

Whistler

A Novel



Ann Patchett

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Epigraph

“I only ask to live another hundred years so that your memory will remain with me that much longer.”

–Jules Verne, *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*

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1

Old guy,” my husband said in a low voice, his lips touching my ear. “Near the exit sign.”

“Stop it.” The joke itself was old as rocks.

Jonathan raised his eyebrows. “I’m serious. He kept looking at you in the ticket line. Then he followed us through Medieval Art, and now he’s just standing there. Do you see him? He looks at you whenever you’re not looking.”

“Everyone cuts through Medieval,” I said. “It doesn’t constitute stalking.” We were in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York City, New York.

“I didn’t say stalking.”

It wasn’t crowded by the standards of the Met, no blockbuster Van Gogh exhibit or Costume Institute to gum things up. If you took the time to notice the people around you, chances were you’d see some of them again in a different wing. “That guy?” I asked, tipping my head slightly in the direction of a tall, thin man who looked like a French film star—black jeans, loose black curls.

My husband straightened up. “Could you take me seriously for one minute?”

Why did the French guy imply a lack of seriousness? I didn’t ask. Jonathan was leaving tomorrow for what might be a long trip, and I had just posted grades for the end of the school year. We decided to make use of the city, have a nice day. “I’m taking you seriously.”

“Okay, let’s go up a floor and see what happens.”

“We just got here.” I liked the American Wing, the Tiffany glass and baseball cards, that tragic bust of Lincoln.

“We’ll come right back.” He started walking in the direction of Armor again, that dimly lit hall of schoolchildren staring at swords and shields. A shiver of gladness passed through me because they were not my schoolchildren and it was not my field trip.

“A suit of armor could weigh more than sixty pounds,” the teacher said as we passed, reading her facts off a display card, though the children were plenty old enough to read. The boys would all be picturing themselves going into battle with a mace and the girls would be thinking about the burdened horses that had to carry both the men and their armor.

“Still with us?” I asked Jonathan.

He looked without looking. Either he was making the whole thing up or he would have been a brilliant spy. “Yes.”

We picked up speed in Medieval Art. Jonathan hates how fast I walk and will often stop to let me sail on past without noticing he is no longer with me, but in Medieval Art, he set the pace. I guess the old guy hung in there because when we got to the Grand Staircase, Jonathan asked me if I’d taken a jealous lover.

“Funny,” I said, and up we went.

“If he follows us to Modern and Contemporary, we’ll know.”

“What will we know?” I set my stair-climbing pace to his, mindful of his knee.

“That he’s in love with you,” Jonathan said generously. “That old guys can’t get enough of you.”

It was not the first time I’d regretted having told him this. In my defense, I only said it once and that was decades ago, never thinking that one day we’d be married and he would hold on to the information like a souvenir postcard from another era. My husband had taken me as his date to a hospital board dinner more than twenty years ago when the head of general surgery all but climbed across the table to sit beside me. He then proceeded to tell me his every thought, about the emergency appendectomy he had performed before arriving, about what the food on our plates was doing to our livers, about starlight. When finally the evening was over, Jonathan apologized in the valet line. “I have no idea what that was about,” he said.

I knew what it was about, but it was stupid of me to say it to Jonathan: Old guys love me. They had always loved me. I never experienced a flicker of interest from a man my own age, but show me a man ten or fifteen years older, twenty years older, and he’d be pulling me aside to tell me he couldn’t remember the last time he felt this way. I meant to be funny, but Jonathan received my explanation as permission. There in the valet line he took me in his arms and kissed me as his car was pulling up, the headlights

dousing us in white light. He was forty-seven to my thirty then, as he was seventy to my fifty-three now.

At the top of the museum's marble stairs we took a left, bypassing Drawings and Prints and heading straight to Modern and Contemporary. For this I gave my husband credit. People don't come to the second floor and skip Drawings and Prints unless they have an agenda. I, for one, never went to Modern and Contemporary at the Met because there were other places in this city to go if modern and contemporary was what I was after, but there it was, a monumental slab of granite into which two horses had been chiseled. Or maybe it wasn't two horses so much as it was one horse and its ghost. It was the only piece in the room, affixed to the wall across from a bank of windows overlooking Central Park. We had come so far from those flat-faced angels and their gilded halos, proffered lilies and velvet gowns. "Who is this?" I asked my husband.

"There he is," Jonathan said, and for a second I thought he meant the artist.

Not the artist but an old man, visibly winded from the significant distance we had traveled. He walked into the room where we were and then, seeing us seeing him, immediately walked away.

"Oh," I said to Jonathan.

"Yes," he said.

I went to the wall, knowing better than to put my hands on art and wanting to do exactly that. *Two Horses*, Charles Ray, Chicago-born, 1953.

"Do you know who he is?" my husband asked. He still wasn't talking about art.

I shook my head.

"What do you want to do?"

"Do?" I asked. *Are you seeing this?*

"You can't tell me you aren't interested."

I wasn't interested in a stranger's attention, nor was I troubled by it. Men rarely understood this. "How do you know he isn't looking at you?" I asked. "Did you think about that? Maybe you went to school together." But wait, I didn't mean that. It sounded unkind. The man was clearly older than Jonathan. The old man was older than my old man.

"It isn't me," my husband said.

"Okay then, it's me. We're not going to invite him for dinner."

"You don't have any curiosity?"

I had plenty of curiosity, but I wasn't curious about this. My dear dead father, whom I had seen not nearly enough of in his life, gave me one piece of advice that I have found endlessly useful: If you don't want to engage with someone, don't engage, by which he meant don't smack the side of the car that cuts you off at the crosswalk because the person in the car might have a gun. Don't think you get to say your piece and then walk away. That's what I was thinking when Jonathan left to follow the man who had followed me there. Not that Jonathan was angry; it wasn't that at all. He meant to start a conversation with a stranger.

I wanted to think about nothing but those horses, but the distraction of my absent husband proved powerful. Jonathan was gone and then he was still gone. When I became annoyed, I went to find him.

There they were, the two of them tucked in a corner of the next gallery. Jonathan was talking, and the man, who wore a navy blazer and pink collared shirt, gray slacks, looked up at him, nodding. His hair was thick and straight and very white, and his glasses were tortoise and round, topped by a noticeable pair of eyebrows. When he saw me crossing the room, he touched my husband's arm and my husband turned and smiled at me, a smile that said, You're never going to believe this.

"You're never going to believe this," he said.

"Okay," I said, and then I said hello to the man.

He nodded at me as if he wanted to speak and could not speak. His obvious mortification made me feel tenderly towards him. I know, I wanted to say to this stranger in regard to my husband, he does this sometimes.

"This is your stepfather," Jonathan said.

I looked at the man, and then at Jonathan. Of course it was not my stepfather. Lucas Ekker lived outside of Boston in a large house with my mother.

"Keep going back. One more stepfather," Jonathan said, watching me work.

"I'm sorry," Eddie Triplett said.

All of this transpired quietly; no one turned to watch life's drama unpacked in the gallery, but still I made a sound. I put my hand to my mouth to stop it, but it had already gotten away from me. It was his voice, Eddie Triplett's voice coming out of this old man's mouth. "Eddie."

"I didn't mean to chase you," he said.

"He thought he saw your mother," my husband said.

Eddie shook his head. "I knew it wasn't your mother."

"At first," Jonathan said. "When he first saw you. Look, you're crying. Daphne never cries," he said to Eddie. "I can count on one hand the number of times." He cut himself off to take the handkerchief out of his pocket and hand it to me.

"Duck," Eddie said, his voice full of sorrow.

And with that I bowed my head and covered my face. I hadn't known there was something in me to break, but there it was and break it did. I stepped into an open crack in time and fell backwards. It was not a few tears. Jonathan put his arm around my shoulder, understanding none of it but knowing the big reveal should not have come here, in front of art. "What do you say the three of us go to the Dining Room and get a glass of water, a cup of tea?"

Did I nod? It didn't matter. I said nothing as my husband guided us out of Modern and Contemporary, Eddie Triplett following along. I remembered Eddie Triplett as a taller man, but that's because I had been quite small at the time of our acquaintance. I hadn't seen him in more than forty years, almost forty-five. Eddie Triplett walked behind us now, wanting to die. How did I know this? Because I wanted to die myself, and our hearts were forever stitched together, mine and Eddie's.

The Dining Room was more or less above us. Jonathan knew where the elevators were and led us there, in part to make things easier for me and in part because his bad knee got worse the more he used it. The three of us stepped into that empty mechanical box, and as the doors slid shut, my crying abruptly ceased, as if I had wrestled back into place that part of myself that had come unstuck. I blew my nose gently on Jonathan's handkerchief and looked at Eddie. How had it never occurred to me that an elevator was so much like a car pointing up? An elevator car. "Remind you of anything?" I asked.

"*See the US-A in your Chev-ro-let*," he sang quietly, his eyes watching the illuminated numbers above the door.

And that made me laugh so abruptly it came out more like a bark.

"I missed the joke," Jonathan said.

"At one time that was your wife's favorite song," Eddie said.

The doors opened. We had only gone two floors. "This is the strangest sensation," I said.

“What is?” Jonathan was still holding my arm. I could tell he was starting to worry about me.

“A stranger hunting you down in the Met,” Eddie said, answering for me. “I didn’t even know why I was following you at first. Well, you do look like your mother.”

“I don’t look like my mother.” My mother, like my sister, has real beauty, the kind that did not succumb to time.

“You do,” Jonathan said with some reluctance. He wasn’t fond of my mother, who was so fond of him.

Eddie agreed. “You’ve got her height, her confidence, the way you walk is like your mother.”

“There’s the laugh, too,” Jonathan said.

“I don’t laugh like my mother,” I said.

Eddie shook his head. “Doesn’t matter. I didn’t think I was following your mother. Your mother is my age.” He stopped himself, struck by a thought. “Is your mother still—”

“Very much.”

He nodded. “Good, good. All I can say is that I knew you were someone I knew and I couldn’t quite remember where I knew you from. One gets to be a certain age and this happens. By the time I was following you up the stairs, I had the terrible thought that you might be a famous actress or a soprano and I was pursuing you. I didn’t know you’d seen me. I think of myself as blending in with the crowd.”

“Believe me,” I said. “I never would have seen you.”

“I saw you,” Jonathan said.

I tilted my head in the direction of my husband. “He’s more aware of his surroundings than I am.”

“Good for you,” Eddie said. “That’s how we manage in the city. Do the two of you live here?”

“Westchester,” I said.

“Bronxville,” Jonathan said, getting specific. We were in line for a table. He gave his name to the hostess.

“That’s the dream,” Eddie said. “See some trees and grass first thing in the morning. See a squirrel, fill the bird feeders, drive a car. I always thought the day would come when I would leave, but I never left. I tell myself I have to live here. I go out a lot at night.”

“Now that you’re retired?” Jonathan asked. Now that Jonathan was retired, he thought everyone should retire. He thought I should retire.

But Eddie disappointed him. “No, no. Not retired in the least. I went to the office this morning right on schedule, but when I got there, they were doing some sort of work on a water main, no idea what it was. They’d shut the tap off for the whole building, sent everyone home, or I should say sent everyone home who was there in the first place. The young people prefer being remote. They like to work in bed with their dogs. But for me, no water means a free day. I thought, When’s the last time I went to the Met? It was a whim. I came on a whim.”

Eddie Triplett was the same age as my mother, and my mother was seventy-six. That much I knew.

“What do you do?” my husband asked, which saved me having to ask the question.

Eddie was an editor at Random House.

People make romantic reference to their own leaping hearts, but at that moment I would say my heart leapt. He was still an editor. He made a game of it when my sister and I were children. He’d say, “When the kids at school ask you what your stepfather does, what do you tell them?”

“Eddie’s an *editor*!” we’d scream.

He said the junior editors were all called Eddie, unless they were women, in which case they were called Edie, and the senior editors were either Ed or Edwina, and the guy at the tip-top of the heap who was known as the chief, he was an Edward. Unfortunately there was no woman at the top of the heap. He said it would be our job to try to change that. Eddie and my mother both worked at Houghton Mifflin publishers in Boston—that’s where they’d met—he in editorial, of course, given his name, and she in publicity, given her propensity for talking on the phone and throwing parties. When she sent Eddie packing, she insisted that he leave not only our house and our family, but his job as well.

“I’m not going to work every day to see my ex-husband in the break room,” she said.

But didn’t that punishment far exceed the crime, whatever the crime had been? “You can’t do that! You can’t make him quit his *job*!” Where would someone thrown out of the profession he was named for ever find work? At the time, I didn’t understand that there was more than one publishing house in the country. I thought all books came from Houghton Mifflin.

Did I say this to my mother or only think it? In the way of all children, I believed the fault for their divorce was mine, though in this case I really was to blame. The past had happened such a long time ago, and while I wasn't square on the details, it seemed we had all come out fine.

The hostess took us to our table, and Jonathan and I both ordered a cup of breakfast tea and a slice of almond cake to share.

Eddie looked at the menu for another beat, then looked at us. "Would you mind very much if I had a glass of wine? It really has been a morning."

We didn't mind at all. Neither of us offered to join him, but we agreed that it had been a morning. Looking around the Dining Room, it appeared that fully half of the customers were having a glass of wine to deal with their mornings as well. Eddie ordered Chardonnay.

Eddie Triplett, sitting across the table, smiled at me. I could remember how painfully I had missed him when he left, but how long did that missing last? A year? Two years? Did Eddie Triplett ever cross my mind in high school? Did I wonder what had become of him after I left for college? "Tell me everything," I said, because everything was what I wanted.

"I came to New York after Boston and got a job at Simon & Schuster, which turned out to be a better job than the one I had at Houghton. And I liked living in the city, so I thank your mother for that. I stayed at S&S for five years and then I moved to Random House, which proved to be the terminal stop."

"When will you retire?" Jonathan asked, bringing the conversation back to his favorite topic. He didn't like to see a man older than himself still working because then he had to question his choices.

"When I show up at my office one morning and find its contents packed into boxes. What do you do?" It was clear that Jonathan wanted him to ask.

"Health care. I was in hospital administration." Jonathan then told him the name of the hospital.

"I had a stent there once, almost three years ago," Eddie said, as if he were talking about a restaurant that served good fish. "In and out the same day. Excellent staff."

Jonathan beamed. He thanked him. "I've always been proud of the work we did in cardiac care."

"So you liked the job but you retired?"

Jonathan nodded. "It was a reorganization in advance of the hospital being sold. The senior staff got an excellent package."

“Oh, the packages. They do their best to get the old guys out of there. What about you?” he said, turning. Each time he looked at me, he brightened. “Tell me you’re a writer.”

I had promised him the night of the accident, we had promised each other, we would both be writers. We would write books and dedicate them to one another. Now I told him I was not, which was fine. I wasn’t bound by a promise my nine-year-old self had made. I told him I taught English at a girls’ prep school. He asked me which one and I told him.

“Never too late,” he said.

“It is, actually.”

“Daphne teaches creative writing, though,” Jonathan said. “Every girl in school wants to take Mrs. Fuller’s creative writing class.” I knew he was trying to tell Eddie that I was more than I appeared to be, but the explanation came across as thin and sad.

“Mrs. Fuller?”

“That’s me.” I refilled our teacups from the little white pot. “I took Jonathan’s name.”

It was Eddie’s name I’d wanted as a child—Daphne Triplet— a true and forgotten fact recovered from where? The teacup? Daphne Triplet would have been a vast improvement for one Daphne Zabriskie. My mother said my father, however uninvolved, would never stand for it, and I shouldn’t ask him because it would be hurtful. Of course she was right. Still, I printed this true name on the flyleaf of every book I owned, the *Nancy Drews* and *Charlotte’s Web*: “This book belongs to Daphne Triplet.” I planned to use it as my pen name. I told Eddie all of this while we were hanging sideways in the car, and he said, “Nom de plume.” He said everything was more convincing when you said it in French.

“Did you marry again?” I asked. Was there a Mrs. Triplet now? He wasn’t wearing a ring, which meant exactly nothing.

He took a long sip of Chardonnay, then slowly shook his head. “You have to know what you’re good at and what you’re not good at. I wasn’t good at marriage.”

“Children?” I asked, because that’s what I wanted to know: Did Eddie have children? My mother had married again and had two sons with Lucas Ekker. “The Little Ekkers,” my sister and I called our half-brothers when we were alone in our room. Their names were Christopher and Matthew

because by then my mother's interest in mythology had waned. Christopher and Matthew were in their forties now.

Eddie looked at me with love. There was no other word for it. "Just you and your sister," he said. "What's Leda up to?"

We kept the table through lunch, ordering salads to follow the cake while Eddie had a slice of quiche and a second glass of wine. I told him about Leda, who was a clinical psychologist; about her children, the youngest of whom was still in high school; about her husband, Steve, who minted money for a hedge fund. They lived in a sprawling apartment on the Upper West Side, overlooking the park. Leda said she could limit her practice to a ten-block radius and be booked twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and run a two-year wait list. Instead she'd cut her practice back to write a column for the *New York Times* called "Your Therapist."

"No!" Eddie put down his fork. "I read 'Your Therapist.' That's our Leda?"

"Our Leda. She turned out to be the writer."

He thought for a moment. "Dr. Ha."

"Steve is Korean."

"Fuller and Ha? I thought all the modern women kept their names these days."

I shook my head. When given the choice between our father's name or our husband's name, we went with our husbands'. "What therapist wouldn't want to be Dr. Ha?"

"You girls could have done anything." He looked at Jonathan. "You wouldn't have believed this one. I was young back then. I mistakenly thought she was representative of her age. I don't think I understood at the time how extraordinary you were."

"We were kids," I said.

"She's still awfully bright," Jonathan said fondly, and for the second time I wished he'd stop it with the praise.

But Eddie held firm. "She was extraordinary."

It embarrassed me, this unchecked adoration of a stranger. I, who was accustomed only to the adoration of certain teenage girls who loved Jane Austen and Toni Morrison. I started talking about books, a brilliant conversational swerve on my part, as Eddie had read everything I could think to ask him about. Some of the books I recommended to him were books he turned out to have edited.

“I’ve never known anyone who reads as much as Daphne,” Jonathan said. Jonathan, who walked the line between amazed and appalled where my reading was concerned. The various stacks beside our bed at times exceeding the height of our nightstand.

“Well, now you know two of us,” Eddie said.

When the time came to leave—and that time had passed an hour before—Eddie took a tiny leather notebook from his shirt pocket and a tiny pen, asking if he might give me his number.

“I can put it right in my phone,” I said, reaching for my purse.

He shook his head, writing out his first and last name lest I find another scrap of paper in my bag that said “Triplett” and get confused. I thought of how that piece of paper was now the only thing I owned that he had given me. I’m sure he gave me plenty of things when I was a child, but life is long and there had been many moves in the years that intervened. Not only did I have nothing left from Eddie, I couldn’t remember what those things might have been. I held out my hand for his notebook so that I could write my number in return, but he declined.

“You may walk to the train station after lunch and say to your nice husband, *Mon Dieu!* That man! I thought we’d never be rid of him. If that’s the case then, you’ll be relieved you didn’t give me your number.”

“Eddie,” I said, and put my hand on his hand.

He looked at our two hands there on the table. He waited. “Your mother called me Eddie,” he said finally. “Only your mother and you and your sister.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“There would be no reason for you to know that.”

“What do people call you?”

Then he looked at me, smiling. “I’ll never tell you,” he said. “You’ll never know. You’ll have to call me Eddie for the rest of your life.”

We took the elevator downstairs together and Eddie walked us as far as the choir screen from the Cathedral of Valladolid before hugging me goodbye. His neck smelled lightly of Ivory soap, and I was overcome with the memory of that smell, that single night I had slept with my face buried in his neck for warmth. He shook Jonathan’s hand. He said he was going back to look for a particular Monet, a haystack in the snow, which he hadn’t seen in years. He had no idea if it would still be there, though surely they

wouldn't have sold it off. The Monet was the whim that had brought him to the Met on the day they'd shut the water off at Random House.

Jonathan and I did not go back to the American Wing. We walked out of the museum and into the clear May light. The day had been wrecked for anything else, and both of us knew it. We were going home.

"That was something," he said after two full blocks of silence. Not that the city was silent. Only us.

The day was barely warm, but it had been an unusually cold May. The fact that it was warmer than the other days had caused people to run home and pull the bedspreads off their beds and then carry them back to the park so they could spread them out across the grass. Some of them, tight on time, lay in the grass without benefit of bedspread. "Do me a favor," I said, taking my husband's arm. "Let me go see Leda. Let me go for an hour or two and not feel bad about abandoning you, then I'll take the train and meet you at home."

He stopped walking. "When have I ever made you feel bad about seeing your sister?"

"Never, but I feel bad anyway. We were supposed to spend the day together and we haven't and now I feel guilty because you're leaving tomorrow."

"I'm leaving tomorrow to go and see my sister," he said. "In case you don't remember."

"I remember."

Jonathan looked at me. "So here's a compromise: text her and see if she's home, and if she is, let me walk you over. I promise I won't come up, no matter how many times she asks me."

It might have been nice to walk through the park by myself and sort things through, but it was a reasonable request. We leaned against the stone wall that circled the park and I texted my sister to see if she was home and asked her if I could come over. Leda didn't see patients on Thursday, she kept the day open to work on her column, but since the column only ran once a month, she often spent Thursdays on errands instead, or went to a yoga class, or had lunch with a friend. I heard back from her right away, saying she wasn't home but she was close. Twenty minutes? She asked me if everything was okay.

I told her yes.

“I’m trying to remember what you ever told me about Ed Triplett,” Jonathan said as we started out across the park. “I can’t remember anything other than your mother had three husbands. I’m not even sure I knew his name.” Jonathan saw this as a failure on his part. He loved to ask me questions about the past: high school friends and family vacations. He was sorry to think he hadn’t asked me more about someone I’d all but forgotten myself.

For me the past was a sinkhole. Not that it was terrible, but there was nothing for me there. “Eddie didn’t get much of a run,” I said. “A year, possibly two years start to finish. Leda and I were crazy about him, but when he was gone, he was gone.”

“He didn’t visit after he left?” My husband had two grown daughters. He could never imagine letting go of them.

But we weren’t Eddie’s daughters. The marriage was so brief we were barely his stepdaughters. I shook my head. “My mother scrubbed him, at least that’s what I told myself when I was nine and I’m guessing I was right. No visits, no birthday cards, nothing. I’m sure she thought we’d get over it better that way, that we’d forget about him. It probably had to do with my father. He was the one she wanted to scrub, but she wasn’t allowed to do that, whereas she had complete control over how things went down with Eddie.”

“Did you ever think of trying to find him?”

Oh, this moment, when all the leaves were fresh and the lilacs were out and New York seemed like the best idea. The present, I wanted to say to my husband, let’s live here. “I thought about it when I was nine, but by the time affordable home computers had been invented and the internet was up and running, I guess I’d forgotten.” Had I failed Eddie? I’d been sure of it at the time. Maybe I was right.

Jonathan put his arm around my shoulder, kissed my head. “Poor you,” he said.

“I did all right.”

“You did better than all right, but I knew your father, and I know your stepfather, and now I’ve had lunch with Ed Triplett, and I have to say that of the three, the best one got away.”

My father, one Neil Zabriskie, called Buddy, was the reason I’d met Jonathan in the first place, as my father was dying of metastatic melanoma in the hospital in Gloucester, Massachusetts, where Jonathan worked.

Jonathan liked to drop in on patients, ask how things were going. He came back later to check on Buddy, to see if he was happy with the care he was receiving. He came back later still to bring me a cup of coffee while Buddy was sleeping, his intentions on his sleeve. That old guys love me has been established, but also true was the fact that Jonathan's wife, the much beloved first Mrs. Fuller, had died of metastatic melanoma five years before. He had some insights into the disease, the main one being that I shouldn't be angry at my father for not staying on top of this thing that was killing him. Not only had Jonathan's wife been on top of it, she was forefront in the mind of every oncologist in the Northeast, the first one called for appropriate clinical trials. She fought like a wolverine and still the cancer pulled her under. This wasn't my fault and it wasn't Buddy's fault—that's what Jonathan Fuller had come back to the room to tell me. Then he asked me to have dinner with him so we could talk about it some more.

Jonathan and I kept on through the park, passing the pond with all its turtles, and Belvedere Castle and then the Delacorte Theater, past the Shakespeare Garden and the Bow Bridge. We were walking up to Strawberry Fields before I realized why he'd wanted to come with me: he meant to keep me from getting lost. In the best of times I was likely to take a wrong turn in Central Park, and when I was distracted, I had the potential to stay lost for days. Maybe this was why he got irritated when I walked so fast; he knew I had no idea where I was going.

Jonathan saw me to the door of Leda's building, the Gallant Green, and told me to call and let him know what train I'd be coming home on. "If the timing works out, we'll have dinner in town," he said, meaning that he held no expectation that I would be back in two hours.

My husband kissed me goodbye in front of my sister's apartment building, and I was thinking about how, at some point, I would tell Eddie all of this: about the walk across the park and the realization of Jonathan's kindness and how I could picture Leda's face when I said Eddie's name. I could remember this feeling from childhood, waiting for him to come home from work on the commuter rail so that I could tell him everything.

"Is my sister back?" I asked Mohammad. I visited Leda so often that the doormen in her building knew me. In response he turned his head and gave a quick whistle. Across the lobby, Leda looked up from the stack of mail in her hands and smiled. Beautiful Dr. Ha. I should have been able to wait until we were in the apartment to tell her what had happened, or at least

wait until we were in the elevator, but I lacked the discipline. I went across the lobby and put my arms around her. She smelled like oranges and verbena. “Never in a million years will you guess who Jonathan and I saw at the Met,” I said.

“Bruce Springsteen,” she said. She had once seen Springsteen at the bookstore Three Lives in the West Village and had been on the lookout for him ever since.

I didn’t want to make it into a game, especially a game she had no chance of winning, so I told her.

“Eddie Triplett?” she asked, as if the name puzzled her. Leda was younger than me, which meant she was, what, six or seven at the time? Surely she remembered Eddie.

“Our stepfather.”

“I know who he is,” she said, her cheeks flushed. “It’s just so strange. Eddie. How did you even recognize him? He must be in his seventies now.”

“Seventy-six. I didn’t recognize him, but the more I think about it, the more I think he did look like himself. I might have walked past him in a museum, but if you put six stepfathers in a lineup, I know I would have picked him out.”

“Six stepfathers in a lineup! Oh, if only Mom had married four more times. That would have been a terrific game.” She pushed the elevator button and the doors slid open. “What did Mom say when you told her?”

“I haven’t told her. We left him less than an hour ago. If we went back to the Met right now, we could probably find him. I’ll call her later. I wanted to tell you first.” In truth it hadn’t occurred to me to call our mother, though of course I would.

“Or maybe you won’t tell her. Mom isn’t a fan of conflicting narratives. She’s married to Lucas, period. The boys bring their families home for Christmas. She’s decided the past was happy and so she has no reason to think about it.”

I asked her where we fit into that narrative. “We don’t,” she said.

When the elevator doors opened again, we walked down the hall to her apartment.

My sister had been named for a girl raped by Zeus, god of all gods, who turned himself into a swan for the occasion. I had been named for a girl whose father, the river god Peneus, turned her into a tree to save her from being raped by the god Apollo. Leda liked to say that made me the lucky

one, but I was never sure. Daphne had been saved, but she was always going to be a tree, a virtuous tree, whereas Leda was still human, though her children had arrived in a clutch of eggs. Our mother had taken a semester of Greek mythology in college and it spoke to her. When she told us she had hoped for a third daughter to name Persephone, Leda and I counted our lucky constellations.

Remembering how young our mother was when she fell for Buddy Zabriskie had been my life's discipline. She found out she was pregnant the week after they graduated from college, and at twenty-three they were married with their new baby Daphne. I told myself to bear in mind how young she still was when he left her with two daughters, the second one in diapers, so that he could go back to work on his family's fishing boat full-time. He told her he was meant for the ocean, and that he would not let her vision of life define him. He actually said that to her. He told me so when he was dying. What had our mother's vision of life been in those days? Paying rent? Buying food? I tried to imagine how I would have managed in similar circumstances, and all I could say was that I would not have survived, any more than I would have survived being thrown out of a plane with two small children. Our mother, who had annoyed me deeply throughout most of my life, managed something so heroic that there should have been songs written about her to be sung around campfires by Girl Scouts.

*Abigail Zabriskie paved the way
So we might see a better day
She never thought that she could fail
Let's raise our cups to Abigail.*

Leda put the mail on the counter, dropped her bag. She got us each a can of seltzer flavored with lime. "I keep trying to get a picture of Eddie in my mind. He seems more like a visiting relative than someone Mom married."

"You were so young then."

"But he made an impression. Like our childhood was pretty much a chaotic mess except for this one little part when Eddie lived with us, even though I can't remember what he did to make it feel that way. He was a nice guy, wasn't he?"

"That's my memory." Leda's living room offered no end of seating options, but we both took our place on the same smallish couch, our shoes off and feet touching.

“Did he seem happy when you saw him?”

I opened my seltzer and drank. Crying makes me thirsty, which was psychosomatic, I know. I had not wept away the equivalent of this seltzer can. “I think he did, but who can say if another person is happy based on one lunch? He was shocked to see me, that much was clear. We were both shocked. I burst into tears when he introduced himself. Sobbed. I have no idea where that came from.”

“Where do you think it came from?” Leda cracked her seltzer and tucked her feet beneath herself like a swan.

“Don’t go getting professional on me,” I said. I admired my sister’s professionalism and wanted no part of it.

“I’m serious. Why do you think you cried? It’s not exactly your go-to emotional response.”

I picked up a throw pillow with a giant red poppy needlepointed on the front and held it against my chest, my blooming, bleeding heart. One of her clients had made it for her when she moved away, obviously to ensure that Leda would never again walk through her own living room without thinking about this missing woman. Why did I cry when I realized Eddie was Eddie? Why was I so close to crying again now? Because I had loved him and I had ruined his life. “There was a time I carried a lot of guilt, about the divorce, about Eddie losing his job—childish stuff, I know that. I would have told you it wasn’t in me now, but I guess there was a splinter of it left. Subconscious, not conscious. I haven’t thought about him in decades.”

Leda nodded and then took a long slug from her can. “I felt the same way.”

That was the difference between being the client and being the sister—the sister-therapist was free to join in. “What could you have done to Eddie?” I asked. “You were in the first grade when he left. You were a baby.”

“Logic doesn’t have anything to do with it, and for the record, I was in the second grade. I was almost eight. I had appendicitis, then you and Eddie were in the car accident, then he was in the hospital—”

“—and after that he was gone.”

She nodded. “Exactly. If I hadn’t said I was sick, then the whole chain of events wouldn’t have gone into motion and he wouldn’t have had to leave.”

“And you would have died of a ruptured appendix.”

“For every action, there is an equal and opposite reaction.”

“Did you ever work through any of this as an adult?” Leda had to go through plenty of therapy on her way to becoming a therapist herself.

“Interestingly, I have not. Somehow this brief but meaningful chapter remained subterranean. This is a revelation in real time. So did you and Eddie talk about the accident?”

“In the Dining Room at the Met? It didn’t come up. To tell the truth, the accident isn’t something I talked about with anyone, I mean, aside from you.”

“And Jonathan.”

I drank my seltzer, held my pillow. “Not really. I mean, he knows I was in a car accident when I was a kid.” I tapped the thin white line that ran down the left side of my forehead and disappeared into my hairline near the top of my ear. You couldn’t see it if my hair was down, and for that reason, my hair remained down. Jonathan saw it when we were in bed for the first time. He leaned over me and traced it with his finger. “What’s the story on this?” he asked, and I told him. I’d been in a car accident when I was a kid, not a big deal, no one seriously hurt.

“Did he ask you who was driving?” This was the reason my sister was Dr. Ha, “Your Therapist.” She always knew the follow-up question.

“I told him Mom was driving.”

Leda opened her mouth and left it open, an incredibly affecting gesture. I wondered if she tried it with her patients.

“I know, I know.”

“Get thee to therapy, sister.”

“Why? Because I didn’t tell the guy I’d gone to bed with about Eddie Triplett? It was an oversimplification.”

“In my profession we call that a lie.”

“I didn’t feel like opening up to him at that moment.”

“You didn’t feel like opening up to him, but you’d just had sex with him?”

“Jesus, Leda, you remember having sex with people for the first time, don’t you? Deep dives into childhood trauma sort of ruins it for everyone. Did you tell Steve about your appendix the first time you slept with him? He must have seen the scar.”

She shook her head and smiled at some private memory.

Later on, when Jonathan became True-Love Jonathan, I never found the right moment to correct myself. “If he thought Mom slammed a car into a

tree, well, Jonathan never liked her anyway.”

She nodded. Had it been a tennis match, I would have gotten a point off of her. “So you want to hear something crazy?”

“These are crazy times.”

“You never told me about the car accident.”

I looked surprised. How had she forgotten? “Of course I did.”

“When?”

“When you came home from the hospital.”

“When I was seven.”

We shared a room in the little house in Winchester, twin beds with a nightstand between them, a lamp with a shade made of dotted swiss. Leda was allowed to have popsicles, Jell-O, Cream of Wheat. She was directed to rest, and when she wasn’t resting, I was directed to read her *Harriet the Spy* and play Go Fish. I asked her what had happened in the hospital, and she asked me what had happened in the car.

Interstitial

(Friday, January 18, 1980. Winchester, Massachusetts.)

The younger of the two Zabriskie sisters had been quiet all morning, but she ran towards quiet anyway. Then, in the school cafeteria, she put down the second half of her egg salad sandwich and vomited the first half onto the floor. The lunchroom lady, as patient Mrs. Valenti was to everyone known, came with a rag and cleaned the girl's shoes and sopped up the pooling mess, and after she'd dropped the rag in the bucket and washed her hands, she went back and found Leda at the table alone, her feverish head pressed against the cool tin of her Camp Snoopy lunch box. When Mrs. Valenti told her they needed to walk to the nurse's office, Leda vomited again. Mrs. Valenti left the mess and the lunch box and the little pink backpack and picked the girl up in her arms, disregarding the inevitable consequence for her own shirt and slacks. She carried Leda to the nurse's office herself.

How could a child who'd spent the morning in reading group have gotten so sick so fast? The thermometer, which the nurse had to hold because Leda wasn't able to keep it beneath her tongue, registered 103.5. When offered ginger ale, she gave a nominal turn of her small head and then vomited into the pan she'd been given. Remarkably few children managed to vomit into the pan. The nurse got an ice pack and picked up the school directory to find the name Abigail Triplett, mother, beneath the names Daphne and Leda Zabriskie. No father listed and a different last name for the children. It was all the story she needed to know.

Lunch for first and second grade started at eleven fifteen, which was lucky because Mrs. Triplett had a twelve o'clock launch meeting for the fall list. If the call had come any later, she would not have been at her desk. The nurse reported the symptoms and said Mrs. Triplett would need to come and get Leda as soon as possible, and maybe she should call her pediatrician.

Abigail Triplett hung up the phone and sat for a moment tapping her pencil against her desk. Wasn't the purpose of having a sick bay at school

that the child could rest on a nice cot and be monitored by an actual nurse so the parent could work without worrying about losing her job? This was January of 1980, neither the dark ages where working mothers were concerned nor the age of enlightenment. Abigail was not an unsympathetic character. She wanted to take care of her children, but part of that care meant keeping her job, a job, it should be noted, she both loved and was good at. She had just finished the scramble of getting through the Christmas holidays when the office reopened on the second and school reopened on the seventh. Abigail looked at her watch and decided she had enough time to walk over to editorial and talk to Eddie.

Eddie had recently been promoted from the cluster of desks left out in the open room of editorial and into what had once been a storage closet. Abigail and Eddie put that closet to use whenever possible. Not for sex—neither of them was as brave or stupid as that—but given a closed door, they kissed like teenagers. Let the record show that Eddie Triplett was a magnificent kisser with a clever pair of hands. Things progressed quickly even though no clothing was removed, so much so that Abigail experienced a Pavlovian arousal climbing the stairs to the third floor and had to remind herself that her daughter was sick, little Leda was sick, and she was going to tell her husband she was leaving for the day.

“How much must he love you to take on two children?” her own mother had said when she called to report the happy news. “Two children with another man who is two years behind on child support and hardly ever takes them for the weekend? I can’t even imagine what it would mean to love someone so much you’d want to get into that.”

No, Abigail thought, you can’t.

Eddie had bought two standing lamps so he could keep the buzzing fluorescent strips in his office-closet turned off and still have plenty of light by which to read. When his wife came in, he smiled, and then stopped smiling. “What?”

“Leda’s throwing up. I’m going to have to go to school and get her.”

“Virus?” Eddie asked.

Abigail didn’t know. “We’ll have to wait and see if the rest of us start throwing up in a day or two.” School was a petri dish, and the children brought home everything that was offered: pink eye, strep throat, lice. “We’re supposed to be at the meeting for the fall list in”—she looked at her watch—“seven minutes. I’m wondering if I shouldn’t pick her up an hour

from now. I could tell them I got stuck in traffic.” The meeting would be in the conference room. They were bringing in lunch from Fill-A-Buster’s.

Eddie shook his head. “Go get her. I’ll tell them what happened. I’ll make it sound dire.” Eddie would do a better job framing it than she would. They both knew that. This was the benefit of working for the same company: they could cover for one another, which meant that he could cover for her since Eddie never had emergencies. He handed her the car keys. “I’ll take notes at the meeting. Everything here will be fine.”

Right away Abigail felt better. There were a million reasons to love the guy, but put this at the top of the list: He kept his head. He did not roll his eyes, change the subject, or rant over circumstances beyond his control. He helped her think things through. She would take the commuter rail back to Winchester, collect the car from the parking lot, and drive to the school. He put his arms around her and kissed her, not because he wanted something but as a means of demonstrating his support. She had to go.

“Hey, Abby,” he said when she was halfway down the hall. She turned around. “Make sure it’s not appendicitis.”

“How do I do that?”

He put his hand on the right side of his lower abdomen, below his belt. “Push a little bit there, on the right. If she screams, take her to the ER.”

She should have asked the school nurse to do it, but when she saw her daughter there, she forgot what Eddie had told her. Leda on her cot was crying to go home, holding up her arms so her mother would pick her up like a baby. When they were home again and she was helping her daughter out of her sour-smelling clothes, Abigail remembered. Leda, hot and dry, weighing as much as a feather pillow, screamed as soon as her mother touched her stomach. She didn’t have to press. Was she going to get the child dressed again and put her back in the car? She didn’t want to go to the hospital for any number of reasons, including that January meant a new year’s deductible to pay, but Leda was sobbing now, heaving up teaspoons of bile, of nothing.

The minute Abigail said the word “appendicitis” to the nurse, the staff of the emergency room heard her. Poor Leda, there were people lining up to press on her lower right abdomen now, then each one stuck a needle in her. Abigail held her daughter’s hand but turned her head, thinking she might faint. Things moved so quickly that she didn’t have the chance to call Eddie until Leda was wheeled off to surgery.

“How did you know?” she asked Eddie when at last she found a pay phone.

Eddie sighed. “My brother. His appendix ruptured when we were kids.”

“Martin?” Had there been some other brother she never knew about, the one who didn’t make it?

“He was so god-awful sick and my mother kept trying to give him ginger ale. By the time she finally got him to the hospital, it was a mess. The doctor said another half an hour and he would have died.”

“Your poor mother,” Abigail said, knowing how close she’d come to letting Leda sleep. All of life’s mistakes were the fault of the mother, all of the suffering.

“Listen,” Eddie said. “Here’s what we’re going to do. I’ll come to the hospital and get the car, give you a kiss, then I’ll pick up Daphne and we’ll go home and pack a bag for you and Leda, then we’ll come back to visit. Does that sound good?”

Eddie had come into the marriage without a car. He had a two-bedroom apartment in Cambridge and took the T to work like any sensible Boston bachelor. Now he paid half her rent in Winchester, paid half of the car insurance. She had forgotten about Daphne but didn’t say so. She might only have been able to hold one child in her head at a time. She told him that sounded good. She told him to bring the manuscript she’d left on her desk.

