ride."

"I was hoping you'd say that."

A pool of cool night air was already filling the bowl of the dune, and Davi pushed herself against Angus, recoiling as a shot of pain hit her ribs. "My ribs aren't as bad as my eye," she said. "They're a lot more painful, but they only hurt when I breathe."

"At least you know you're alive."

"Where are you staying?"

"The Perry Inn."

"Classy."

"I've got a balcony with a view."
"It's early. We could pick up a bottle of wine."

"Are you inviting yourself over?"

"I'll warn you, though," she said, lowering her sunglasses, "I've hardly had a drop to drink in months. This one beer has already gone to my head."

"That sounds more like an invitation than a warning."

"The two have a lot in common."

"Well, now I know that the sea is even more powerful than I'd thought."

"How so?"

"It's managed to make Davi Johnson philosophical."

Davi punched his arm.

"And it's left you girly! It must have worn you out."

"Enjoy it while it lasts."

"Is that another warning or another invitation?"

"You figure it out."

#

Davi could smell Angus as she sat in the window seat of the Boeing 747, bound for Panama. She wasn't sure when she'd fallen asleep the night before. She remembered four a.m., remembered the knotted sheet pressing into her back, remembered thinking that it was a good thing, that it would keep her awake. It was too late for sleep. She remembered the sex, one last sleepy time with the knotted sheet digging into her lower back. She remembered, too, that when Angus' weight fell upon her, favoring one side, careful of her ribs, she had been thinking of Peter.
The flaps of the 747 retracted, and Davi's stomach retracted with them, a fluttering of unease as the airliner leaned more deeply into its wings. When Angus found her in the dark for the last time, she had been thinking of Christmas at their mother's house, of waking entwined in Peter's arms. She'd thought, too, of closing Peter's robe as he slept in his recliner chair, of stumbling across Peter's nude self-portraits. Then she was a teenager again, a hot flutter as she sat on his bed and leafed through his erotic magazines, the naked men, the rush of adrenaline as she heard his footsteps outside the door, the pounding of her heart as she stood hidden in his closet. The pounding of her heart as Angus thrust his weight forward. Her heart breaking as she lay on her face in the sand, Peter already sitting in the sunfish, the sail catching the wind. Peter skeletal and dripping wet with the cat in his hands. His casket dipping into the ground, the black belch of the bulldozer creeping from behind the tree. These thoughts drifted freely through Davi, Angus heavy on top of her. They drifted and lingered and cycled, and Angus was still there, substantial. They drifted, and the knotted sheet in Davi's back flattened into the mattress. They drifted, and then they began to fade, pushed back by the image of Peter, laughing in his wig, his vampire teeth cheap plastic, his breast a baggie of ketchup and water. This was Davi's own memory now, she realized. This was not an image from Peter's story, but from her own. She saw his dimples, as he pressed with her the spike into his left breast. She saw the stage makeup and her fear was gone. Angus rocked faster on top of her, and she rocked with him, reached her arms around his back, dug her fingers there until he twisted and pushed harder. Their heads bumped, and it hurt a little bit, and they laughed, and then he grew serious again, intent upon his pursuit. Davi thought that this was what it felt
like to be real, and she thought that it was worth it, that fire would burn just the same whether she were real or not.

She had awoken after sunrise, the slow moment of realization, and the shouting to Angus as she scrambled to dress, hopping with one leg thrust into his pants, losing his balance and collapsing into the corner. They talked through the entirety of the three-hour drive to the airport, Davi describing her race, the lead boat, the dengue fever.

"Fiji is nice this time of year," she said at the airport, from the far side of the metal detector. "I'll be there for two days."

"Maybe Spain," Angus said. "A send-off before you cross the Atlantic."

"I'll write," Davi said. When she looked back before entering her gate, he was still there, hands in his pockets. She waved. "I think I have a story to tell."
Mary pulled the last piece of Peter's photography equipment from a cardboard box and laid it on the table with the other pieces, price tags and a pen ready beside them.

The thrift shop would be open in an hour. She had no idea how much to ask, no idea what most of it was. She'd tried to get Davi to take it, but Davi had refused all but one piece. "Where am I going to put all this on my boat?" she'd asked. "Besides, I don't know what half this stuff is any more than you do."