Would she have been like Eddie’s mother, who, on the occasions they had met, struck her as more competent than she could ever dream of being? Without Eddie’s preemptive direction, would she have left Leda in her bed, a cool washcloth on her forehead, only to find her dead later in the day? Abigail sat down in the hallway, near the doors where they had taken her daughter away. She closed her eyes and felt the sickening speed of her heart, like being on the turnpike when the eighteen-wheeler starts to merge into your lane from the right because it doesn’t see you there, the concrete barriers on the left, eighteen inches from the edge of the side mirror. It was the almost death that terrified her, the almost derailment of everything she had ever known. Sitting in that hallway, she turned her fear into rage because she could not abide the fear. Her rage took the shape of Buddy Zabriskie, who, on this freezing January day, was no doubt sitting in a shed somewhere mending lobster traps, his phone long disconnected for

nonpayment. He didn't know that his younger child had almost died, or that she had been saved by the good thinking of one Eddie Triplett.

Eddie, her office pal who paid for lunch, who sat beside her at book launch meetings and passed her notes, who wanted to marry her, who did marry her. Eddie, who loved her and loved her girls. He had been willing to take the whole package. Eddie, who knew where the appendix was located, because honestly, she did not. There ought to be some sort of a test you had to pass before you were allowed to have children. First you would have to be able to identify a good man (she'd had to repeat a grade on that one), then prove a basic proficiency in how to keep your child alive. Abigail knew nothing at all. Her greatest fear was that she and Buddy Zabriskie were soulmates, and that they should be together on that boat with no one to hurt but one another and some fish.

Daphne and Leda attended an after-school program, which gave Abigail enough time to finish her workday. That's where Eddie picked Daphne up. Full-on dark of night arrived before five o'clock in the winter, and so she was waiting behind the glass front doors of the school in what she referred to as her teddy bear coat, a pale brown coat made of fake fur that made the child look like a large stuffed animal. She had wanted the coat for her birthday. She had begged for it, and she had won.

When Daphne saw the station wagon, she ran outside, waving goodbye to the one remaining teacher and a couple of the other leftover kids. Eddie was rarely the one to pick her up, but it was not unprecedented.

"Leda threw up in the cafeteria," Daphne said, sliding into the front seat even though she knew she was supposed to sit in the back. She wasn't about to sit in the back. "She got sent home from school."

"So I heard."

"She threw up everywhere. All the kids were talking about it."

"They should cut her some slack," Eddie said, correcting the mythic pack of other children but not Daphne. "She's pretty sick."

Daphne looked at him. "How sick?"

"She had to go to the hospital and have her appendix out. She's going to be fine."

"Leda had surgery?" People in books had surgery. The thought of surgery was so glamorous he might as well have said she'd gone to New York City for the day.

Eddie nodded, eyes on the road. "Like I said, she'll be fine."

“Are we going to the hospital to see her?” Daphne liked her sister. Even when they were children, they had liked one another. People talked about how pretty Leda was, but it didn’t bother Daphne because privately Daphne knew Leda to be a strange little bird.

“We’re going to run home and pick up some things Leda and your mother need, then we’ll go to the hospital so we can check on both of them.”

Daphne thought about this. “We should bring them dinner.”

“I don’t think Leda can have dinner.”

“Sure, but Mom can.”

So that’s what they did. They went back to the house, and Daphne packed a bag for her sister: a nightgown and bathrobe, underwear, toothbrush, a bear who was named Mr. Crispy for reasons none of them could remember. Eddie packed a bag for his wife. They went to their favorite chicken place and got a grilled chicken sandwich and French fries for Abigail (“No onions, double sauce,” Daphne told the girl at the counter). They got a bucket of chicken tenders with honey mustard dipping sauce for the two of them to eat later at home. They got three Cokes.

The visit didn’t turn out to be much of a visit. Leda slept through the whole thing. She looked so insubstantial in the hospital bed, her golden hair caught up in a blue paper surgical bonnet. Her mother told them Leda’s appendix ruptured during surgery, so it had taken the doctor longer than he’d expected. She would be monitored overnight and, if she was stable, she could go home in a few days. Fortunately it was Friday, so Abigail had at least two days before she had to start worrying about work.

Daphne’s mother looked like she’d been sitting by that bed since the day Leda was born, so exhausted that Eddie offered to trade places with her. “You go home with Daphne,” he said. “I can sleep in the chair. If there’s any trouble, I’ll call you.”

But Abigail declined. Even if Eddie was more competent than she was, she wasn’t about to drop her guard now.

When Eddie and Daphne headed home, it was barely past six, but the night was so cold and dark it looked more like the small hours of the morning, not that it mattered. The big car was warm and smelled of chicken, and while Daphne wished that she were the one who’d had her ruptured appendix removed and been laid out in a hospital bed like Sleeping Beauty, she was also glad to be the one with Eddie. Daphne had no details

from the time her parents had lived together, and in the years since their divorce, she had seen her father so infrequently that the thought of him made her uncomfortable. What did she know about her father? That he was burly. That he often but not always had a beard and his face above that beard was either sunburned or wind-chapped. That he had never smelled of fish on the times she'd seen him but she had assigned the smell of fish to him all the same. Whenever she passed the tank of lobsters in the grocery store, their bound claws tapping sadly at the glass, she wanted to ask them, Did my father do this to you?

Eddie Triplett had been cut from an entirely different piece of cloth, and it was the same piece of cloth that Daphne came from, or that's what she told herself. He read constantly, and not just finished books. He read books that were loose piles of paper and marked them up to make them better. "A work in progress," he liked to say, as if the novel needed some help getting on its feet. At her insistent begging, he once marked up a theme paper she had written for English class, correcting it the way a teacher would so that she could write it out a second time, fixing her mistakes before handing it in. "I don't think I'm supposed to be doing this," Eddie said, circling her misspellings, her word repetitions.

"Other parents do it," she said. And they did. Not her mother but other people's mothers. Never the fathers as far as she knew.

The word "parents" struck him. "Other people's parents." "My parents." That's what won him over. Eddie made room for her in the big chair he sat in at night and showed her how to improve her work.

"What should we get for Leda?" Eddie asked when they pulled out of the hospital parking lot. "We could go to the grocery store and get her something special for when she comes home."

"Tonight?"

"Tonight, tomorrow, either way. What kind of ice cream does she like?"

"Raspberry sherbet," Daphne said. She considered herself the authority on what her sister did and did not eat. "She likes raspberry yogurt, raspberry licorice, raspberry jam, raspberry-lemon snack cakes."

"Did you know there's a raspberry farm up on the hill over there?" Eddie asked. They were driving in the direction of home, but that also meant they would pass the grocery store.

Daphne shook her head. "There wouldn't be raspberries now." It was too cold for anything to be growing now. Old snow banked along the side of the

road in dirty lumps.

“That’s true. That’s absolutely right. Have you ever picked raspberries?”

She wanted so much to say yes because maybe he had a special respect for children who picked their own raspberries, but it seemed important not to lie to Eddie, not to do anything that could mess things up between them. She shook her head again.

“I went a couple of years ago, before I knew you. Picking raspberries is a terrible business. The canes are covered in tiny thorns. But the place was pretty, way up on top of a big hill. Do you want to see it?”

“In the dark?”

“If you wanted to. There are all sorts of things to see in the dark if you can sit with it for a while, let your eyes adjust.”

Her mother would never drive to a raspberry farm in the middle of winter when there weren’t any raspberries. It was the kind of thing Daphne only could have done with Eddie. “Are we going to walk around?” She was thinking of those thorny canes.

Eddie shook his head. “I don’t have a flashlight. We’ll stay in the car, eat the chicken, look at the stars. There’s hardly any moon at all. Can you see it over there?”

Daphne craned her head. She saw the silver crescent moon.

“See how small it is? That means the stars are going to be bright.”

Whenever either Eddie or Daphne thought of this excursion later in life, what struck them was the utter pointlessness of it. As many times as they were interrogated as to what the purpose of their trip had been, no purpose could be found. How did it happen? Why did you think it was a good idea? It happened because Leda liked raspberry sherbet, which got them talking about actual raspberries. They thought it was a good idea because it was so dark that the stars would be especially bright. “Leda was in the *hospital*,” her mother would say, as if one child’s surgery logically precluded another child’s trip to a raspberry farm in winter. But there was no logic. Stop looking for it.

“I’d like to see the stars,” Daphne said.

Eddie reached out his hand and patted her coat above her woolly knee, which was his way of saying, You and me, kiddo. He took a left on High Street, heading off in a direction Daphne didn’t know. The heat vent blew directly on her boots, which were galoshes because she’d outgrown her snow boots. The front seat was a lot warmer.

The raspberry farm hired workers in the summer and early fall to pick the berries and take them to a co-op that sold them to grocery stores or sent them to processing plants, but several acres were U-Pick, where families drove up for the day, usually Saturday or Sunday, to crawl around picking berries and getting scratched. There was a farmhouse set back on the property where the owners lived, but that was nowhere near the dirt U-Pick parking lot, and anyway, the owners left for Fort Lauderdale every year after Christmas and came back the first of March.

Eddie and Abigail had been married for fourteen months. They had dated for a year before that and been chummy at work for quite some time prior to dating. Because Daphne was nine and Leda seven, this otherwise small amount of time that comprised their mother's relationship represented a significant portion of the girls' lives on earth. They had almost grown up with Eddie. They knew he drank coffee with milk and worked the crossword puzzle with a blue Bic pen, leaving the easiest answers blank so that Daphne could fill them in later. He had no temper that they had witnessed, though he did not like to be sat on while he was reading, and he was often reading. He brought home piles of books from the children's department (he had a friend in children's—he had friends everywhere) so they could read with him. He did not cook. He was nice to their friends when they had friends over. He made their mother laugh. At night he would sit on the front steps of the house they rented and smoke a cigarette, which drove the girls to grief because they loved him and wanted him to live.

Up the hill the station wagon climbed, the transmission straining. Maybe it was more mountain than hill. There were no streetlights this far from town, no houses. The dark of night was dazzling and complete. When Eddie clicked off the headlights, Daphne gasped. Now the only light came pale from the dashboard. They were going eighteen miles an hour and had a third a tank of gas. Who knew things could be so different ten minutes from home! Up and up. How could Eddie see? Sometimes the town swung into view below them and then another turn and it was gone again. "Look at that," he said, pointing, because now they had nearly reached the top. They were turned away from the town and Eddie was right: without the headlights, her eyes adjusted to the dark. Then through the windshield came the milky wash of stars.

"Look!" she cried. "Look!" Both of them were looking up, trying to take in the wonder of the universe, when the car, going forward, left the edge of

the road and pitched into the fathomless darkness below.

There was no time to correct the situation but a seemingly infinite amount of time to consider it. What Eddie wanted to know and did not know was if Daphne was wearing her seat belt. He knew he hadn't put it on her himself—she was nine, she put her own seat belt on—but it was his responsibility to check and he had not checked. He had not been driving fast, but now they were picking up speed. When they hit whatever it was they would eventually hit and she wasn't wearing her seat belt, her neck could break. She had bones like a pigeon. He had been entrusted with the one child because the other child had just come from surgery. He would not be forgiven, not by Abigail or himself or the god of all those stars. Impact arrived when he reached the word “stars” in his mind, and the car, a 1972 Chevrolet Impala weighing more than four thousand pounds, tossed like a boat on high seas before coming to rest on its left side, the left front quadrant crunching in, the nose pointed down. Eddie's head rested on the driver-side window, and he felt something catastrophic in the area of his left foot or ankle. He turned to look over his right shoulder, and in the utter darkness, he could make out the shape of something dangling. He didn't know if she was dead or alive, but she had put her seat belt on.

“Duck?” he whispered.

“I'm here,” she said. “Are you okay?”

Eddie Triplett had not killed a child, nor would he ever again in his life love another person as much as he loved her.

2

I looked at my watch. Five o'clock. I told my sister I had to go.

Leda, who had sunk into the couch while listening, sat up. "You can't leave. You've only told me the part of the story I already knew."

"I'm sorry. I had to start at the beginning."

"So you start at the beginning, so what? This isn't a therapy session. You have plenty of time."

"I don't. I promised Jonathan I'd be home. He's leaving town in the morning. We were going to have a day together and then we ran into Eddie and then I wanted to come and talk to you. I need to go home for dinner. He doesn't know how long he'll be gone."

"Where's Jonathan going?"

"Wisconsin. He and his sister are cleaning out their mother's house. There's a lot that needs to be done before they can get it on the market." Jonathan and Bea's mother had died six months before, at the age of ninety-six. The enormous force of her will, combined with Bea's tireless service, had kept her in her own house right up to the end.

"But his sister lives there. Can't she do it?"

I shook my head. "Bea gets stuck with everything. She did all the caretaking because Jonathan was working, and now that he's not working . . ."

". . . he needs to clean out some closets. Okay, I get that, but I still want to hear about the accident."

"We'll do the rest of it later, I promise."

Leda pushed her feet beneath my thigh. "I feel like I've been waiting forty-four years for this one, and now I'm impatient."

I put down my emotional support pillow and stretched my arms overhead. "What if I give you the punch line?"

"What's the punch line?" my sister asked.

"We lived."

The late-afternoon light was soft and the leaves on the trees were new and everything in me wanted to walk along the edge of the park but time was short so I took the stairs down to the subway. Even then, I wouldn't make it to Grand Central for the Metro-North 5:38, which should have been my train. I had once dreaded peak service, but remote work had changed everything in New York, including opening up more seats on trains. The people I'd commuted beside for years were probably living in Montana now. I'd text Jonathan and tell him to meet me at the restaurant, knowing full well that he would be standing on the platform when the train pulled in. There were things that Jonathan understood that few men had ever considered, including the comfort of seeing your spouse on the station platform instead of searching the parking lot for your car.

On the subway to the train, my head was full of things I hadn't said or thought about in decades. I'd been interested in my own childhood when I was a child, but Eddie wasn't the one who'd knocked childhood out of me. My mother's third husband, Lucas Ekker, got the credit for that, and it wasn't even Lucas as a person as much as it was Lucas as a concept who brought about that end. The first two husbands had left me so completely (until they came back) that when the third candidate for fatherhood arrived, I had reached my limit—no more, not interested. I was twelve, and my mother had abandoned the mythology of the Greeks in favor of a book called *Name Your Baby*. She gave birth first to Christopher and then Matthew. Lucas was a Methodist and so she converted from nothing to something, another dividing gulf we failed to cross as a family. She had the opportunity to start again from scratch, and good for her, and good for all the Ekkers, but it left Leda and me adrift in different ways. Leda grew up and sought the training to dig into other people's childhoods so that she could sort them out, and I committed myself to reading and locked the rest away. "When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things." First Corinthians, basic even for the nonbelievers. I did not become a man, but that was part of the problem. First Corinthians did not properly account for the experiences of women. I couldn't say exactly where childhood ends, but dealing with your pregnant mother at the age of thirteen was as good a place as any to wrap it up.

Lucas Ekker had been my mother's author at Houghton Mifflin. She saw the sales potential in his first book, *Positivity!*, where her colleagues saw

only gifty nonsense. Thanks to her vision, he stayed on the *New York Times* list longer than Dale Carnegie. My mother went on the road with Lucas whenever possible, leaving Leda and me with neighbors, cousins, school friends, and, later, Eddie. This was back in the days of local television, local newspapers, stand-alone Sunday book sections. Every city could be a love-fest, a media-fest. If Lucas hadn't invented positive thinking, he surely knew how to pitch it, and people ate it up. Smile for no reason in two-minute intervals. Hum in the car—the vibration of the larynx encouraged endorphins. Affix gratitude lists on the refrigerator with a rainbow magnet, one for each member of the family. When my mother married him, two years after divorcing Eddie, I had my own gratitude list to fill in on the refrigerator.

It wasn't child abuse I suffered, but it was certainly child estrangement. The success of *Positivity!* was followed by a rehash called *Positively Positive!* Then came *The Positivity Workbook!* *Positively Christmas!* *American Positivity!* *The Positivity Pop!* and *Positive Every Day!*, which offered 365 platitudes in a tear-off format. They bought a big house on the other side of Winchester, where, despite the ample number of bedrooms, Leda and I continued to sleep side by side in our twin beds, the lamp with the dotted swiss shade between us. We created our own continuity.

It was the AIDS epidemic that ultimately crushed the Ekker empire, a blow that came later than it should have. No one wanted to be positive anymore. As bitter as Lucas was, and as unable to imagine his empire with a different brand, there was plenty of money to see them through. My mother was a numbers person and Lucas was not. To his credit, he had left all the financial decisions to her. She told him he could have the gold Rolex *or* the Porsche *or* the boat, but not the gold Rolex *and* the Porsche *and* the boat. He went for the car, and all four of us went through college free of debt.

I came up from the tunnel beneath 42nd Street and crossed through the terminal of Grand Central at a good clip, glancing up to see the blue arch of the ceiling painted with stars. Who wouldn't be distracted by stars? Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis had made the ultimate sacrifice for her country and still found the energy to save this beautiful train station, a living testament to not being defeated by one's past. Jackie was also a book editor, I remembered that now. I wondered if Eddie had ever met her.

I checked the board and then rushed to track nine, slipping through the doors at the last possible minute. As I suspected, I had no trouble finding a seat. On the 6:23, I finally got the thing I needed, thirty quiet minutes to look out the window and explain myself to no one.

When I saw Jonathan waiting on the platform in his jeans and white dress shirt (he had yet to master the art of dressing for retirement), I thought that I might miss him if he stayed in Wisconsin too long. I remembered how Leda hadn't been in favor of our marriage at the time. "Your absent father dies and you immediately take up with the hospital administrator who's seventeen years older than you? I don't think you need a professional to identify the problem with that." But that was twenty years ago. Now she loved Jonathan. Everyone loved Jonathan.

"I got sushi," he said, giving me a squeeze. "I thought this was a night best spent at home."

Home. Oh, home would be better than anything. I hadn't thought of that. There was still plenty of light. We could sit in the backyard and look at the peonies having their moment, take off our shoes and sink our feet into grass. I felt like I'd been in the city for a semester.

He walked me to the car and opened my door, then waited for me to settle myself in. "I can't imagine how tired you must be," he said.

I smiled up at him, thinking he might reach over to fasten my seat belt for me. "It was a day, for sure."

"Did Leda help you get things sorted out?"

"We talked about it. I'm not exactly sure what sorting it out would have entailed."

Jonathan got in. "I wish you'd come with me," he said, looking over his shoulder as he backed out the car. "I know you don't want to, but it's pretty this time of year and Bea would die to see you."

"You know I'm not going to Wisconsin."

"But you could at least consider it for a minute, couldn't you?"

I shook my head. I didn't fly. I had stopped flying when my father, Buddy Zabriskie, died, which was to say that Jonathan and I had never been on a plane together. He knew my limitations when he married me, even though he would occasionally push on them to see if they held. We had taken our honeymoon on Cape Cod, our vacations in Maine. One of his daughters lived in Philadelphia and the other in Baltimore, and in both cases it was quicker to drive than it was to fly. I understood the inconvenience I caused,

but other people lived with great burdens. There were wives who wouldn't take the subway, wives who wouldn't get on elevators. There were wives who were afraid to drive over a bridge and wives who refused to take the tunnel that ran beneath the river. We had taken the *Queen Mary* to Southampton and then taken the Chunnel to Paris for our tenth anniversary. It was splendid.

Jonathan once asked my sister over Thanksgiving dinner if she didn't know someone who could fix me—hypnotism or EMDR—and to my great surprise my sister said yes, she could put me in touch with someone if I were willing to try. I handed her a dish of roasted sweet potatoes and said I was not willing to try. I said if she had had a similar experience on a flight, she might well have come to a similar conclusion, not to mention the fact that I believed it was healthy for Jonathan to spend time with his sister, in the same way I believed it was healthy for me to spend time with mine.

"I don't want to leave you alone now," he said. "I wish you'd come."

"Why shouldn't I be alone?"

"Well, clearly it rattled you, seeing him."

"I was surprised, not rattled. I was happy to see Eddie. I loved seeing Eddie."

"So, do you think you'll call him?"

"Of course I'll call him." I looked at his profile. He kept his eyes on the road. "You liked Eddie, didn't you?"

Jonathan nodded. "I did."

I wondered if he'd gotten any packing done since he'd come home or if he'd just been taking apart the afternoon in his mind. "So what's the problem?"

He stayed quiet a beat too long, then gave me a small smile that was meant to indicate bravery. "I want to be sure you'll be here when I get back."

"Seriously? You think I'm going to run off with Eddie Triplett?"

"I don't," he said. "But you have to admit, he seems to love you more than most of them do."

"Jonathan, he's my stepfather."

That explanation provided no comfort at all.

I had been a young-looking thirty-one when we married, while Jonathan's hair had gone gray around the time his wife died. More than one waitress commented on how nice it was to see a father and daughter going

out to dinner in those early days. Neither one of us knew what to do with that one. I remember a particular dress I loved, a navy blue pinafore that I wore over a white blouse, and one day Jonathan asked if I would please get rid of it. "Give it to one of your tall students," he said. "It makes you look like you're twelve."

These days no one looked at us twice because I was no longer his much younger wife. I was a woman safely past fifty, and Jonathan was newly seventy. We were at last a perfect match, and my husband wanted to make sure I didn't mess it up while he was out of town.

I would tell this to Eddie someday. I would tell him that Jonathan was worried about what could happen, and then the two of us would laugh.

Jonathan and I ate our sushi in the backyard, sitting in Adirondack chairs. We stayed there until the sun, tired of waiting for us to go back inside, called it a night. We talked about his mother's house and the work there was to do, how to dispose of a lifetime's possessions. One of Bea's sons was planning to drive over from Madison to help for a couple of days, and Jonathan's older daughter, Sydney, was going to fly in from Philadelphia. Bea's husband would be there, too. I still didn't feel guilty. If anything, I felt glad there were so many hands on deck.

"It would be nice to be able to travel," Jonathan said.

"We travel," I said, seeing how the conversation was about to circle back.

"You get to be a certain age and you realize that time isn't stretching out forever."

"Is there something you want to tell me?" I'd brought out a box of strawberries and we ate them for dessert, dropping their little green hats into the lawn.

"I worked for a long time," he said.

"I know you did."

"I thought when the time came to retire, I'd be able to see some things. I don't need to go around the world, but I'd like to see some things."

"Jonathan, we've known each other for more than twenty years."

"It's not just that you're afraid to fly," he said. "It's that you can't ever go places with me."

"What are you talking about?" Was he anxious about the trip?

"We have plenty of money, but you want to keep working."

"We both worked. We always worked. No one came to the school and offered me a buyout. I'm still working."

He looked at me. "This is the time we have."

"So you want me to quit my job and start flying again? Neither one of those things interests me."

"Well, see, that's the problem," he said. "Right there."

"I'm not saying *you* don't interest me. For as long as you've known me, I've been a non-flying schoolteacher. I haven't changed. We've rented the house in Wellfleet this summer. We still go away." Jonathan was a wonderful person, a wonderful husband, who had become a little destabilized by his newfound free time. He was adjusting. I held fast to that.

"I want to go to Fiji," he said. "I want to see the Milford Sound."

I didn't say anything. I waited to see where this was going. We were both looking up at the stars.

"All of Candy's dreams had to do with travel. We were going to go places when the girls got older, when we had some money put away."

"Candy?"

"She never got to do any of it. She was forty years old when she died, and for the years before she died, she was too sick to travel. She'd been to Rome and Florence when she was in college and that was it."

"And I'm sorry. It was a terrible thing, but I don't see —"

"It's that we die, and we should think about doing the things we want to do while we're able to do them."

It might have been the looming prospect of cleaning out his mother's house that was bringing this up, or maybe, if he really did feel threatened by the arrival of Eddie, he was letting me know that he could go, too. Maybe he was thinking about how gladly his first wife would have gone to Wisconsin to sort through the boxes of old report cards in the attic. All I knew was that he was leaving in the morning and I didn't want to fight.

"Maybe one of the girls would want to go."

"Go where?"

"I don't know. Fiji, the Milford Sound."

He shook his head. "They've got their lives. They can't walk out the door and travel with me."

And clearly I could. "Ask Bea," I said.

He sat with that one for a while.

"Bea never gets to go anywhere," I said. "She's been stuck taking care of your mother all these years. I bet she'd be thrilled to go."

Jonathan ate another strawberry. "Maybe."

“You’ll have plenty of time to talk about it.”

He waited. I could tell he was rolling the idea around, seeing if he could picture the two of them in Kyoto or Rome. “I’m sorry I said anything about Candy.”

“You know you can talk about Candy.”

He shook his head. “I still feel bad for her, that’s all. I think about all the things she missed, not only the travel but the weddings, the grandkids.”

I reached out across the wide arm of my chair and took his hand. The lightning bugs dotted the grass with brief yellow light. “You still have to pack.”

When we stood up, we held each other for a couple of minutes, and when we went inside, I took the suitcase off the bed and we made love, which was the best way I knew to reassure him. I was telling him he could go and come back and I would be here and it would all be fine.

In the morning I drove Jonathan to the airport, the second most reassuring thing I knew how to do. I thought about calling my mother on the drive home and telling her I’d seen Eddie, but I kept getting stuck on that week after the car accident when I was nine. Leda was still in the hospital on the second floor, unable to achieve peristalsis in her bowels, and Eddie was in the hospital on the fourth floor, having had surgery on his ankle. In 1980 the insurance companies were fine with people staying in the hospital until they had recovered. All I had was a brutal row of stitches down the left side of my face. My mother had arranged for me to stay at the Cathcarts’ house down the street. I would go to school with my best friend, Tavia. There was plenty to worry about, but nothing was coming to an end. I liked going to the hospital. I’d get Leda to write a note to Eddie: “Dear Eddie, I am sorry about your foot. Feel better soon. Love, Leda.” Leda confessed that she didn’t know how to spell “ankle.” Then I would take the stairs two flights up and deliver it, waiting for Eddie to write out his reply. “Dear Leda,” he began on the back of the same piece of paper, “I am sorry to hear you are still in the hospital. I hope there is more fun on your floor than there is on my floor. The fourth floor is the duller floor of all. The food is bad and I am lonely. I think they should put us together in a double room. I would give you my ice cream. Love, Eddie.”

Eddie did not seem to be having such a terrible time. Our mother brought in the fat manuscript he’d been working on, and he sat propped up in bed,

marking away. Eddie in the hospital didn't seem so different from Eddie at home, except that he was wearing a green gown beneath his robe. What was different was me. I wanted to stay right there with him. I wanted to sleep rolled up at the foot of his bed.

"How are the stitches?" he asked me.

"Itchy." I understood the stitches were small potatoes compared to everything else going on.

"You know scars make people more interesting. And not just pirates, all people."

When I asked Eddie if he had any scars, he kicked back the covers and stuck out his bare leg, the one without the cast. His leg was pale and covered in long dark hair, an unattractive leg and still somehow thrilling to see. "Right there," he said. "The neighbor's dog Judith tried to take my kneecap off. Twenty-three stitches, thank you very much."

I had had twenty-six stitches in my face, but I didn't want to seem competitive. "How old were you?"

"Twelve."

"What happened to Judith?"

"Not a thing. Her family had a nice, big backyard, and they fenced it in. I don't think Judith was inconvenienced at all."

I smiled. I had always wanted a dog.

"You know what I like about you, Daphne?"

"What?"

"You asked about the dog. You knew I was fine. You're looking right at me. You wanted to make sure Judith was okay."

"Well, I'm glad she didn't eat your kneecap."

"You and me both," he said. "Go on and take the mail to your sister. I'm going to go back to work. No one wants to be fired when they're in the hospital."

I went to the bed and took the letter and gave Eddie a kiss. I believed that we were inseparable. We'd always liked each other hugely, but things were different now.

Buddy came to see us in the hospital, or he came to see Leda but both of us were there. Our mother, who must have been the one to tell him, left the room as soon as he walked in, as if there were some urgent mission she had only now remembered. He brought Leda a stuffed lobster and made it scuttle up the bed, which made her laugh. He said he was sorry he hadn't

brought one for me as well. “You were in an accident, too,” he said, maybe thinking that Leda’s appendix had ruptured in a car wreck. I told him I was fine, and Leda said the lobster could sleep on the nightstand between our beds so that it would be both of ours.

Four days later everything went to hell. I walked to our house after school and found my mother in the kitchen, sobbing, sobbing, her head down on the kitchen table, shoulders heaving. Surely Eddie or Leda was dead—I just didn’t know which one. Either way I wouldn’t be able to survive. I stood in the doorway, shaking, and when at last she looked up and saw me, my mother said that she and Eddie were getting divorced.

“What?”

She took a paper napkin out of the holder on the table and pressed it to her eyes. She could not stop crying. “I’m divorcing Eddie.”

“Why?” Was that an actual word I said, or did I make a sound?

“He could have killed you.” It was as if the accident had just happened, or was happening right this minute—*BOOM!*—only this time she was in the car. “Driving around in the dark like that, going out at night.”

“We were on our way home. It wasn’t his fault,” I said. I wasn’t crying. No one was dead, and what she was talking about was some sort of lunacy I could surely explain away.

“Leda’s in the hospital at death’s door, and then he takes you out and almost kills you.”

It was my death she was worried about? It was me she was afraid of losing? “The car slipped.”

“I can’t trust him. I can’t trust him with my children.”

“It’s *Eddie*,” I said, because surely she’d forgotten who she was talking about. Eddie was more trustworthy than the rest of us put together.

Some version of this conversation happened again another twenty or thirty or forty times over the next month, and through the constant telling my mother honed the tale. Eddie had to leave our family because he had been so careless with my life. *He* had sent *me* out in the snow to find help. *He* did not bother to do it himself, even though his ankle was broken and his foot was pinned in place by the emergency brake. It was my fault that they were getting divorced?

“Not your fault, not my fault. *His* fault,” my mother said.

That part I never listened to because clearly it was my fault if she had to get divorced for my safety. That was the truth I carried with me. I chewed it

up and swallowed it without examination. I was nine. My heart exploded with the blow.

But now I was fifty-three and driving back from LaGuardia on a Saturday morning, and for the first time I was wondering what had changed between the day after the accident, when we had been found at the raspberry farm, and four days after that, when I came upon my mother crying in the kitchen. What about those four days in which my mother went from one floor of the hospital to the other, sitting by Leda's bed, sitting by Eddie's bed? She was exhausted and often wept, but she was weeping with gratitude. Everyone was alive.

At nine I didn't know enough to interrogate the story, and when it all became too painful to carry, I put it away. But it wasn't painful now. Now this thing we'd lived through was a curiosity, and not one I was going to solve on the Hutchinson River Parkway coming back from the airport. I wasn't going to call my mother until I had sorted it out, talked it through with Leda. When I got back to the house, I called Eddie instead.

He answered on the first ring. "Daphne!" he cried.

"Eddie!" I said.

"I don't want to say that I've been walking around with my phone in my hand, but I've been walking around with my phone in my hand."

"Is your heart on your sleeve?"

"Can you see it?"

"It's radiant."

"All the way in Westchester. I wouldn't have thought. Oh, Daphne, it's so good to hear your voice."

"I feel the same way." Eddie had aged, as all of us had aged, but his voice was still his voice. I would have been happy listening to him read me a takeout menu from a Greek restaurant: spanakopita, tzatziki, baklava.

"I've been carrying around my memory of you for a long time now and still you are remarkably fresh. How long has it been again?"

I told him, forty-four years.

He whistled. "Forty-four years. Isn't that something? Now here you are all grown up and married. Did you have a nice wedding? I meant to ask you that yesterday. Did Buddy Zabriskie walk you down the aisle?"

"It was a nice wedding, very small, but Buddy died before I got married. That's how I met Jonathan. I met him in the hospital when Buddy was sick."

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Eddie said, and I could hear it in his voice. He truly was sorry. “I wasn’t allowed to say it at the time, but I was enormously fond of your father.”

“You knew him?”

“I’m sure I didn’t *know* him, but I’d do the handoffs when he came to get you and Leda. Or I’d drive to Gloucester to pick you up. Do you remember?”

And then I did remember in a fuzzy way, the joy of Eddie coming to my father’s apartment to reclaim us, the careful suppression of that joy until we were back on the highway. “I was so afraid of hurting Buddy’s feelings,” I said. “We never wanted him to know how happy we were to be leaving.” Or how happy we were to see Eddie.

“He was such a decent man who had no business getting married, certainly no business having children. I remember as soon as we’d gotten you all strapped into the backseat he’d close the door and look at me, and his eyes would be huge and he’d give his head a little shake, like he was saying, What the hell happened? All he wanted was to be out on his boat, have a couple of beers with the guys at the end of the day. Your mother was always screaming at him to keep hats on both of you.”

“Is that why Buddy was always buying us hats?”

“He was completely flummoxed by girls. He might have done better with boys, but I wouldn’t swear to it. Did he feed you Cheetos the whole time you were there?”

“Pretty much.”

“You were always dusted with orange when you came back. Did you ever read that Mishima novel, *The Sailor Who Fell from Grace with the Sea*?”

I smiled. I had.

“That was your father. His nature was to be on the ocean. Your mother thought she could change him, but no one changes another person’s nature.”

“Why did she even want to try?” That was the part I’d never understood.

“Well, Buddy Zabriskie was a notably attractive man. Virile, you know? Women were on him like a flock of seagulls.” Eddie sighed. “Your poor mother. She wasn’t much for picking husbands.”

“She married a third time. That one stuck.”

“Third time’s the charm. What’s this one like?”

“Positively positive.”

“How do you mean that?”

“She married Lucas Ekker. Do you remember those books?”

“She married Lucas *Ekker*? I’m speechless.”

“Did you know him?”

“Of course I knew him! Your mother was his publicist when we worked at Houghton. What a pontificating bore of a man.”

“That’s him.”

“I shudder to imagine the through line between Buddy Zabriskie, myself, and Lucas Ekker.”

“My mother had range.”

“Well, I wish her every happiness. I do. She deserves some peace in her life. Did you tell her that we ran into each other?”

“I haven’t yet.” The phone and I went out the kitchen door and into the backyard, where I sat in Jonathan’s Adirondack chair.

“There’s a fear, of course, that once you do, I’ll never hear from you again. I’ll have to put your memory back in its little box, but even if that’s the case, this has been wonderful for me. I can’t begin to tell you what it’s meant to see you again after so many years, to be able to talk like this.”

“Why are you talking like one of us is about to die?”

“Because I’m afraid of getting my hopes up.”

Two tiny rabbits were grazing their way through the tender spinach in one of Jonathan’s raised beds. Rabbit Mecca. “If my mother told me you were a Russian operative working to overthrow democratic elections, I’d still want to go to dinner with you.”

“Would you? Oh, Daphne, that would be wonderful. I’ll expense the whole thing to the Kremlin. Bring Jonathan! Maybe Leda and her husband would like to come as well.”

“Jonathan’s in Wisconsin with his sister, cleaning out their mother’s house.”

This information was met with such prolonged silence that I wondered if the call had dropped. “Are you there?”

“Sorry,” he said. “Thinking.”

“I can wait. I’m in the backyard. It’s nice out here.”

“I have to go to a party tomorrow night at the Century Club.”

“Some of the parents have graduation parties for the girls there. They always like to rope in a teacher or two. It’s extra fancy.”

“That’s the place. This party will be extra fancy, black-tie. I’d asked a friend to go with me, but my friend caught a cold, a summer cold. She made

her regrets this morning. The thing is, there's no way for me not to go. Fiftieth anniversary, fifty couples, very precise. Polly would never forgive me if I didn't come, or if I came and didn't bring someone. Forty-nine and a half couples for her fiftieth wedding anniversary would kill her."

"Is this an invitation?"

"It would be, if the thought of asking you didn't seem so overwhelming."

"I'd be happy to go with you."

Again, there was silence on the line, and this time I knew to wait. I stretched my legs out in front of me, tilted my face up to the sun. Jonathan had wanted a retirement party, a fancy one, and I had thrown it for him, which meant I had the perfect dress to wear to the Century Club.

"I used to think that if I ever saw you again it would be like this," Eddie said, his voice quiet.

"Like what?" I asked. I wanted to hear him say it.

"Like it was still the two of us, like we were in the car."

"I know," I said, even though I had failed to imagine what it would be like to see Eddie again. After the end of childhood, I had failed to imagine him at all.

"Do me one more favor."

"Name it."

"Don't tell your mother you're going with me. You can tell her once it's over, but I don't want to worry that you're going to call her before I see you and then you'll decide not to go."

"You really are a Russian operative, aren't you?"

"It's a job," he said.

"I'll call my mother next week."

"You were always a kind child, Daphne, and you grew up to be a kind adult."

Eddie said he would hire a car and pick me up in Bronxville. I told him to pick me up at Leda's. "That way I won't have to go home if it's late. I'll spend the night in the city. I sleep there all the time." I gave him the Has' address at the Gallant Green. I told him I would see him tomorrow.

The whiff of betrayal where my mother was concerned did not trouble me. I called her faithfully once or twice a week, as did my sister, as did my brother Christopher's wife, Paula, the favorite. My brother Matthew was married to a dentist named Lyle, and Lyle, like my brothers, was not held to the standards of regular calls, and of course Jonathan and Leda's husband,

Steve, were not expected to call at all. Such were the laws of patriarchy. Since my mother did not believe the phone worked both ways, there was no chance I would hear from her and be forced into a lie. I would simply tell her the next time we spoke that Jonathan and I had run into Eddie at the Met.

That I wouldn't tell Jonathan I was going to the Century Club with Eddie was the more troubling omission. I didn't want to lie to my husband, but I also didn't want him packing boxes in Wisconsin while worrying that I was running off with my stepfather. He would never tell me not to go, but it would bother him, which would bother me. Whatever happened between me and Eddie this time around needed to be between the two of us.

Whenever the parents of one of my students got a divorce, or the parents of any of the girls at school, I made myself available. The first one was a sweet girl named Hannah, who, after being bright and talkative for nearly an entire semester of British literature survey, drifted to the far left-hand corner of the classroom, put her head on the desk, and fell asleep. After class I asked her if she was sick, and she said she wasn't sick, only tired. Then she failed to hand in her next two papers. When I talked to her about that she said she was sorry but she was very, very tired. I told her she should talk to the nurse, but she declined. I told her that I would need to call her parents and she stood up and closed the door to my classroom. Her parents, she told me, were getting divorced.

Jonathan believes we all have our ministries. He would have said that his was metastatic melanoma, but in truth it was much larger than that. Jonathan's ministry was loss, the loss of a spouse, sure, but he knew how to translate that into the loss of a friend, a parent, a child. He had been a brilliant hospital administrator because he never stayed in his office. When he walked the halls, he kept an eye out for suffering. Jonathan knew how to stand beside suffering, not only the patients and their families, but the nurses and the doctors and the housekeeping staff. He knew when to speak and when to say nothing, when to bring a glass of water or take a stranger in his arms. He believed it was his job to comfort people, and he never turned away from the responsibility. That's the way it was for me and the girls whose parents were splitting up. I could repeat those platitudes that parents spit out about how it wasn't the daughter's fault because they were all true. It wasn't her fault, but she was the one who'd have to live with it. Sometimes it was only one lunch we had, while other girls stayed close to

me for months. It was a terrible loss for all of them, the end of their lives as they'd known it. Funny to think that what I was drawing on was my experience with my father, who I didn't know to miss until he was dead. The pain of missing Eddie was too much for me to contemplate, especially since I was the stated reason he'd been sent away.

I texted my sister and made plans to spend the next night at her apartment. Leda and Steve had plenty of empty beds. Neither of the girls were home from college yet. Only their son, Henry, was around, and Henry Ha was always glad to see me.

"Ask Eddie to come early and have a drink with us," Leda said. "Do you think he'd do that?"

"I know he would."

"Do you have any idea what he drinks?"

Leda had every last thing any guest could ever imagine, but this was for Eddie and she wanted to get it right. I told her he drank Chardonnay.

Jonathan called the next afternoon when I was folding my dress into an overnight bag. "Do we want a set of china for twelve?" he asked.

"China?"

"Bread plates, salad plates, dessert plates, luncheon plates, cream soup bowls, flat soup bowls, serving pieces including but not limited to a tureen and a turkey platter, all in zippered, quilted bags."

"Well, we don't need it," I said, wondering where we would even put it. "We don't use the china we have." The china we had was the china Jonathan and Candy picked out for their wedding registry, back in the days of sterling flatware and stemmed water glasses and place-card holders that looked like tiny bouquets of porcelain flowers. This, no doubt, was the china Jonathan's mother had picked out when she got married, unless it was *her* mother's china. "Do you want it? Is it sentimental?" I went in the closet to look for my evening bag.

"Everything is sentimental. All of it matters and none of it matters. You can't believe all the things I'm not asking you about. Bea said I should ask about the china."

"Bea doesn't want it?"

"Bea wants to hire a service that sells what they can and carts the rest to the dump."

I felt a surge of fondness for my sister-in-law. "It's not a bad plan."

“We have to at least look through it all. This house is my mother’s archive—the history of an entire life as recorded in personal possessions.”

I found a black satin clutch and dropped it in the bag, then took out a box of jewelry from the bottom drawer of the dresser. I never wore my pearls.

“I’m guessing the girls don’t want china.”

“I think Sydney came out here to make sure I didn’t send her anything. She keeps texting pictures to Rachel, but Rachel doesn’t want anything either.”

I sat down on the bed in an attempt to make myself pay attention to what he was saying. “I hope you don’t drive home in a moving van, but you should take what you want.”

“I don’t know what I want. You should see the Christmas tree ornaments, the ones she collected on trips, the ones Bea and I made when we were kids. But it’s not just Christmas tree ornaments, it’s Easter rabbits and Easter baskets and Thanksgiving napkins and Fourth of July hats, thirty years’ worth of *Gourmet* magazine in binders, three giant boxes of loose photographs. We’re going through all my father’s stuff, too.”

“Your father’s stuff?” Jonathan’s father had died years before Jonathan and I met.

“She kept all of it. Handkerchiefs, belts, Rotary bulletins.”

I lay back on the bed, my head beside my tiny overnight bag. “It’s too much.”

“I want to scream at her, but she’s dead. She’s old and she’s dead.”

“Listen to me. Remember when I said you should take a trip with Bea? Start planning it now. Call the service that comes and takes it all away. Have them come three days from now. Spend three days going through things, and if you don’t look at all of it, well, you don’t. Otherwise you’re going to go out of your mind.”

“Oh, too late for that. Everything in my bedroom is still there, all the stuff in the desk drawers, the closet, under the bed. It’s like Pompeii. I feel like I’m going to get stuck here, like I’m going to fall into the past and it’s never going to let go of me.”

How interesting to think of two married people falling into their own separate pasts so far away from one another but at the same time. “Where does Bea want to go? Rome? Prague?”

“Norway,” he said.

I closed my eyes. I saw my husband and his sister on a ship looking out over the fjords. I told him I loved him.

"I love you, too," he said. "I love you so much that I'm glad you're not here. Have you called Eddie Triplett?"

"Not yet."

"You should call him. He's probably waiting to hear from you."

"Probably," I said. Lying had never felt like such an act of kindness. Jonathan didn't need one more thing to worry about, especially when there was nothing to worry about.

After we got off the phone, I found the shoes I'd bought for the retirement party, stashed away in their box. They were both sparkly and low to the ground. I gathered up the makeup I never wore and tossed that in as well. Once I had everything together, I locked up the house and walked to the train station.

My nephew Henry ate the second half of a meatball hero while his mother ran a flat iron through my hair. Her plan was to curl my straightened hair and pin it up, a complex grooming skill acquired from her daughters. I was wearing Leda's bathrobe at the kitchen table. When she finished, I would step right into my dress without messing up her work.

"I never thought about the discrepancy of the days," Leda said when I laid out the order of events between her appendectomy and Eddie's banishment.

"So let me get this straight," Henry said, licking his fingers. "When the two of you were little kids, Grandma had this wonderful husband you were both in love with, then she divorced him for no reason."

"Well, there must have been a reason," Leda said.

"No reason you know of," Henry said.

I clarified. "She told me it was because he had almost killed me in a car accident, but he didn't almost kill me." Henry was a beautiful kid who had his mother's empathetic nature and his father's head for math. Whenever Henry was in the room, I believed in the survival of our species.

"And she married Mr. Positive after that?"

We nodded, newly mystified by a fact that had stymied us decades before.

"So Eddie isn't your stepfather. Mr. Positive is your stepfather."

Leda shook her head. “Eddie Triplett is our stepfather, ‘stepfather’ being an honorific bestowed or withheld by the stepchild.”

“Did you just make that up?” Henry asked his mother.

“I did,” she said, “but I’m also right.”

“She’s right,” I said.

“So do you think Eddie had an affair with one of the nurses in the hospital?” Leda asked.

“Either that or Grandma found out he was a spy,” Henry said, finishing off his sandwich.

I turned my head to smile at him and barely missed getting my ear burned off with the flat iron. “That’s what I said.”

“Hold still,” my sister said.

Steve leaned into the doorframe of the kitchen. “Is there time for me to go for a run?”

“Sure,” Leda said. “Plenty of time.”

“I don’t want to miss him,” Steve said.

“It’s early. You won’t miss him,” Leda said. “Run away.”

Henry pushed back from the table and patted his stomach. “I’ll go with you.”

“After eating a hero?” I asked.

He shrugged. Leda told him to put his plate in the dishwasher.

Steve paused for a moment to look at my hair. “She does good work,” he said. The compliment was for his wife, not for me. Steve Ha could not care less about my hair.

“Go,” Leda said. When they were gone, she asked me how I planned to manage this.

“I don’t think it’s going to be complicated. I’ll wait and see if Eddie tells me, and if he doesn’t tell me, I’ll ask him. I’d rather hear his version before I talk to Mom. Whatever happened, I’m pretty sure he did it, though. He seems to carry a lot of guilt.”

“But then so do you, and so do I, and I’m pretty sure we didn’t do anything.”

Which was why she was Dr. Ha, “Your Therapist.”

My dress was jade green with a rounded neck and half sleeves, fitted waist and full skirt, though not too full, appropriate for any formal retirement party, anniversary party, or wedding. With my hair done up, you could still see the trace of the scar that ran along the side of my face, but

like everything else, it had, with time, faded to insignificance. Steve and Henry came back from their run and got cleaned up. Leda put a silk blouse on with her jeans. When the doorman called to say that Mr. Triplett had arrived, the four of us went down the hall to wait in front of the elevator.

“This is sort of ridiculous,” Henry said. He was seventeen.

“You think it’s ridiculous because you’ve never known the fleeting pleasure of having a decent stepfather,” Leda said to her son.

“There are a lot of cultural experiences you miss out on when your parents stay married,” Steve said.

“You’ve deprived me of everything,” Henry said. Then the doors opened and the elevator presented Eddie Triplett in a tuxedo holding a small vase of lilies of the valley.

He raised his free hand and covered his mouth to stare at the four of us while we smiled like fools. His eyes blinked hard behind his tortoiseshell glasses. “Look at you,” he said.

“Hi, Eddie,” Leda said.

“Look how beautiful you are, all of you.” There was a woman with him in the elevator, her Pomeranian on a leash. He turned to her. “Have you ever seen such a beautiful family?”

“I have not,” the woman said generously.

I held out my hand, as if he were standing outside in the rain. “Come on.”

He shook his head. “It’s too much.”

“That’s true,” Leda said. “But you can’t stay in the elevator forever, and I will only hug you in the hall.”

“Go on,” the woman said, maybe hoping to get to her own floor but not wanting to rush the moment.

Eddie stepped forward then, straight into Leda’s arms. He gave her the flowers, and when she introduced her son and husband, he hugged them as well.

Where had this happiness been? Not with our father in his apartment near the docks, and not with our mother and the exceedingly positive Lucas Ekker. The joy of childhood had come in moments with Leda and in moments with Eddie Triplett, who had been with us for such a short time. We walked to the Has’ apartment as a family, all of us touching him.

“Heavens, would you look at this?” Eddie said, going to the long bank of windows to take in the view of the park.

“It never gets old,” Steve said.

“You live in the city?” Henry asked.

“Downtown,” he said. “Chelsea.”

“That’s fashionable of you,” I said.

“Trust me, it was not always the case, but I bided my time. I waited for fashion to find me.”

“These flowers are beautiful,” Leda said, holding them up to the light.

“And what a beautiful vase.”

“The vase is the present,” Eddie said. “It belonged to my mother.”

Let’s say Leda was never surprised, but in that moment she looked at him with absolute wonder. “Oh, Eddie,” she said.

“I have a present for you, too,” he said to me. “I’m giving it to you later.”

“Thank you. Thank you in advance.”

“I didn’t know what kind of flowers you liked. Lily of the valley were your mother’s favorite.”

I leaned in to my sister to smell the small bouquet. They smelled like our mother, the way she had smelled when we were children. I remembered almost nothing. Eddie remembered everything.

Eddie asked Henry about high school. He asked Steve about finance. Leda had made cheese puffs and brought them out with some nuts and a bottle of Chardonnay.

“Perfect timing,” Eddie said. “Perfect everything.”

“Whose anniversary is it?” Steve asked.

“Skip and Polly Hotalling, college sweethearts.” He raised his glass in acknowledgment of the long union of Polly and Skip.

“Which college?” Henry asked. He was a rising senior. He was interested in colleges.

“Yale,” Eddie said. “We went to Yale. Well, Polly went to Pine Manor. Yale was only men when we started out, which tells you how old I am.”

“I didn’t know you went to Yale,” I said.

Eddie nodded, chewed his cheese puff. “You did. You’ve just forgotten, and you’ve forgotten because it is not an interesting fact. These are wonderful,” he said to Leda.

Had I known where Eddie went to school? Had I known where he grew up or if he had a sister of his own? “So you’ve been friends since college?”

“Skip was my roommate. He and Polly met at our graduation dance. We had one foot out the door, and there she was, a freshman bused in for the

evening. She was the size of a teaspoon. Skip liked to say he had to wait for her to grow up before he could marry her, like Elvis and Priscilla.”

I crossed my legs beneath the stiff skirt of my dress. If I told my students that once upon a time girls dressed up to be bused to dances in hopes of finding husbands, they would call me a heretic. They would demand that security escort me off campus. Steve got up to refill Eddie’s glass, but Eddie shook his head. “There will be many toasts this evening. I must pace myself.”

“Are you making a toast?” Leda asked.

“Friends, Romans, countrymen,” he said.

“You’re going to the Century Club not to praise them but to bury them?” Henry asked.

“Ah, yes, wrong toast,” Eddie said. “The real one’s in my pocket. I thought I could reuse the one I wrote fifty years ago for their rehearsal dinner, but when I found it—” He shook his head. “The sentiments were breathtakingly stupid. I don’t suppose I knew much about marriage at the time.”

“Were you the best man?” I asked.

“The very best.”

Eddie had a car waiting, so we didn’t stay long. We were saying our goodbyes when Eddie stopped to look at a painting in the living room and asked if it was really a David Hockney. He’d been glancing in that direction the whole time we’d been in the apartment. Steve and Leda had gone out on a limb to buy that painting. “We went out to the last leaf on the limb,” Leda liked to say, but all these years later they were happy to sit and stare at it. As it turned out, what they had bought was eternal life. The apple tree would always be glowing, the field around it would always be lush, the colors would always be more than anyone thought possible. Eddie and Leda and Steve were standing in front of the painting when Henry came up behind me and tapped my wrist. When I looked at him, he said nothing, but turned around and walked down the hall to his bedroom. Maybe Henry was the spy. I followed him. His running clothes were in a soggy pile on the floor. He closed the door behind us. Was there anything in nature like the bedroom of a teenage boy? The twin bed, the poster of Einstein sticking out his tongue, a trophy that said “Best in Show” on the bookshelf.

“Dude’s gay,” he said to me in a quiet voice.

“What?”

“Gay,” he said again. “I’m guessing that’s why Grandma divorced him.”

I looked at the door as if I could see Eddie in the living room. “Because he likes Hockney?”

Henry closed his eyes.

“I don’t know! Not Hockney. What makes you think he’s gay?”

Henry sighed, as if to say the elderly were blind. “I’m betting it’s not a secret. You should ask him.”

“I’m not going to *ask* him.”

“No, sure, listen, I’m not trying to out the guy. He seems totally sweet. I’m just saying if you’re wondering what went wrong, that’s probably what went wrong.”

This information was followed by a light knock, then Leda stuck in her head. “Showtime,” she said. She looked at Henry and then at me. “Are you two having a conference?”

I nodded and gave my nephew a hug. “Fill your mother in.”

“You bet,” Henry said. “You’ll have a great time. You look pretty.”

We all said our good nights, and after one more meaningful stare at the Hockney, Eddie and I were in the car on the way to the Century Club.

“Oh, your sister,” he said, shaking his head. “What a marvel she is.”

“It’s true.”

“I have guilt where Leda’s concerned. She was a wonderful child but quiet, harder to know.”

“Leda was always taking things in. Even at seven, she was training to be a therapist.”

Eddie nodded. “You and I had such a natural affinity. We were easy. I never spent as much time with Leda and I should have. I always thought I’d get to know her better later on, but I should have tried harder when we had the time.”

It was almost seven o’clock and the light came slanting between the buildings. Everything it touched turned to gold. “Trust me, Leda remembers you as the highlight of her childhood, the same way I do.”

Eddie turned away from me and looked out the window. “Don’t make me cry,” he said. “If I start now, I’ll cry all night. I may cry all night anyway.”

Dude’s gay. No problem with that, unless he was your husband, unless you didn’t know. Eddie was not my husband. In the backseat of the black SUV I took his hand.

“Both of you married nice men,” he said. “Both of you seem happy.”

“We’re happy.”

“You were happy children. You didn’t have the best possible circumstances growing up, but you were little light bulbs, both of you. Life beats that out of so many people, but not the two of you.”

“Leda and I had each other. That was a huge help.” And we had you, I wanted to say, but was that me being sentimental? Could Eddie have made a difference in the short time we were together? I looked at him. “I don’t know if you had siblings,” I said. “I can’t remember where you grew up. I don’t think I knew you went to Yale.”

“An older brother, Martin. Younger sister, Amy. Altoona, Pennsylvania. And you knew I went to Yale,” he said. “I taught you both the Whiffenpoofs song.”

And then, of course, I did know. We sang it everywhere. We sang it on the way to the Century Club. “*We are poor little lambs who have lost our way . . .*” Eddie shining on the lambs’ chorus: “*Baa, baa, baa.*”

He smiled. “It drove your mother to distraction, you and me and Leda, bleating.”

“Leda sang it in the first grade talent show,” I said. There was a memory that unpacked itself out of thin air.

Eddie nodded. “A cappella. She was terribly brave.”

When the car pulled up at the club, Eddie turned to me. “I want you to know that if you never do another kind thing in your life, this will have been enough.”

“Is the party going to be that bad?”

“No, it will be a beautiful party. I just didn’t want to go in there alone.”

“Well, good. You don’t have to go in there alone.” And so we went through the doors of the Century Club, arms linked, into the sea of older men in tuxedos and women in silk pantsuits and good jewelry. Always get married in May—it ensured anniversaries full of peonies and ranunculus and anemones. The room might as well have been a cutting garden. “The Hotallings like flowers,” Eddie said as my gaze went from one massive arrangement to the next. We filed into the receiving line with everyone else, fifty couples to mark fifty years, everyone moving forward. All of them knew Eddie. His name was a bass note called again and again. I could see how truly rotten it would have been to show up to this thing alone.

“Ed!” the woman at the front of the line said, holding out her arms to him. He let go of me long enough to kiss her. Polly Hotalling wore a white

silk duster over white silk pants, an outfit appropriate for a second marriage or a fiftieth anniversary. She was still the size of a teaspoon.

“Ed,” her husband said, and shook his hand. Skip Hotalling was trim and tall, a full head of silver hair and a cleft in his chin, for heaven’s sake. A leading man from bygone days. “Who do we have here?”

Eddie put his arm around my waist. “Here we have my daughter, Daphne Fuller. Daphne, these are the famous Hotallings, Polly and Skip.”

Skip, Polly, and I were each taken aback by the introduction but for different reasons. For me, it was a huge promotion. I held out my hand and said how glad I was to meet them.

Skip, lost, kept on smiling, but it only took Polly two beats to catch up. “Daphne Zabriskie?”

I smiled. “It’s been a long time since anyone called me that, but yes, Daphne Zabriskie.”

Skip laughed. “No one ever put one over on Polly.”

“No one was trying to,” I said, still beaming. I knew how to beam.

“You look beautiful,” Eddie said, and pressed Polly’s hand to his heart. “Let everyone else see how beautiful you are.”

“You’re at our table,” Polly said to me, spider to fly.

I felt the doom ahead as Eddie steered me towards the bar. A young woman in a sequined dress leaned her hip into the curve of the piano, singing, “*I wandered around and finally found the somebody who . . .*”

“Well, we’re here,” he said. “Let’s make a night of it.”

“Daphne *Zabriskie*,” I said, a glass of Sancerre in hand. What open bar featured a good Sancerre? None that I’d ever seen. “Have I met them before?”

Eddie nodded. “Probably, when your mother and I were first dating, or it may have even been when we were palling around. Your mother was once a great pal of mine.”

“Good to know.”

“Polly and Skip came to see me a couple of times in Boston before they had children. Polly was besotted with children so we brought you and Leda along.”

“She’d remember me from that?”

“Polly has what we used to call an acute memory. She would remember that Abigail’s daughters were Daphne and Leda. I’m a little surprised she was able to pull up Zabriskie.”

“Wait, were they at your wedding?” The one in which he married my mother, the one in which Leda and I got matching dresses made of yellow silk with a sewn-in slip. Eddie called us daffodils.

He shook his head. “They were not.”

“You were the best man at their wedding and they didn’t come to yours?”

“Your mother did not care for the Hotallings.”

“Ed!” a woman cried, short gray hair, large black glasses, making her way towards the bar. “Tell me what to read!”

“Daphne, this is Maxine.”

Maxine and I shook hands.

“Maxine likes to play Stump the Band but with books. Maxine has read everything. Don’t engage with her. She was the associate publisher at Farrar, Straus.”

“Retired,” Maxine said, hitting the word hard. “Out of the loop. Yesterday’s news. Tell me what to read.”

I longed for my husband, who was probably cleaning out a linen closet now, eighteen sets of sheets for double mattresses. He could have played the retirement game no matter where he turned.

Eddie took a sip of his drink. “Je refuse.”

“*The Bee Sting*,” I said.

Maxine smiled, a little smear of lipstick on her tooth. “Good,” she said to me. “Smart.”

“Don’t do it,” he said. “She’ll break you.”

“*The Loneliness of Sonia and Sunny*,” I said, trying again.

“I finished it two weeks ago.” She turned to Eddie. “If the party had been three weeks ago, she would have had me.”

Eddie shook his head. “She says things like this to keep you playing. Chances are she finished it six months ago.”

I felt like I was at a slot machine. “*Independent People*.”

“Halldór Laxness, Iceland, published in two volumes in 1934 and ’35. That’s an excellent choice.”

“She really does take the air out of the room, doesn’t she?” I said to Eddie.

“This one’s smart,” Maxine said. “New editor?”

“Daphne is my daughter,” Eddie said. It was his story for the night.

Maxine looked at the two of us together. The room was getting louder by the minute. There was a bottleneck of traffic coming into the bar and we

were part of the problem. “We should move,” I said, raising my voice.

“This is the story I want to hear,” Maxine said, not moving.

“It’s a long one,” Eddie said, also raising his voice. “You’ll like it.”

“I’ll take you to lunch next week. I want you to tell it to me someplace I can hear you.” Maxine turned to me. “Daphne Triplett, it was a pleasure to meet you.”

I told her the pleasure was mine, and maybe I meant it. I got a kick out of Maxine. I watched the crowd open slightly and then swallow her up. “I wonder if I’ll meet somebody tonight who calls me Daphne Fuller,” I said to Eddie.

“Give it time. There’s bound to be a doctor here somewhere who worked with your husband.”

“Isn’t there something, I don’t know, *combative* about introducing me to people as your daughter when they all know you don’t have a daughter?”

“Probably,” Eddie said, killing his drink. “‘Combative’ is a good word.”

“You know, if you’re not having fun, we could always call Leda, see if she and Steve want to meet us for dinner?”

“Too much trouble,” Eddie said over the noise.

“It wouldn’t be any trouble.”

He tapped a stud on his tuxedo shirt, the noise reducing us to gesture. “I’d get in too much trouble.”

The room smelled like flowers, like competing perfumes, like white wine. The louder the party became, the easier it was to be there. We went through a period of shouted introductions, which in turn gave way to pantomime, Eddie pointing to me, me smiling, hands shaken, then people pointing to the bar, tipping back an imaginary glass. He knew everyone.

Then a waiter came by, tapping a mallet against a three-note xylophone, as if we were at the opera and the second act was about to begin. (The second act was about to begin!) We all filed into the dining room.

The white linen tablecloths were strewn with another garden-load of flowers, arranged low enough that we could see across the table, votive candles dotted around. The message was that, despite the enormous amount of money spent on this evening, the hostess was fun, still playful, natural. The five tables of ten were set with place cards: Polly and Skip anchored table one, with each of their four married children and their spouses anchoring tables two through five. Eddie walked me to each table and introduced me to the Hotallings and the Hotalling partners: two sons

married to women, two daughters married to men, eight people who referred to Eddie as uncle.

“Alex,” Eddie said when we stopped at table five, “I want you to meet my daughter, Daphne Fuller.”

Alex (then Sam, then Mae-Mae, then Nanette, and all of their beloveds) shook my hand and commented on the fact that Eddie didn’t have a daughter. “What closet have you been keeping her in?” Alex (Sam, Mae-Mae, Nanette) asked.

“I had an entire life before you were born,” he told them. “Daphne is the best part of that earlier incarnation.”

Mae-Mae, a woman who combined her mother’s power and unfriendliness with her father’s beauty and height, put her arm around Eddie. “Uncle, does this mean she’s getting my inheritance?”

“Don’t you worry, darling. There will always be something for you.”

“I’m his goddaughter,” she told me. “Which means I’m his daughter but with god attached.”

“Come along, come along, more people to meet,” Eddie said, smiling. He guided me away.

“Is she for real?” I asked.

“For real insofar as she is what she seems, but she’s joking about the money. Mae-Mae is an intellectual properties lawyer, and her husband is a hedge funder of the mega-yacht variety. Her inheritance is a long-standing joke between us. I suppose she’ll need my money after I’m dead to tip the crew.”

“What a sparkling wit.”

“It’s a Hotalling family trait. They tease. The whole lot of them. They practice when they’re together.”

We went to table one to find our seats. “You’re Esther Newberg,” Eddie said to me.

“My third name of the night,” I said.

“No, Esther is my friend with the cold. She couldn’t come.” Esther Newberg had been seated directly across the table from Eddie.

“We have to switch this,” I said, picking up the place card. I was seated next to Skip Hotalling.

“I have no doubt that Polly worked on the seating chart for a month. If you switched the cards, she would switch them back. She would tell you the

reason she and Skip have made it fifty years is that they never sat next to one another at a dinner party.”

“But I’m not your wife. I’m your *daughter*.”

Then someone else who Eddie knew swept him away, and I was left alone to sit in Esther Newberg’s chair.

The evening had been fun up until this point. The camaraderie between Eddie and myself kept things jolly. Women in cocktail pajamas admired my dress and the men who were with them admired me. A part of me, a person small and far away, was thrilled to have Eddie call me his daughter. He never would have done that if Buddy were alive, but here at the Century Club, there was no one to be hurt by so small a misrepresentation. All he meant was that he had chosen me, and I appreciated that. Still, around now I was wishing I was in my own backyard. The role for which I was the stand-in belonged not to Esther Newberg but to my mother, who had yet to be apprised of her ex-husband’s reappearance. Wasn’t it her responsibility to be seated across the table from Eddie? To be seated next to Skip Hotalling, who even now was working his way towards the chair at my left?

But my mother was decades out of the picture, and she hadn’t liked the Hotallings anyway. If she hadn’t invited them to her wedding, then chances were good they wouldn’t have invited her to their golden anniversary dinner.

“Daphne Zabriskie,” Skip said once he was seated. “I could have spent fifty years guessing who I might be seated next to this evening and I don’t think I would have come up with you.”

“Would you have come up with Esther Newberg?”

Skip nodded. “Oh, sure. Esther’s a friend from Sag Harbor. Her place is four blocks over from ours. We see Esther all the time.”

“I guess that doubles the disappointment.”

My host laughed heartily, and the other members of our table smiled to think that Skip had been seated next to a woman both witty and young.

“So you and Polly live in Sag Harbor?”

“We live in Darien, but we get out to Sag Harbor when there’s time. A lot more time now that I’m retired.”

Again, I longed for Jonathan, but then remembered that even if he were here, he would not be able to take this burden from me. Jonathan would have been seated on the other side of the table next to Polly.

“How long have you been retired?”

“Five years. Five long, dark years,” he said. “What about you and Ed? Have the two of you been in touch for a while now?”

“A while,” I said, because what did “a while” even mean? “I’ve enjoyed being with him.”

“No one’s better company than Ed. I would bet you he’s the favorite person of everyone in this room.”

“He has my vote,” I said.

From across the table Polly sent a telepathic communiqué to her husband, who then picked up his salad fork at the moment she picked up her salad fork. The first course had begun. “How’s your mother these days?”

“My mother’s well, thank you.”

“Tell her I said hello, that Polly and I said hello.”

“I’ll do that.”

“Your mother had some funny ideas,” he said to me, still smiling.

Skip Hotalling had his own teeth, a peculiar thing to say, but in this room it set him apart. I looked at him square and told him I knew nothing of my mother’s funny ideas, because it was true.

At this bit of information, Skip Hotalling’s straight shoulders rolled forward slightly, and the smile he had worn for the evening’s duration fell away. Right in front of me he grew old, and not only that: I could see the energy it cost him to hold up his own bright veneer. He left me then, turning to the woman on his left while buttering a dinner roll. From what I could make out, she was the wife of one of Skip’s former partners at the four-name law firm where he had worked. That partner was seated on Eddie’s side of the table. The man on my right—I turned to him—had also been a partner at the same firm but retired early to pursue the study of lepidoptera, which, he said, would have been his life’s work had his father not forced him to attend law school. He and his wife (she was across the table) now spent half the year in Costa Rica, where they owned a condominium not far from the edge of a national park. The rest of the time he volunteered at the Museum of Natural History. He had played a significant role in the creation of the museum’s butterfly vivarium. Eighty species! He told me the first time he went through, he wept, and one of the eighty species alighted on his face to drink from his tear. He was an enthusiastic student of nature, and I was grateful for his willingness to carry the entire burden of conversation. I saved up the details of the glasswing butterfly, the blue morpho, and the tropical checkered-skipper to tell Eddie later.

Once the cake had been served, Eddie stood, and someone tapped a knife against their glass. Ten waiters circled the five tables, pouring champagne into the flutes that had been waiting there.

Eddie smiled and nodded. In a roomful of tuxedos both ill-fitting and out of date (because who wanted to buy a new one at seventy-six?), Eddie looked razor-sharp. He took a piece of paper from the inside pocket, looked it over, then returned it to his pocket, a bit of theater to say he was going off the cuff. “When I arrived at Yale my sophomore year, I was nineteen. My roommate, one Skip Hotalling, had beaten me there by ten minutes and claimed the better bed, but he left me the desk beneath the window to make up for it. At dinner that night, I asked him what he planned to do with his life. Back in those days, nineteen-year-olds had the answer to that question, and even if we were wrong, and we were usually wrong, we went forward with a great deal of purpose. Skip told me he was going to be a lawyer who worked with Native peoples to restore the promises of government treaties.” There was a big laugh here, and Skip raised his hand and smiled. Eddie let them work their way through the moment before giving them something else to laugh about. “When he asked me what I was going to do, I told him I was going to write the great American novel.” The crowd laughed again with, I thought, a lot of unnecessary whooping. Eddie only smiled. “Both of us failed,” he said, “and in other, related ways, both of us succeeded beyond our wildest expectations. We continued to believe in one another’s dreams long after giving up on our own. Skip’s confidence in my abilities saw me through times when my own confidence failed. What good luck that the gods of Yale’s housing lottery assigned me a friend to see me through the rest of my life, a luck that was perhaps only bested by Skip seeing young Polly Wellons standing by the punch bowl as we were leaving the graduation dance our senior year. We were halfway to our room when he told me he was going back. He said he’d seen someone he thought he knew.”

For a moment I saw Eddie as I remembered him—his voice, the way he stood, the way he moved his hands. “He’d seen someone he thought he knew, meaning Polly, whom he had never met. Polly, the girl he would come to know better than anyone else in his life. There is so much randomness to youth. The person assigned to share your room becomes your friend, the girl you pass on your way out the door becomes your wife, and from these random encounters our entire lives are built, four beautiful

children came into the world, and they, in turn, found the people they were meant to spend their lives with. There are ten grandchildren now. Ten new people who in part owe their lives on earth to Skip admitting that there was something deeply familiar about the girl he had passed, and trusting himself enough to turn around to go back and see who she was.

“If you ask Polly, she’ll tell you this fiftieth anniversary should have taken place four years ago, because she wanted to marry Skip right there by the punch bowl on the night they met. But Skip insisted she finish college while he went to law school. As the old saying goes, good things come to those who wait. Polly and Skip were always good together. I learned what it meant to be married not by watching my parents, but by watching the two of them. And while I didn’t manage to do as good a job” —(more laughter) —“my life has benefitted immeasurably from the love and attention they’ve shown to one another. And so your best man again raises his glass to the bride and groom. I wish you, if not another fifty years” —(laugh)—“then many more excellent years, beautiful golden years.” Eddie raised up his glass. “To Polly and Skip.”

“Polly and Skip!” the crowd cried, and when we lifted our champagne, the sound of glass touching glass rang like a hundred tiny bells.

Skip Hotalling, who had not so much as looked in my direction since the salad course, turned. “Your father,” he said to me. “He does go on.”

Women pressed their napkins to their eyes. Men discreetly checked their phones. The band struck up “What a Wonderful World,” and Skip gallantly led his wife to the dance floor. When Eddie came around the table, everyone he passed touched his sleeve and congratulated him. “You should have been a novelist!” they said, each after the next. He sat down in Skip’s chair, the newly empty seat beside me.

“That was beautiful,” I said to him.

“I would have rather given them a kidney, but neither of them wanted it.”

“Do you want to dance?” Nearly everyone had left for the dance floor—bursitis in their hips, plantar fasciitis in their heels, they rocked back and forth like creaky boats.

Eddie leaned towards me. “If I dance with you, I’ll have to dance with every woman in this room.”

“If that means I’ll have to dance with their husbands, then I say we skip it.”

“What I want,” he said, “is to use this moment of confusion to make a break for it.”

I stood up, dropping my napkin on the table. The lepidopterist had printed out his name and number on the back of Esther Newberg’s place card in case I ever wanted him to take me through the vivarium, and I put the card in my bag so I could throw it away later. He had been kind, and I didn’t want to hurt his feelings by leaving it on the table. Eddie and I walked along the edge of the dance floor with everyone waving at us. Eddie laughed and pointed at the bar, then we made a break for it.

Outside, the city was finally, beautifully dark. “How comfortable are your shoes?” he asked.

“I only buy comfortable shoes.”

“I didn’t keep the car,” he said. “I was going to call one, but I could stand a walk if you wouldn’t mind.”

“I never liked being in a car with you anyway,” I said, and he laughed.

“The minute you get tired, let me know and we’ll hop in a cab. I’ll take you to Leda’s.”

“Which is in the wrong direction if you’re going to Chelsea.”

He shook his head. “No such thing as a wrong direction.”

And so we headed uptown on Fifth while the traffic streamed towards us. We were three blocks from the Century Club before Eddie stopped to light a cigarette.

“You still smoke?” Oh, that single cigarette he had at night on the front steps after dinner, how I harassed him through every drag, the nine-year-old nicotine police. “You’ll die! You’ll die!” He wised up eventually and waited until after we went to bed to smoke. Children are righteously abstemious where any pleasures not available to them are concerned.

He took a deep inhale. “I deserve this cigarette. I deserve an entire carton. The funny thing is I just started again. I quit smoking decades ago. In fact”—he looked at me, surprised to remember that I was part of the story—“in fact, I quit after our famous accident. After your mother suggested I not come home from the hospital or come back to Houghton Mifflin, I went to Polly and Skip’s in New York because where else was I going to go? Back to Altoona? To Mom and Dad? What a mess I was! I’d had surgery on my ankle and foot, I had a cast up to my knee, non-weight-bearing, mind you. I wasn’t allowed to so much as tap it on the floor. Polly and Skip were living in a third-floor walk-up at the time. When they

brought me home, I had to go up the stairs backwards on my ass. They had two babies by then, Alex and Mae-Mae. There was a pull-out sofa in the living room that must have been made out of coat hangers and twine. Your mother had left two suitcases on the front porch. I wasn't allowed to say goodbye to you and your sister. I was homeless, jobless, footless, family-less, an awful, awful time, and then I lit a cigarette in Polly's living room because I couldn't get downstairs to smoke, and as it turned out, *that* was the worst thing that happened."

"Wait, he's a Mergers and Acquisitions lawyer living in a walk-up with two babies?"

"Funny you should mention that. Polly often noticed the same thing. But Skip refused to move to a building with an elevator until he'd paid off all his school debt. I think that happened the next year, when Nanette was born."

"I'm trying to imagine it."

"You can't. Anyway, that's when I quit smoking. I'm sure Polly did me an enormous favor."

"And when did you start again?"

Eddie tipped up his chin, exhaled. "Maybe six weeks ago? I'd have to do the math. I only smoke on an as-needed basis. Absolutely minimal, I promise you, nothing to worry about. The only place to smoke in New York is on the street, and I don't want to be outside walking around at all hours."

"Did something happen?"

"When?"

"Six weeks ago."

He shrugged. "A bad day," he said. "I thought, There was a time when I would have had a cigarette on a day like today, and then I thought, Why not? What substantial damage can a cigarette do to me now? So I bought myself a pack. Do you have any idea how much a pack of cigarettes costs these days?"

"No clue."

Eddie started to give me a number and then thought better of it. "I'm not going to tell you. You'll lose all respect for me. Do you want one?"

I declined.

"Good girl," he said.

Eddie stopped to look in the window of Sephora. "Do you remember when this was a bookstore?"

“I do not.” I had bought moisturizer there, shampoo. I did not say this to him.

“Closed in 1988. What a blow. This used to be the Scribner building, and downstairs, they had the most beautiful bookstore you’ve ever seen in your life. I used to come here on my lunch hour, leave all those books in my office so I could come over here and look at books.”

“What did you edit then?”

His face was bathed in the light reflected off skin care products. “Novels. Novels then and novels now. I would edit collections of short stories when my authors turned collections of short stories in, and later, when memoirs became a thing, I edited those. Collections of essays, all of that. But all the while I tapped them ever so gently in the direction of novels because that’s what I loved. That’s what I was good at.”

“Writing?”

“Reading.” He shook his head. “I wish you could have seen this bookstore.”

“I was seventeen in 1988.”

“That’s why your mother and I should have stayed married. It would have been a stretch, I realize that, but I would have shown you New York before it was devoured by skin care emporiums and nail salons.”

I had more questions than I knew words to ask, but I decided to start with the obvious one. “Tell me more about the Hotallings.”

“Oh, them.” Eddie stared at a pyramid of little white tubs of grapefruit facial scrub, as if he could will them into being books. “They’re my best friends. They’ve always been there for me. They have also been a great source of pain. I think that pretty much covers it.”

We walked again. Eddie held on to the filter of his cigarette until we passed a trash can. I added in the place card. “Let’s go to the Plaza and have a drink,” he said. “Do you want to?”

I’d already had more to drink than I usually have over the course of a month, but I told myself the walking helped. Eddie said we were going to go to the Oak Bar, but when we arrived, the hotel was in the full swing of celebration and the celebration called to us. Two doormen pulled open the heavy glass doors fitted in brass and welcomed us in.

“They’re expecting us,” Eddie said, sotto voce.

I scanned the milling crowd, men in tuxedos, women in cocktail dresses, long dresses. “Maybe we should find some other hotel,” I said. “We could

try the Sherry-Netherland.”

He took my arm. “Act natural.”

The wedding we walked into was long over, as was the dinner that followed. By the time we arrived, the cake had been cut, and the layered white slices trimmed in ganache rosebuds were lined across a long table like the sugared shingles for a candy house. Some of the guests had taken a slice back to their table, but most of them were dancing. Whoever had gotten married at the Plaza had hired an entire orchestra for dancing, as well as a structural engineer to erect the floral arrangements, as the flowers spiked to extraordinary heights before spreading out in lacy canopies. Were the sprinkler system tripped, we could all seek refuge beneath the stephanotis. This was the magic hour, when the music played at a humane decibel and the parents and uncles and aunts were dancing, grandparents were dancing, a smattering of elderly among the glorious youth. Countless young women in sherbet-colored slip dresses leaned against the broad chests of so many handsome men, some of them in white dinner jackets, others in tuxedos of midnight blue.

“Look!” Eddie whispered.

And sure enough, the bride danced past us—either in the arms of her father or the arms of her much older husband, it was impossible to know—her bare shoulders emitting light, her long black hair loosely configured and pinned with orange blossoms, the white silk of her hem dusting the impeccable floor. She smiled at the man she danced with, husband or father, with so much love it would have been enough to sustain him for the rest of his life. In another minute the crowd had shifted and she was gone again. I thought of my seatmate, the lepidopterist, and how he must have felt in the jungles of Costa Rica, having witnessed an insect so impossibly beautiful and rare, a once-in-a-lifetime sighting.

“Come on,” Eddie said, and then he was holding me in his arms as we joined in that swirling river of life, every body in sway to the time of music, everyone glad to have been asked to bear witness to such happiness. The bridesmaids and groomsmen, siblings and cousins, friends from work and from school, each one abloom with radiant life. They loved the bride and the groom. They rejoiced in their happiness. They hoped to find such happiness themselves one day, or maybe they already had: she was there in his arms, he was there in her arms. Despite all the fires in the world, on this night, in this room, they believed the whole thing might work.

“It’s the perfect antidote to a fiftieth wedding anniversary dinner,” I said to Eddie. “I hope every single couple at the Hotallings’ party found a wedding to crash on their way home.”

“A requirement,” Eddie said.

“Look, look, there she is again.” We both stopped dancing, and the people around us stopped as well, as if the moon had split the clouds to bathe us in light. Twice we had seen her. We couldn’t believe our good fortune.

We stayed on the floor for a few more songs. Eddie knew all the words, and he sang them quietly so only I would hear. “*People stop and stare, they don’t bother me, for there’s nowhere else on earth that I would rather be.*”

“Who?” I asked.

“*My Fair Lady*, Lerner and Loewe, 1956. In the recitation of Broadway musical lyrics I cannot be beaten.”

Jonathan didn’t like to dance, and Eddie was a wonderful dancer. After we stopped, Eddie set out to find champagne. I was at the dessert table picking up a slice of cake and two forks when a young woman draped in salmon-colored satin, one of the glorious bridesmaids, came up to me. “Mrs. Fuller?” she said. “Oh my god, I thought that was you! Oh, you look so beautiful!”

Repair people and students and former students were the only people who called me Mrs. Fuller, and since I didn’t remember her fixing my roof, she must have been in my English class. So many bright young women had passed through my teaching life that I dreaded running into them. They receded so quickly after graduation, replaced by the fall’s fresh crop. I was smiling stupidly as Eddie returned with the champagne. He put the glasses down on a small table and I put down the cake.

“Ed Triplett,” he said, holding out his hand to her.

“Kathy Schultenover,” she said, taking his hand. “Oh my gosh, are you Mrs. Fuller’s husband?”

“I’m Daphne’s father,” he said, as if this were a common mistake.