Mary had donated the darkroom equipment and the file cabinets filled with slides and negatives to the Detroit Institute of Art. A friend of Peter's who worked there said he would look through them. His tone warned that most or all of them would be thrown out, and Mary tried not to speculate whether or not he actually planned to look through them at all. "I trust your judgment," she'd said, and she'd turned away before she could infer anything more.

By twenty minutes to ten, she had all of Peter's equipment priced and arranged in the glass showcase of the sales counter. It had been an agonizing forty minutes of guesswork and speculation, of trying to find the line between giving the equipment away, and charging so much that it would not sell, but would instead stay in the store for days, for weeks, months, she returning each shift to find Peter's lenses and cameras and mechanical doodads still in the showcase. She couldn't bear the thought that they would be un-
wanted, but she shunned as well the knowledge that, although the sight of these lenses and camera bodies gave her some comfort today—so solid in their armored coats of shiny black metal—there would come a time when she would not want these pieces of her son between herself and everyone who entered the shop.

She hoped that the equipment would go to someone who really appreciated it, someone young and excited about photography, a father with his boy, perhaps, the child looking wide-eyed through the front glass of the showcase, the father looking down through the top. Or maybe a college student, someone in the art department, just starting off, as her own son had too few years ago. She worried then that she had priced the items too high, that this college student, living on ramen noodles and macaroni and cheese, would not be able to afford them, and she determined that she would break the thrift shop's rule against haggling for price. I'll ask him what he can afford, she thought, almost wishing that he could not afford the price she'd marked, wanting the sale to be in part a posthumous gift from her son.

In the final twenty minutes before the store was to open, Mary priced several boxes of Peter's clothes and kitchenware, odds and ends that she had spared from the trash bags, which would fetch fifty cents or a dollar or two. Better that they should go to someone who could use them, she thought, as she folded a pair of boxer shorts and laid them on top of two more pair, writing up a price tag of three for a quarter.

When she had finished with this second box of Peter's things, it was time to open the store. Her help for the morning, a new volunteer, had not yet arrived. The new help would be Bill's replacement, a penciled line drawn through his name for the remaining Mondays, Wednesdays and Fridays of the month.
Mary hadn't been surprised to see the changes on the schedule. She hadn't expected him to return to the shop. But she hadn't expected him at the funeral, either. Though she must have hoped. She had looked for him. Seeing him dressed in his tweed jacket that she knew so well, that she knew by sight as well as by smell, she felt as if she had conjured him there, as if he had been sitting on the couch in his dusty living room, or in the lobby of Timberly Acres, not prepared for a funeral, but simply finding himself standing there, drawn by Mary's desire. When she walked over to him, however, she did not speak of desire, but asked instead about Bill's wife. "How's Jane?" she asked.

"She's well," he told her. "Better than well. She's a young woman again. She's having lemonades on the porch with suitors. I play the suitors. It's the year of our lord nineteen hundred and forty-who-knows-what. But she's happy. How are you, Mary?"

"I'm jealous of Jane now."

"So am I. But are you holding up all right?"

Mary nodded. "A little numb maybe."

"I know this isn't the place, Mary. I know this isn't the time. But I want to see you again."

Mary looked out over the bay, at the sailboats that she knew would be there, sails burned white against the blue, and she understood something about her daughter. She felt for the first time that there might be a time and a place to put your foot on the deck of a departing ship, and to watch the shore recede, come what may.

"Jane is sixteen years old now," Bill said. "Sweet sixteen. I'd forgotten how she could flirt. She used to work me into such a state. Her parents had a wicker love seat on
the porch. Her mother came home one evening while we were sitting together on that white wicker, and I couldn't stand up to greet her. She never did warm up to me."

"I can't," Mary said.

"Oh, but you can. You really can. I didn't think I could either, but look at me. You're the one who opened my bedroom door, Mary. You did that for me. Do it for yourself. You have a closed door in there, locked tight. I know you do."

Mary put her hand on Bill's chest. "You invited me in," she said. "I haven't invited you."

"Invite me, Mary. Invite me and we'll leave here. We'll take a trip. We'll find a place, and we'll make it ours."