“*Father!*” she said. “Oh, I love that. You brought your *father!*”

The father-husband business tripped me up, and as a result I was both slow and stupid in my response. “What a beautiful wedding.”

“Right? We’re having the *best* time. I think everyone’s having the best, *best* time, and it’s so wonderful that you came, both of you. Livi must be over the moon. And look, I’m engaged!” She raised her delicate hand, the

twinkling stone a not insignificant burden. "I'm going to invite you to our wedding. Would you come, both of you? You should come, Mr. Triplett."

"That's a wonderful invitation, but I won't hold you to it," Eddie said.

Then, without warning, Kathy Schultenover put her arms around me and pressed her head against my neck. "I'm a tiny bit drunk," she said, "but I love you. You were my favorite teacher. I read *Madame Bovary* because of you."

I kissed the top of her head and said she might have been my favorite student. When she stepped away, there were tears caught in the mascara of her lashes. Then a young man appeared out of the mass of dancers and took her in his arms. She waved to us as they danced away.

Eddie shook his head. "I wouldn't have missed that for anything."

"The bride was my *student*?"

"It's hard for me to imagine forgetting a girl like that."

I shook my head. "There were so many of them."

"Did you remember Kathy Schultenover?"

"I remember the name Schultenover, but I don't remember what year she graduated or what she read for her senior thesis." I shook my head. "You remember all the lyrics to musicals and I can't remember my own students. I'm terrible."

"The songs stay the same while the people cycle through," Eddie said. "It's madness to think you could remember all of them."

"I remember you," I said.

"Well, see, that's plenty."

"I love teaching," I said, staring out at the brightly colored tide of dancing youth. "There aren't many schools left where you can assign *Madame Bovary* to an eleventh grader and she'll come back after Christmas break to tell you she read *A Sentimental Education* for fun. When they read *David Copperfield*, they read the whole thing. They read *The Return of the Native*. The AP girls read *Anna Karenina* and *Moby-Dick* last semester. *Moby-Dick*!"

"I hate to tell you, but everyone read *Moby-Dick* when I was in high school, and I didn't go to any fancy private girls' school on the Upper East Side."

"Times change. Soon no one will believe the wonders I've seen, smart kids reading big books and writing papers without AI."

"I don't believe they write their own papers," Eddie said.

“Jonathan wants me to retire, but I won’t do it, not as long as girls get drunk at weddings and talk about *Madame Bovary*.”

“You’re fifty-three,” he said. “You’re too young to retire. For heaven’s sake, I’m too young to retire.”

We took up our cake and champagne and walked the room’s perimeter until we found a velvet banquette tucked in the far back corner, our own wedding island. There we settled in.

“This cake is better than the last cake,” I said. Eddie said he hadn’t eaten any of the last cake, and I said in that case he would have to take my word.

“I take your word on everything,” he said.

The champagne was better at the Plaza, too, but there was no need to harp on it.

“So are you going to tell me?” I leaned back into the banquette and pushed off my shoes, which had grown less comfortable over the course of the evening. Like Kathy Schultenover, I was a tiny bit drunk.

“Which part?”

“Let’s say all of it, but why don’t you start with my mother. I think we should get her out of the way.”

Eddie looked across the room and smiled at the extraordinary flowers, the candlelight, the dancing groomsmen. “Your mother would have loved this. Wedding crashing was exactly her style. In the years that I knew her, your mother was extremely game, extremely pretty, and extremely angry at your father. She was also good at her job. We worked on a couple of books together. I was still a junior editor, but she was a full-fledged publicist. Publicists mature more quickly than editors. We’d go out to lunch sometimes. She had a hard time going out after work.”

“Single mother, two kids.” Once again I remembered to humble myself in the face of all my mother had held aloft.

Eddie nodded. “I liked her kids. On the weekends, I’d take her and the two daughters to a sandwich shop between Harvard Square and Central Square called Uncle Bunny’s. Editorial made more money than publicity, and they paid the men more anyway, and I had no dependents, so by comparison I was rich.”

There we were, the four of us taking the commuter rail in from Winchester and then taking the T to Harvard Square and walking up Mass Ave. to Uncle Bunny’s. I held Eddie’s hand the whole way. “Raspberry-lime rickeys.”

“That’s right, and your mother got egg salad. Uncle Bunny’s made the best egg salad sandwiches. So there we were, coworkers, pals. A couple of times we met up with my friends, the Hotallings. Polly had grown up in Boston and liked to come in to see her parents. Once, when you and your sister were with your father for the night, your mother and I went out to dinner with the Hotallings like two couples. We went for Turkish food and all of us had too much to drink, except for Polly, who was pregnant with Alex at the time. Skip was being difficult. He had it in his head that the best way to deal with our situation was for him to belittle me in front of Polly, in case she had a good imagination, which, by the way, she didn’t have.”

Skip Hotalling had told me my mother had some funny ideas. “Do you want to tell me about the situation?”

“With Skip?”

“That’s who we’re talking about, right?” Because, come to think of it, Skip was the natural progression from my mother. I emptied my glass of champagne.

Eddie looked alarmed. “You mean your mother didn’t tell you any of it?”

“I was *nine*.”

“I know how old you were, but she must have, later on.”

“There was no later on. We didn’t talk about you. I don’t think my mother ever said your name again.”

Eddie sat with this for a minute “Wait here, will you?” Then he left the banquette and was swallowed by the dancing crowd. A singer in a silver catsuit strutted out in front of the orchestra and I knew that everything was about to change. No more Lerner and Loewe. She opened her set with “I Wanna Dance With Somebody,” and all the aunts and uncles and grandparents turned and left the floor as if dismissed. My god, how sad my mother must have been to have lost Eddie Triplett to Skip Hotalling, having already lost Buddy Zabriskie to the sea. Unlike Polly, my mother had an impeccable imagination.

When Eddie came back he was carrying an open bottle of champagne. “I tried to pay for it, but the bartender wouldn’t let me.” He filled our glasses again. “First, let me say, your mother is a prince. That’s the only word I have because calling her a princess sparks the wrong connotation. She was good to keep all of this to herself.” He looked over at the stage. “Isn’t that very loud?”

I nodded. “She is. Did you really think I knew?”

“I thought you must have known some of it.” He shook his head. “This is strange. It’s been decades since I came out to anyone.”

“So you’re out.”

“Everyone’s out,” Eddie said dryly. “Except the men who are married to women who think they’re straight.”

“Polly knows you’re gay?”

“Polly Hotalling wouldn’t dream of having a chair recovered without showing me the fabric samples first.”

No matter what, he made me laugh. “Are you good at that?”

“I am neither good nor interested, but certain stereotypes prevail.”

All the parts of the story swam out of order: the pieces that were mine, the pieces that were Eddie’s, the parts that belonged solely to my mother. “I’m trying to get my head around all of this.”

“Okay. I shouldn’t have started with the Turkish restaurant. That’s not where this starts. This starts at the beginning of my sophomore year at Yale when I walked into my dorm room and found Skip Hotalling lying on the better of the two beds.” Eddie shook his head. “When he looked up at me, it was god and man. His grandmother was a Creek Indian, did I tell you that?”

“Don’tcha wanna dance with me, baby?” the catsuited woman sang.

“Don’tcha wanna dance with me, boy?”

I shook my head. I listened. I didn’t say, You have told me nothing.

“That business about him wanting to devote himself to the cause of the Native American people was real, at least until he started law school. He had this country in his blood. A more beautiful man there never was. I can look out over this trophy case of human life and promise you not one of them could hold a match to Skip Hotalling at nineteen. And on top of that he was tender and funny and dear. Very dear to me.”

I tried to reconcile the boy in the story with the taciturn man seated next to me at the Century Club on the evening of his fiftieth wedding anniversary. I suppose we all change. “So the two of you—?”

“That’s a long story, the two of us. Back then we didn’t know what it all meant. We didn’t know if the other was interested or how our own interest might manifest. It was very difficult to study.”

“I’m assuming you figured it out.”

“I did,” he said. “We did. But it took some time. Twenty-three days to be exact. Twenty-three days of potential bliss we wasted waiting for the other one to make the move.”

“Who made the move?”

Eddie tipped his head down so as to look at me over the top of his glasses.

“You made the move,” I said.

“Later it would become our favorite topic of conversation. Skip said he had no experience in these matters. Dreams, hopes, desires, of course, but no experience. So I said no experience here either.” He pressed his hand to his starched tuxedo shirt. “Pure as snow.”

“Let the record state that Mr. Triplett had no past at all.”

“He believed me,” Eddie said. “And I believed him. It was all very sweet.”

“So then what?”

“Then we decided that college would be the happiest time in our life, which it was. After college we’d both get married and have children and lead regular lives, all the while maintaining a second life that would be the two of us—Skip and Ed. That’s not so complicated, right?”

“So Skip marries Polly.”

Eddie nodded vigorously. “Skip marries Polly. As you know, he met her at that god-awful dance the week before graduation. We had one more week together, then it was home for the summer and Skip was going to start law school at Columbia and I was going to Boston to be a slush-pile reader at Houghton Mifflin because I hadn’t found a job at a New York house. Skip was still irritated that I hadn’t taken the LSAT. He thought we both should go to law school, put the future off for a few more years, but I had no interest in the law. We had one more week together in the dorm, one more week of real life before the whole thing fell apart. Skip wanted to stick to the plan: we would both get married and then it’s fine to go off together as much as we wanted because that’s what guys do, he said. Skip says, ‘All we’ve got to do is find the right girls,’ and I said, ‘You can’t just *find* a girl. It’s not like you’re looking for a car.’ And he said, ‘The hell it’s not,’ and he turned around and went straight back to the dance, where he found Polly Wellons by the punch bowl waiting for her roommate to come back from the bathroom.”

“Now you’re making me feel sorry for Polly.”

For a moment we sat there, taking in the beauty of young people dancing, everyone having had too much to drink. The catsuit had moved on to “Proud Mary.” There were backup singers now, and men with horns. The

volume continued to dial up and soon we'd have to excuse ourselves or be saddled with a lifetime of deafness.

"It's hard for me to feel sorry for Polly," Eddie said absently. "I believe she's gotten everything she ever wanted, and she's had fifty years with him."

I imagine that Polly did not get everything she ever wanted. "So he went to Columbia and you went to Houghton." I didn't want to raise my voice, but it was becoming increasingly difficult to hear.

"And I never lost one minute of sleepin' worryin' 'bout the way things might have been."

"No," Eddie said brightly. "There was a last-minute reprieve. Harvard took Skip off the wait list. He lost his deposit at Columbia, and we got a convincing two-bedroom apartment in Cambridge. Polly was a sophomore at Pine Manor in Chestnut Hill. Skip only let her visit once a week. He said he needed to study. I am certain I saw more of young Polly Wellons in those years than he did. She was always trying to fix me up with her friends, until she decided that none of them were good enough for me. After graduation, Skip landed his big job in New York and bought an engagement ring. Polly and her mother took a year to plan the wedding."

"So where does my mother come in?"

"Back to the Turkish restaurant and my friend Abigail Zabriskie," Eddie said. "I was not in good shape after that dinner. Once Skip and Polly got married and moved away, there was a period of great awkwardness between us. Clearly we needed to wrap things up, and we all felt the burden of that, even Polly, who had no idea what was going on. Skip's answer was to be a total bear to me whenever we were together. After that horrible dinner, your mother and I decided to take a walk through the Commons. I wasn't talking and she wasn't talking and then finally she said, 'So how is he your friend?' and just like that, the whole story came out. I had never told anyone the truth about Skip, not before or since, except of course for tonight. Well, I told your mother the truth about all of it."

"And that's when you started dating?" Jesus, Mom, what were you thinking?

"Sweet word, 'dating,' but yes, that's when things started. For the record, I adored your mother. She was wonderful to me. And I loved you and your

sister. She was offering me an off-ramp from the half-life I'd been living. I could have a wife and children and the little house—"

"—and all you had to do was give up Skip."

"Which, on that night, did not seem like such a hardship. No one would say such a thing today, but there was a time when it did not feel like lunacy to want what the majority of the human population had. Your mother's deal was that I had to give up Skip and give up being gay. I know it sounds terrible now, but she didn't know any better. I'm the one who should have known better."

"Now I have to feel bad for Polly *and* my mother."

"They were never in the same category. Your mother was a true friend betrayed."

A photographer appeared at our little table then. Later it would occur to me that I should have sent her away, considering that I didn't remember the bride and hadn't been invited to the wedding, but in the moment I tipped my head to Eddie's chest and he wrapped his arm around my shoulder.

Somewhere around midnight a new singer appeared, a girl who looked to be every minute of fourteen, and suddenly the ceiling was lit with violet light. That she was extremely famous was clear to everyone, even those of us who had no idea who she was. She was the last great surprise of the night, and when she took the stage, the wedding guests lost their minds, keening and whistling and stamping their feet. We decided, through a series of hand gestures, that the time had come for our departure. We declined the gift bags being handed out at the door. We didn't want to take advantage of the situation.

Once we were outside the Plaza, we briefly discussed taking off our shoes and climbing into the fountain like Scott and Zelda, and then thought better of it. This was what it meant to grow old: we were capable of thinking better of it before it happened.

"Do you remember—" I began.

"I remember everything." Eddie's arm was back around my shoulder.

A few small clouds sailed miles above us, passing the moon. "Do you remember the story you told me that night in the car?"

"Which one?"

"The one about the woman and her horse."

"Oh, that one," he said. "Of course I do."

“Whistler,” I said, and suddenly I was afraid I’d cry again. Being drunk was a terrible burden.

“Whistler,” he said, looking up at the moon between the buildings. “That’s right.”

“I thought about that woman and her horse for a long time after you left, and I wondered if maybe you’d told me the story because you were leaving and you wanted me to know you’d come back for me, which, of course, you did.”

“Only it took me considerably longer than you thought it might.”

I smiled. Oh, this night, this arm around my shoulder. “Did you make that story up for a reason?”

Eddie stopped and lit another cigarette, and this time I almost asked if I could join him even though I don’t smoke. “I didn’t make that story up. It was a book proposal, straight off my desk.”

“Someone else made it up?”

“No, no, nonfiction. I was more open to nonfiction back then, and it was the most spectacular story. The woman’s name was Mary Carter. She lived on a ranch in Wyoming about fifty miles south of Sheridan.”

I would have sworn the story wasn’t true, even though Eddie told me at the time that it was. Nothing about it seemed true. “How do you remember this?”

“Because I tried to buy the book. I tried for years. An agent had seen a piece about the accident in the newspaper, it was practically nothing, maybe three inches of column, and she got in touch with Mary. She told Mary there was a book in there. The agent sent me the clipping and a brief outline. For all I knew, the agent had written the proposal herself because Mary Carter never seemed to have any interest in writing a book. She and I talked several times. She was a shy person, very polite. I would have flown out to Wyoming to meet her, but then my foot was in a cast and I was living on the Hotallings’ couch. I thought it could be a great book, especially the business with the horse. I called her again once I settled at S&S. I even called her when I got the job at Random House. Random House! Boy, she’s going to listen to me now. But Mary Carter didn’t know Random House from a mimeograph machine. She’d listen to me tell her own story back to her, explain why it was meaningful, why people would want to read it, but I could never get her on board. The farther away she got from the accident,

the less she had to say. I think it was hard for her to tell me to leave her alone.”

“Do you know what happened to her?”

“She died,” Eddie said. “Years and years ago. She was older than I was, maybe fifteen years or so. Her daughter wrote to tell me. She said when she was going through her mother’s things, she found my letters. She said she knew her mother cared for me, she could tell that by reading my side of the correspondence.”

“How did she die?”

“The daughter didn’t say, but I always had the feeling that Mary wanted to get the hell out of here.”

Though it hadn’t been discussed, we were walking back to Leda’s, going north along the dark edge of Central Park. I thought about what it would be like to go into that park and lie there for three days, looking up through the trees thinking you were going to die. “How’s your ankle?”

“The ankle is a brilliant metaphor for that time in my life. My ankle was unbearably painful, and I thought it would never function the same, and then, maybe a year later, I realized I hadn’t thought about it for the entire day. My ankle and I recovered, and that was sad, too.”

“What about the horse? Did the horse die?”

“Whistler? Oh, Whistler must be dead by now. I read the proposal in 1980. Horses last, but not that long. Funny that you think about her, though. Do you want to hear something crazy?”

“Tonight? Something crazy?”

“When I got the book proposal back in 1980, it came with a picture of the horse.”

“You told me that.”

“When?”

“In the car.”

Eddie shook his head. “Oh, the past, the past. Anyway, when your mother told the people at Houghton I was quitting, she packed up my office and mailed the boxes to Polly and Skip.”

“That’s aggressive,” I said, but the other thing that should be said is Oh, my poor mother.

“The picture of the horse was in the box. And when I finally set myself up at S&S, the picture of the horse was pinned to a cork board in my office. I would have told you I did it to remind myself to be vigilant about trying to

close the deal, but the truth was I found the horse comforting. After a while I got it a little frame, and in that frame it sits on my desk to this day.”

“Are you kidding me?”

“Not about anything. When you come to my office, I’ll show you. The authors always go straight to Whistler. They all want to know if it’s my horse.”

When you come to my office. That was the part I got stuck on.

When we arrived at Leda and Steve’s building, we took another moment to stand beneath the dark red awning, Eddie with his hands on my shoulders.

“I still have a million and six questions,” I said. I wondered if the doorman would let me sleep on one of the couches in the lobby as I was too tired to take the elevator upstairs.

Eddie yawned. “I’ll answer anything.”

“Promise? Promise you won’t disappear again?” I wanted never to let go of him.

“I didn’t disappear. That makes it sound like I abandoned you. I was exiled.”

“You’re missing the point. I don’t want to lose you.”

“Okay then. Till death do us part,” he said. “How about that?”

“Sounds good.” Now I was yawning, too. “And you have to promise me you won’t die.”

“Oh, Duck,” he said. “I’ll die, and so will you. I promise to go first and check it all out, make sure things look good up ahead.”

I saw an empty cab going downtown and my arm shot up. “*Hey!*” There were so few people on the street, so few cars, and the cab saw me and skidded to the curb up ahead and we trotted off to meet him. “Call me tomorrow,” I said, and kissed his cheek. Then he was in the taxi, squeezing my hand through the open window and letting it go. I kept standing there. All the lights were green, and in a minute he was gone.

Henry said he hadn’t waited up for me, but he was up, sitting in the dark living room playing a video game with someone in Reykjavík. I sat down on the couch beside him and fell backwards.

“How did it go?” he asked, continuing to play. I guessed it wasn’t the kind of thing you could stop once you were in the middle of it.

“You were right.”

Henry's head gave an imperceptible nod. "Okay, but did you have a good time?"

"I may have had the best time of my life."

He looked at me then, his face awash in blue screen glow. "Are you drunk?"

"I am." I closed my eyes.

He tapped his goodbye onto the screen. "Wait a minute." He got up and went into the kitchen, then he came back with an unreasonably large glass of water and three aspirin.

I sat up and thanked him.

"Aspirin is old-school," he said. "It's the most amazing drug and nobody takes it anymore because it's always been around."

"And because it burns a hole through your stomach lining."

"This is *Bufferin*, as in *buffered*. Do you think I'm not looking out for you? Never take Tylenol when you're drunk. You'll blow out your liver."

"You are my North Star," I said.

"Did it make it any better to know?" He kept his voice quiet in deference to his sleeping parents. He was such a good boy.

"It did. When Eddie told me he was gay, I didn't say anything about David Hockney. It was out of my system."

"Good," he said. "That's good. Are you going to bed?"

"I am," I said, but did not move.

"Should I get Mom to come and help you?"

I took a deep inhale and pushed myself up, first to sitting and then to standing. I wobbled slightly, and wondered how we had walked all the way from the Plaza. "I've got this. I love you. Good night."

"I love you, good night," he said, and went back to his game.

My two nieces, Wynn and Clare, were not yet home, and so I was sleeping in Wynn's room. I struggled to reach the zipper on my dress, but the fabric was stiff and restrictive. The length of the sleeve did not allow my arms to properly bend. Leda had zipped me up. The only other time I'd worn the dress, at Jonathan's retirement party, Jonathan had been there to both get me into it and get me out. I didn't have the life force to walk back to the living room and ask for more help from Henry, and I didn't want to ask him to unzip my dress anyway. I kicked off my shoes and crawled into Wynn's bed. The pattern of her quilt was called Ohio Star. She told me that once.

All that night, I dreamed of my father, the two of us out on the boat. The engine was loud and spit out greasy black clouds of diesel exhaust, but in this dream the wind was coming straight from the east and the day was clear and fresh and Buddy was so happy, and I was so happy to be there with him as we chugged out towards the open sea.

In the morning, Leda came in quietly with a beverage tray: black coffee, orange juice, more water, and two pieces of dry wheat toast to sop it all up. She must have been talking to Henry. The clear bottle of aspirin balanced like a sentinel between the orange juice and coffee. “Scoot over,” she said, then saw that I had slept in my dress.

“Okay,” she said. “What a night.” She opened her daughter’s dresser and found a pair of scrub pants and a field hockey T-shirt, then she liberated me from my cocktail dress, which allowed me to fully inhale for the first time since yesterday in the early evening.

“Oh, this is so much better,” I said.

“Wait, sit next to me, you’ve still got pins in your hair. Does Jonathan usually get you ready for bed?”

“I don’t usually go to bed drunk.” I scratched fiercely at my scalp, a wonderful feeling.

She handed me the mug. “Start with this.” We crawled into bed together and pulled the covers up. “Tell me everything, and I mean everything. Don’t leave out a word.”

I leaned against her. “Okay, first, Eddie came to your apartment to pick me up.”

“Yes,” she said, nodding. “That’s good. Start there.”

Interstitial

(Friday, January 18, 1980. Winchester, Massachusetts.)

This was Daphne Zabriskie's first car accident, and it was a big one. They had sailed off a cliff and crashed down through the dark winter trees. Two minutes in and she could already imagine herself telling the story.

"Take an inventory," Eddie told her. "Wiggle your fingers and toes." It seemed prudent to whisper. He had a fear of setting things back into motion.

"Okay," she said. Wiggle, wiggle.

"Now roll your wrists and ankles. Roll your neck—gently. Can you do that?"

"Rolling." She circled her shoulders as well. Rocked her hips in her hip sockets.

"All good?"

"Good," she said. There was something wrong with her head, but she would tell him that later when he was less upset. "What happened?"

"What happened is I missed the curve and drove off the side of the mountain." He reached up and batted around in the dark until he found her hand. He held her hand.

"Mom's going to be mad about the car." The car had three more years to go before it was paid off. Thirty-five monthly payments left, to be exact. Daphne knew this because her mother made the pay-down into a game, letting Daphne and Leda count the remaining payments in the coupon book every month when she did the bills. Her mother wrote the check, and Daphne recorded the check in the register, then Leda licked the envelope and stamp. Teamwork. Her mother explained the concept of interest, which the girls found so appalling they refused to go inside the bank for months. Their mother was a big believer in spelling out the way life worked.

"She won't be mad about the car. She'll be happy we're alive." Eddie thought Abigail would be upset about the car but that her anger would quickly give way to joy. In the end, everything would balance out in their

favor. “We didn’t die in the car accident and Leda didn’t die of appendicitis, all a win.”

The shoulder harness was cutting into Daphne’s neck, and she remembered again that she should have been sitting in the backseat and this was why. Maybe she could convince Eddie not to tell, which reminded her of the important question: “How long before Mom comes to get us?”

That was a second-level question: Who would find them? Eddie was still focused on the first-level questions: Was there a fuel leak? Could the car fall further down if they moved? What in God’s holy name had happened to his ankle? He turned off the ignition. “I don’t think your mother knows where we are.” He tried to keep his tone casual.

“When we don’t come home—” Daphne began, but then, before she’d reached the end of the sentence, she solved the problem herself. “She won’t be home either. She’s spending the night in the hospital with Leda. She’ll stay in the hospital until Leda gets better.”

Eddie nodded his head in the darkness. “Unfortunately, that is the case.”

“And when she calls the house to say good night and we don’t answer, she’ll think we’ve gone to the movies. She won’t worry about us because she’s already got Leda to worry about.”

“Seriously, Duck, you should join the FBI. You’ve got the right kind of mind.”

“I’m going to be a writer,” she said, as if such an admission were completely natural. She’d been thinking about it seriously since the start of fourth grade.

In the dark she could hear Eddie’s surprise. “Seriously, are you?” Then, in the spirit of fellowship shared by two people trapped in a car, he told her that he planned to be a writer as well.

“Really?” This struck Daphne as more than luck. Not for the first time, she wondered if there wasn’t some mistake and she was really Eddie Triplett’s daughter. “I thought you were an editor.”

“I’m an editor so I can be around books, so I can learn how to write books. Everybody has to have a job, you know, pay the bills.”

“Sure,” Daphne said, but she hadn’t thought about the money part, which was stupid of her because she knew about the money part. See: book of payment coupons for the car.

“What are you going to write?” Eddie asked her, as if they weren’t even hanging in a crashed car. “Poems, stories, plays, novels, essays?”

“Novels,” Daphne said quickly. She wasn’t interested in the other choices.

Eddie was quiet for a minute. Like Daphne, he felt himself genuinely moved by the coincidence. “Me, too.”

“Maybe we’ll write novels together,” Daphne said. She didn’t know if people did that, but she loved the idea.

“Maybe so,” he said. “Listen, do you think you can undo your seat belt? I don’t want you hanging there.”

“I can.”

“Okay, I want you to be—” He had a series of instructions to walk her through the process, but she had already punched the button and was released like a skydiver on the shortest possible jump, straight onto him.

Of all the things Eddie regretted, he regretted screaming the most. The weight of the nine-year-old landing full force on his right side, his good side, jostled his left side considerably, proving that something was either broken or shattered in his left ankle and foot, and that something might be wrong with his left shoulder as well. The pain came on him in a green flash. He actually saw the color green behind his closed eyelids.

“Sorry!” Daphne cried. “Oh! Sorry, sorry, sorry!”

“Not you,” he said, his breath ragged. Now she was lying on his right side. Gravity and the angle of the car had given her no alternative. There was only one place to land. “I think I broke my ankle.” Best to put it out there.

“I broke your ankle!?”

“No, no. It broke in the accident. The front left of the car must have gotten crunched.” He made the smallest effort to move his foot, but that wasn’t happening. He left it alone. He lifted his right arm and maneuvered it around his stepdaughter’s shoulder, and she gently adjusted herself into his armpit. “Do you have Coke in your hair?”

“Maybe,” she said. Her head was wet, and Eddie’s coat was wet. There had been two extra-large Cokes in a to-go box on the floor. She moved her hand around. She felt an empty waxed paper cup and then an ice cube. She felt a chicken tender and popped it in her mouth. It was greasy and cold.

“Can you reach the visor? Go super slow.” He was thinking about his ankle. He was also thinking about that scenario in which the car detached from whatever tree was holding them in place and continued its luge run.

Daphne and Leda were both born monkeys. They could climb up trees, but they could also climb on kitchen counters and bookcases. They could stack up boxes to make it to a top closet shelf in search of Christmas presents. Neither girl had ever looked at a vertical surface and thought, No, bad idea, too high. Up they went.

This time Daphne put some thought into it. She ran her hand over Eddie's face, so she knew it was resting against the driver-side window. Then she took her left foot and put it in front of his face, then straightened her knee. Standing on one foot, one hand out beside her on the ceiling of the car for balance, she reached for the visor above the passenger seat. She knew that Eddie wanted the light in the makeup mirror that came on even if the car was off. There wasn't a light or a mirror on the driver-side visor, something Eddie didn't know because he'd probably never thought about it, whereas her mother regularly raged over the fact that there wasn't a makeup mirror on the left-hand side of the car.

"That's because you aren't supposed to put on makeup when you're driving," Leda told her once, to which her mother had responded, "Then when in the hell am I going to have time to do it?"

The visor came down, and a parking ticket that had been pinned there fluttered away. Daphne slid the little cover over the mirror to the side, and a small light leaned against the enormity of darkness. She couldn't see Eddie's ankle and she didn't want to, but she could almost make out his face. He had a sick and wild look about him, and there was blood on his chin, and there were chicken tenders everywhere.

"Oh, Daphne," Eddie said. He was back to whispering again.

Daphne pivoted (carefully, carefully) to try to catch a bit of her own face in the mirror's reflection. All she saw was blood. A lot of blood. Eddie put his hand on her standing calf in the exact moment she felt unwell. "Sit back down," he said.

So she did, slowly. She sat on the side of him. Had she hit the dashboard before the shoulder harness snapped her back? Was she cut by something flying past her in the crash? Did it make any difference? None at all.

Daphne's mind stayed straight when Eddie's was muddled, and Eddie could think straight when she needed him to. What was there to work with here? What was in reach?

"I went to a meeting today," he said. "About all the books coming out in the fall."

“It’s January,” Daphne said. Now she could feel something warm dripping near her eye and it made her feel sick so she didn’t touch it. Then she thought about her sister throwing up in the school cafeteria and willed herself to stop thinking about that because she knew where this was going.

“I know, it’s stupid, but that’s the way things work. So this afternoon, we all had a big meeting with the top guy, the Edward-in-Chief, except your mother wasn’t there since she had to go be with Leda in the hospital, and you know what I wore?”

“What you always wear?” She didn’t care if it was a stupid game; she was going to play. He wore dark pants or khaki pants, an oxford shirt, and one of the two blazers he owned, every single day. Her mother always said men were so lucky.

“That’s exactly right, what I always wear, except today I also wore a tie.”

“You hate ties.”

“The Edward-in-Chief wears a tie, so when there’s a big meeting all the Eds and the Eddies wear one, too. As soon as I got out of the meeting, I took the tie off and put it in my pocket.” A shot of pain radiated up his leg, an extraordinary burst of pain, but this time he knew to hold back any sounds. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the tie his mother had bought for him when he first got the job at Houghton Mifflin. “Ta-da! So here’s what we’ll do: I’ll put my handkerchief over the cut, then I’ll tie it in place with the tie.”

“Is the handkerchief clean?” Daphne asked.

“Very clean. You’re smart to ask.”

In the dark, with only the slightest glow of a makeup mirror to guide him, Eddie wiped what blood he could from her face, then laid the handkerchief over the approximate location of where the cut seemed to be, then wrapped his necktie twice around her head and tied it snug-not-tight. “Once, when my sister was in high school, she walked out of the house with my father’s tie around her head. The look was aggressively Woodstock. That’s where I got the idea.”

“You have a sister?”

“Amy.”

“Did your father get mad at her?”

“He did indeed. He worked in a tool and die shop. He only had one tie and he wore it to funerals. Didn’t you have a hat on before?”

Daphne touched her head. “I did.” Where had the hat gone?

“Okay, it’s time for you to take inventory of our resources. If you find any ice cubes, put them in a cup. If you find chicken tenders, put them in the chicken bucket. If you find your hat, put it on your head to help keep the handkerchief in place.”

“I can do that.”

“But Daphne, I don’t mean to be a baby about this, but I don’t want to move my ankle, okay? If you get down there where my foot is, be careful not to touch it.”

It wasn’t that Eddie was talking to her like she was another adult, but he was talking to her like they were two equal people. They had to be equal because they relied on one another now. Daphne, who felt the throbbing of blood in her head, began to pick her way around the floor of the car, although the floor was technically the door now. She found the bucket and, without benefit of light, gently extracted the chicken tenders from around Eddie’s foot and put them together. She found plenty of ice cubes as well, many of them between Eddie’s back and the upholstery. She found her hat and put it on. It was her favorite: ribbed, pink with a lavender fake-fur pompom. The hat felt both nicely tight and warm. She found her mittens, which, after handling all the ice cubes, she was grateful for. She found books she knew by shape: her math workbook, her paperback copy of *Charlotte’s Web*. She found the box of Kleenex her mother always kept in the car. “Do you want a Kleenex?” Daphne asked.

“Oh,” Eddie said, “I’d love one. Give me several, please.”

Daphne pulled out the Kleenex for him, and Eddie blew his nose. “I’m going into the back,” she said. “Find out what’s there.”

“Will you please be careful?” Movement was the enemy as far as his ankle was concerned. He was increasingly terrified of even the slightest jiggling, which meant he couldn’t envision how their rescue would proceed, as obviously being rescued meant being removed from the car.

“I will,” she said. She gave him the chicken and the cup of ice. She closed the visor because the tiny light would do her no good in the back and she didn’t want to run it down. She maneuvered her body over the front seat, careful not to put her foot in Eddie’s face. It wasn’t like she’d never done this before. She’d climbed from front to back, from back to wayback, and then to the front again while her mother did sixty-five on the Jersey Turnpike, going to visit her parents. Daphne would be tasked with getting something out of a suitcase that her mother needed, or getting a snack for

Leda out of the grocery bag or a drink out of the cooler. That the car was now sideways in the forest, that there was no light whatsoever, affected her less than she might have thought. She knew every inch of the Chevy, which meant she knew where to go.

There were few remaining vestiges of Buddy Zabriskie in their life: in the girls' shared bedroom, a framed picture of him with his arms around Daphne and Leda on the boat; in the kitchen, a glass lemon juicer that had belonged to his mother; above the mantel, a clock that had been given to Buddy and Abigail as a wedding present. But the best place to know that Buddy cared about them, that he continued to think of them, was in the Impala. He changed the oil whenever he came to visit, and, when necessary, flushed out the radiator and refilled the windshield wiper fluid. If the snow was bad, he appeared with chains. Who knew why he kept this up after the divorce, but he did. Maybe he understood that doing it himself was the only way it was going to get done. He had left behind the red duffel bag that lived in the wayback. He had told Daphne it was there, and that it was important. Eddie had likely never noticed it before. Her mother grumbled about it every time she threw something back there—"Buddy's stupid bag of crap," she called it. But she didn't throw it away, or she hadn't the last time Daphne checked. If she got back there and the duffel was gone, she would never speak to her mother again.

"What are you doing?" Eddie called.

"Reconnaissance," Daphne said.

"Big word," Eddie said.

"I'm looking for stuff," she said.

"I know what it means," Eddie said.

It turned out she was good in the dark. She was good crawling over things. Maybe she wouldn't have done as well as Leda being in the hospital and having her ruptured appendix removed. Maybe they were both holding down the crisis best suited to their own abilities. Daphne flipped her body over the backseat, landing in that small space that contained the spare tire. She ran her fingers along the little piece of carpet and found the duffel bag. She shivered from excitement and from the significant cold. She hadn't made the emergency bag, but she was the one who knew of its existence. That was her contribution. She made the handles into shoulder straps and arranged it on her back like a jet pack. "I got it!" she called out to the front of the car.

“Got what?” Eddie asked.

“I got my dad’s bag.”

It would be an overstatement to say that Buddy saved the day, but he made a material contribution to their survival for which he would never receive credit. He was a man who spent most of his life on the water, and there was no going to Ace Hardware to pick up what you needed while at sea. The trick was to always think ahead, be prepared for any inevitability. In the years that Buddy spent with Abigail, the Impala was the closest thing to a boat that he had, and so even on land, he was ready. The duffel bag was proof of that.

Daphne had to contain herself on the way back. Her natural inclination was to flip over the front seat and land next to Eddie in a celebratory Spider-Man move, but she remembered. “My dad left an emergency bag in the back of the car,” she said, returning to the front seat as quiet as a cat. She positioned herself in the passenger-side wheel well, bracing her feet into the center console so as not to slide forward onto Eddie’s foot.

“Are you kidding me?”

She patted the bag, then opened up the makeup mirror again so she could show him in the little light.

Eddie whistled. “Buddy Zabriskie, you are some sort of man.”

“Dad always says he was prepared for everything in life except Mom.”

Eddie laughed, knowing he shouldn’t laugh. “Open it, let’s see what we’ve got.”

And so she did, and the first thing she put her hand on was the cold silver cylinder of a flashlight. She handed it to Eddie, who flipped it on. “Oh my god, Daphne, will you look at this? I might have thought to put a flashlight in a car—possibly—but I can guarantee you the batteries would be dead when I needed it.”

“Dad changes out the batteries.” She ran her hands through the bag. “And he puts in extra batteries. See?” She held them up.

Eddie turned the light on her and she squinted. “Oh, Duck, I don’t mean to alarm you, but you’re a bloody mess. Is there any medical stuff in there?”

Was there ever! Antibiotic ointment, gauze pads, alcohol pads, Band-Aids, an Ace bandage, a bottle of Tylenol. Eddie availed himself to three of those, washing them down with the melt from the ice cup. “Do you have a headache?” he asked her.

She did. He shook out two pills for her and handed over the cup.

“I’m going to do a better job on your head,” he told her. “What else did Santa Buddy leave us?”

There were four flares. There was a box of Diamond Strike On Box Matches in a sealed Ziploc bag. The thought of anything related to fire made Eddie’s stomach churn. “Put those back. What else?”

There was a small transistor radio, also with good batteries. There was a silver space blanket. “Who is this father of yours?” Eddie asked. “The Wizard of Oz?” He didn’t think they’d freeze to death, not overnight, not in the car, but whatever warmth the car heater had provided had seeped out long ago. Eddie was not about to turn the car back on to see what would happen. There were also four plastic bottles of water, all frozen solid. Four from a time in which it had been Abigail and Buddy and Daphne and Leda in the car. They weren’t going to die of dehydration either.

Once upon a time, there had also been four full-sized Snickers bars in the bag, the only full-sized candy bars Daphne and her sister ever had access to, though they got the bite-sized ones at Halloween. The candy bars were long gone.

Eddie told Daphne to take off her hat, and he went to work on her face, using the significant resources now available to him. She held the flashlight. The wound was a real bleeder, his folded handkerchief soaked through. He didn’t touch the alcohol wipe to the cut, but he used it to wipe up some of the blood. Then he put a glob of antibiotic ointment on a gauze pad and tapped it gently into place, wrapping her head up with the Ace bandage. “Good work, Mr. Triplett,” he said. “Nicely done.” He carefully put her hat back on.

“Shouldn’t we wrap your ankle?” Daphne asked.

“We should not.”

It had been nice to have a project, but now they weren’t sure what to do. Eddie asked if she wanted a chicken tender, but she didn’t. Neither of them did. “Maybe we should try to get some sleep,” Eddie said. “We won’t be able to do anything until morning.” He had no idea what they would do in the morning, though. They had gone a good way down a steep hill into the woods, in a place where no one lived and no one drove. There was no way he could get out of the car with his ankle, and he had no idea if either of the two car doors now facing skyward could be opened. If they waited around for assistance, it seemed possible that none would come until the raspberries were ready for harvest, and that would be, what? June?

Daphne closed the visor and unfolded the silvered blanket. "How do you want to do this?" she asked, and Eddie, who still had the flashlight on, simply raised up his right arm.

"Careful," he said.

"I know," she answered.

Both of the girls were capable of running into him with the velocity of cannonballs, but they could also rest beside him like leaves. Daphne lay down like a leaf, and spread the thin silver tarp on top of them. "Look out the window," she said quietly, by which she meant, shine the light outside.

The world was just the trunks of trees, little trees and big trees, and in-between trees, the tangle of wintry underbrush. It was like they were in a submarine under the sea. Eddie swept the light slowly right to left, and then hit on a pair of bright yellow eyes. Two pairs of eyes! Daphne let out a yip and both of them jumped, and mother of god, the pain in his ankle was like nothing he had ever experienced, and still, he managed not to scream.

"Did you see it?" Daphne whispered.

"I saw it," Eddie said. He turned off the flashlight. Nothing in his voice was natural.

"What do you think it was?" She kept her voice quiet, as if not wanting to attract the attention of the yellow eyes.

"Fox, maybe? Raccoons?" He did not say coyote because coyotes were too close to wolves, and there were no wolves in Massachusetts, and even if there were, they wouldn't be able to get into the car so there was no sense in thinking about them.

In time, after the flashlight went off, their eyes readjusted to the darkness, and their ears adjusted to the depth of silence. Now that they knew there were animals out there, they could hear them walking around. Not much, not often, but enough to remind them they weren't there alone. Funny, but neither one of them thought to try out Buddy's transistor radio.