Mary's hand moved to Bill's mouth. Then it moved away, and she was kissing him. She was putting her foot on the deck of a departing ship, the land receding. Peter's casket lowered into the ground, and the cranking diesel engine of a bulldozer coughing to life, a poorly hidden bright yellow hulk parked behind a crop of trees. In five minutes the soil would be pushed back into place, Peter buried, the rift of earth sealed. Her foot on the deck of this departing ship, the promise ahead of islands and treasures, Bill climbing rope ladders, a knife in his teeth, a spyglass at his eye as he surveys from the crow's nest, a table for two on a wooden deck, a bottle of wine in Bill's hand, filling her glass, a red sun setting the sky on fire as it touched the horizon. So the scenes passed through Mary as she kissed Bill, each isolated moment so clear, every detail except the woman, who was never quite Mary, never uncomfortable in the role as Mary would have been, this woman content to receive what Bill was so eloquent at giving. Then there was Karl, alone at a bare
table, hungry, afraid, incapable, alone at Mary's dining room table. And when a woman
came from the kitchen carrying a steaming porcelain bowl, that woman was Mary.

A blast of black smoke rose up from the bulldozer, the yellow mass of the machine
creeping from behind the trees, inching toward Peter's open grave, and Mary pulled away
from Bill. "You'll find her," she said. "Or she'll find you. Goodbye, Bill. Good luck."

Bill called to Mary as she walked away. "I wasn't your patient," he told her. "And
you weren't my nurse that day." The sputtering breath of the bulldozer's exhaust was the
only breathing then, the flutter of the hinged valve at the tip of the pipe. "You were my
lover."

Mary took the key from the desk drawer, walked to the front of the shop, and un-
latched the deadbolt. She flipped the sign to read "open" from the street, and she tuned
the radio to the classical station. Davi's flight would have already left Detroit Metro, she
thought. If there hadn't been a delay, if nothing had gone wrong. She thought of Davi's
friend, Angus. She wished that her daughter had gone with him back to Erie. They
would make a cute couple. Cute babies. A mother can hope, can't she? But he can wait,
too, she thought. In fact, she was sure that he would.

When the bell above the door rang, five minutes later, it was not the new volunteer
arriving for work, but the flea-market vendor, whom Mary had entirely forgotten. His
burned-paper hair and beard were more matted than the last time he had appeared,
Mary thought—if this were possible—his army jacket more filthy with grease. He stood
in the doorway, as he always did, his eyes picking out those items which were new, plenti-
ful this week with Peter's belongings sprinkled throughout the store. He nodded his head
here and there, and then he walked to the pegged pole that displayed the hats. He pulled
a hat from its peg. It was the straw hat that Mary had taken from the guest bedroom, the hat that she'd found on the big antique camera. She had given the camera to the museum and put a fifty-cent price tag on the hat. The man pushed the hat over his ragged hair. He did not look at himself in the nearby mirror, but walked away with the hat on his head, as if he already knew how he looked in it, as if it had been his own hat that he'd found there on the thrift-shop peg. He pulled one of Peter's shirts from a rack and draped it over his arm. He pinched up a pair of black leather shoes that had belonged to Peter, held the sole briefly to the bottom of his own raised foot. He found a cat toy on a shelf, and Peter's tripod in a back corner. He brought all this to the sales counter, where he bent forward to look into the case, the top of his hat a foot from Mary's face. "Add up all the camera stuff," he said. "Give me a price."

"Why don't you pick out what you want, and I'll total that," Mary said, not moving to open the showcase doors.

"Add it all up," he said, his breath washing over Mary, the odor of his decaying teeth.

Mary added up the two dozen items, the calculator shaking in her hand, heat in her face as she willed the total higher, and an increasing relief as the numbers rolled on, up and up. She couldn't contain a smile as she read from the display the total. "Three hundred forty two dollars and thirty five cents," she said, triumphantly.