"I wish we could see the stars," Daphne said.

"Can't you?" Both of them looked up, the passenger-side window like a sunroof, and while the night sky was mostly blocked by a crosshatch of black branches, there might have been a few bright bits of starlight visible.

It was nice having someone to lie on, nice having Eddie to lie on. Her body rose and fell slightly with his breath. The blanket did a surprisingly good job for being so thin. "I think I'd be afraid if I was here by myself," she whispered.

He squeezed her beneath his right arm. "I'd be afraid, too," he said.

That was the difference between Eddie and any other adult. Any other adult would have said, Don't be afraid. But Eddie's way was honest and infinitely preferable.

They stayed like this for a long time, listening and breathing, trying to fall asleep and having no luck. Daphne didn't know how much time had passed when she asked Eddie if they were going to die. That was what she'd been thinking about.

"I don't think so," he said. "I mean, of course we will eventually, everything does, but I don't think you and I are going to die in this car."

"Why not?"

He waited a long time to answer, like maybe he was weighing out how much of the truth to tell her. "I read a story at work today," he said. "A true story."

"Tell me."

"It might be a little scary for you. I don't know."

"Scarier than this?"

Eddie laughed. "Well, it's sort of similar to this, which is why I was thinking about it."

She put her head back down on the side of his chest. The quiet was such that she could hear his heart through his jacket. Eddie had definitely not dressed to spend the night in a car. "Once upon a time," she said.

Eddie began. "Once upon a time, there was a woman named Mary Carter who lived on a ranch in Wyoming. Her parents lived on a ranch, and her grandparents had lived on a ranch. Same with her husband and his family. Everybody had pretty much grown up in the same place and they stayed there. They had a lot of land and they knew it well. They raised sheep and horses, lots more sheep than horses, but they liked the horses better. Raising the horses and training them was fun. I don't think the sheep were much fun. Each of the Carters had their own horse. Mary had a horse, her husband had a horse, two of her children, a boy and a girl in high school, each had a horse. And when they went out to do things on the ranch, they always took their own horse. Mary's horse's name was Whistler.

"She had named her Whistler because even when the horse was young, Mary could stand in the pasture and whistle for her and the horse would come. Apparently that's not something many horses do. And this was a beautiful horse, chestnut color with a white blaze and two white stockings.

There was a picture of the horse that came in with the book proposal, and in the picture it was like she was looking right at the camera.”

“Was Mary in the picture with Whistler?”

Eddie shook his head. “Just the horse, which is a little strange, but, like I say, this was a good-looking horse. Whistler followed Mary around like a dog. She’d come up behind Mary and put her head on Mary’s shoulder. Not anybody else’s shoulder, only Mary’s. So even though this was one of the horses they were raising to sell, Mary decided to keep her. She trained Whistler herself, for years and years, and once Whistler was trained, she gave the horse she’d been riding to her third child, the second daughter. That horse’s name was Nutmeg. The daughter’s name was Sarah. Sarah was still a little young to have her own horse, but it was okay. Nutmeg was a sweetheart.”

“Did you ever have a horse?” Daphne asked.

Eddie laughed. “I’ve never even touched a horse.”

She might have told him about going to day camp last summer and how there were two days in which they were put on horses and a counselor led them around, but she didn’t want to distract him, so she just said, “Oh.”

“So by the time this story starts, Whistler had been Mary’s horse for a long time. Her children were grown, though Sarah still worked with her parents. One day a storm came up and blew a gate open. They’d been meaning to fix that gate for a while, the latch wasn’t right, but they hadn’t gotten around to it and now Nutmeg was gone. Mary didn’t know how long ago it had happened, but Nutmeg was a sweet horse and she was old by now and she probably hadn’t gone far, so Mary saddled up Whistler in the rain and went out to look for her. Whistler was about eight years old then. Mary didn’t even have to whistle for her anymore. Whenever she went out to the paddock, Whistler came to her. She remembered thinking, Oh, Whistler would never run off.

“It was still raining, but it wasn’t bad. She had a slicker on. Mary’s husband and daughter had taken the truck into Sheridan to get some things from the hardware store and the feed store and the grocery. She didn’t leave them a note because the drive there and back with all the errands took half the day. Mary would be back before they got home. She put an apple and a couple of carrots in her pocket, got an extra bridle, and she and Whistler rode off to find Nutmeg.”

“I don’t have a good feeling about this,” Daphne said.

Eddie's hand was on her head, on her hat. "I wasn't sure this would be a great story to tell you. Do you want me to stop?"

"No," she said. "Don't stop."

"Okay, but if you change your mind, you tell me. We can stop. I can tell you the other part when we're back home, or I can tell you when you're grown up."

"Tell me."

Eddie repositioned his shoulders. The left one was definitely wrong. He hadn't thought about it because his ankle took precedence over everything else in his body, but still, he could feel it. "Mary went up the hill where the sheep liked to graze, but Nutmeg wasn't there. She decided to go farther up, up to where it turned rocky, because there was a place with a good view from which she'd be able to spot the horse, but when she got there, she looked all around and didn't see her. Part of the problem was the rain, which was coming down harder now. She couldn't see much of anything. She decided to keep going up, though Nutmeg could as easily have gone down to the lower pasture. She had to look, she had to start somewhere. Mary and Whistler went farther and farther, and even though Mary was sure she'd been over every square inch of this land, she didn't remember it. Nothing looked familiar. She rode out another mile or so and was starting to think this was stupid and she should go home and wait for her husband and daughter to come back and help her, when a bolt of lightning made Whistler rear up and Mary fell."

Daphne dug her face into Eddie's arm. "I don't like this part."

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he said. "I thought this might be too scary."

"Does she live?"

"She lives," Eddie said.

"And the horses?"

"Everybody lives," Eddie said, because the creation of narrative tension was not his objective. He only meant to take her mind off the fact that they were trapped in the freezing car. He meant to take his own mind off of that as well.

"Okay," Daphne said, taking in a deep breath. "Go ahead. I'm ready now."

"You're a champion."

"Tell me what happens."

He told her it was a hard fall. Maybe Mary lost consciousness, but only for a minute or two. When she opened her eyes, the rain seemed to be about the same, and the light, not that there was much light with all the clouds, but the light was the same. Her ankle had gotten twisted in the stirrup. She knew it was broken, and so was her wrist. Never put your arm out when you're falling off a horse, but how can you stop yourself? Based on how much it hurt to breathe, she guessed she'd cracked a rib or two. She tried to sit up, but it was too much, so she lay back down in the grass. She lifted her head and looked around in the rain for Whistler, but the horse wasn't there.

"Whistler isn't there?" Now Daphne was scared, because Mary was alone and badly hurt. She wouldn't tell Eddie to stop the story, but she sort of wished he'd never started.

The lightning had spooked the horse. Wherever Whistler was, she was probably still running. Mary put her head back down in the grass. Now there were two horses gone. She was still thinking about what had happened in terms of the horses. After another twenty minutes or so she began to understand what had happened to her. She was badly hurt and alone in a place where no one in her family normally went. She had no way to get herself out of there.

Eddie hadn't thought this through. Not only was the story too scary, it was too close to home. But this was what he had started and now there was no way out but through.

The rain came and came. May was a month more tied to winter than spring. Water seeped beneath Mary's slicker and spread up the back of her flannel shirt and then around to the front until she was so wet she might as well not have been wearing a slicker at all. She opened her mouth to drink what she could. There was nothing else for her to do but wait. The rest of the day passed and no one came. At night she thought about wolves and the sheep. She would have said she didn't sleep at all, but when she opened her eyes, the rain had stopped and the sky was full of stars, so many stars it almost looked white in places.

"The way the stars looked before we went off the road," Daphne said.

"Like that," Eddie said, "and maybe even more because Mary was fifty miles from town and that town was small. There was no other light where she was. She looked at the stars. For all the pain she was in, she loved the stars."

"She lay there and loved the stars?"

“There was nothing else to do.”

“Then what happened?”

Mary doesn't die and Whistler doesn't die and Nutmeg doesn't die.

“She fell asleep for a while, and when she woke up, the stars were still there and Mary went back to watching them. She wondered how long she could last before anyone found her, and she thought that maybe if she didn't last she'd be one of those stars. She thought how terrible it would be for her husband and her daughters, and how they'd blame themselves for not being able to find her.”

“And her son,” Daphne said. “Her son would feel bad, too.”

“Oh,” Eddie said. “Her son died years before. His name was Jeffrey.”

“*How?*” Daphne started to cry. The death of this character who had not been introduced by name proved too much for her.

Eddie should never have been in charge of a child, especially not a child he dearly loved. First he ran the car off the road, and then he finished her off with a story. “Oh, Duck, oh god, I'm so sorry I started this.”

“I want to know!” she cried. “You have to tell me.”

“I will, I will. We're going to be novelists, you and I. Sometimes the stories are terrible.”

“*Jeffrey!*” she shouted.

“I don't know,” he said. “I'm not trying to protect you. I should have tried to protect you, but we're way past that now. Mary Carter said in her proposal that her son, Jeffrey, had died three years before her accident. That's all she said.”

“Are you going to ask her?”

Eddie stretched his neck back. Daphne was right. The thought of this dead son was unbearable, not knowing how old he was or how it happened. He must have been a grown man. “Yes,” he said. “If I get to buy the book, if she writes it, she'll need to tell us about Jeffrey. A proposal is more like an outline. You don't get much of what happened in the proposal.” In fact, a few of the details he was making up himself to fill things out, but he would never make up a death for Mary Carter's son.

“All right,” Daphne said. “But when you find out, you have to tell me.”

“I'll tell you,” Eddie said.

Mary thought a lot about Jeffrey when she was lying there looking at the stars. She thought about all three of her children and her husband. She thought of how hard they worked. She thought about how much she loved

them even though there was almost never enough time to think about loving them. She thought of the ways she had failed them. Jeffrey had wanted to go to school in Laramie, but her husband thought it was a waste of money and time. Mary had said nothing about it either way and Jeffrey didn't go to college, smart as he was. That was wrong.

Time went on like this until the darkness began to ease and a little dog came running through the pine trees. Mary heard something, and she lifted her head to see the dog barreling towards her, mouth open, tail going, a little gray-and-white dog who then leapt onto her chest and began licking her face, licking, licking, one of his paws pushing down on her cracked rib, the one that had collapsed her right lung, and the pain was more than she could stand, but she stood it. She would not have pushed the dog away for anything.

"Was it her dog?"

"It was her dog, the dog she'd had growing up, a dog named Marty. The greatest dog she had ever known, and everyone in her family had dogs."

"Marty's dead, too?"

"I'm afraid so. Marty had died a long time ago."

Daphne and Leda lobbied tirelessly for a dog, and still they got nowhere. Maybe after the accident their mother would change her mind. "So if Mary can see Marty, does it mean Mary's dead?" She was looking for logic. Was Mary sick enough to hallucinate a dog? She had already asked Eddie, and he swore that Mary didn't die.

"Mary thought the same thing. If she was seeing her dead dog, then she must have died in the night. But if she was dead, then why was she still in so much pain?"

"If she's dead, she shouldn't be in any pain."

"That's what she thinks, and then she doesn't think about any of it because she's so happy to see her dog. She'd cried for months when Marty died. She would go in her bedroom closet to cry because she was a ranch girl and ranch girls knew the way life worked. Both of her parents had told her it was time to get over it, but there had never been a dog as good as Marty. And look at him now! All youthful and shiny again, all his little white teeth still there. He licked her neck and then he'd stop and look right in her eyes, then he'd lick her neck some more. He barked! He had missed her as much as she had missed him, and now they were together and they were so happy."

Eddie stopped for a minute here so they could repair themselves, bask in the joy of Mary and Marty being reunited.

Then the story came together—click-click-click—in her mind. “Then Jeffrey comes,” Daphne said. She could hardly believe it.

“What?”

“That’s the story. If Marty comes, then Jeffrey comes. They’re coming to see her before she dies.”

Eddie was quiet. “How did you know that?”

“That’s the story,” Daphne said, feeling the intense wonder of it.

“I didn’t know,” Eddie said. “I was reading the proposal and I didn’t know.”

“Did anyone else come?”

“Susan, her best friend from childhood, who had died when she was having her first baby, and her father, who had died ten years before, and Jeffrey.”

“Did they come one at a time, or did they all come together?”

“One at a time,” Eddie said. Who was this child? How had she figured this out? “So she got some time with each of them alone at first. They must have had a lot to say to one another. It had been a while since she’d seen any of them.”

“What order?”

“It was Marty, then Susan, then her father, and then Jeffrey. I’m pretty sure Marty was there the whole time.”

“And she had enough time with each of them?”

“She had a lot of time. She was up there for three days.”

“And did the dead people all know each other? Did they like each other?”

“Her father knew Susan when she was growing up,” Eddie said. “She lived down the road. And of course he knew Jeffrey because Jeffrey was his grandson. Susan and Jeffrey wouldn’t have known one another, but they all got along.”

“And they were all nice to Marty?”

Eddie nodded. “Oh, sure, everybody loved Marty. Mary’s father had found Marty on the side of the road when he was a puppy. Someone had thrown him out in the snow. He wouldn’t have lasted an hour if Mary’s father hadn’t seen him. He pulled the truck over and put the puppy in the inside pocket of his coat, brought him straight home to Mary. ‘Mary, what are you doing leaving your dog out in the cold?’ he said to her when he

came home, then he gave her the puppy. There had never been a happier girl or a happier dog.”

Daphne made a mental note to tell her mother this part when she saw her again.

“So what happened?”

“What do you think happened?” Eddie said, still shaken by how quickly she’d gotten ahead of him.

“Tell me.”

Jeffrey and his grandfather were trying to start a fire. The wood was wet and they kept apologizing for the smoke. They couldn’t get it to catch, and Mary and Susan laughed and said they had nothing but time. Everyone was happy. Susan got Mary’s head in her lap and she combed out her hair with her fingers, and Marty went to sleep on Mary’s chest. Mary asked them how it was, and they all said it was different, but it wasn’t bad. “You know,” her father said. “It’s the way things go.”

“Sure is nice to be here, though,” Susan said, and she ran her hand down Marty’s back. “I wish I had a dog.”

Marty stayed close to Mary the entire time. One of them was always with her. She would go to sleep for a while, and sometimes when she woke up they would all be there, then other times it would only be Susan or her father. Once when she woke up, Jeffrey was lying beside her, his arm across her waist. She couldn’t imagine how she could have had such a luminous son. “I love you, Mama,” he said. “I love you, baby,” she said, and she was glad she got to say it because after he died, she wasn’t sure if she had told him. She told him when he was young but maybe not after he’d grown up.

“Once they finally got the fire started, they kept it going,” Eddie said. “They talked about their memories. They didn’t ask Mary many questions because they more or less knew what was going on with her. Mary loved them all so much, and the weaker she got, the more she thought it would be fine to be with them all the time.”

The others weren’t so sure.

“You’ve got your whole life to be dead,” her father said to her.

“Well,” Mary said, “I don’t know what kind of choice I have. I can’t get up. Either they find me or they don’t.” Was it easier to think about death when you lived on a ranch? Animals always getting killed, people you knew died in one sort of horrendous accident or another. Maybe she wouldn’t mind, or maybe she was very tired?

Then Jeffrey leaned right over her face and Marty looked up. “Whistle,” he said.

“Oh,” Daphne said. She hadn’t thought of that.

Mary’s mouth was dry. There had been nothing to drink since the rain stopped. She did not say that surely Whistler was too far away to hear her, that surely she and Nutmeg were home by now and her husband had fixed the lock on the gate. No, he wouldn’t have fixed the lock. He would still be looking for her. Did she have a fever? Even if he thought she was dead by now, he would still be looking. She ran her tongue around the inside of her mouth and pursed her lips. She made a breathy sound, a pale imitation of a whistle. Marty barked. They waited.

“It isn’t going to happen right away,” Susan said. “You have to be patient.”

Mary Carter was made of patience. Her whole life was patience. She didn’t mind waiting because she was with the people she loved, the people she had missed for such a long time. They went back to telling stories and laughing, and Mary drifted in and out. Such a comfort to hear them talking. Marty’s head was on her shoulder now. Whenever she thought of it, she’d try to whistle again. Then she fell back to sleep.

She whistled. She couldn’t remember how long she’d been trying, but then the horse was there, entering their circle through the pine trees to stand near the fire. She seemed almost shy at first, like maybe she knew she shouldn’t have reared, shouldn’t have run away. Mary didn’t know where Whistler had been all this time, but clearly, it wasn’t home. She hadn’t been brushed. That saddle and blanket had been on for three days, the reins and the bit. Mary felt terrible to think her horse had spent three days with a bit in her mouth.

“This is going to be the hard part,” Susan said when she saw the horse.

Mary couldn’t stand the thought of leaving Marty. Was that a terrible thing to say? Her best friend, her father, her own son, but the dog had never left her side. “I don’t know about this,” Mary said. “I’m not sure I want to leave.”

“It’s okay,” her father said. “You’ll be back later.”

“We’ll still be here,” Jeffrey said. “You won’t believe how fast it goes. Might as well be a minute.”

“You’ll look after everyone?” she asked her son.

“No,” he said. “We’ll look after you.”

They couldn't help her on to the horse. Somehow that was part of the deal. They didn't explain it and she didn't ask them why because it was clear. She whistled again and the horse came to her, leaning down to sniff her pockets. Marty gave a low growl and Mary petted his head. Then she remembered the two carrots and the apple she'd brought for Nutmeg. All this time she'd had a little food in her pocket and she'd forgotten. She gave one of the carrots to Whistler. She had come back, after all.

Then Whistler lay down on the ground. For a horse it was an unheralded act of generosity. The fire had gone out, and her friend and her father and her son were standing together in front of the trees. She had tried so many times to teach the horse to do this as a trick, but horses weren't interested in lying down unless something was wrong. Then she remembered, of course, that everything was wrong. She had to get herself on top of the horse with her broken ankle, her broken wrist and ribs, all of it on the right side. She would have to do it or she would have to die there, though dying there wouldn't be the worst thing. Marty went over to her father, and her father picked him up and held the dog in his arms.

When Mary rolled onto her left side, the pain exploded, turning her vision green. She lay there in the sea of it, panting. "I can't do this," she said.

"Sure you can," Susan said. "Take your time." Susan had pink cheeks and a thick brown braid. She'd barely been more than a girl when she died.

"We've all done this," Jeffrey said. "You'll make it through."

She hadn't thought about that, but of course it was true. They had already died. All of them had faced the hardest thing and gone forward. And so Mary Carter dragged herself on top of the horse, enduring something so otherworldly that she would never be able to tell anyone about it. When Whistler stood again, she held to the saddle horn with her left hand, dug her left foot into the stirrup, letting her right foot hang. Whistler standing was not an easy thing, not for either of them. She didn't know if she cried from the pain or from the wonder of it all, or if she cried because she was losing the people and the dog she had already lost. They waved to her, the three of them, and Marty barked as the horse picked her way down the hill towards home.

By the time he had finished, Daphne was crying too hard to say anything, but she knew now why Eddie had told her the story. They weren't going to die.

3

Leda was lying in the bed beside me, staring at the ceiling, tears soaking the pillow beneath her head. “You thought I knew that story?”

“I don’t know. I thought you knew some of it? When I was nine, I thought you knew everything I knew. I thought we transferred information telepathically.”

“I didn’t get that one.”

“I’m not even sure how accurate my memory is. I mean, it’s been a long time, and it was fairly traumatic. And there’s no way Eddie was just giving me a recap of a book proposal he’d read. He must have made parts of it up when he told it to me. Recovered childhood memories, don’t you deal with this in your business all the time?”

Leda nodded. “Absolutely. So what part are you sure about?”

I rolled over on my side to face her. “The horse. I’m positive about the horse.”

“Tell me.”

“Did the dead people show up? Did the dog show up? There’s no evidence. Mary Carter had a broken ankle and broken wrist, two broken ribs and a collapsed lung. There could have been an infection setting in, she probably had a fever, dehydration. She went through a terrible fall out there, and no doubt things got worse as the days went on. Did she see things she didn’t really see? The further away she got from the actual event, the less she wanted to write about it, so maybe she wasn’t sure, or maybe she didn’t want to deal with a bunch of readers questioning her memories.”

“This was pre-internet.”

“I’m sure they still had imaginative ways of destroying people back then.”

“Or maybe Mary *was* sure about what happened,” Leda said, “but as time went on, she came to think of it as private.”

I nodded. “I like that answer better, but either way, we’ll never know. The only thing anyone can be sure of was that the horse came back to get her,

then brought her back to the ranch. Whistler was real.”

After breakfast and a long shower, after the walk to the train station and the train ride to Bronxville and the walk back to the house, I convinced myself that I should have called my mother by now, but there simply hadn’t been time. This was Sunday, and Jonathan and I had only gone to the Met last Thursday. But of course there had been free hours here and there, and in those hours I did not reach for the phone. I hadn’t even turned my phone on. When I did, I saw I had four missed calls from my husband, who never left messages. I had a tendency to turn off my phone, and Jonathan never left messages: two habits that were a source of irritation for both of us.

“Where have you been?” he said in lieu of hello.

If I was out of touch for longer than the length of a movie, then the answer to any question regarding my whereabouts was always going to be: At Leda’s. Jonathan knew that, no matter how many times he acted like he didn’t. “At Leda’s,” I said. “Are you okay?”

“We’ve been going through papers,” Jonathan said, “which include love letters, camp letters, insurance policies, electric bill stubs, report cards, dress patterns. Would you have thought of dress patterns?”

“They didn’t immediately spring to mind, but I guess it makes sense. They’re paper.” I waited for him to ask me how I was.

“These are unopened, uncut *Vogue* patterns from the fifties and sixties. My mother apparently meant to sew her own clothes, but she never got around to it. Dress patterns are like baseball cards. They’re worth money. Sydney’s been Googling.”

Sydney. Why did I keep forgetting that his daughter was part of the great clean-out?

“Are you losing your mind?” I asked, half hoping he would ask me if I was losing mine.

“Not really. We found the baseball cards, too. My father’s, mine.”

“Did you call the service that takes everything away?”

“No, the patterns kind of killed that idea. There’s a lot of nuance to the sorting process.”

“But won’t that take the rest of your life?”

“Not the rest of it.” He sounded more cheerful than he had the last time we’d talked, which felt like a month ago but had only been yesterday.

“I called Eddie,” I said.

“Did you? I’m glad. You should get together. He seemed like a nice guy.”

I waited for a minute. Jonathan had started talking to Bea.

“Go,” I said. “You’re busy.”

“Let me call you later,” he said. “Keep your phone on for a change.”

I told him I loved him because I did. I did love him.

There was always a period of adjustment after school let out, a sudden realization that once again my time was my own. Every year the ghost memory of obligations followed me well into June (I have to grade papers! I have to look at *Persuasion* before class!) until finally I shook them off, though the dreams in which I was late, unprepared, or in the wrong room speaking the wrong language never left me.

It was strange to have so much to think about and so little to do. I thought about weeding the raised beds in back and then going into town to buy tomato plants. I thought about cleaning the refrigerator. I thought about finding a book I would never dream of teaching or recommending to a teenage girl. Old Philip Roth novels! Our house was full of them. I could spend the day on the couch reading.

But I called my mother instead. This story had gone on too long without giving her an entrance.

“Daphne?” she said.

“It’s me,” I said. “How are you?”

“Fine, thank you.” Why did my mother always make me feel like a telemarketer calling to rope her into a time-share?

“Good,” I said. “Good. Listen, Mom, I was thinking I might come see you.”

“Are you in town?” I caught the edge of nervousness in her voice, as if I were on my way over to discuss the time-share now.

“No, I’m home, but school is out and Jonathan’s gone to Wisconsin to help his sister clean out their mother’s house.”

“Where is his mother?”

“She died,” I said. “You know Jonathan’s mother died.”

“I did *not* know Jonathan’s mother died! That’s terrible. I would have called him. I would have sent him a note.”

Was it possible I hadn’t told her, maybe to keep her from calling him or sending a note? No, I must have told her. “I was thinking maybe I could come to see you,” I said, letting the other thread of conversation lapse.

“When?” I could almost hear her stepping back.

“I don’t know. Soon? Tomorrow maybe?”

“Christopher and his family are coming over tonight.”

“Which is great,” I said, “but they live two miles away. They’ll go home after dinner.” That my half-brother and his family chose to live in such close proximity to his parents, one of whom was also my parent, was the great and abiding joy of those parents’ lives. It also removed the burden from my sister and me. Matthew, the younger one, lived with Lyle in Swampscott, a scant hour away, and near the beach! Christopher and his family provided regular attentiveness while Matthew and Lyle provided vacations.

“Let me talk to Lucas,” my mother said. “Let me see what the plans are.” As if Lucas might have plans of which she was unaware.

“Sure.”

“It might be better to wait,” she said.

“Sure,” I said, “of course, but Mom?”

There was a dead space on the line and so I went ahead. “I wanted to tell you that Jonathan and I ran into Eddie Triplett at the Met on Thursday.”

I knew my mother when I was young. I knew her through her marriage to my father, though I was four when that one ended, and I knew her through her friendship and marriage to Eddie, though, given the recent facts, I hadn’t known much. But in her marriage to Lucas, I had barely known her at all. I had never made a place for myself in that relationship, and no place was made for me. Then the boys were born and that was that. I called to tell her about Eddie because, I supposed, I still believed the primary relationship was between the two of them. Wasn’t it? They had been married. They had been divorced.

“Eddie?” she asked brightly. “Oh my god, how is Eddie Triplett?” It was more the voice I’d expect her to use if I’d run into her best friend from high school.

“He’s good,” I said hesitantly. “He seemed good.”

“You ran into him at the opera?”

“At the museum.”

“At the museum, that makes sense. Eddie had a great eye for art. We used to go to the museum in Boston, the big one?”

“The MFA,” I said. We were talking about museums?

“That’s right. He took me to the Gardner, too, and the one at Harvard. Anything I know about art today is something Eddie taught me. I can only

imagine how thrilled he must have been to see you. He loved you, Daphne, you know that. He adored you. After that car accident? He was so torn up about having hurt you.”

“He didn’t hurt me.”

“Well, he was *upset* about the scar on your face. He was. All those stitches. You looked like someone had hit you with an axe. He’s not still at Random House, is he? He must have retired by now.”

As much as I would have liked to separate out each of those sentences and address them individually, I could not. I had to pick. “You knew he was at Random House?”

“I read *Publishers Weekly*. Even after I stopped working, I kept up with things.”

Someone started talking in the background and my mother stopped to listen. “I’m talking to Daphne,” she said. “Two more minutes.”

Lucas walked away.

“He didn’t retire,” I said. “He’s still working.”

“Oh, bravo, Eddie!” she said. “Good for him. Publishing is short on wisdom these days. All the mentors took the buyout. Of course I’ve been gone for *decades*, but I have to tell you, part of me *still* wishes I hadn’t retired. I stay so busy around the house, and at the end of the day I have no idea what I’ve accomplished.”

I took the phone away from my ear. I stared at it.

My mother was still talking. “It’s been such a long time since I’ve seen him, but—”

“Forty-four years,” I said, mystified.

“Is that even possible? It can’t be that long. Eddie was so good at his job. I can remember being at publishing functions over the years when his name would come up, someone saying they had worked with Eddie Triplett and what a good editor he was. Of course none of those people knew that we’d been married, and I wasn’t going to say anything. I don’t think they would have believed me anyway. Eddie Triplett. Do you think you’ll see him again?”

“I do,” I said.

“Will you tell him hello for me?”

I sat down on the couch. All this time I’d been standing, looking out the window into my backyard in Bronxville, and now I felt such a need to sit down. “Mom,” I said. “What the hell?”

My mother was quiet, and over in Winchester, I had a feeling that she had sat down on her couch as well. “What?” she said.

“You’re not mad at him?”

“Well,” she said, “forty-four years is a long time.”

And then I said something to my mother that I had never said to her before, at least not since the car accident. I told her she needed to help me understand.

She thought about it for a minute and then told me to come up tomorrow. “Tomorrow would be good,” she said.

“I hate having a job,” Leda said when I told her I was going.

“You love your job.”

“I love my job, but I’d like to be in the room for this one. I want to hear what she has to say firsthand.”

“Henry could see your patients, couldn’t he?” I had a great deal of confidence in my nephew.

“He’s wise,” my sister said of her son. “New York isn’t full of seventeen-year-old boys who could cover your therapy practice for you. Still, I think the licensing would be an issue. Call me the minute you leave the house.”

“Why did we never ask her before?” I couldn’t remember anymore.

“Because we weren’t thinking about Eddie. We forgot about him,” Leda said.

Maybe that was the question I should ask our mother: How had we forgotten about Eddie?

I called Jonathan next.

“Why are you going to your mother’s?” he asked. “Why not go to Leda’s if you’re lonely?”

“I’m not lonely. I need to talk to her, that’s all. Anyway, if I go while you’re in Wisconsin, she won’t get her feelings hurt.” Jonathan was always the one my mother wanted to see. I believed it had to do with the misalignments in our ages: her husband was now too old for her, and my husband was quite a bit older than me, which meant that my husband could have reasonably been my mother’s younger man. Jonathan would have fainted dead had I told him this theory.

“Well,” he said, “if that’s the case, I hope you go and see your mother. Have a wonderful time.”

“How’s the clean-out coming along?”

“We found an entire second house’s worth of crap in the attic: boxes, toys, furniture. I’m amazed the ceiling on the second floor never caved in. We’ve been so proud of the progress we’ve made, cleaning out closets and kitchen drawers, but we haven’t done anything. The attic, the basement, the garage—that’s where the problems are.”

“Are you ever coming home?”

“Someday,” he said. “After you visit your mother, you might want to think about taking a bus to Wisconsin.”

Jonathan had gotten the job in Manhattan six months after we started dating, but it took me another year to decide that I should be with him, which was stupid. I loved him, and he wanted me there, and Buddy was dead and nothing was keeping me in Boston. In the year of our commuting relationship, I lived in Newton and taught at Newton South, a good public high school, but I had no seniority, so there was nothing to give up. On weekends I took the bus to New York because the bus was cheaper, and I lived on a schoolteacher’s salary with the load of credit card debt I’d acquired while taking care of my father. Every week I brought a tote bag full of student papers with me on the bus and marked them up over the length of Connecticut. Round trip, I had nearly eight uninterrupted hours of grading and class-preparation time, which meant that during the week I was never behind. Jonathan hated the thought of me on a bus, mostly because it meant I started and ended my trips in bus stations. He was forever offering to buy me a train ticket, but in those days my feminist standards were such that the idea of letting the man I was sleeping with pay for my train ticket so I could go and sleep with him in a different state seemed tantamount to signing away my freedom. (Jonathan might have ridden a school bus when he was a child, and once or twice the 72nd Street crosstown bus, but he had never taken an interstate bus in his life. He never came back to Boston to see me after he left, which had to do with his busy new job and my depressing efficiency apartment.) Every time I waited in line to board the bus, some young woman, usually a college student, would attach herself to me. “Okay if I sit with you?” she’d say, and I’d tell her yes. If my seatmate got off in New Haven, some other girl who was already on the bus would dart over to take her place. I never understood it, until one Sunday night going home, a girl told me her mother had instructed her to identify the safest-looking person on the bus and ask if she could sit with her. “That’s you,” the girl said to me.

“How can you tell?”

She laughed. “Look around.”

And when I did, I could see that she was right. I was a little older. I was grading papers. I was always going to be the safest-looking person on the bus.

I used to daydream about the train in those days. I thought of how, in some mythical future where there was nothing but money, I would buy a ticket on the Acela, which was the fast train. Then I would pay extra to sit in the quiet car. Those luxuries meant so much when you couldn’t afford them. Two days after the Hotallings’ fiftieth wedding anniversary, I took the Acela to Boston, booking my ticket for the quiet car, and while I meant to read, I spent most of the time staring out the window, thinking the whole thing through.

Lucas and Abigail Ekker had stayed in Winchester, a suburb that offered both the small rental house we had lived in when I was a child, as well as the stately spreads where they had raised their sons. My mother had been enthralled with the grander side of town back when she was broke, so once she had money, she knew exactly what she wanted. She wanted to be able to walk to the Boat Club for lunch. In this way we were not dissimilar: she set her sights on the five-bedroom foursquare, and I wanted a train ticket on the express.

They had moved through Winchester strategically over the years—my mother quietly improving their circumstances through knowing when to sell and when to buy. She had worked for a real estate company back when she and Buddy were married, typing up the offers and the contracts, then writing the offers and the contracts because she was better at it than the agents. This was before she landed her job in publishing. I had never lived in the house she and Lucas lived in now, nor had I lived in the two houses before it. This one was the apex of her real estate dreams.

“We have to think about downsizing,” my mother said when she picked me up at the station. “We’re rattling around in there, and we need a main-floor bedroom suite. Lucas going up and down the stairs scares me to death.” At seventy-six, my mother was still taking Pilates twice a week.

“I’m all in favor of a simpler life,” I said, thinking of my husband and his sister going through the attic in Wisconsin. Sydney, his daughter, had given up on the project and gone home.

“You need to be thinking about downsizing yourself,” my mother informed me.

I shrugged. “We have the rare Bronxville ranch, all on one floor.”

“Is it?” she asked.

“It was this morning.” Surely she wasn’t doubting my memory on this one.

“I told Lucas we were going to the market,” she said. “Is there anyplace you want to go?”

“I’m happy to go to the market.”

She shook her head. “I’ve been already. I just don’t want to walk in the door having some big conversation about Eddie. Nobody wants to hear their wife talking about her ex-husband.”

“Lucas knows about Eddie, doesn’t he?” Anything was possible.

“I was briefly married to an editor who took a good job in New York City when I didn’t want to live in New York City. I wanted to raise my girls in the suburbs. Just one of those things.”

“You could have raised us in Bronxville or Maplewood.”

“Eddie was adamant about living in the city,” she said.

“That’s what you told Lucas?”

“He knew about your father, of course, I had the two of you girls to show for that one, but we never talked much about Eddie. If you don’t have children with someone, the marriage doesn’t count.”

“Jonathan and I don’t have children.”

“I’m not talking about you and Jonathan,” she said. “I’m talking about Eddie and me.”

“The raspberry farm,” I said.

“What about it?”

“I want to go to the raspberry farm.” It had come on me like divine inspiration.

My mother turned her big sunglasses in my direction. “You’re kidding me.”

“It’s a quiet place to talk,” I said. “And anyway, I’ve never seen it in good weather.”

“I’ve never seen it at all,” my mother said.

“You never went up there?”

“Why would I?”

“I don’t know. Eddie and I could have died there. We didn’t die there. Leda loves raspberries. That makes it a seminal location in our family history.”

My mother shook her head. “You didn’t almost die. You got a cut.”

I leaned back into the Audi’s comfortable leather seat, regretting everything. “Raspberry farm, please.”

My mother did not agree, but at the next light she turned the silver sports sedan and started in the direction of High Street.

A raspberry farm saw no more business in May than it did in January, but in May there were preparations going on, mostly of the digging and planting variety. Ours was not the only car on the road.

“Will there be a reenactment?” my mother asked. “Shall I crash the car into the woods?”

“Here’s the thing,” I said. “I hadn’t thought about any of this in a long time, and now I am. I’m thinking about the accident, I’m thinking about Eddie, I’m thinking about your divorce.”

My mother nodded. She was a cautious driver, both hands on the wheel. “What did Eddie tell you?”

“He took me to Skip and Polly’s fiftieth wedding anniversary party at the Century Club.”

Now her eyes did leave the road. “Those awful people are still married?”

“Fifty years.”

“How did that happen?” How had she had three husbands while Polly Hotalling had gotten by with one?

“They sit on the opposite sides of the table. I’m guessing that’s part of it.”

“So Eddie just runs into you, just happens to run into you in a museum, and the first thing he thinks to do is drag you off to see the Hotallings?”

I found the fact that my mother was mad infinitely preferable to her being bored or buoyant or sarcastic. Mad I could deal with. Mad made sense.

“Eddie didn’t drag me anywhere. He was going to the party and his date got sick. He needed someone to go with him.”

“So now you’re his default date?”

“Not his date,” I said. “His stepdaughter. Actually, he introduced me as his daughter.”

My mother looked at me once more. “Had I had a child with Eddie, I would have remembered it, or maybe not. I’m getting old.” She stopped the

car and turned on the hazard lights, *tick-tick-tick* like a metronome. She opened the door.

“Mom?” I leaned in the direction of her open door.

“You’re driving.” She walked around to my side and opened the passenger door. “I’m serious, get out of the car. This isn’t safe.”

I undid my seat belt and walked around. I had never driven my mother’s Audi. A navy blue Camry came up behind us, slowed, then stopped. That we were two women in distress was a self-evident truth. I nodded and waved him on.

“It would have been kind of you to suggest that we go for a late lunch, order a bottle of wine,” she said.

“We can do that later.” I clicked the hazards off and put the car in drive.

“What did Eddie tell you?”

“He told me about Skip. He told me that you knew.” I scrolled through the information he had given me, which now seemed like less than it had at the time. “Honestly, he said nothing but nice things about you.”

She ignored this last part. “Are he and Skip still . . .” She paused. She had no idea what word to use.

“I think it’s still going on, and I don’t know what ‘going on’ entails for the two of them.” The heavy leaves trimmed the light in the forest, letting less and less of it onto the floor. The turns in the road came without warning. I could see how easy it would have been to sail right off the edge of the world.

“Skip Hotalling was a waste of time,” my mother said. “Eddie’s friend, Eddie’s lover, either way, Skip wasn’t good enough for him. As for my knowing that Eddie was gay, can we take a minute to think about how stupid I was in 1978? I was divorced with two children. I had found the one man who wanted to be my friend, who didn’t try to jump me from behind when I took my coat off. There were the girls who were waiting until they were married, and then there were the girls who were already married, and then there were the *divorcées*.” My mother gave every syllable its due. She made the word swing. “Divorcées were the cows who gave the milk for free, or so went the wisdom of the day. Into that equation came handsome Eddie Triplett, funny, well-read Eddie Triplett, who knew how to listen and kept his hands to himself and loved my kids and had my back at work. Eddie Triplett, who made me laugh so hard I once spit my coffee all over

my desk. Go to the offices of Houghton Mifflin in 1978 and show me a woman who wasn't in love with Eddie. Probably a woman or a man."

The steering wheel of my mother's car was made of actual wood, polished to satin. Jonathan and I had a nice life, but the steering wheel on our car was not wood. "So what happened?"

"We went around together, that's all. We kept company. We were friends. Nothing ever happened and we never talked about it. I'm sure we were both grateful for the break. That's the sad thing about Eddie and me. We liked each other so much. I'll even say we loved each other, not with all the bells and whistles, but in our way we did."

The road to the raspberry farm was longer than I remembered, and I wasn't exactly sure where we had gone off the road. On this side of the hill? The other side? "So how did you go from there to being married?"

"It was those awful Hotallings. We had gotten together with them a few times. Polly was from Boston, you know, big money. I expect she was always anxious to get out of their roach-infested walk-up and go home to her parents' house, sleep in her childhood bed for the weekend. They lived on Marlborough Street. I'd never been in such a fancy house in all my life. She had a brass canopy bed. Do you remember that? We took you girls over once, and she showed you the bed and all her dolls. You and your sister about lost your minds."

And then I did remember, though not until this exact moment. My stomach twisted to think of it now, the same woman who had put the fear of God in me two nights before, a young bride coming back to sleep in her parents' house with her cohort of dolls.

"Even I knew there was something fishy going on. The charming part was I thought it had to do with Polly. Was Eddie meeting up with his best friend's child-sized wife on the sly? I'll tell you, there was enough electricity between the three of them to power up the Citgo sign. Eddie was always holding my hand when they were around. He would whisper to me, try to make me laugh, order one piece of cake with two forks, one more glass of wine for us to split. He may as well have been trying out for the lead in a Broadway show called *This Is My Girlfriend*. Then one night you and Leda were on a rare sleepover at your father's and the Hotallings were in town again, so the four of us went out to dinner. Skip, god, but I hated that smug son of a bitch, Skip was bending over backwards to grind Eddie into the ground, asking Eddie to remind him why didn't he go to law

school, not that he could have gotten into law school. Why would he spend his life fiddling with the commas in some book that no one was ever going to read? What kind of a job was that? And I sat there thinking, Oh, Eddie must be sleeping with your wife. This is the moment it's all going to come out and Skip is going to beat him to death in a restaurant. Then Skip says, 'If you were going to waste your life like that, you should have gone to Vietnam, gotten it over with.'"