The man looked at her, two thick, soiled fingers pulling on the frizzled end of his beard, bumping into a bit of food that had woven itself into those ashes. The scrap of food was a stringy wet thing, the color of infection, and Mary realized that it was a bit of egg. As his fingers touched it, the egg fell to the glass countertop. Mary looked into his
eyes then, and saw that they were leveled on hers, and that they were vibrating, two quick brown slits that seemed never to rest. She saw also that his teeth were bared—long, cracked teeth, tobacco-stained, pitted black, appearing from the hollow opening of his beard. It took her a long moment to realize that the sum of this expression—the narrowed eyes and the stretched, open mouth—amounted to a smile. "Bag it," he said.

The calculator fell from Mary's hand, cracking the glass pane on top of the showcase. She felt the solidity of the floor waver, and she thought this must be what it felt like to be at sea. She saw herself on a boat, then, not on her daughter's, but on the tall ship with Bill. She saw the setting sunlight, ruby, through the wine in her glass. She saw Bill, pouring, and she saw herself at the table holding the glass, not another woman now, but Mary, sailing into that crimson horizon. And she saw again Karl sitting at the table, a knife in one hand, a fork in the other, and a woman whom Mary did not know, carrying the casserole dish. She saw the hungry smile on Karl's face, and she realized that he wasn't aware of the change of his server, so focused was he on the dish. Mary saw all this and, running through it, the broken line of the glass countertop.

The man with the ashen hair pulled a thick fold of money from his front pocket, and as he placed the hot, worn bills onto the showcase, he gave no sign that he noticed that the glass had just broken, nor that something equally fragile and impossible to mend had just broken inside Mary.
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

September 7, 1987

06° 13' 02" N, 109° 10' 22" W

Clipperton Island, 400 miles west of Malpelo

When Davi stepped off the plane, the policeman was on the tarmac, leaning against a green and white police car, a ten-year-old Volkswagen. "That is a beautiful black eye," he told Davi. "A shiner? Right?"

"Yes," Davi said. "A shiner."

"I always meet the plane," he told Davi. "I'm the welcome committee." He lifted a shoulder, a gesture both of hello, and what did you expect. "Welcome," he said.

He drove Davi down the sloping ridge to town. The drive was slow, the road rough and winding, the car's small engine protesting as the policeman worked the gears, navigating potholes and switchbacks. The windows were down, and Davi closed her eyes, enjoying the wind on her face, the scent of sea air. They rounded a final bend, emerged from the forest, and the panorama of the village filled the windshield, the sun setting over the western shore of the bay. Davi saw her boat, the only mast in the bay.

"She's not so bad," the policeman said. "She's a sturdy little boat. The rigging needs some work, but not bad. A torn shroud. The mast is good."

"Can I get parts on the island?" Davi asked.

"I took the liberty of ordering some. If you need anything else, maybe three or four days from the mainland. Maybe a week."
The policeman parked the car in the street, no attempt to pull out of the traffic lane. But there was no traffic. He waved a boy of ten or eleven over, a thin boy with a thick head of dark hair. He wore cutoff pants and a blue short-sleeved shirt that buttoned down the front.

"He'll bring a boat," the policeman said, and he walked with Davi along the seawall to a short cement staircase that descended into the water. "Your dinghy is lost."

"That's okay," Davi said. "I have a spare, inflatable."

They didn't speak, as the boy appeared from behind a dock, rowing a skiff in their direction. When he was almost there, the policeman said, "The seat pillows—your cushions. Some of the women washed them." He looked at Davi without turning his face away from the boy approaching in the skiff. "They washed the cabin, too. The salt. It was nothing."

"Who?" Davi asked. "I want to pay them."

"The race brought a lot of business to the market. After you left, boats were coming every day. Six came in one day. They bought a lot of food. They went to the cantina. Pass the favor to someone else. Everything is paid for here."

The boy coasted the skiff up to the stairs, and Davi climbed in and sat forward in the bow. The skiff lurched ahead with every stroke of the boy's paddle, Davi's boat growing closer with each pulse. She saw the broken shroud, the snapped cable lolling organically in the air. She saw that the steering vane had snapped off, and that the spreaders were twisted. The mast would have to be tuned. Otherwise, her boat looked unharmed, sitting level in the water, its proud nose angled high.
After she climbed from the skiff onto the ladder at the stern of her boat, she tried to offer the boy a dollar. He shook his head no, an embarrassed smile. He pushed off, dipped his oar and slid away. The slats were in place, sealing the companionway. Davi removed them, surprised that she smelled only a light hint of mustiness, the scent of a tent properly stored, used for the first time in the spring, nothing more. She climbed below and was at first unsure what she was seeing, her cabin glowing softly in the dim evening light, a pale white shroud covering the boat’s interior.

“As ever,” were the first words to catch her eye, the first of the hundreds of words on the pages that the women had lain out to dry, the paper covering every flat surface of the cabin. She took a page from the galley counter, and she read, “... no fools at Walloon Lake.” She looked at the other pages on the countertop, and she found them still legible, the penciled words soft now, their edges indistinct, as if they were about to disappear. But they wouldn’t disappear. The paper had dried, and her brother’s penciled words had not washed away.

She switched the electrical system to battery and found that it wasn’t working. She would find the next day a whole host of other things that would need fixing, enough to keep her in the bay for ten more days, but nothing so serious that it would give her a moment’s hesitation about continuing. She gathered up the letters in the increasingly dark cabin, heedless of their order. She would have months of open ocean to sort through them. When she’d finished stacking the wrinkled pages, she pulled from the v-berth the gear that the women had stowed there. She stretched out and, a moment after thinking that she was too overwhelmed to be tired, she fell into a long sleep.

#
Davi had been passing a dozen times a day the old woman with the basket of kittens. The woman sat every morning and evening on a wooden chair beside the police station, a print dress tied beneath her bosom, a scarf over her head. At her feet were several baskets of bread, and one basket of kittens. She spent all her time scooping the kittens back into the basket as they climbed out. They mewed as she scooped them up, and when she dropped them back into their basket, they climbed again up their wicker walls to be scooped up once more. Even as she sold her bread the woman worked the kittens with one hand, while she gave the bread and took the money with the other. As the days wore on, however, her job became easier; the kittens disappearing one by one, to starvation or disease or customers, Davi wasn't sure.

Although she didn't know what happened to the kittens, and although she never approached the woman, Davi always knew how many kittens were left. There were eight to begin with, and then the calico was gone. Easy to notice that one. A gray tiger-stripe went next, and then an orange tabby. When the black-and-white disappeared, Davi felt a pang of regret, though she still adamantly told herself no, she would not have another cat onboard. But then the white one was gone, the white one that she'd admired from a distance, with its one yellow eye and one blue.

The morning that she was to leave, Davi rowed to shore with her grandmother's Nikkor camera, the only piece of Peter's photography equipment she'd taken. She called on the policeman, seeing as she passed that only two kittens remained in the woman's basket. The policeman was standing in the doorway. "I have two at my house," he said. "It's not fair that she sells them so close to my office. If I were busier . . . She makes me
watch them while she gossips with the women in the market. I wish she would sell them in the market, but she doesn't want to leave her best customer."

Davi peeked into the basket—one stocky yellow kitten, and one thin and black.

The woman took Davi's hand and spoke in a matter-of-fact tone.

"She says she'll sell you both for five dollars."

"Tell her I only want one," Davi said. "Uno," she told the woman, who Davi could see now was much older than she'd thought.

The woman spoke again, Davi's left hand clasped now in the woman's left hand.

"She says to choose," the policeman said.

Davi watched the kittens crawling up the sides of the basket, the woman's free hand sweeping them back down, where they tumbled over each other.

"I can't," Davi said. "Tell her to pick for me."

The policeman spoke to the woman, and she let go of Davi's hand and held up the thin, black kitten.

"I don't think that's the best one," the policeman said. "You should take the other."

"It's okay," Davi said. "Cuántos pesos?"

The woman held up three fingers. "Dolares," she said.

Davi handed her three one-dollar bills, and the woman pushed them into the bosom of her dress.

"Can I take your picture?" Davi asked, lifting the camera toward her eye.

The woman waved a modest hand, as if to decline, then smoothed her dress, and patted the scarf on her head. Davi motioned the policeman to stand beside her, and she
snapped the picture. The woman spoke to the policeman in a rapid matter-of-fact tone, nodding and pointing a finger toward Davi's black eye.

"She's talking about your trip through the reef. Not much happens on the island, you see. When something does, we make the most of it. It becomes a story. You can return years from now, and people will still be telling the story about the lady sailor with the dengue fever."