Now I looked at her. "What?"

"It was a bad night," my mother said. "I was holding Eddie's hand under the table. We were drinking too much, and Skip was drinking more than the rest of us. Polly kept putting her hand on his wrist and saying, 'Skippy,' real quiet. I'll tell you, even thinking about it all these years later makes me want to go and find them."

I had missed it, the place where the accident happened. Not that I thought I'd be able to find it. Suddenly the road had ended and we had arrived at the gravel parking lot of the raspberry farm. I put the windows down and turned off the car.

My mother looked around. "You didn't find it," she said. She seemed disappointed.

"It doesn't matter," I said. "Tell me what happened."

"Well, the miserable evening ended miserably and Eddie and I went for a walk. Did he tell you about the walk?"

"He mentioned it," I said.

My mother took off her dark glasses and closed her eyes. "So many things I didn't know. I blame the time, that was part of it, but part of it was me in that time. Eddie shouldn't have taken that horseshit off of anyone, and especially not pompous Skip Hotalling. He deserved so much better than that."

"So what did you do?"

My mother looked at me then and gave a tired smile. "I offered him something better. All of my love, and the love of my beautiful girls, and all he had to do was promise to never speak to Skip again. And not be gay."

"Oh," I said. Seventy-six, and still my mother was a beautiful woman. The other children used to stare at her when she came to pick us up at school.

She waved her hand, as if to wave away my thoughts. "It wasn't purely mercenary on my part. I saw a good life for all of us, you and Leda and me

and Eddie, all of us. I thought Eddie would change his stripes. He would change who he was so that I could have what I wanted.”

I had no idea what to say, and after a while she went on.

“I don’t much believe in God,” my mother said. “But someone sent me your brother so that I could redeem myself. Matthew told us he was gay the summer after his freshman year of college, told us what I’d pretty much known since he was born. And while Lucas crashed around the house rending his garments, I said to my son, ‘Let’s you and me go take a walk.’”

“So Matthew knows about Eddie?”

“Matthew is the only person I ever told.”

I might have reminded my mother that she had blamed me for her second divorce. Eddie had driven off this very hill and I had cut my face, so she could no longer be married to him. She couldn’t trust him. But my mother had suffered enough. And if my brother had in any way benefitted from her suffering, well, I was happy for them both.

“How did you find out about Eddie and Skip?”

“Did he tell you this part?”

I shook my head.

“That’s too bad. I would have liked to know how he remembered it. As far as I was concerned, we had a good thing going. We were tender with one another, thoughtful. I had loved your father, but that was madness, screaming, moving out, making up, making up in every room of the house.”

I held up my hand.

“I’m just saying, Eddie and I did a better job, especially where you and Leda were concerned. We did a good job with the two of you.” She stopped. She might have been resting.

“So?”

“So Leda was still in the hospital. She couldn’t get her bowels going, there was a lot of worry about infection. Then Eddie comes in and his foot and ankle are smashed to bits, his shoulder’s cracked. You were good, though. Just a cut. You were such a solid, reliable child. The car was gone. I was running up and down the stairs between Eddie and Leda, back and forth, back and forth. Eddie had surgery, he was doped to the gills, his ankle was in a rig to keep it elevated and he was still working on some book he was editing. He had asked one of the firemen to fish it out of the backseat before they brought him in. All of it was crazy, but we were okay. No one died. We made it through.”

“Eddie told me that’s what you’d say.”

“When you saw him?”

I shook my head. “When we were in the car after the accident. I said you’d be upset about us wrecking the car, and he said no, you’d be too happy that we were alive.”

My mother’s chin dropped to her chest, but she smiled. “That’s Eddie,” she said. “Bright side.”

“I interrupted you.”

“They’d put a sign up on the door whenever the doctor was there to do an exam or the nurse came to give him a bath: ‘Privacy, Please.’ I’d been in the room ten minutes before and I came back. There was something I was bringing to him or something I’d forgotten to say, I don’t remember. I saw those two words on the door and didn’t give them a second’s thought. ‘Privacy, Please’ did not apply to me, but I should have been respectful. He gave me everything. I could have given him that much.”

“Skip?”

“He was sitting in the chair beside Eddie’s bed and he had his head on Eddie’s chest and Eddie had his hand on Skip’s head. That’s all it was. Skip was crying. He must have been waiting down the hall for me to go. Eddie must have called him and told him what happened. He would have told Skip not to come. Eddie was no dummy. But Skip came anyway, and he sat in the chair I’d been sitting in ten minutes before, and he put his head on my husband’s chest. And everything was over because Eddie was still gay and he was still in love with Skip. And so I wanted Eddie gone. I never wanted to see him again for the rest of my life, but that isn’t true. I wanted him to be in love with me. That’s what I wanted.”

I reached over the gearshift and took my mother’s hand.

“It’s an awful business,” she said. “Loving another person.”

“It is,” I said, and for the first time in a long time, I remembered that I loved her, or more precisely, I remembered she was a person who had lived her own autonomous life full of mistakes and disappointments and judgments and thwarted love.

My mother and I got out of the car to look at the rows of promising raspberry canes. “It’s nice here,” she said. “Who would have thought?”

“You should see it at night,” I said, and she laughed. She hadn’t ever asked me what had happened in the car, probably because she thought she

knew. And maybe she did know, maybe Eddie had told her, before everything between them was ruined.

When we had returned from the raspberry farm, my mother announced her need to lie down, and I found myself sitting in the den, flipping through the Positivity books. Lucas had never regained his footing after the demise of Positivity, a franchise dead in the water by 1985. It would have died long before then had it not been for my mother's publicist tenacity. Once the series was scrubbed, Lucas spent the rest of his life pacing around the yard, or pacing up and down the halls when the weather was bad. He never could stop grumbling, to my mother or my brothers, about the unfairness of it all. To be unable to find something else to write about was one thing, surely that happened all the time, but his inability to take his own advice was a real mark against him. A stack of his books sat on some table or another in every room of the house. I hadn't picked one up since a night in high school when Leda and I did a dramatic reading for our much younger half-brothers when Lucas and our mother were out for dinner. "Bounce on your toes while brushing your teeth!" I said in my most positive voice.

"Feel the positivity radiating up from your ankles!" Leda cried.

It wasn't that we got busted. Lucas wasn't there to hear us and the sweet boys didn't tell. But when bedtime came around that night, and Christopher and Matthew stood at the sink, bouncing, bouncing, Leda and I felt like toads. Who were we to say their father was a fool? Our own father was out on a boat somewhere, pulling lobsters out of the ocean. At least their father came home.

Looking at those books now, the person I most wanted to read them to was Lucas himself:

While a positive attitude yields positive outcomes, life's deepest joys come not from those outcomes but from the practice of a positive lifestyle. Gratitude is the garden in which the flowers of positivity bloom. Look around right this minute. What are you grateful for? Make a list, starting with your health. If you're not in good health, focus on what *is* working, because something in you is thriving: your eyes, your heart, your hands. Pick one thing and spend an entire minute feeling a sense of wonder for what you've been given.

Next, think of a person you're grateful for. Maybe it's a child, a parent, a spouse. Maybe it's not. Maybe it was your third grade teacher. Mine was Mrs. Smithson, who picked up leaves on her way to school. Every day she found new leaves, even if it meant taking a longer route, and the wonder she felt at the sight of those leaves spread to every student in the class.

I went out into the yard and found Lucas staring at a flower bed. “Hey,” I said, holding up his book. “Have you looked at this in the last forty years? This is good.” Sentimental and simplistic, but gently nudging the reader towards the obvious: Here you are, lucky thing. You’re alive.

“Weeds,” he said. “Look at them. I pay that gardener a fortune and everywhere I look I see weeds.”

Positivity meant solving the problems. Solving them and letting them go. Or it meant not solving the problems but coexisting with them peacefully. “So you talk to the gardener, or you find a new gardener, or you pull the weeds yourself, or you look at the flowers. What about those lilacs, Lucas?” I sniffed the breeze. “I swear, I just read a chapter about this exact thing.”

Lucas looked at the book in my hand, *Positively Grateful!* “That was a good one,” he said.

“It is!” I said. He was eighty-eight and I had never liked the man, but in that moment I was open to the idea that I had been wrong about everything.

“Then tell me why it hasn’t been reissued? Old books get reissued all the time. Some big shot needs to slap their brand on it. You tell me Oprah can’t get behind Positivity? What about Anderson Cooper? He’s Mr. Compassion.”

“You’re missing your own point: it’s not about getting the thing you don’t have, it’s about recognizing what you do have. You’re still in good health, you’ve got this beautiful house, your wife loves you, your sons are nearby.”

Lucas looked at me as if he wasn’t entirely sure we’d met before. The late-afternoon sun shone bright against his heavy spectacles. “Are you still teaching school?”

“I am.”

He chewed on this for a minute, nodding slowly, and I began to think that once again I was wrong about everything. Lucas had dementia. Lucas had no idea who I was. “Maybe you could get the books adopted as textbooks for your class,” he said. “Kids these days are no better than rats. They’re lawless. All they care about is what pops up on their phones, then they repost the most loathsome things they can find so that they can bring down democracy. They’re the ones who need Positivity.”

Scratch that. Not demented. “The books we read in my classes are novels.”

“So what? Think outside the box,” he barked. “Think positive for a change. A book gets onto the curriculum in one school and the other schools get competitive and order it, too. That’s what we need to get going, some real competition. Siblings, neighbors, friends. If I can get it started in one school, it will spread, especially if the kids start posting about it.” The thought of this seemed to cheer him, then he shuffled off in the direction of the garage.

Was my mother looking out the window? Was this her life every day?

The life they lived in Winchester might have begun with Positivity, but it had been sustained through my mother’s cleverness and self-taught financial acuity. She had spent their married life buying and selling and shifting things around. She took what Positivity had given her and she worked it. She’d made a brilliant deal on some beachfront property on the Cape, as well as a large, early buy in Apple.

And wouldn’t she give it all back to be married to Eddie Triplett now? He could be as gay as he wanted. He could spend every weekend with Skip Hotalling. They could laugh about it all over dinner. They could laugh after a book club at The Center for Fiction, after a black-tie fundraiser for PEN. After all, Abigail and Eddie had been friends, and in the end a friend was the better person to have.

I slept poorly among the proliferation of fringed throw pillows and the high-thread-count sheets in the house of abundant guest rooms. In the morning I stripped the bed and took my sheets to the washer. My mother, who had been equally exhausted by our time together, drove me back to catch the commuter rail to South Station. I thought she might object to my leaving so early, but she didn’t. She didn’t at all. “It’s impossible to park,” she said, looking around the lot.

I told her not to worry. I kissed her and let her go. My connections were tight, but I made them.

I couldn’t call Leda from the train. Not having to listen to other people’s telephone conversations was the privilege of the quiet car, and anyway, it was Tuesday, and she would be seeing patients. I sent a text to tell her I’d survived. Proof of life.

I should have taken Jonathan up on his offer of train tickets when I was young because he was right, the train was better. When would I have the chance to see all those marinas, the water and the boats? The marshy grasslands and tidal lakes, the little shingled houses and the vast stretches of

scenic nothingness were unimaginable to those confined to a bus. How was it that a weekday trip to a museum with my husband had plunged me back into childhood at the age of fifty-three? I knew what Leda would say. She would say it was because childhood never leaves us. We seal the room up and cover it in sheetrock. We dry and sand and paint, but the pocket of history remains, and sooner or later someone always winds up tapping on the wall, commenting on the way it sounds strangely hollow in there, and then the whole thing comes tumbling down.

All the way back to New York, my mind went to Buddy. Isn't that strange? The one father I didn't have to deal with. Buddy had managed to be true to himself. My mother had always talked about Buddy in terms of his selfishness, which was not incorrect—he had largely abandoned our family to do what he wanted to do—but in a way his story was not so dissimilar to Eddie's. He was supposed to give up the ocean for my mother, and Eddie would give up men. Looking back, it was easy to see that neither one of those things was ever going to happen.

My father went to Boston College from Gloucester on a football scholarship—a win for everyone. The school got a big Catholic boy who was fast and good with his hands, and my father could still go home on the weekends to work on his family's boat. This was years before Doug Flutie's Hail Mary pass put BC on the map as a force in football, which in turn brought in the high tide of alumni donations. When my parents went there, it was still mostly a school for local kids who came to class on the T, then went home to sleep in their childhood beds. That's what my mother did. My father had a room in the dorm as part of his scholarship, and soon enough Abigail was in that room more often than not.

"We were really something back in the day," Buddy told me, years after the fact. "She'd be waiting in the stands after the games, and I'd go and pick her up. A big tall girl like that thinks no one's ever going to pick her up and swing her around again."

When Buddy lost his scholarship, it had nothing to do with football. He was good, and they were more than happy with him. Then he wrapped a line around his hand while pulling up a lobster trap, and the middle part of that line got caught in the boat's propellor. Five little bones were snapped, which meant surgery and the rest of the season in a cast. They might have forgiven that, Buddy was popular, but the strength never fully came back, and he couldn't catch the ball with one hand anymore, and half of the time

he couldn't catch it with two, but it made Abigail love him more, the sweet injured bird, and it made him love her more because she didn't seem to care that he was no longer at football practice or playing in football games or on a bus going to play in football games. She talked him into staying in school, where his scholarship was reconfigured into a loan, though not the kind of life-crushing loans students get today. He gave up his room on campus and moved home. Everything was manageable, and Buddy read his history books while his father drove the boat and his brothers made fun of him, though not much. Buddy Zabriskie wasn't a guy to be made fun of. When my mother turned up pregnant at graduation, she didn't want him working on the boat anymore. She kept saying he was going to drown and then what was she supposed to do with a baby by herself? So he got a job as an assistant-assistant coach at Boston College, and my mother went to work in a realty office. Buddy was still allowed to go out on the boat on the weekends because they needed the extra money, and who ever drowned on a Saturday?

What would life have been like had my parents stayed married to each other and my father kept working on the boat? What if they rented a place in Gloucester together and my mother still landed her publicity job at Houghton Mifflin? What about the life in which they were good to one another and therefore good to us, all of us good together? I would have liked to have seen that.

Next fall I would be more attentive to the sad girls who washed up in my classroom after their parents broke the news of their divorce. There were things I remembered now, including the particular longing that life could stay as it had been. How strange that such a pointless wish could resurface after all these years.

For a while I slept on the train, my head against the glass, the bridges and coastal towns rushing by. The train was still an hour out when my phone pinged.

Lunch? It was Eddie. I can come to Bronxville.

I laughed. No one from the city had ever come to Bronxville for lunch. I pushed myself upright in my seat and told him I was on my way into the city. Send me the address. I would meet him at his office. *Send.*

Then, for the briefest moment, I regretted my quick reply. Wasn't it too soon to see him again? I shouldn't present my life as a vast expanse of open time into which he was welcome to drop in at will.

But wait, no, he could! He could come anytime! I wasn't dating Eddie Triplett. We were not at the start of some disastrous affair. The ping from the phone had woken me from a dead sleep, that was all. I was confused. I wanted to see him. I wanted to see him more than I wanted to see anyone. I would gladly run all the way to Random House to throw my arms around his neck because somewhere deep inside myself, in a place inaccessible to me since I was nine, I had missed him every day of my life.

The guard checked the name on my driver's license against a list of welcomed visitors and found me there. He took my picture, gave me a badge, and sent me up. I was sorry to be wearing sneakers and jeans, sorry that I hadn't taken a shower this morning before leaving early, but not sorry enough to decline the invitation. Upstairs, the lobby was big and bright and full of walls of brand-new face-out books, each one lit like a star. I told the receptionist I was there to see Mr. Triplett. The words were hardly out of my mouth, and there he was, coming around the corner.

"Daphne Fuller for Mr. Triplett," he said, holding out his arms.

"You're sure you want to go to lunch with him?" the receptionist asked. It was her job to be the straight man. I imagined she waited all day for an opening.

"Look who's jealous," he said to her. "Miss Bilardello, I want to introduce you to my daughter, Daphne Fuller."

"Your *what*?" she said.

"My *daughter*. Of the long-lost variety."

I held out my hand. "Pleased to meet you."

Miss Bilardello shook my hand, then turned back to Eddie. "She doesn't look like you."

"Well, she did. She used to. You should have seen her when she was a baby. We could have been twins." Eddie hugged me. "Should you come and see my office?"

"Yes, please," I said, then waved goodbye to Miss Bilardello at the desk.

We went through the corridors of books, books beautifully displayed as well as books in boxes and in naked stacks on the floor. Books up and down the walls. Eddie stuck his head into every open door, introducing me. "This is Daphne," he sang. "I want you to meet Daphne."

All of them stood up and smiled and shook my hand. They loved him, that was clear. Everyone was glad to see Eddie and meet his friend.

His office was buried in books and I wanted to read all of them. I wanted to sit in a chair with every book he'd ever sat with, think about him thinking through all those sentences and pages and chapters. Here was his heart: in these books. He had loved them and so I would love them. I had the feeling that all the books in the hallway were inching their way in for their terminal stop. Eddie had a good window. I remembered going to his office at the old Houghton Mifflin on Park Street, the one that had once been a closet. "This is where they store the Eddies," he had said to me then.

"It used to be impossible to get anything done here," he said, picking up a stack of manuscripts from the second chair so I could sit. He sat down at his desk. "There were always meetings and new interns and somebody wanting to come in and shut the door so they could share the latest palace intrigue. I would go home at night and do my editing at the breakfast table, which meant I was either at work or working at home or sleeping. But now everyone prefers to work at home, except for me, because I'm the opposite: I'm tired of working at home. Now I can work in my office and no one bothers me. Some days I go to the cooler and fill up my little cup with water and bring it back to my desk and I don't pass another living soul. Excellent for my productivity but *sad*, of course. Young people learn by osmosis, and now they don't get to knock on my door and ask me what a semicolon is supposed to do. I guess someone else will tell them. I wasn't going to be around forever anyway."

"So you do think you'll retire?"

Eddie laughed. "I think I'll die, which I suppose is a form of retiring. That Ed, they'll say. He was very retiring."

"Stop it," I said, and I meant it. Stop.

"Are you hungry?"

"Starving. I left before breakfast."

"Left where?" he asked.

I had forgotten to tell him. "My mother's. I've just come back from Winchester."

"Oh, my," Eddie said. "I suppose that's why I've been thinking about you all day."

As we got up to leave, I saw the small framed picture of a horse.

"Whistler?" I said, though who else could it be?

He picked it up off his desk and handed it to me. "I was going to wrap it up," he said, "but here you are."

“What?”

“It’s your present. Leda got my mother’s vase and you get the horse.”

“I can’t take this.” The photograph was faded, four by six. All these years later you could still see what a beautiful horse she was.

“Put it in your bag and we’ll argue about it later.” He took the frame back from me and slipped it into the top of my overnight bag. “There. Done. We have to leave immediately. There’s so much to say.”

Café Luxembourg was a twenty-minute walk but we flew there. All the crossing lights lit in our favor, all the tourists, walking three abreast, arms linked, caught sight of something in a store window that intrigued them and stepped aside. Eddie and I, determined not to start any real conversation until we were properly seated, talked about books. “Tell me what you’re working on now,” I asked. “Tell me what you’re reading,” he replied, though neither of us listened to the answers. We existed in a state of mutual distraction.

The lunch rush had ended before we arrived, and Eddie knew the hostess, so we got an excellent table alone in the corner. “This is where the soprano sits after the opera,” he said to me. “They have to have a quiet table to avoid vocal strain. After a full night of Bellini, their voices are tender.”

I nodded. Those sensible sopranos.

“I’m going to have a glass of wine,” Eddie said. “You can tally them all up in your head if you want, but I’m nervous now.”

“I’m not keeping count,” I said, though maybe I was.

The waitress came to the table, and Eddie ordered two glasses of Chardonnay.

I shook my head. “Only one,” I said. I was too tired for drinking.

“Two,” Eddie said. “Her glass will keep my glass company.”

Then we each ordered an omelet, and the waitress nodded and left us to our lives.

“So,” he said, beginning the conversation for me.

How thrilled my mother would have been to join us for a late lunch, to sit at the soprano’s table with a glass of wine, telling Eddie the story herself. “She was perfectly lovely,” I said. “I was surprised. I would have thought she’d be angry, but she wasn’t at all. If anything, she took responsibility. She knew she’d asked you to do something impossible.”

“Giving up Skip? Well, she was probably right about Skip. Life would have been easier for all of us if I’d kept my word on that one.”

“Do you still—” I stopped there, remembering that I didn’t care what they did. My mother cared.

“Skip Hotalling does my taxes,” Eddie said flatly. “The former senior partner of Mergers and Acquisitions does my taxes. And in return I shave the two small corns he has on his left foot because he doesn’t trust the podiatrist not to go down to the bone. Sometimes we watch a movie—we share a strong preference for movies with tap dancing—or we work the crossword puzzle together. That’s pleasant. I bring him presidential biographies and World War II spy novels. Getting the advance reader’s copies still makes him feel special. Sometimes it’s nice to be with someone you’ve known for a long time, and other times, not so much.”

“And what does he tell Polly?”

“He tells Polly he’s going to see good old Ed Triplett. Best friend from Yale, best man at the wedding. She cuts a piece of last night’s cake and wraps it up, sticks it in his pocket for him to bring me.”

“Which means she doesn’t know or doesn’t care?”

At that moment the wine made a perfect entrance, and while I left my glass on the table, Eddie raised his drink to me all the same. “Polly Hotalling is not your mother.”

“Meaning what?”

“Meaning Polly was never one to ask a lot of questions. She has her children, her grandchildren. She’s got the house in Darien, the place in Sag Harbor. She and Skip take the grandchildren on trips now, one at a time, anyplace they want to go. One of them wanted to go to Mongolia last year, so that’s where they went.”

I looked at him steadily. “Meaning what?”

Eddie sighed and put down his glass. “Meaning I don’t know what she knows and neither does Skip and neither one of us asks. Sometimes I think yes, sometimes I think no. Mostly I’ve stopped thinking about it, because I have found that when you start to wonder about who you’ve hurt in this life, you can easily lose your mind. Did I damage Polly’s happiness? Did I damage your mother’s happiness? What about Skip’s? What about yours?”

“Not mine,” I said.

“Well, that’s a comfort.”

“And not my mother’s. She made her choice. She knew what she was getting into.”

“No, she didn’t.” Eddie finished the wine in his glass and then set the glass aside. “I promised her I’d stop seeing Skip, that I’d stop seeing men. For the record, I lied on both counts. I meant to keep my promises and I did not. I’d love to present myself as a sympathetic character, but I’m not entirely sure that I am. Continuing to meet up with your college boyfriend for the rest of your adult life is a ludicrously bad idea, but somehow we made it into our mid-seventies without stopping. That makes us sound like we were star-crossed, like Romeo and Tybalt, when really we were more like a habit. Every point at which we should have drifted, we clung. First the extension granted by Skip moving to Cambridge, then our marriages, then there was AIDS. In the eighties, Skip was adamant that we only sleep with one another, though I guess for him that meant sleep with me and with Polly. I didn’t exactly do a yeoman’s job keeping that promise either. There were always too many other yeomen around.”

“Were you in love with any of them?”

Eddie looked at me. “By which you mean, did I give my heart to anyone other than Skip Hotalling?”

“Let me know when I cross the line.”

“There are no lines,” he said. “You and I reside on the same side of the line.”

“We do,” I said.

“Love,” he said. “Yes. Skip aside, I was in love twice, once for a long time and once for a short time. Wait, I take that back. I’m going to say three times. One long, two short. And honestly, we could count your mother. It was an entirely different sort of love, but still, I loved her. But through all of that, Skip persevered. That’s just the way it was, the way we were.”

I nodded.

“Were you in love with anyone in college?”

The abrupt change of direction caught me by surprise. “Fred Bowen.”

“Oh, I wish I’d known you then. Tell me about Fred Bowen.”

I didn’t even think he asked to spare himself more questions about the intricacies of his own past. He wanted to know, and so I told him. “Fred majored in biology, played outfield, and once wrote me a sestina.”

“And you loved him?”

I covered my heart with my hand to commemorate the place where Fred Bowen had once resided. “With my whole heart.”

“You went around together? People knew about the two of you?”

He had bought a bottle of red nail polish and written “Fred loves Daphne” in clear block letters on the white enamel underside of the sink in the men’s locker room. He brought me there in the dead of night for my birthday, had me lie down on the floor. “Close your eyes,” Fred said, working us under the sink. “Now open them.”

“Everyone knew,” I said.

Eddie nodded. “Good,” he said. “Good for you. But now imagine that no one knew, and everything that happened between you and Fred was a secret with potentially damaging consequences, and over time you got very good at keeping everything to yourself.”

“I get the point.”

Eddie reached over and took my glass of wine. “I’m not entirely sure that I get the point. It was a long time ago,” he said. “That’s what I want to tell you. It all happened in another lifetime, to different people. We should never speak of it again. So, what happened with Fred?”

Fred, so sunny and tall, always walking around with a baseball glove in his hand. “He left me for a girl named Breelyn. I became unreasonably fixated on her name, *Bree*-lyn. I hated that.”

“And did Fred and Breelyn have a long and happy life together after they ran off and left you?”

I shook my head, eating my omelet with satisfaction. Breelyn had a semester abroad in Spain. The relationship, from what I was told, did not survive the distance. “They did not.”

“Everyone shuffled through relationships with several other people, perhaps many other people?”

“To the best of my knowledge,” I said. “But my knowledge only extends to the end of college. I never got into this business of looking people up. It seems like such a depressing habit.”

“I’m sure it is,” he said. “It’s a luxury not to know what happened to the people you were once in love with. Unfortunately, it was not a luxury I was afforded. Which leads me to an unpleasant question.”

“Shoot.”

“The Hotallings have invited us to brunch on Saturday, in Darien.”

“Both of us?”

Eddie nodded. “Polly said if I had a daughter, then I needed to bring her to the house.”

It was the first time I saw a possible downside to this door that had opened, because while I was happy to dig around in the past with Eddie or Leda or my mother, I had no interest in digging around with the Hotallings. None at all. “Is there a tactful way around this?”

“For you, of course. For me, alas, no.”

“Let me think about it,” I said, even though I had already thought about it. The question wasn’t whether or not I might enjoy it, but if I’d be able to stand it in the name of familial duty. “I’ll let you know.”

“May I ask you another question then, something that’s absolutely none of my business?”

“May I have a banner made that says ‘Absolutely None of My Business’?” I asked. “We could sit beneath it all day, catching up.”

“Why didn’t you have children?”

That was a question my father had asked me before he died, and my mother had asked me until I told her to stop. Random people asked until I reached the age when no one bothered anymore. It had been a while since another person had shown interest in my reproductive choices, but Eddie had been gone a long time. “Jonathan has two daughters,” I said. “His first wife died. Being a stepmother was plenty.”

Eddie had another sip of my wine, then tipped the glass in my direction. “And the other answer?”

I took the glass from his hand. The wine was warm but still good, still capable of doing the job. “I didn’t have a happy childhood. There was one part that I liked very much—” I handed back the glass. “The rest of it, not so much.”

“I see,” he said.

“I didn’t want to do that to someone else.”

“Do what?”

“Childhood,” I said.

In 1992, while I was having sex with Fred Bowen underneath the sink of the men’s locker room at Amherst, Candy Fuller was in treatment for metastatic melanoma. Of course I never met Candy, though I have lived with her memory, her photographs, her china, her sofa, her husband, her paintings of rabbits. Candy Fuller collected paintings of rabbits, and while I know that sounds terrible, it wasn’t. In her short life she curated a truly remarkable group of rabbit paintings, most all of them small, rabbit-sized.

She had a genius eye. Jonathan said that he was never allowed to give them to her. With one exception, all the paintings she had she'd found herself. A rabbit hung in nearly every room of our house in Bronxville—rabbits in a meadow, in a hutch, in several cases a single rabbit looking straight at the viewer. There was one tiny pencil sketch done by Beatrix Potter herself. While people noticed them individually, complimenting one painting or another, no one had ever caught onto the theme because there weren't too many of them. I believed, as Candy must have, that on some subliminal level the rabbits held the house together. We'd asked the girls a hundred times if they wanted the paintings, and they always said later, eventually, not now, which was fine with me. I was attached to them.

Candy had been dead five years when I met her husband in the hospital where my father was dying. The two Fuller daughters, Sydney and Rachel, were both in college then. I didn't meet the girls for some time. Jonathan said he didn't want me to meet them until we knew if we were serious, and I agreed with that. No daughter ever born needed to meet her father's casual girlfriend.

Sydney had been sixteen when her mother died, her sister, Rachel, fourteen. I had a particular sympathy for those ages, though children, siblings, and all manner of loss inflicted on children were matters close to my heart. The death of the mother upended the daughters' lives, and what they had left was each other and a father who loved them. The fact that they were older when I came along, in college, didn't matter. I didn't want them to feel threatened.

I was a good stepmother before I'd even met them, respecting these young women I didn't know by not disrupting their lives. When Jonathan moved to New York, I would come to see him (via bus) on the weekends, unless it turned out to be a weekend when one of the girls decided to come home. Home! Jonathan had bought a house in Bronxville instead of an apartment in the city so that they would both have their own bedrooms, so their boxes of childhood memories could be safely stored in the attic, so there would be plenty of closet space for old prom dresses and winter coats, so there would be a yard the way there had always been a yard at home. I lined the kitchen cabinets of the new house, stacked up their mother's plates. I helped their father hang the rabbit paintings before taking the bus back to Boston. My invisibility was the proof of my deference as I lurked

past the edge of their peripheral vision. I was so good that they didn't see me at all.

It had always been my plan to do right by Jonathan's girls, to be a helpful and supportive person in the family who did not try to take the place of their mother and did not take their father away, but I didn't foresee the doom in my enterprise. First and first and first, I was too young. When finally the four of us sat down at a restaurant, I appeared to have been seated on the wrong side of the table. I should have been on the daughter side. They would not forgive me my age. Nor were they pleased to find out we'd already been seeing each other for a year. "Not seriously," Jonathan said, trying to roll back his announcement. I looked at him, the three of us did. "I mean, we're serious now," he said. Damned if he did or if he did not.

We were not a catastrophe, Sydney and Rachel and I. We were all decent people, smart people. They loved their father and wanted his happiness. They only wished that happiness had been found with someone his own age, and that maybe it could have come a little later, when they felt more securely launched. Sydney was starting medical school in the fall. Rachel was working on her undergraduate degree in environmental science. Rachel had specific ideas about wind turbines. These were STEM girls, girls of the future. I was never going to win them over with talk of Thomas Hardy.

Many times I wanted to tell them they should love me for not having children of my own. They should love me for not wanting to have children with their father. I was still young in those days—I could have pushed for it, thus throwing a permanent wrench into the family happiness. But I didn't ask for a closet or a desk, much less a child. When finally I came to Bronxville, I brought less than a graduate student moving into a furnished apartment: no furniture, no rugs, no paintings to compete with the rabbits. I had my clothes, some bedding, a cast-iron Dutch oven that had been my father's—Buddy made many a glorious cioppino back in the day. When Rachel eventually found that heavy pot on the back shelf of the pantry, she sat down on the floor and quietly wept over the disruption to her memories, even though this was not the house she'd grown up in.

"I'm sorry," she said, covering her face with her hands. "I know it's stupid, but everything makes me sad."

You make me sad, was what she was saying. You who aren't supposed to be here.

"The pot was my father's." I stood beside her in the pantry.

“Doesn’t he want it back?” she asked. Couldn’t it still be made to go away?

My stepdaughters did not know my father was dead. They didn’t know my parents had divorced, making me, like everyone else on the planet, a person with my own sad past. I’d been so careful to not impose myself on them, and as a result I had told them nothing at all.

And so Rachel and I began a conversation in the kitchen pantry, well over a year after we first met. Talking to Sydney was easier the next time she was home because Rachel had already filled her in.

Our best times came later, when both girls were home and Leda came up on the train, leaving Steve in charge of making dinner for their three small children and getting everyone to bed. On those nights I sent Jonathan away, and the two sets of sisters made popcorn and drank beers and watched a movie. Rachel put nutritional yeast on the popcorn, which Sydney regarded as old news and Leda and I embraced as a revelation. That was when the tide began to turn. I believed we had Leda to thank for that. Even when she didn’t appear to be using her therapeutic toolbox to move us forward, I knew she was.

Might I have liked a child of my own? It would be so easy to blame my stepdaughters now, to say yes, I would have been a mother if not for them, but it wasn’t true. If anything, the lesson of Candy Fuller confirmed what I already knew: there was no protecting anyone, no matter how much you loved them.

As for love, I loved their father, and as the years passed and the girls found partners of their own, this came to count for more. They took in our quiet and accepting brand of happiness and possibly admired it. Sydney and Rachel were never like my own daughters, but they were my husband’s daughters. That alone would have been reason enough to love them.

That night I called Eddie after dinner to tell him I’d go to the Hotallings’ for brunch on Saturday. He called me heroic. Maybe I was heroic, but I had done these things for my stepdaughters over the years, gone to my share of inconvenient brunches with difficult in-laws. I did it because they were my family, and Eddie was my family. Besides, I had found the photograph of Whistler in my bag. I put it on the dresser.

Jonathan continued to call me from Wisconsin, sometimes first thing in the morning and always at night, lying in the twin bed of his youth after dark. His sister went back to her own house every day after their work was

finished, to her own husband and dog five miles away, and every day she renewed her invitation to bring him home with her, but he always declined. “Once this is over, I’ll never be in this house again,” he told me over the phone. “I won’t walk through the door, much less sleep here.”

“That’s the way it works when you sell a house,” I said.

“Believe me, I want to sell this place. I don’t know, maybe I’m trying to absorb the past while it’s still available to me.”

Jonathan’s father, an only child, had inherited the house in Fond du Lac from his bachelor uncle when he was twenty-two. When he married Jonathan’s mother, he brought her home and there they stayed, first the two of them, then with Jonathan and then Bea. Jonathan went to college and didn’t come back, and Bea went to college and came back to marry her high school boyfriend. Thirty years later, their father died—emphysema—and their mother stayed on by herself. The exterior walls of the house were a double thickness of brick—who does that now? There were deep-set windows, a wide porch. “I’m sorry one of Bea’s kids doesn’t want it,” he said, but they didn’t. Bea had talked to all three of them. No, no, and no. Rachel and Sydney just laughed.

It turned out one of the lamps in the living room was valuable. Sydney had found a dealer in Los Angeles who, based on the pictures she’d sent, would pay \$8,000. For a lamp. “I’ve been walking past that thing my entire life,” Jonathan said. “I’m pretty sure it came with the house.” Though of course there was no one left who would know.

“The past is soul-crushing,” he said lightly.

“Tell me about it,” I said.

“Maybe we should sell the house,” he said.

“I thought that was the plan,” I said, slightly alarmed.

“*Our* house,” he corrected. “Maybe we should get rid of everything and move into the city, get a loft in Tribeca, a big open room with triple-height ceilings and a wall of windows.”

What about the rabbits? “You’re having real estate hallucinations,” I said. I liked our house. I liked getting on the train after work. I liked getting off the train and walking up the hill beneath a canopy of trees and sitting in the backyard at dusk, listening to the insects sawing away. I had lived in that house longer than I’d ever lived anywhere else. I liked that.

Jonathan yawned. “Something to think about,” he said. “I’m not making any plans.”

“Good. Don’t make plans. I love you. Go to sleep. You’ve had a long day.”

And Jonathan said that he would, that I was right, that he loved me, too.

Little from the rest of the week was worth reporting. I talked to my husband, my sister. I cleaned out the freezer. My mother called me more than usual because she kept remembering things she wanted to say regarding Eddie, chief among them that she still had the red leather dictionary his parents bought him as a high school graduation present, “To our son Edward Triplett, with love from Mom and Dad, May 1957” written on the upper right-hand corner of the first blank page. “It’s *awful* that I have it,” my mother said. “I felt so guilty that I put it away, and then I forgot about it completely. I should have given it to you when you were here. Can I send it to you? Would you give it to him?”

“I can give you his address,” I said. “It might be nice if you sent it yourself.”

“I couldn’t do that. He wouldn’t want to hear from me.”

I told her I would ask him, and that seemed to placate her.

“His parents were sweet people,” she said. “I wonder how long ago they died.”

“You knew Eddie’s parents?”

“Of course I knew his parents. I was married to their son. They came to see us a couple of times. They came to our wedding.”

But as much as I tried, I could not find them in my memory. It felt like such a failure on my part. “Where were they from?”

“Altoona,” my mother said. Of course they were from the same place Eddie was from.

We said goodbye, but an hour later she called me back. “You don’t think it was *only* Skip, do you?” she asked.

“What are you talking about?” I was cutting up some watermelon to eat for dinner in the backyard. My hands were sticky.

“You know what I’m talking about,” she said, tired of having to spell everything out for me. “You don’t think Skip Hotalling was his only boyfriend? I mean, he must have seen other people over the years. Otherwise it would be sad.”

“I’ll ask him,” I said, even though I already knew the answer, even though I had no intention of telling her the answer. “Once he has the

dictionary.”

When Jonathan called me on Friday morning, there was so much noise in the background I could hardly hear him. “You sound like you’re in a bus terminal,” I said.

“Airport terminal,” he said. “I’m coming home.”

“Today?”

“Four hours, give or take,” he said. “I wanted to surprise you, but Bea said people don’t like surprises. She said you might need time to get your lovers out of the house.”

“Bea *said* that?”

A gate announcement blared through, a final boarding call to Minneapolis. I had to ask him to repeat himself. “No, she didn’t. That was me being funny.”

“Ha, ha,” I said.

“I’ve missed you,” he said.

The sincerity in his voice landed with a weight, and suddenly I missed him, too. I missed him very much. I wrote down the flight number and arrival time. I told him I would be there.

“Don’t drive to the airport,” he said, but I could tell he was happy.

When we got home, Jonathan and I had sandwiches and watermelon for dinner. He emptied his suitcase straight into the washer and took a shower, and after that we got into bed while it was still light outside. This was the definition of a long marriage: the same things happened but in a different order.

“So does this mean you’re done with Fond du Lac?” I asked, my head on his chest. “Can Bea finish up the rest of it?”

He cupped the back of my head with his hand. “Oh, no. Nothing like that. But a couple of days ago, we were doing something, I don’t even know what it was, maybe going through Dad’s tools, and we both decided we needed to stop for a while. The house isn’t going anywhere, the canning jars aren’t going anywhere, but we could go somewhere.”

“That makes sense.”

“The further along we get, the more it feels like some sort of immersive therapy project. I wonder what Leda would think about that—put two siblings in their childhood home and let them go through every single object in the house, see what comes up.”

“So what came up?”

“Memory, loss, love, anger, all the usual suspects. Sometimes I’d have to go in the other room and stand there with my eyes closed for a minute because I couldn’t look at anything else. Every teacup comes with a short documentary film: I remember Mom’s friend Marie had taken a china-painting class, and she’d painted this cup and saucer for our mother, peonies or roses, we couldn’t tell which it was, but it was nice, she did a good job. The thing was, though, every time Marie came over, our mother would have to drink her coffee out of this particular cup or Marie would get her feelings hurt. And then I have to think it all through: Marie is dead. I have no idea what became of her children. I’m going to wrap up this cup and saucer and put it in the box for Goodwill, but is anyone going to want it? It’s pretty, you know. Then I’m hoping that someone will want it because I don’t want to bring it home with me.”

“About a hundred thousand times.”

“About that. Maybe more. That’s why I wouldn’t go home with Bea at night. We’d be vibrating by the end of the day. Wait.” He got out of bed, my dear naked husband, and went into his closet. He came back with his hand in a fist. “I brought you something. Hold out your hand.”

I held out my hand, and he covered my hand with his hand, then took it away.

There sat a metal horse. As small as it was, it had some weight. It had been painted a chestnut color, with a saddle and bridle a darker brown. No rider. The horse must once have been part of a regiment of toy soldiers.

“I painted them when I was a kid,” he said. “Hundreds of them, soldiers, I mean. I didn’t paint that many horses. I thought that one was especially good. I don’t know why it made me think of you.”

I stood the horse upright on my palm and felt my throat tighten. “I love it,” I said.

He was so pleased. “Do you? There were so many things I could have brought you.”

I shook my head. “You picked perfectly. This is the only thing I would have wanted.”

When we lay back into the pillows, Jonathan told me about the set of lead soldiers and how he had painted them after school and on weekends when he should have been doing his homework. Rachel agreed to take the set for her son, though no twelve-year-old boy with his own iPhone wanted a

regiment of British soldiers. Rachel was taking them because she was kind and I loved her for it.

“When do you think you’ll go back?”

“Soon enough. There is a sense of the ending now, and we both want to get things finished.” He stretched and then resettled himself. “It’s awfully nice to be home, though.”

“I think we’re living parallel lives,” I said, and from there I told him everything, about talking to Eddie, and about Henry telling me Eddie was gay, going to the Century Club and then the wedding, about talking to my mother, and talking to Leda about our mother and Eddie. “I mean, it’s fascinating and I also want it to stop. I’m too old to be nine again.”

That was when I remembered that tomorrow was Saturday, and on Saturday I had agreed to go to brunch at the Hotallings’.

“Who are the Hotallings?” Jonathan asked.

We were comfortable in bed, and so I explained who the Hotallings were as well. Skip and Polly were easier to unpack than one might imagine.

“And there’s a brunch in Darien?”

“At their house.”

“Are you picking Eddie up?”

I shook my head. I would drive and he would take the train. He would get there before me. We had worked it all out. Jonathan told me he was going to come. “Call Eddie and tell him to call the Hotallings. They’ll understand. The husband just got back from a lengthy trip. He refuses to be separated from you.”

“You don’t want to come to the Hotallings’ for brunch,” I said. “Trust me on this.”

“I want to be with you,” he said. “I came back from Wisconsin to be with you.”

Like all long-married couples, Jonathan and I were capable of sitting across from one another at the breakfast table without a single sentence to exchange, which made this closeness a luxury—bed, horse, brunch. That he offered to go with me to Connecticut was an act of generosity I could hardly fathom.

I lived in a school full of girls, most of them smart from wealthy families, a few of them very smart from working-class families or occasionally poor families. Girls who loved literature above all else—ask me any question about these girls, and I would be able to answer. I imagined Eddie’s life to

be limited in similar ways, buffeted as he was by readers on every side. We were especially qualified to talk to people coming out of libraries, bookstores, or certain classrooms. The rest of humanity? Less so.

But Jonathan could talk to anyone, illness and death being the guaranteed common denominator. He wasn't worried about the Hotallings at all. I texted Eddie to tell him Jonathan was coming, and Eddie promised to pass the happy news along to our hosts.

The next day we took the Hutch north, past the exits for Rye and Port Chester and Scarsdale, the parkway living up to its name as a park to be driven through, the trees that lined either side of the road a rich and heavy green. Jonathan seemed to be nothing but happy driving to Connecticut on his first full day at home, giving my knee an occasional affectionate pat. Moreover, there was nothing in the story of Eddie Triplett and Skip and Polly Hotalling that surprised him. "Everyone goes their own way," he said when I laid it all out.

"I once fired a doctor who lived in Darien," he said as we passed the state line into Connecticut and the beautiful Hutch became the much more beautiful Merritt and the tax rates lowered considerably. "It must have been my first month or two on the job. I know it was before you got here. The guy who had the job before me left the mess behind. Didn't want to deal with it. Not that I could blame him. I didn't want to deal with it either."

"What was he doing?" I asked, grateful not to be driving. Grateful for pretty much everything.

"Back surgery. There is a fortune to be made in back surgery."

"He was doing back surgery on people who didn't need back surgery?"

"He was doing back surgery on people who should have had their tonsils out. Anyway, the guy was impossible to pin down. He was always busy doing back surgery. For whatever reason, I ended up going out to his house to talk to him. I'd never been to Darien before. Maybe that was why he wanted to get me out there, so he could show me what his overhead looked like."

"So what happened?"

"I fired him," Jonathan said. "Then I dealt with the lawsuits. He sued the hospital, the patients sued the hospital. He tried to sue me personally. As we say in the business, it was a dumpster fire. That's what I think of whenever I think of Darien."

"What was his house like?"

Jonathan thought for a minute. “Like stacks of money shaped into a building.”

I laughed, and when, fifteen minutes later, we arrived at the Hotallings’ address on Pear Tree Point Road, I asked him if the surgeon’s house had been anything like this. Jonathan shook his head. “Oh, no. This is tasteful,” he said. “This is modest.”

We continued to sit in the car, contemplating. “I guess if all their children came home at the same time and brought all their children and no one was willing to double up in a room—”

Then the heavy wooden door of a type most often found on cathedrals swung open and Eddie came out. “Fullers!” he shouted.

It was the second time they had met, but there went Jonathan, arms open, as I was getting out of the car.

“Am I ruining your entire weekend?” Eddie asked.

“Brunch in Connecticut?” Jonathan said. “Are you crazy?”

“Polly wants very much to make a good impression,” Eddie said to me. “If I had wanted to make a good impression, I would have let you stay home.” In another minute she was there behind him, standing in the open door.

“Come in, come in,” she said with radiant good cheer. “You’re so nice to drive out here on a Saturday.”

Then Skip came out and shook our hands, showing us his formidable teeth. His insistence that he was glad we were there was so convincing that I wondered if he remembered keeping his back to me for the entirety of the evening at the Century Club. All three men had on khaki pants and navy sports coats, as if there had been a memo.

“I haven’t met your husband,” Skip said, looking straight at Jonathan, shaking his hand. Topflight polite.

“Your firm handled our merger,” Jonathan said, playing his ace while we were still in the driveway.

“You’re a lawyer?”

Jonathan said the name of his hospital. “We worked with your team during the RFP.”

That would be Request For Proposals.

Skip willed himself to his full and former height. “Did you stay?” he asked.

Jonathan shook his head. “Took the buyout.”

Jonathan had taken the buyout. Skip had taken the buyout. In the span of two minutes, Jonathan had established the conversational triangle: I know your law firm, you know my hospital, we are both retired. We all went in the house together, but Skip and Jonathan immediately peeled away, heading to the sunroom at the back of the house. Skip said he wanted Jonathan to see the water, to see the restored Chris-Craft that bobbed at the end of the dock.

“Well, I need to see about the drinks,” Polly said, and then she was gone as well.

Eddie looked around. Only the two of us remained. “That was a neat trick,” he said.

“Give me a minute,” I said, walking through the entry hall as if through a strange dream.

“Pace yourself,” Eddie said. “It’s a lot to take in.”

Every item in the house appeared to have been chosen for texture. The living room walls were covered in what might have been raw silk, lightly padded from beneath. The extravagantly floral carpets, the sofas, the floral pillows arranged on the sofas, the arrangements of flowers on side tables and coffee tables both resplendent and familiar because, of course, Polly loved flowers. She had ordered the arrangements for the anniversary party —peonies, ranunculus, anemones, dahlias—and here they were again, both different and the same. They stood in contrast to the heavy swagger of the drapes restrained by multicolored silk ropes, the palest flash of lining showing at the edge like a slip beneath a dress. Even the glass in the windowpanes seemed different from other glass in other windowpanes, so freshly washed as to appear watery. The art hung from satin cords attached to the crown molding. I had the strangest desire to run my fingers over all of it.

Polly reappeared. “Mimosas or Bloody Marys?” She looked at Eddie. “I know what you want.”

“Jonathan and I will have to pass,” I said. “He’s driving, and I’ve never been able to drink during the day.”

“So you’ll just have one,” she said. “One apiece. Which do you want?”

I shook my head. “Not unless you want to put me in the guest room.”

Polly clapped her hands. “Bloody Marys then. That’s what Eddie and Skip always have, and I don’t care. We’ll all have Bloody Marys. That will be fun.”

When she turned and left for the kitchen, I widened my eyes in Eddie's direction and he held up one finger. "I'll cover for you," he whispered.

I took his sleeve, and together we crossed the flowered field of carpet to the far corner of the living room. "How often do you do this?"

"Come out here?"

I nodded.

"Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter. Engagements and weddings, of course. We do birthdays in the city, the café at Le Bernardin, a play. When you put it all together, it averages out to something every fifteen minutes."

"But you don't usually do brunch."

"No, no," Eddie said. "Brunch is for you."

"Eddie!" Polly called from somewhere offstage. "Come help me, please."

Eddie looked back at me. "Come help me, please," he said.

I followed him down the hall.

"Oh, Eddie," Polly said, standing in the kitchen and looking only at me. "Now she'll see the mess."

"Daphne's seen mess," he said.

But there was no mess, only exuberant wallpaper and glass cupboards, wide marble countertops displaying platters of grilled chicken and shrimp, a sliced tenderloin, three different kinds of salad in bowls that must have been shipped over from Capri. "Who's coming to lunch?"

"You're coming!" Polly said. "This is a big day. Daphne Zabriskie returned to the fold. We'll put out a spread for that."

But that made it sound like I had left, marched off in a nine-year-old huff, only to return at fifty-three. Why hadn't I asked if I could bring Leda to brunch? Surely they wanted to see both of the Zabriskie girls. And Leda could have brought Steve and Henry since I'd brought Jonathan. Fair is fair, and there was plenty of food. Instead I asked what I could carry.

"Eddie can take his drink," she said, handing him a glass, a bright stalk of celery playing the role of swizzle stick, then she handed me two glasses and picked up two more herself. "It's one for each of us and one for each of the husbands."

Polly walked in front of us, a hostess in miniature, the proportions of her clothes precisely correct, ballet flats, narrow white pants, a boxy top in a dark pink, the color of certain carnations. Framed photographs of her children and grandchildren lined the hall, beautiful people holding skis,

holding tennis racquets, holding the bridles of horses. I imagined they had all been invited to brunch. I imagined they declined.

“The thing about Augusta that no one factors is the heat,” Skip was saying when we came into the glass-fronted room with the staggering view of the bay. “There was a time I could take it, but not now. Now I’d just as soon play Blind Brook. Excellent course and I can finish off the day in my own shower.”

Jonathan looked up at me. If he was in hell, his face did not betray him. “We’ve found the overlap,” he said, taking the drink from my hand.

“Watch out for that,” I said, but it didn’t matter. I could drive us home.

“Don’t be a killjoy,” Polly said, then raised her glass to me. “To lost lambs.”

“*Baa, baa, baa,*” Skip and Eddie sang together, and everyone laughed.

I took it back: the person I wished for in this moment wasn’t Leda, it was my mother. My mother would down her Bloody Mary, then drag me to the kitchen to tell me she was appalled—*appalled!*—and not only by the wallpaper and the square footage but by Polly’s obliviousness and Skip’s soul-dead acceptance, Eddie’s agreeableness. It’s clearly some form of Stockholm syndrome, my mother would contend. He’s so used to them that he can’t even see it anymore. Then she would go back out to the sunporch and sit next to Eddie, holding his hand beneath the tablecloth. My mother was a great one for giving voice to rage, something I would not get from Jonathan on the drive home.

The spread of hors d’oeuvres had been laid out on a low table in advance of our arrival—olives and cheese and onion dip and some sort of bright green dip, seeded breadsticks, homemade potato chips, some carrots and celery sticks that no one wanted.

Jonathan was asking Skip how he was managing his retirement.

“Why don’t you ask me?” Polly said. “Ask me how I’m managing Skip’s retirement.”

“I couldn’t have stayed another minute,” Skip said, crossing one long leg over the other, ankle to knee. “The golden age is already twenty or thirty years behind us. Now the summer interns come to their interviews wanting to know what company policies are in place to support their work-life balance. *Interns!* Two years in they start asking questions about paternity leave and lactation suites. These are lawyers.” He shook his head. “It’s a different species.”

“Work-life balance,” Polly said, “means that he worked all those years and now he’s come home. That was work and this is life.”

Skip didn’t seem to hear her. “Not to get all nostalgic about hard work, but gone are the days of putting your head down on the desk for an hour if you happened to find yourself at the office come two a.m. on a Saturday night. That’s how it was done. Plenty of people got upset about the money we made, but I’m here to tell you, we worked for it. Same as the doctors.” He gestured to Jonathan, who was not a doctor. “Am I right? Did you ever hear a surgeon in the eighties talk about his work-life balance? It didn’t exist, and the practice of medicine was better for it. You’re here to save a human life, goddamn it. That’s what men signed on for. What about you? Getting out of hospital administration must have felt like running out of a burning building. Health care’s gone straight to hell.”

Jonathan gave his most affable shrug. “Oh, I don’t know. We were still doing good work.”

“Maybe so, but you’ve got the insurance companies, and then the uninsured on top of that. Together they’ll beat the incentive out of any living thing. You must have been glad to leave it behind.”

Was he glad? I looked at my husband. Are you glad?

Jonathan worked his celery stick around the inside of his half-empty glass. “I liked the work. But no one gets to do the job forever.”

Skip pointed at Eddie. “Except this one.”

Eddie had just put a potato chip with onion dip in his mouth, and so we waited while he chewed, then dabbed his lips with a napkin. “I’ll have you know I was offered a buyout, and I declined to take it. As our host has said on more than one occasion, my vocation doesn’t matter, so it stands to reason that it also doesn’t matter if I decide to keep doing it.”

“Have you been to his apartment?” Skip asked me. “He lives like a graduate student. A whole lifetime of work for a one-bedroom.”

“There’s only one of me in there,” Eddie said.

“I gave him the money for the down payment. Had I known he was never going to leave, I would have found him a better place.”

“*I paaaid you baaackk*,” Eddie sang.

“Aren’t you sick of it by now?” Polly asked. She had eaten nothing, and her Bloody Mary, like my own, sweated on the glass table, untouched.

Eddie remained sanguine. “There are plenty of things I’m sick of that I continue to do,” he said cheerfully. “But I happen to like editing books.

Anyway, I need the structure. Structure gives life meaning.”

Polly shook her head. “What about you?” she asked me. “You’re still working, aren’t you?”

I had no idea if Polly had ever had a job outside the home, but taking care of Skip and their children had no doubt been plenty. I nodded.

“Look at her,” Skip said, pointing his breadstick in my direction. “Of course she’s working. She’s a child. She should be working.”

I spent my days working with the fourteen-to-eighteen-year-old set, girls who thought of me as time’s own crone, so Skip’s perspective pleased me. Age was a matter of comparison, and in this room I was young. “No one’s offering buyouts for private school teachers. And anyway, I love teaching literature.”

“Books, books, books.” Skip laughed. “The family obsession. Like father, like daughter.”

Every person in the room knew that Eddie was not my father, and we knew his calling me his daughter was nothing more than kindness, but Polly couldn’t let it stand. “How *is* your father?” she asked.

I told her my father was dead.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said, and said it genuinely. If she was trying to change the subject, she hadn’t meant to change it in that direction.

“It was a long time ago.”

“That’s how Daphne and I met,” Jonathan said, jumping in. “Her father was a patient at my hospital outside of Boston.”

Eddie took a sip of his drink. “What a nice man he was.”

A slight rearrangement of understanding took place among the people around the table. I felt the shift. “You knew Buddy Zabriskie?” Jonathan asked.

“I was married to his wife,” Eddie said. “I was the stepfather of his children.”

Jonathan nodded. “I’d just never thought about it.”

“Abigail had many feelings where Buddy was concerned, many large feelings, so when there were things that needed to be dealt with, they tended to go through me. Buddy and I got along fine. In fact, he came to see me a couple of times when I was in the hospital after Daphne and I were in our famous car accident. He would go to see Leda and then he would come upstairs to check on me.” Eddie looked at me then. “Your father was such a decent man.”

“I didn’t know her first husband came to see you,” Polly said. I wondered why it bothered me so much to hear Polly refer to my mother only as *her*.

“He did. He’d bring me a copy of the *Globe*, a couple of magazines. I remember he brought me a Peter Matthiessen book called *Men’s Lives*, about fishing off the coast of Long Island. I’m sure it had to do with the time in which I read it, but the book made a huge impression on me. All about impermanence.”

I could see my own hardback copy of that book on the living room shelf at home. I knew exactly where it was. “He gave it to me when I graduated from high school,” I said to Eddie. “He loved that book.” Buddy was full of surprises.

“He gave you a book about fishing for your high school graduation?” Polly asked, no doubt thinking of the gifts she’d assembled for her own children when they graduated from Choate.

“I was so close to calling him when it came time for me to leave the hospital,” Eddie said, though now he was speaking to himself.

“You were going to call Buddy?” I asked.

Eddie nodded. “I was thinking of who I could go to. I didn’t want to go back to Altoona, to my family. I didn’t think I should ask anyone from Houghton since I’d be leaving the job.”

“You called us,” Polly said. “Of course you came to us.”

“I wanted to be near the girls,” Eddie said. “I didn’t know that I wouldn’t be able to see you anymore. I thought if I went to Buddy’s—”

“He would have said yes,” I said, speaking for my father, a man who might have dropped the ball on many fronts but spent his life in the service of generosity and hospitality, no questions asked.

“I know that,” Eddie said. “It’s quite an exercise, thinking about who would take you in when your ankle’s been crushed.”

“How is your ankle?” Jonathan asked, as if it had recently mended. We were all tumbling into the past.

Eddie raised his left leg and made a couple circles with his foot. “Never bothers me at all. Time is the great healer.”

“We took you in,” Polly repeated, adamant that her service be acknowledged.

Eddie leaned across the open space between their chairs, picked up her hand and kissed it. “And I am forever grateful.”

We ate our lunch in the sunroom, moving to a table that was already set. Eddie and I helped Polly bring out the food that we no longer wanted while Jonathan held down the fort with Skip. The conversation moved to real estate prices and the long arc of human migration between Manhattan and the suburbs of Connecticut: first the exodus from the city, then the exodus from the suburbs back to the city, then back out to Connecticut at the start of the pandemic, and finally to Ibiza and Bergen and wherever else people wanted to live because they could get their work done anywhere.

“People should be *made* to come to the office,” Skip said, stabbing his fork against his plate for emphasis. “There’s a culture to office life, and that culture holds the company together. If you don’t show up, you aren’t part of the culture.”

We understood the futility of correcting him and so we didn’t, and anyway, it made him happy to have the last word.

Later there were tender strawberries that had reached their full potential earlier that same day, and a cold lemon pie to accompany them. Then Skip announced they were going out on the boat. He dropped his crumpled napkin on the table. “Come on, men.”

“Daphne’s going to help me clean up,” Polly said, handing me Jonathan’s dessert plate.

I was happy to clean up, I would even say I was born to clean up, but I couldn’t remember my services ever having been commandeered by someone who was not my mother. I didn’t want to be alone with Polly. “I’d love to see the boat,” I said.

“You go,” Jonathan said, taking his plate back from my hand. “Polly and I will knock this out in a minute.”

“No, no,” Polly said. “Skip wants to show off his boat. Humor him.”

“I’ve seen the boat,” Eddie said. “I think I’ve seen the boat a thousand times. I can clean up by myself and then everyone can go.”

I realized then my glass was empty. So deft! I’d never seen it happen.

Skip gave a single clap. “Here’s the edict, sailors: you’re coming and you’re coming.” He pointed to Eddie and then my husband. “So says the captain. Let’s go.”

But in this complex entanglement, Jonathan remained his own man. He put his arm around my waist and pulled me to him. “I am not leaving my wife, sir. I have been in Wisconsin for more than a week. I came here today to be with Daphne. We’re a package deal.”

“Oh, for heaven’s sake,” Polly said, annoyed. “Skip, you and Ed take the boat out. The Fullers and I will clean up. Is everyone happy with that?” She was not happy with that.

“I could not be happier,” Jonathan said, and kissed the side of my head, which seemed to annoy Polly further.

“Happy,” I said.

“Happy enough,” Eddie said.

“Well, that’s what I get,” Skip said. “One mate and one mutineer. Let’s go.”

Eddie and Skip went through the glass French doors and crossed the flagstone patio, following a wide set of stone stairs down to the water. Maybe it was my imagination, but it seemed to me, looking at the two of them as they receded into the afternoon light, that they moved more easily as they reached the Long Island Sound.

Jonathan and Polly were stacking plates while I picked up the glasses. Only Polly’s glass was full. “A lovely, lovely lunch,” Jonathan said. “Couldn’t have been nicer.”

But Polly wouldn’t look at him, and she didn’t say a word. She picked up her stack of plates and left for the kitchen.

I looked at my dear husband, mouthed the words *thank you*.

“I will never leave you behind,” he said quietly, and the two of us went to the kitchen.

Polly’s boxy carnation-colored top had belled sleeves, and one of those sleeves had dragged through a plate or possibly into one of the bowls of salads. When we came in, she was standing at the sink, scrubbing.

I asked her if I could help.

“With the *stain*?” she said. “No, thank you, I know how to do this.”

I put the glasses down. Jonathan put down the plates.

“I planned the whole thing,” Polly said. “I worked it out with Skip. After brunch he would take the men down to the boat so you and I could talk.” She was crying now, holding her sleeve beneath the running stream of tap water.

“You can talk to me.” I took two steps towards her and stopped. I was supposed to comfort her.

“It’s the leukemia, isn’t it?” she said. “My god, when he told us, we thought it was the end of the world, but then you go along year after year and nothing changes and you start to think that maybe it’s okay, maybe we

can just forget about it, and then you do forget about it, you really do. But it's not okay, is it? That's why you've come back. I said to Skip, the only reason she's come back is his leukemia's gotten worse. Maybe you've got some score to settle or maybe you think there's money, which there isn't, but if there's something going on, you have to tell me. We're his family. We deserve to know."

A large wooden table took up the center of the kitchen, the place where Skip and Polly no doubt ate when the two of them were home alone, the place we had set the dishes down. Now my fingers curled around the edge to keep me standing. Given the chance, I would have said I had no idea what she was talking about, because I didn't. I didn't know anything. But before any of that, Jonathan went to Polly, reaching over to turn off the faucet. He took her wet hand from the sink. I could see her shaking.

"Ed is fine," Jonathan said. "Nothing's changed. We've got the best people keeping up with it. If anything, the numbers look better than they did last month."

Polly Hotalling looked at my husband the way you look at the person who is telling you what you wanted to hear, the thing you weren't expecting to hear. "He's okay?"

"Well, he has chronic lymphocytic leukemia, it's nothing you'd want, but he's managing it. For the most part, it doesn't affect his life. Someday it will, but that's not what's happening now."

Polly took a small step towards him and Jonathan put his arms around her. "Are you sure?" she asked. Her voice came out as a small croak from the front of his shirt.

He patted her back like a baby. "As sure as anyone can be under the circumstances. This is emotional stuff. We all love Eddie, we all want what's best for him."

"I just thought . . ." she began, but she didn't feel the need to finish. She had already said what she thought.

"Go put yourself together and let Daphne and me handle the kitchen." Jonathan took off his blazer. "They'll be back before you know it. No boat ride lasts forever."

She looked up at him and smiled, wiping her eyes on a dish towel. "You won't tell him I said anything?"

Jonathan held her eye. "Not a word."

She left the room relieved, the dish towel still in her hand. I don't think she remembered I was there, though she walked right past me. When she was gone, Jonathan and I stood there, trying and failing to make sense of it all.

"How did you know it was chronic lymphocytic leukemia?" I asked him, when what I wanted to say was, Eddie? Leukemia?

"Because if it were some other kind, he'd be dead." Then Jonathan rolled up his shirtsleeves and started on the dishes.

In other circumstances, seeing my husband lie with such fluency might have alarmed me, but in these circumstances, I felt nothing but grateful. How do we talk about death but to lie about it? I had asked Eddie if we were going to die in the car up at the raspberry farm. "I don't think so," he had said to me that night. "I mean, of course we will eventually, everything does, but I don't think you and I are going to die in this car."

I wondered if this would turn out to be the eventuality of which he spoke.

I carried the glasses and plates to the sink, then hunted around until I'd found containers for all the leftover food, then I put the food away.

Nearly an hour passed and still the boat did not return. We had no idea what had become of Polly. We had cleaned up and put away every trace of lunch and then gone back to the sunroom and out those same glass French doors to sit on a wicker love seat that looked out over the water. Jonathan and I agreed to say nothing about Skip or Polly or Eddie for as long as we were in the house, or, better still, for as long as we were in Connecticut. To pass the time, we looked at the housing prices in Darien on Jonathan's phone, and when we got tired of that, we looked at the water.

"We could go home," Jonathan said. "Leave them a note."

I was just saying I'd give the whole thing another half hour when, in the distance, the Chris-Craft swung into view. They were going fast, a tall arc of spray above their wake. When the boat came closer in, we could see that both men were standing, and when they saw us, they waved and we waved back.

"You never know what the day will bring," Jonathan said.

We watched the boat slow, then make its way to the dock. Eddie and Skip tied the lines and then got off like two old men, Skip helping Eddie up and then Eddie, safely on the dock, turning around to give Skip his hand. A few times they stopped to laugh about something we were too far away to hear. They were both wearing sunglasses and baseball caps.

Polly came outside as they were climbing the stairs and sat down in the wicker chair beside us. She wore a different blouse now, still in the family of dark pink. She must have been watching for the boat from a window somewhere. "Look at them," she said to us. "Every time they get together, they're kids again. Can you imagine having a friend like that for your entire life?"

"No," Jonathan said.

"My sister," I said.

Polly shook her head. "Doesn't count."

Eddie, coming up the stairs, waved his hand over his head. "Ahoy!"

"Was it glorious?" Polly called.

Skip, a few steps behind Eddie, stopped to catch his breath. "There's still water in the bilge. The boat's spent so much time in the yard getting fixed that I might as well not have a boat and the goddamn thing is still leaking."

"I'll call on Monday," Polly said.

"A boat sits in the water all day long," Eddie said. "Logic dictates that it's going to get a little water in it."

Skip shook his head, still on the same step. "That's like saying logic dictates the house will have a few termites because it's sitting on dirt."

Eddie laughed and turned around. He held out his hand and Skip declined to take it, so Eddie went up without him. After a minute or two Skip caught his breath and came up.

"Where did you go?" Polly asked.

"Westport!" Eddie said. "A pretty town to see from the sea."

"Made all the better for not needing to find a parking space," Skip said.

Polly agreed. "There is no parking in Westport."

It was clear, at least to us, that brunch at the Hotallings' had at last reached its conclusion. "Well," Jonathan said, looking at his watch, "it's time my bride and I headed back to Bronxville."

"Drop me at the train station, will you?" Eddie asked.

I said we'd be happy to.

"You can't go now," Polly said to Eddie, her franticness resurfacing for the moment. "Spend the night! Or at least stay for dinner. We can watch a movie. Did you see all the food we have?"

Eddie shook his head. "There's work to be done, manuscripts waiting in line for the red pencil."

“But it’s *Saturday*,” Polly said, a fact she’d no doubt called out to the men in her life for as long as she’d had men in her life. Later she would say it to her children, and then to their children: It’s *Saturday*. Stay with me.

I was still undecided as to whether I disliked her intensely or felt terribly sorry for her.

“No one’s going to die if you don’t get chapter fifteen straightened up this weekend,” Skip said.

“Did I ever once, in all the years you were working, tell you to put either the merger or the acquisition aside so that we could go out on the boat?”

But Eddie had missed what Skip was saying: Skip wanted him to stay. If belittling Eddie’s job was the only way he knew to ask, still, he was asking. One imagined time passed slowly in Darien.

Skip waved Eddie away with his hand. “Let them go,” he said to Polly. He still had his sunglasses on.

Polly declared that in order to leave we would have to take a portion of the leftovers with us: leftovers as exit tax. Then she disappeared to the kitchen, returning ten minutes later with plastic containers full of food arranged in two giant bags from Palmer’s Market. “Eat it,” she said sharply. “I don’t want everything going to waste.”

We said our goodbyes. I put the bags in the backseat beside me and told Eddie to get in the front. We looked like we had robbed a specialty food store and were making our getaway.

Eddie clipped his sunglasses back onto his glasses. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” he said as we pulled down the driveway, his head falling back against the headrest. He continued to wave and Polly continued to wave even though Skip had gone inside. “I never would have gotten out on my own. Her will is too strong. Take a left down here.”

“We’re not going to the station,” Jonathan said. “We’ll drive you home.”

Eddie shook his head. “Don’t be ridiculous.”

I told him we were ridiculous people.

The Yankees were playing, and so we set out on 95 South towards 287 West to avoid the traffic. Jonathan, who had promised Polly he would say nothing, recounted our afternoon down to the stain on her sleeve.

“Skip took me out on the Chris-Craft so she could ask you about my health?” He stared out the window, taking in the passing mansions for a while before pushing ahead. “*That’s* why we had to go to Connecticut?”

“That was our impression,” I said. “I don’t think she meant to welcome me back into the family.”

“I don’t even remember how long I’ve had leukemia. Eight years maybe? It’s not exactly breaking news. My doctor stumbled onto it doing the annual blood work. ‘Your cholesterol looks good, Mr. Triplett, but we need to run some more tests to see if you have leukemia.’ Which I did. It sounded so terrible at first. When I got back to the office, I called Skip—that was poor judgment on my part. Skip told Polly, Skip and Polly looped in every expert they could think of, and all the experts said I was fine, given the circumstances. I’m fine. I can’t imagine they’re still thinking about it.”

“They’re very attached to you,” I offered from the backseat. We hold these truths to be self-evident.

“Anyone would think that Polly’s the one you’ve been seeing on the side all these years,” Jonathan said.

“That’s what my mother thought!” I said.

Eddie turned to look at me. “Your mother thought I was seeing Polly?”

“Back in the earliest days, when you and my mother were friends at Houghton Mifflin. She thought Skip was so angry at you because you were sleeping with his wife.”

“Skip was so angry at me because I was sleeping with Skip.” Eddie turned back in his seat. “I don’t know why people bother to guess at things. They’re always wrong.”

“Skip still seems angry.”

We could see the water from the car now, blue sky, blue water, the bobbing boats, the occasional storybook cloud. “I wish you’d come out with us on the boat,” Eddie said. “There’s no explaining how lovely he can be. Which is not to say he isn’t perfectly capable of being a complete ass. Both things are true. Both things are true for most of us, I suppose.”

“So you’re telling me I don’t have to worry about your leukemia?”

“I am telling you,” Eddie said, “that given the state of the world, worrying about my leukemia, or my relationship with the Hotallings, should be far down on your list.”

Jonathan asked some more questions about Eddie’s numbers and the details of his medical care. Jonathan, who had spent much of his adult life in a hospital, was full of knowledge he no longer knew what to do with. Listening to him ask about leukemia was like listening to him recite the lines from a play he had once been the star of. He sounded good.

“I’ve had two flare-ups, if that’s the term,” Eddie said. “One last year and another one maybe three years before that. One dose of chemo and a little rest and I was back on track.”

“That’s reasonable,” Jonathan said.

Eddie turned to me and smiled. “See? Your husband says I’m reasonable.”

I smiled back. I wasn’t entirely sure we weren’t being snowed, but I would wait and ask Jonathan later. He would know.

“We’re on the Cross County?” Eddie asked, looking at the signs overhead. “Don’t you live in Bronxville?”

“We’re about six minutes away from our house. That way.” I motioned in the general direction.

“Take me to the train station in Bronxville then,” Eddie said. “You’ll lose the rest of the day if you drive into the city and back.”

“We have the rest of the day to lose,” Jonathan said.

“No, I can’t stand this. Or I have a better idea: Take me to your house. Show me your house and let me use the bathroom. I didn’t go before we left Skip and Polly’s because I didn’t want to impede the departure and that was a mistake.”

After a little more tugging back and forth, we finally agreed to take Eddie home with us, and then later we would drive him to the station.

Bronxville was not unlike Winchester, the town where I grew up. Bronxville denizens lined the platform every morning to take the train to New York City, while Winchester denizens took the commuter rail to Boston. In certain sections of both towns the houses ran towards mansions, and, in Bronxville’s case, foreign embassies, but there were also plenty of houses I thought of as regular. We lived in one of those houses. Our life had never seemed as delightfully regular as it did on that day coming home from Darien.

“It’s wonderful to be home,” Eddie said, even though he’d never been to our home before. And I thought to myself, Yes, it is.

I showed Eddie straight to the bathroom while Jonathan brought in the bags of food. We were set for the next three days’ worth of lunches and dinners. Not having to cook made me think for a minute that going to brunch had been worth it. It had been worth it because now I knew what was going on with Eddie.

“There’s a drawing of a rabbit in the hallway that looks like a Dürer,” Eddie said when he came back.

“It’s not,” I said.

“Well, still, it’s quite good.” He stopped and looked around, then went to a painting of two rabbits eating the edge of a cabbage leaf. That one might have been my favorite. There was something both industrious and romantic about it. After a while, he went and stood in front of the Beatrix Potter in the front hall. “Will you give me the rabbit tour?”

I didn’t ask him how he knew, and I didn’t tell him that no one had asked before. I called to Jonathan, who was still in the kitchen. “He wants to see the rabbits,” I said.

I didn’t think about Candy much anymore. For years I did. I thought about how Rachel and Sydney still missed her, but I didn’t wonder if Jonathan missed her. In that moment I saw it cross his face, the loss of her, the pride he felt in this small, lingering accomplishment: she had put together a first-rate collection of rabbits. “This was the first one she bought,” he said, starting with the cabbage leaf. “She found it in a junk shop in Anchorage.”

“When were you in Anchorage?” I asked.

“Never,” he said. “One of her friends got a job there after college, fell in love. Candy was in the wedding. I didn’t know her then.” He led us down the hallway to speak of the rabbit that was not a Dürer. “It’s good, though, right? It’s French, late 1800s. She paid some real money for this one.” The most expensive one, of course, was the tiny Beatrix Potter in the heavy frame, a rabbit in a calico dress holding a spoon. “This broke two of Candy’s rules, the first being no one was allowed to buy a rabbit painting for her, and the second being no rabbit anthropomorphizing. She didn’t believe in rabbits wearing dresses. But she forgave me. That’s the kind of collector she was.”

“She had the most extraordinary eye,” Eddie said, pulling his glasses down the bridge of his nose when he got close.

“She was disciplined, I’ll say that. She never wanted the house to be overrun. She sold several off over the years because she’d find a new painting she liked better. The fact that she picked them all out herself turned out to be the real gift. They make me think of her, of what she liked, which is much better than paintings that remind me of going shopping.”

We showed him every rabbit in the house, including the one that none of us could stand, a thin dead hare hanging upside down, its back legs bound together with twine, its ears limp. We kept it in the laundry room. "She was already sick when she bought it," Jonathan said. "She hung it in the kitchen back when we lived in Beverly. The girls couldn't stand it. They were so young then. I don't know what Candy was thinking. I mean, I do know, and the girls knew, too. They used to take it off the wall and hide it under the couch or in the coat closet. Finally she gave up. They still hate the painting. If one of them is home for a while, they stick it between the dryer and the wall."

"Still," Eddie said, "you can see it from Candy's perspective."

The way the fur was painted was extraordinary, brown and gray and white, every single hair defined. The hair of the hare. I wanted to touch my fingers to its flank every time I put in a load of wash.

"That's why I keep it up," Jonathan said.

There were eight pieces in all, and the last one on the tour was in our bedroom, which made me grateful that we were people who always made the bed. "This is my favorite," Jonathan said.

By the standards of the others, the rabbit in our bedroom was more abstract: white and leaping, the grass beneath it tipped in blue. It hung on the wall by Jonathan's closet.

Eddie nodded. "I agree with you," he said. "This is my favorite."

"Candy liked to paint," he said, nodding. "But she never thought anything she did was good enough. She never would have let me put this up when she was alive."

"Did she paint other rabbits?" Eddie asked.

"Well, sure, some. Candy painted everything."

Then Eddie went over and sat down on my side of the bed. "I'm sorry," he said. "I need to sit here for one minute."

"No," I said, "it's perfectly fine. Are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

He shook his head, then changed his mind. "If I could have a glass of water."

Jonathan was gone in an instant. He was a great believer in the power of a glass of water.

"Stay," I said quietly, not wanting to sound like Polly.

Eddie closed his eyes. "One minute. I'll be fine."

"Does this happen to you?"

“Do I get tired after listening to Polly and Skip talk over one another and two Bloody Marys in the middle of the day along with too much to eat and then going for a boat ride? Yes, I suppose every time I do that, I feel tired.”

Jonathan reappeared with the water. He sat down beside Eddie on the bed. “Here,” he said.

Eddie drank, then opened his eyes. “That fixed it,” he said, but he didn’t stand up.

I was thinking that I didn’t know what to do when Jonathan said, “This is what we’re going to do: We’re going to walk down the hall to the guest room and you’re going to take your shoes off and lie down. And if you want to leave in an hour, that’s fine. And if you want to leave tomorrow, that’s fine.”

He drank some more water. “This is quite a detour to make on the way to the train station.”

“Do you want to stand up?” Jonathan asked.

“I do,” Eddie said. “I will in one more minute.”

“Take your time,” Jonathan said.

Eddie finished the water and handed me the glass. “Okay,” he said. “I’m going to listen to your husband. That’s what I’m going to do.” He looked like he was about to stand when he saw the little horse on the nightstand and changed his mind. “Look at that,” he said, reaching over to pick it up. “Whistler.”

4

It didn't happen right away. Eddie's white count held for another ten months before it started creeping up. Those ten months were good. I would go over to his apartment when school let out. Sometimes I would bring him dinner. He was trying without success to teach me how to play bridge. He brought me advance reader's copies of the books he knew I would like. "You and Skip," he said. "No one else."

Later things began to tilt. Often when I came by, he was sleeping, or when we walked, I could hear his shortness of breath. He took my arm. One day over lunch, he told me that he had retired.

"You're going to retire?"

He shook his head. "I did it. Needless to say, they pretty much ran me to the door as soon as I mentioned it. 'Goodbye, Mr. Triplett! Good luck, Mr. Triplett!' They've been waiting for me to give it up for years now."

"But you love your job."

"I do," he said carefully. "I did. But everything comes to an end. I'll keep editing the books I've been working on, maybe do some freelancing after that. No authors left behind. Why are you looking at me like that?"

Because I'm afraid you won't be happy. Because I'm afraid this means you'll die. "I'm surprised, that's all. Give me a minute to catch up. Is there going to be a party?"

"Will Polly rent out the Century Club but this time decorate in a book theme? Will Skip give a speech about my wasted potential? Will there be a sheet cake in the shape of a book that all my former assistants will come to eat a square of?"

I told him all sheet cakes were in the shape of books.

"The answer is no, no party, and the going-away lunch is right now and you are the only person I've invited. In fact, I'm going to order a glass of Chardonnay to celebrate."

"Does this have to do with your health?"

Eddie rolled his eyes. “Things were so much nicer back when you were in the dark.”

“The dark is no longer available.”

“Well, I shouldn’t complain. If Polly hadn’t spilled the beans, I never would have met Dr. Ocean, and I love Dr. Ocean.”

Eddie’s oncologist, whom he had seen so irregularly since his first diagnosis, had retired some months after his last treatment, and Jonathan got him in to see a woman named Dr. Ocean who practiced on the Upper East Side. Her office was in a building beside a hospital. Jonathan thought it was the hospital Eddie should go to should a hospital become necessary in the future.

“In fact, I’m going to chemo on Thursday,” he said. “Are you free?”

“Of course I’m free,” I said, which technically wasn’t true but would be true by Thursday. I had not retired, but I knew how to take a personal day from school.

Other things had changed in those ten interim months. Jonathan and his sister finally finished emptying the house in Fond du Lac. Near the end, Bea found a heavy lockbox in the wall behind the hot water heater. “What even made you look there?” Jonathan asked when she led him to the basement.