"I like it here, but I don't think I'll return. If I did, it would probably spoil the story anyway."

"Oh, no. That's not true. It would just add another chapter," the policeman said.

"Do you know who this woman is? Do you remember the story I told you of Mariquetta?"

"Vaguely," Davi said. "I wasn't feeling my best that night."

"Mariquetta, who had all the men on the island quarreling."

"This is Mariquetta?" Davi asked.

"No. We never heard of Mariquetta again. This is the woman who sold the flowers that filled Mariquetta's house."

"I thought she became rich and left the island."

"She did, but she came back," he said. "Not so rich, either. But she's doing pretty good with the kittens. I'm just afraid for the rabbits. We have beautiful rabbits on this island. The next time you visit, I'll tell you the story of how the first rabbit came to the island—the first two, actually. They were both female. It was a miracle." He looked at the old woman as he spoke, and she laughed, an uncomprehending, distracted laugh, as
she dipped her fingers back into the bosom of her dress and felt once more the dollar bills.

# Davi found the envelope with the photos late that afternoon. She had sailed east from the bay, over the deeper shelf of the atoll, from there south until she could make a westerly line toward Fiji. She caught a wind from the south then, an unbroken beam wind, and she raced on a calm sea at seven knots, until, far earlier than she had thought likely, the island was hull-down behind her, nothing but open water ahead for two thousand miles.

The kitten had cried itself hoarse, and then it had fallen asleep. Davi had spent the day in the cockpit, and when she went back belowdecks, the kitten had jumped off the v-berth and was sniffing at the engine compartment vent. "I'm going to have to name you," she told it. "Is Theodore too big of a name for you?" The cat mewed. "Theo?" She scooped him up, and saw as she did the beige of a manila envelope on the other side of the slats. She pulled open the vent, fished out the envelope, and recognized the padded package of photographs that she had picked up when she'd arrived at Clipperton. While refitting her boat over the past ten days, she had cleaned and tuned the engine, but she had not seen the envelope. She suspected that it had been propped standing against the inside wall of the compartment, and had fallen from the rocking of the boat under sail. The outside paper of the envelope was more pulp than paper now, rotted from the seawater. The inside had remained dry, however, sealed and protected by the plastic bubble wrap.
There was no letter in the envelope, only pictures. The first was of Davi, seven years old, in a red and white polka-dot swimsuit, sand stuck to her stomach and the fronts of her thighs. It was a Polaroid, shot at the beach near their grandparent's house, the rainbow of a sunfish sail, out of focus behind her. The next picture was of Davi's grandmother, standing in her quilted robe, smiling, a black eyepatch covering one eye, the patch covered with her glasses, a corkscrew of blue smoke spiraling up and then wide beside her head. The next picture is a shot of the twin bedroom, empty. Then there is a picture from Davi's camera, a shot of Chanthavy. It wasn't one that she'd printed with Peter when they'd worked together in his dark room. It wasn't even one she remembered seeing, though she suspected that she'd pushed past it, not wanting to see such a clear picture of the girl. She is wearing a navy blue blazer and maroon tie, beaming into the lens, as close to the camera as Davi remembered she had always stood, as if she could push her way through to the other side, as if she saw a darkness there that her presence might brighten. Davi looked at Chanthavy for a long time, before flipping to the final picture, a shot of Peter. Although he was standing with his back to the camera, she guessed him to be five or six years old. He stood in the yard behind their parent's house. He wore Osh Kosh pants and a tight sweater with stripes of mustard and olive. In front of him, arranged in semi-circles was an orchestra of teddy bears, fire engines and dump trucks, a set of drums and a child's piano. And behind this orchestra, filling the frame, was a blazing wall of autumn forest. Peter's arms were raised, a ten-inch length of stick in his left hand, his right showing four extended fingers. Four, Davi thought, and she felt her new sail hum, taut in the stiff beam wind. Three, and she felt the push of her boat through the sea. Two, the roll of water, steady across the hull on either of side of the cabin. One,
and Davi and her boat were gone, having finally sailed that day, in a line bent only by the curve of the earth, out of this picture, leaving in the frame only the sea.