She crouched down. “Look. There’s no mortar between the bricks,” she said. “I was going to put it on the repair list.”

They drove the box to a locksmith, who had to make a key, a production more costly and time-consuming than they had imagined. Inside were six pocket watches from the 1800s, two of them solid gold, seventeen gold coins, and a diamond solitaire that neither brother nor sister had ever seen before—a small treasure chest. “Which is why you don’t hire a company to get rid of the past for you,” he told me over the phone. After the house had sold, they used part of the money to take the trip to Norway they had talked about. They went to Tromsø to see the northern lights, swaths of bright green illumination arching through the night sky. They both agreed it changed their understanding of what the world was capable of.

When all of that was over—the sorting and cleaning and sale and trip—Jonathan was left with only our relatively tidy house to manage, and he paced around it looking for things to do. He cleaned out the garage and built a new set of raised beds in the backyard. He went through all the files in his home office, and the files on his computer, getting rid of everything that could safely be gotten rid of, but it wasn’t enough to occupy him. There was

only so much winnowing a person can do. Then he got a call from someone he knew at the hospital in Bronxville, not two miles from where we lived. Their chief administrator had been tapped for a better job in Chicago, giving three weeks' notice. The hospital's second-in-command was not sufficiently commanding. What they needed was an interim head who could steer the ship until a hiring committee could be assembled.

Did he run to the hospital? Did he dance his way there?

"Don't make fun," Jonathan said, confiding to me alone that his plan was to make himself indispensable.

I told Eddie I'd pick him up at his apartment on Thursday.

"That's silly," he said. "I'll meet you there."

I told him that's not how chemo worked.

"How do you know?" he asked.

"Trust me," I said. "I'm picking you up."

And I did. We took a taxi to the Upper East Side. I brought a thermal bag of drinks and snacks. I signed him in.

"Oh, this is nice," I said as the nurse led us down the hall. Every patient had their own pod with frosted-glass dividers and floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the city. The space was small but private, luminous.

"Even on a gray day like this, we don't get complaints about the view," the nurse said.

Eddie got into what looked like a dentist's chair, and she brought him a blanket. "Watch me. I'm going to fall asleep."

"You can't fall asleep," I said. "You have to keep me company."

"You should get a hygienist," Eddie said to the nurse. "People could get their teeth cleaned while they're having chemo. Maybe a pedicure." He wagged his feet back and forth.

"You're ambitious," the nurse said.

"I like to get things done," Eddie said.

"Me, too," the nurse said, and then she was gone.

"She's off for the poison," he whispered to me. He was careful to keep his voice down as the pod had no door.

I looked out the window at the light fall of February snow. "They could rent these out at night, market it like one of those tiny Japanese hotel rooms." The pod had a small sink. There was a toilet down the hall and surely, somewhere, a shower.

Eddie agreed. "They'd make a killing. This is a very comfortable chair."

"There isn't room for the hygienist and the manicurist if the nurse and I are both in here with you."

"Take shifts. I'm here for hours."

Eddie's was the last pod on the left, and while I hadn't meant to notice, every patient in every other pod had someone with them. Everyone had found another person to sit with them through chemo. Not having any doors was the thing that made the design possible for the nurses who went in and out with their hands full, keeping an eye on all the sparrows. It also meant the people on the right-hand side of the hall could still enjoy the view. It was masterful. "The place where Buddy had chemo was nothing like this," I said.

Eddie smiled. "Of course you took Buddy to chemo. Of course you did. What was that like?"

"It was one big room, all the chairs in a circle, all the nurses going around checking on everybody. Don't get me wrong, it was great, or great for chemo. Everyone was incredibly kind, but some of the patients were so sick, and when I see a place like this, I think how nice it would have been for them to have had a little privacy."

The nurse returned and asked Eddie to state his full name and date of birth, which he did, cheerfully, even though it was the fifth time he'd been asked the question since we arrived. "Edward James Triplett, May 2, 1949." He held out his arm and she scanned his wristband.

"How are you feeling today, Mr. Triplett?"

"I have a smile on my face and a song in my heart."

The nurse smiled at him. "I noticed that. No fever, no pain?"

He shook his head.

"In that case, I'm going to hook you up."

Eddie didn't have a port, and so the nurse started a line on the front side of his elbow. "A stick and a sting," she said. I turned my head.

"What's that called, that vein?" Eddie asked, admiring her work.

"The median cubital vein."

"Well, now you've taught me something new. Median cubital. We come to chemo to grow."

She got the chemo running, and when she was sure the line was good and Eddie had everything he needed, she left. That's when Eddie returned to his question. "I was vague," he said. "I didn't mean, what was the treatment

center like, though don't get me wrong, I find it all interesting. I meant, what was it like for you to take your father to chemo?"

"Oh, that," I said, suddenly flush with memory. "I loved it. Is that a terrible thing to say? I bet if Buddy were here, he'd tell you the same thing. We had such a good time. We'd never spent much time together before. When he first called to tell me he was sick, I don't think I'd seen him in a year or more. I was in Newton then, and he only lived over in Gloucester."

"He stayed in Gloucester?" Eddie asked.

"Born and raised and died. Aside from college and those few miserable years he and my mother were married, he was always in Gloucester. You remember the apartment he had when we were kids?"

"Don't tell me," Eddie said.

"Same place. He couldn't care less where he was sleeping as long as he had a good bed and a washer and dryer. Laundry mattered to him. Other than sleeping and laundry, he might as well have lived on the boat. The boat was a lot of the reason I didn't go see him more. He always wanted to go out on the boat, but the smell of the fish and the smell of the diesel exhaust and then whatever chop there was in the water always did a number on me."

"I can see how chemo would be preferable to that."

"How are you feeling?" I asked.

"Me? I'm fine."

I nodded. "Buddy, too. Buddy was always fine. He had people lining up to take him to chemo, his brothers and his brothers' wives and my cousins and other fishermen and the waitress in the diner where he had breakfast every morning. The fact that he asked me to go with him meant a lot."

"Everyone was in love with Buddy Zabriskie," Eddie said.

"The *nurses*," I said. "Oh my god, the nurses came over to check his line every two minutes. As soon as Buddy came in, they were all putting on lipstick. Who tries to pick up a guy with a port? It really was a sight to behold. All my life I'd thought of my father as an obligation that I wasn't attending to. I felt guilty about not seeing him more. Come to find out my father was doing fine."

"What was it he had?"

"Metastatic melanoma, same as Candy Fuller."

"Oh, that's right. You told me that."

"He'd already had a melanoma taken out of his ankle. It looked like he'd been bitten by a small shark. He was fine for about three years and then he

started coughing. The cancer had spread to his lungs, his pelvis.”

Eddie shook his head. “How old was he?”

“When he died? Fifty-four.”

Eddie and I looked at each other. “How had I not thought of that?” I said. I was fifty-four.

“If you searched ‘picture of health’ on the internet right now, I bet you’d still get a picture of Buddy Zabriskie. He was the man least likely to die young.”

“It’s funny, but when I was growing up, he used to tell me there was nothing healthier than working on a boat. He said your body stayed strong because you used all your muscles pulling in the nets and stocking the ice, and your brain stayed sharp solving problems because something you’d never thought of before was always going wrong with the engine or the nets or the fish. You had to be fast, use tools, have good balance on the slippery deck. He said fishermen always had friends, both the immediate family of your own boat but also the other people on other boats. Everyone helped each other out and would go looking for you if your boat didn’t come back. They all met up for a beer at the end of the day to tell their fish stories and the socialization was good for you and the beer was good for you. You stayed outside in all kinds of weather so you built up your immune system. And on top of that there were long stretches of nothingness spent staring out at the beautiful ocean, seeing dolphins and porpoises, maybe a whale, and that gave you a sense of wonder and maybe peace. I grew up thinking my father, who I pretty much never saw, lived some magical existence, and then one day I realized that fishing was hard, dangerous work and he was telling me a story so I wouldn’t worry about him drowning.”

The nurse came in to check the bag. “Still good?”

“I get to see you,” Eddie said. “I get to see her. What’s not to love?”

“Your friend has an excellent temperament,” the nurse said to me.

“My father,” I said. Buddy wouldn’t have minded that; Buddy, who was always happy to share.

She looked at us, one and then the other.

“Genetics are a mystery,” Eddie said.

The nurse nodded. “Do you want anything to drink? Coke? Ginger ale?”

“All good,” Eddie said. He waited until she was down the hall. “Did he die in the hospital? I hate the thought of dying in a hospital.”

“You’re not going to die,” I said.

Eddie laughed. "I hate to break this to you."

I corrected myself. "You're not going to die anytime soon. You're not going to die in a hospital." What was it about death that made people lie this way? I had no idea how or when or where Eddie would die; I only knew I couldn't stand the thought of it. Like Buddy, I hoped that telling a story would make the story so.

"Buddy," Eddie said, steering the conversation back.

I looked out the window. We were high enough up to see the East River, and yet the East River had disappeared beneath the low-hanging clouds. "He said he'd become an old boat. There's a leak in the starboard, and while you're plugging it up, a leak springs up in the aft, and you plug it, but then there's water seeping up between the boards of the deck and you don't know where it's coming from, but the starboard leak is going again and then you're not trying to plug anything, you're bailing, and the pump chokes."

"I get the picture."

"Later on they'd found a melanoma in his brain, a small one but still, bad news. Then he got pneumonia from the chemo. His lungs were shot anyway. They had to put him back in the hospital then."

"So he did die in the hospital."

I shook my head. "Don't get ahead of me. This is when Jonathan Fuller arrives. Well, we'd already met him a few times before that. The hospital in Gloucester was small. There were plenty of opportunities to run into the friendly administrator."

"You must have looked like springtime to Jonathan, like wildflowers in a glass."

I shrugged. "Hard to remember. Did we ever look like springtime?"

"Yes," Eddie said in his great dental chair. "Both of us."

I liked the thought of this—both of us—because I had known Eddie in his springtime, when he was beautiful. I went back to my story. "Once Buddy had pneumonia, once he was very sick, Jonathan came a lot. Buddy's room was always full of family, my grandparents, my uncles, my cousins, all the fishermen in and out. As far as anyone could tell, Buddy had been happy with his life and had two regrets: he was sorry that he'd never been on an airplane, and he was sorry he'd never seen the Pacific Ocean."

"Buddy had never been on a plane?"

I shook my head. "I didn't know it either. I guess the work on the boat never stopped and the money he made went back into the boat, so he didn't

go anywhere. If he took a vacation, he went to the Cape or he went to Maine and worked on other people's boats for a week. He once drove his mother to New York because she wanted to see *Jesus Christ Superstar*."

"You're making that up."

"It was the seventies. Anyway, that was Buddy's one trip to Manhattan and he'd be the first to tell you that it was not for him. But he was sorry that he never saw the Pacific. He had wanted to go to Big Sur. That was his dream. He'd seen pictures, and he liked the name. So one day there were too many people in the room and I went to sit in the hall and here came the hospital administrator I would later marry, and I started talking to him. Did he think Buddy could make it out to California?"

A stricken look passed over Eddie. "Did he die in California?"

"Stop," I said. "Seriously, listen. Jonathan said he thought Buddy could make it. He said I should wait until he was stronger, but he thought it would work. He said as long as I got a nonstop flight, I should be okay, which was good advice. I bought two first-class tickets, Boston to San Francisco."

"First class?"

"You remember how tall Buddy was, and he had a lot of pain in his back. I couldn't fold him up in coach for such a long flight. I had no idea how expensive it was going to be. Then there was the rental car, the hotels, all of it on the credit card. My grandparents and my uncles wanted to kick in, the fishermen wanted to kick in, but nobody had any money. Thanks to the Power of Positivity, I'd made it through college without student loans, and everyone I knew had student loans. This would be my debt. Buddy and I were having a good time being together and I wanted to do that for him."

"So how was the trip?"

For two people who had spent their lives looking at the Atlantic Ocean, it was like nothing we had ever seen—cliffs and rocks and the crashing sea.

"Beautiful," I said. "Have you ever been?"

Eddie nodded. "A long time ago. I went to some legal convention in San Francisco with Skip, a full-blown holiday. We rented a convertible and drove to Monterey, Big Sur. I'm glad Buddy got to see it."

I did not let my story be derailed by the thought of Eddie and Skip driving down Highway 1 in a convertible. I only regretted that I hadn't thought to rent one myself. "The trip exhausted him, but he was so happy. They loaded him up on steroids and antibiotics before we left. Sometimes he would walk a little ways, but mostly we stayed in the car. There were

places you could park and the view was unbelievable. One day we were right there looking out at Big Sur and he told me he'd always thought he would drown. He said it was hardly an original idea, fishermen always think they're going to drown. You know people who drown, and you hear the stories about the ones you didn't know, and on top of that you're looking at water all day. He said it wasn't that he wanted to drown, but he felt like he'd spent his whole life planning for the wrong thing."

"Did you ever have a premonition about how you were going to die?" Eddie asked.

"Me?"

"The only other person in the room," he said.

"Car accident." I had never said that before to anyone.

He nodded. "Exactly. All my life I was sure I was going to die in a car accident. It's like we beat the devil once, so it must be coming back around for us later."

"We're all looking for the death we know. I'm sure that Buddy went over the side of the boat a time or two."

Eddie nodded.

"Well, Buddy didn't drown in the Pacific. We had a wonderful trip. It was the single smartest thing I'd ever done in my life. He never wanted to eat, so I'd get a couple of milkshakes and bring them back to the hotel room. We'd lie in our beds and he'd talk and talk. Buddy had never been much of a talker, so the whole thing was a revelation to me. He told me about fishing and my mother and how they met and when they got married. He told me how bad he was at having little kids and how much it meant that I'd come through for him anyway. He was so tired by then. He was tired and he was happy."

"How long were you out there?"

"Four nights. The hardest part was driving into San Francisco at the end, leaving him in the terminal with the luggage, taking back the rental car, taking the bus back to the terminal. I'd been with him every minute and I didn't want to leave him alone. But when I got back, he was sitting right there where I'd left him, big smile on his face. When I think of him now, I always see him at the airport terminal, waiting for me to come back. I got a wheelchair and I pushed him to the gate. He said, 'In my next life, I'm going to be a Californian.'"

"So he died when you got home?"

I shook my head. “What was it you said to me? Why do people always guess?”

“It’s because I’m nervous.”

I went on with the story. “Buddy had the window seat, and I had brought one of those space blankets to cover him up.”

“Are you kidding? Like the one in the Buddy emergency bag?”

“Buddy swore by those things. He got so cold once he was sick. He didn’t have any fat left. He wore that blanket in the car. I put it over him in the hotel bed.”

“I can picture him on the plane, this great big silver man.”

“Ten minutes after we took off, he was asleep, and every time the flight attendant came by, I said, let him sleep, let him sleep. Then I went to sleep. We were both tired. When I woke up, he was dead. We were still an hour, hour and a half out from landing.”

“My heart just stopped.”

“I had rolled up my jacket for him to use as a pillow and the jacket had slipped. When I leaned over to fix it for him—”

“What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything. He was dead. I mean, no one was going to save him. I was terrified if anyone knew they’d have to land the plane and put us off in Erie or Elmira or wherever we were flying over, and then what was I going to do? I wanted to get him home. My uncle Jay was meeting us at the airport and I knew he would help me.”

“So you just sat there?”

“I didn’t know what else to do. He died of a pulmonary embolism, by the way. They did an autopsy. He might have thrown a blood clot without being on a plane, but the plane certainly didn’t help. Leda says if I would do some work, I could probably get the whole thing sorted out in my mind, put the trauma in the trauma box and the grief in the grief box, but I don’t want to. Buddy’s life ended and my interest in being on an airplane ended at the exact same time.”

“Sure,” Eddie said. “You live in New York. There’s no place you need to go.”

“That’s what I think.”

“So how did it end?”

I thought about it for a minute. I thought of Buddy and me in a parking lot at the beach, looking at the waves. “It was sad. That’s all it was. When

the plane landed, I told the flight attendant and she went around quietly and told the other flight attendants. There was no announcement. Everyone got off the plane in the usual way. Then two of the flight attendants came back and sat in the seats across from us. They were so kind. What you realize in a situation like that is not only are you not the first person whose father has died on a commercial flight, but they've trained for this. There's protocol. We had to wait for the medical examiner to get there and pronounce him. The flight attendant asked if there was anyone meeting us and I gave them Jay's name, and fifteen minutes later, there's Jay. Once I saw Jay, I fell apart because he was crying and I felt so sorry for him. I gave him my seat and he sat down next to his brother. All their lives they'd been together, pretty much every day. The flight attendant asked me if there was anyone I should call, and I thought of that hospital administrator, Jonathan Fuller. Jonathan Fuller would know how to get Buddy back to Gloucester. Nine o'clock at night, a Sunday night, and Jonathan picked up the phone right away and I told him what had happened. He said he'd take care of it. That was pretty much it for me. In all the sadness and confusion, there was also this overwhelming gratitude. If he'd shown up with an ambulance and a justice of the peace, I would have married him on the plane."

"People have no understanding of how love works," Eddie said. "They don't take gratitude into account. They don't think about relief."

I nodded. "Oh, the relief was huge. Jonathan got there before the medical examiner. I can't imagine all the things he had to do to get through security, to get on that plane, but he did it. When the examiner came with the transport people, Jonathan said Jay and I should go down the jet bridge and wait, so we did. We just wanted someone to tell us what to do. Fifteen minutes later, they brought Buddy out. He was in a body bag on a rolling stretcher." I shook my head. "Jesus, this was not a good story to be telling you at chemo."

"It's better than the story I told you about Mary Carter seeing all her dead relatives when we were freezing to death in the car."

I conceded the point. "Maybe," I said. "A little."

"How did your mother take it?"

Sometimes I forgot that Eddie knew my mother, that Eddie had once been married to my mother. "Her head blew off."

Eddie nodded. "That would have been my guess."

“Really? It wasn’t my guess. My mother wouldn’t hear a word about Buddy. When we were growing up, we knew not to talk about him. That never changed. I might have said that he’d been sick, but I never told her I’d been going to Gloucester to see him. I certainly didn’t tell her I’d bought first-class plane tickets to take him to California. But then I told her he had died. I told her over the phone. Huge mistake.”

“Your mother never got over Buddy Zabriskie.”

“Are you serious?”

“College love, first love, true love. It was one of the things we had in common. I loved Skip and she loved Buddy. When Buddy came to see Leda in the hospital but he didn’t come to see her? It was awful. Then Skip came to see me in the hospital. She wanted Buddy to come back for her then. She wanted him to see how much she needed him.”

“Okay, maybe then,” I said, still not believing it. “But by the time Buddy died, she and Lucas had been married for going on twenty years. They had the boys.”

Eddie shook his head. “It didn’t matter. Your mother had traded down. Lucas Ekker was no Buddy Zabriskie.”

5

Two months later, my mother found Lucas dead in the backyard. He liked to circle their property every morning while my mother drank coffee in bed. That morning she'd gone back to sleep for a while. She wasn't entirely sure how long he'd been out there.

"Still, that's a nice death," Eddie said when I called to tell him.

I'd thought the same thing, the result of spending one's adulthood with a hospital administrator who went straight to the obituaries every morning and reported the deaths of the day every evening when he came home from work. Lucas had enjoyed above-average health throughout his life, along with a below-average outlook. I had to think he didn't suffer, or didn't suffer much, but no one did autopsies on ninety-year-old men who died in the garden, and so there was no way to know which part of him had failed. Not that it mattered. Lucas had been telling my mother for some time (at top volume) that he had no intention of leaving their house. She could move to a condo if she wanted, but he was staying put. Every night he pulled himself up the long staircase to their bedroom to prove that he still could, while my mother climbed the stairs behind him, her hands hovering inches from his back as if she could catch him.

"I'll send her a note," Eddie said. He had already sent her a note, thanking her for the return of the red leather dictionary some forty-five years later. He was touched that she'd held on to it, and she was touched to have heard from him.

Leda canceled her patients and I canceled my classes. We would take the train to Boston and then the commuter rail to Winchester, where our extremely competent half-brothers would carry out the details of their father's death. We, the useless stepdaughters, would demonstrate our support by showing up.

Leda had never been close to Buddy, though he could have dialed her number as easily as mine when he got sick. He tended to call us in order of age: me first, then her. If I hadn't picked up, she would have been next, and

had she gotten the call, she would have gone to Gloucester. She was in graduate school at Fordham at the time, rounding on psych patients in a locked ward, but she would have made it work. He only needed one of us, either of us. No one needed both of us.

I had an easier time with Buddy when we were children by virtue of being older. I could still remember him living in our house. I could remember some of the good old days and Leda could not, but that didn't matter, it could have gone either way, and in this case, it went my way. That's how I thought of it. Leda visited Buddy a few times in the year before I took him to California (my unfortunate euphemism for his death), but I was the one who got to know him.

Similarly, it could have been Leda that Eddie ran into that day at the Met. That would have made more sense since Leda looked more like our mother, and she only lived on the other side of the park. But it was me that he found, or it was my husband, forever curious and aware of his surroundings, who had noticed Eddie there.

But our mother's third husband was a different story. Lucas thought of Leda as a daughter, whereas Lucas and I thought of one another not much at all. Being a little younger meant that Leda could be folded into another family configuration, while I, slightly older, had already reached my limit. I would lock myself in the bathroom and stare in the mirror at the scar running up the side of my face. In those days I still dreamed of getting Eddie back.

Leda and I made our way through the crowds of Penn Station. Where was everyone going? We did not opt for the quiet car. We found two seats together and stashed our small bags. The plan was to come back on the last train, not to sleep in Massachusetts if at all possible. There wasn't going to be a funeral. Maybe there would be a memorial service at some later date, but maybe not. Our mother hadn't decided. She had kept a modest account for Lucas to use for his investments, and last year he'd sunk everything he had into a company that was developing a new kind of casket made of hemp and mushrooms that promised to consume the body and then itself, all in forty-five days.

"Your entire corporeal self, gone!" he had told us at the Thanksgiving table. "Poof!"

He was in love with the idea and needled my mother to give him more money to up his investment, which she refused to do. Then he died. Now he

was to be eaten by mushrooms, as per his wish.

Leda tipped her head back when the train pulled away, closed her eyes. “The problem with having too many parents is having to watch them all die,” she said. “It’s nice that Buddy never married again.”

Of course Buddy had married again, but only for a couple of years when we were in high school, years in which we rarely saw him anyway. We were grateful to have not been invited to the wedding. There were no additional children, and in the end she went back to Arizona, which meant that we were free to disavow her entirely.

“How do you think it was we weren’t destroyed?” I asked her, because now that I was thinking about our childhood more, I wondered.

“Compared to most people?” she said. “Oh, honey, you have no idea what people do to their children. Our childhood was fine.”

This news surprised me. “Was it?”

“We were loved, not passionately but enough, and we were largely ignored, which allowed for our healthy separation from the primary family. Necessity made us resourceful and brave. We were left to solve our own problems and so we did. The children you should worry about are the ones who are the singular light of their parents’ lives, the ones who hit thirty and are still calling their mom five times a day.”

My mind went to my students, so many of whom had parents who might as well have carried them to school on golden plinths. These parents would call for a teacher’s head if a spot in a desired class did not open, if a grade was not raised, if the girl did not get to sing in the play or was left on the bench through lacrosse season. “Too much love?”

“Not too much love, more like too much crippling dependency on the part of the parent, which masquerades as love.”

“I never thought about that,” I said, and truly, I had not, though it had been right there in front of me all these years.

“Our parents,” Leda said, “did not depend on us for their sense of identity. They had their lives and we had ours. Bless them.”

Leda and I talked plenty on that train ride, but my mind kept drifting back to the unfamiliar concept that perhaps our mother had done us a favor. We had been given a ringside seat at the edge of her life, and there we balanced. Maybe that was fine. Buddy was harder to factor into the equation because he was so consistently absent, but whenever we were on the boat, he expected us to dig our own life jackets out of the well and put them on.

We applied our own sunscreen. He didn't tell us to stay away from the lobsters. He assumed we were smart enough to see the snapping claws and keep our hands in our pockets.

Leda and I were in the taxi from the station in Winchester when we discovered that we each thought the other had called ahead to say we were coming.

"When she called me yesterday, I told her we'd see her soon," I said.

"It's not the same thing," Leda said.

But then the taxi pulled into the driveway of the stately foursquare on Everett Avenue and it was too late to do anything but get out and ring the bell.

"Do we ring the bell or go in?" I asked. Suddenly I had doubts about everything.

Leda leaned in front of me and pushed the button.

Miraculously, when the door opened, Christopher and Matthew were there together, lanky and large of tooth like their father, Christopher paler, Matthew better-looking. Our sort-of brothers, who I would forever think of as The Boys, who doubtlessly thought of Leda and me as The Girls.

"You came!" Matthew cried, and wrapped his arms around my neck as his brother reached for Leda. Then, having embraced the man in our arms, we switched our partners, dancing a sibling reel in the front entry hall.

"We failed to confirm our arrival," I said.

Leda had her arm around Matthew's waist. "I'm so sorry about your dad."

It was never just the four of us, and soon this moment would end—spouses, children, neighbors, friends, our mother, all would come pouring from the other rooms any second. But for now we were together, recounting every positive thing we could think of to say about Lucas Ekker. Remember how much he loved the peppermint ice cream you could only get at Christmas? Remember how he liked to stay up to watch reruns of *M*A*S*H*, and how, being lanky and tall himself, he identified powerfully with Alan Alda? While we assembled our list, I kept looking at their faces, thinking of how their mother was our mother—that was the part that always amazed me. Our lives had so little overlap, and yet she had given birth to all of us.

"She can get rid of this place now," Matthew said, his eyes going up to the double-height ceiling above the stairwell. "She can get herself a fancy

condo in town, spend the winters in Florida if she feels like it.”

“Not that we’re thinking about Dad’s death in terms of the real estate potential,” Christopher said. He had a job in tech, something to do with search engines. That’s all I knew.

“She spent her life taking care of him,” Matthew said. “Even before she married him, she was taking care of him.”

His brother agreed. “That’s why he married his publicist. The publicist is always going to take care of you.”

This conversation lasted maybe five minutes, seven at most, and it made the hours we had traveled to Winchester and the hours we would travel to get home worth it. Christopher’s wife, Paula, came in and let out a little howl to see us there, and the howl drew forth their own two sons, ten and twelve, from the den where they had been splayed across the sofa playing video games. They gave each of us the tentative hug of a young boy. Christopher had picked them up early from school, the same school Leda and I had gone to, the same school Christopher and Matthew had gone to. When does that happen anymore?

Only Lyle was missing. “He never leaves work,” Matthew said.

“Let him hide from us for a minute,” Paula said. “He was here last night until nine o’clock.”

“Teeth take precedence over everything,” Matthew said.

“Where’s Mom?” Leda asked.

“Lying down,” Christopher said. “She’s been on the phone fighting with the mushroom casket people all morning. Apparently Dad’s modest stock purchase does not move him to the top of the wait list. Demand for mushroom caskets has exceeded inventory.”

“He really wanted to be eaten by mushrooms,” said Sean, the older of Christopher and Paula’s boys.

“Well,” Leda said, putting a therapeutic arm around his shoulder, “he won’t know the difference.”

I dropped my bag on the long Shaker bench in the hall and excused myself for a minute. I went down the hall to the kitchen, through the mudroom, and down the stairs to the backyard, going across the patio and into the soft grass where Lucas had died. How long had it been since he and I stood there together while he made his cranky pitch for more Positivity books in the classroom? Lucas had gotten much more time on this earth than my father had. Buddy, whose funeral mass so overflowed the church

that people said there must not have been a boat on the Atlantic that day. I stood in front of the lilac beds and thought about them both, Lucas Ekker and Buddy Zabriskie. I was not inclined towards magical thinking, but I sent out something like a prayer to the two of them all the same. Let me keep Eddie, I asked them. Not forever, of course, but if you could look out for my third father for a little while, I would be grateful.

A cold spring wind had picked up, and I had left my jacket on the bench in the hall. The moment I had the thought, my mother was there, the jacket in her hand. "You're going to freeze," she said, and held it up for me to thread my arms inside. I must have been standing in front of the place where Lucas had fallen. She no doubt thought I was there for a different reason. I put my arm around her and I told her I was sorry, because I was sorry. How awful that she had to find her husband that way.

"Thank you," she said. "No one seems to feel bad that he's dead."

We weren't looking at one another, which made it easier. "Well," I said, "it's hard not to think about all the other ways it could have gone."

She nodded. "And it's hard not to wonder if the four of you won't say the same thing about me when I'm gone. Mom's dead, check that off the list."

What Leda had said on the train came back to me, that by going about the business of her own life, she had made us capable. I made a quarter turn and took her in my arms. "You're a whole other story," I said to her, thinking it might even be true. "If you ever die, the four of us will cry out a river for you to be carried away on."

My mother smiled at the thought of that, then she rested her head against my shoulder. We stood there in the cold until Leda came and told us it was time to come inside.

6

Eddie went to the opera and he went to the theater. He saw the plays on Broadway but also saw plays in Brooklyn. He had memberships at the Whitney, MoMA, the Frick, and a twelve-ticket package to the Tribeca Film Festival. He attended lectures at the New-York Historical Society, the Center for Fiction, the 92nd Street Y, as well as occasional dharma talks at the Shambhala Meditation Center. Despite being retired, he continued to go to bookstores to see his former authors. He passed on dance.

I went with him to some things, or Jonathan and I did, and on occasion it was only Jonathan, who was happy to serve as a fourth in a Sunday bridge game that Eddie had been a part of for years. My husband and my stepfather played bridge. Skip played bridge, but he often canceled at the last minute, unable to get away from the responsibilities of Darien. Sometimes Leda and Steve met Eddie for dinner, and I wouldn't hear about it until after the fact, and twice over the summer he took Steve and Leda's son, Henry, to the Blue Note because Henry was cultivating an interest in jazz. Eddie was a popular man, and the few members of our family didn't begin to fill his social calendar. We accepted the invitations that were extended, and we offered invitations in return. But I got to take him to chemo. I was clear about that.

"Okay," he said. "Time to go."

It was July again, and so there was nothing I needed to cancel. I picked him up at his apartment, and Jonas, the doorman, hailed us a cab. Eddie had a cane now, not a statement piece but the kind you buy at Duane Reade. There was a bit of a struggle getting it into the taxi, closing the door. "I have become a tri-ped," he said.

"It is the natural progression of time."

"Just think," he said, touching my sleeve, "if you'd left me in that car to freeze all those years ago, none of this would have happened."

The day was hot and bright, and it seemed almost funny to remember how cold we'd been. How alone. Forty-five years later we were stuck in

traffic on the FDR, watching the boats slicing their way up the East River.

The sunny waiting room was crowded. In some cases you didn't know who was the patient and who was coming along for the ride, but then there were the people who looked like they'd been assembled from a bone kit, translucent and bald in their wheelchairs, their sock hats pulled low against the air conditioner's chill. We made our way through, found two empty seats.

"Will you tell them we've arrived?" Eddie asked me, and lowered himself into his chair. Taxi to the curb, across the sidewalk, into the building, across the lobby, into the elevator, out of the elevator, down the hall, through the door, it had exhausted him. I carried his canvas tote bag — a thick book, a yellow legal pad, potato chips with half the salt. I went to sign him in. When I came back, his head was tipped against the glass behind him.

"Not sleeping," he said.

"You can if you want," I said.

"Dr. Ocean knows exactly how long I can go before I start to wear out. Then she beats back the rising tide of white cells with her elixir."

"She's very good," I said, and it was true. I, too, had become attached to Dr. Ocean, this place, our routine. I had become attached to Eddie's life.

"I love her," he said.

"Lucky Dr. Ocean."

"I love you more," he said.

"Then lucky me."

"Tell me about your mother. Was she able to get a mushroom casket for Lucas?"

The casket, of course, was months ago. I had told Eddie the first half of the story, then failed to follow up. "She did! I don't know who she paid off, but she did it. They told her it wasn't going to be possible, and the next thing I knew, he was going into the ground in a hemp basket."

Eddie nodded. "Every publicist should have the privilege of burying at least one of her authors."

"Certainly the authors they marry. Oh! and she sold the house."

"She told me that," he said. "I asked her about the house. I didn't think it was my place to ask her about the casket."

"You've been talking to my mother?"

“We write each other notes, back and forth, back and forth. It’s like texting for people with large collections of stationery.”

“That’s awfully nice of you,” I said.

“Your mother and I both have a small shard of glass in our hearts where the other is concerned: her disappointment, my shame, her regret and my regret. This helps to pry it loose. All these years later, you can still pry something loose. There’s no sense carrying shame and regret into the next life.”

I assumed he was speaking metaphorically and so, metaphorically, I agreed.

“She says she might come to see me,” he said.

“Really?” My mother never came to see me.

Eddie, reading my mind, said she hadn’t been able to leave Lucas, not when he was well and not when he was in decline. “She has the flexibility now.”

“Meaning what, she would have been visiting you all these years if it hadn’t been for Lucas?”

“No. I think she’s feeling a little left out is all. If you and I are friends, then she thinks it might be nice if she and I were friends. After all, your mother was once a great friend of mine.”

I took a moment of interior assessment to see if this bothered me and found it did not.

We continued to wait. Chemo was running behind schedule. The people who were so much sicker, the ones who were already here when we arrived, they were waiting as well.

Eddie opened his eyes, checked his watch. “Late,” he said.

“They are.”

He smiled at me and closed his eyes again. “I appreciate the fact that you’re not going to the desk to tell them how long we’ve been here.”

I laughed. “Chemo takes as long as it takes. They can’t pull out one person’s line to get the next person in there faster.”

“Once upon a time, at my first chemo appointment, the friend who accompanied me, we need not say her name, lost her ever-loving mind when we were kept waiting. She marched back to the desk and told the woman that she *knew* people, *lots* of people, and they best see me right away.”

“Don’t worry,” I said. “The only people I know are other English teachers. We have no sway.”

Eddie was quiet. “I shouldn’t have told you that.”

“What? You didn’t say anything.”

Eddie nodded. “Thank you. I’ve made an important decision,” he said.

“What’s that?”

“I’m never going to be angry at anyone ever again,” he said, and then he fell asleep.

It was another hour before his name was called. The waiting room for oncology patients was always quiet, unlike some other waiting rooms where they kept a television going with HGTV. In the oncology waiting room, people were less likely to talk on their phones. They conserved their energy so as to take inventory of the heart’s collected shards of glass. We were in the quiet car now, both the patients and their guests. I read the novel I’d brought while Eddie slept. Every now and then I put my hand on his wrist because I could.

The nap did him a world of good. When at last we were taken back to the hallway of frosted-glass pods, we were given the same room on the left that we’d had the time before. The coincidence made us giddy — giddy! — though only a hopeless person would see such a thing as a promising sign. Eddie handed me the cane and settled himself back into the dentist’s chair. “Let Jonathan know I’ll be keeping you out later than expected,” he said.

“I will.”

“I’ve been reading about impermanence. That’s the part about retiring that no one tells you, how you get to read any book you want to read.”

It was a different nurse than the one he had the last time, but right away we liked her just as much. One imagines generalizations could be made about oncology nurses: nice people.

“No port,” she said, looking at his chart. “Old-school.”

“I don’t come in much,” he said.

“Good for you,” she said. “And good for me. You’re keeping my skills fresh.” She left and came back with her packaged needle on a silver tray, her clear plastic bags. She rolled the vein with her gloved fingers until she got it where she wanted it. “Stick and a sting,” she said.

I always turned away.

“What about impermanence?” I asked once the nurse had gone.

“That’s all there is!” he said cheerfully. “Every single thing is going to end, so you need to get used to it. Then, when our time comes, we won’t get stuck in the bardo.”

“Eddie, what are you talking about?”

“The *bardo*,” he said. “You know. You read the George Saunders novel. Apparently death can be confusing, and it’s hard for the dead person to accept that they’re dead because no one likes change and life is all we’ve ever known. The bardo is supposed to be a place of transition, but if you don’t accept your death, you get stuck there, which would be like getting stuck in Penn Station for eternity.”

Perish the thought of such a perishing. “I think you’d know if you were dead,” I said, but the truth was I’d never thought of it one way or the other.

Eddie shook his head. “Think of Lucas lying in the lilac bed. Do you think he accepted the fact that he was dead? Lucas, who still hadn’t accepted that the Positivity series dried up in 1985? Lucas, who, at ninety, refused to sell his five-thousand-square-foot house with no bedroom on the first floor because he didn’t like change? What if his soul is still out there in the grass somewhere, yelling for your mother to come get him up?”

“Then it’s good she sold the house.” Though it probably wasn’t the sort of thing that should be disclosed to potential buyers.

“You’re supposed to talk to the dead person right after he or she dies. Talk to them for a couple of days, keep telling them they’re dead. Tell them it’s fine, this life is over, and now they need to go.”

“Where was he supposed to go?”

“Forward,” Eddie said firmly. “It’s a whole process.”

“There are a lot of other things I’d have to accept before I could accept that Lucas is still in the lilac bed.”

“Sure, sure, but this is chemo,” Eddie said. “For the sake of this conversation, let’s say it’s true and this is the way the system works: no one wants to change even though change is the never-ending engine of existence. We are attached to our life, so we want to stay alive even though we know we’re going to die. Are you following me here?”

“I am and I’m not,” I said. I didn’t like where it was going.

“So by practicing nonattachment and recognizing impermanence, we might have a happier life, and we might have an easier death.”

“Are you telling me this for a reason?”

Eddie nodded. “When the time comes, I want you to promise to tell me I’m dead. Maybe ask Leda to do it, too. And Henry, get him to do it. There’s a kid who’d be happy to tell someone they’re dead.”

“What about Jonathan?”

He considered Jonathan for the part. “I’m very fond of your husband, but I don’t want him to think I’m a fool.”

“What if he thinks I’m a fool, telling you you’re dead after you’re dead?”

“It’s not like you go around the house saying it. In fact, I think you can do the whole thing in your head, like a prayer. You can be praying to me: Eddie, you’re dead now. Trust me. You’re going to be fine.”

An enormous sadness came over me then, less like a blackbird passing the window and more like a pterodactyl, its great, leathery wings blocking the light. “Has Dr. Ocean told you something?”

“This isn’t about *my* death,” he said. “Well, it is and it isn’t. It’s more about death in general. You can think of it as your death, too. Once we’re comfortable with death, we’ll do a better job with our lives.”

“What have you been reading?”

“*The Tibetan Book of the Dead*.”

“Is it cultural appropriation to want to die like a Tibetan?”

Eddie looked at me sternly. “I want to do a good job,” he said. “I’d like my transition to be peaceful. I’m asking you for help.”

“Are you going to ask Skip and Polly to tell you you’re dead?”

Eddie ignored me. “This is what we’re going to do, right now, we’re going to practice. We’re going to tell Lucas Ekker that he’s dead and he needs to move on.”

“But you said it needed to happen in the first few days and he’s been dead for months now. The mushrooms have already finished him off.”

“This is about his spirit, not his body. Let’s assume his spirit is stuck in the bardo. Even if we’re late, we’re not going to do him any harm. And if we’re not late and he still needs guidance, we’ll be providing an invaluable service. I imagine that no one has checked in on his soul’s transition.”

“What if he’s not there?”

“Then we’ve wasted ten minutes of our lives that would have otherwise been spent sitting here. What difference does it make?”

“Okay,” I said, but I still had my doubts. “Are we doing this aloud?”

He shook his head and closed his eyes. “No, go ahead, start.” And that was that. He was already thinking of Lucas.

Eddie had gone to a Buddhism seminar two weeks ago, the same week Jonathan and I had rented a house in Wellfleet. We had invited Eddie to go to the beach with us, but he said no. The speaker was someone he was excited to hear, someone whose books Eddie had read. Now I couldn't remember who it was. I looked at Eddie in his giant chemo chair, the slowly collapsing plastic bag suspended overhead from a silver pole, the slender tubing bringing the poison into his body through the median cubital vein. Do your work, I prayed to the poison. Beat the odds, I prayed to Eddie. And then, because I'd been asked, I went forward in my own imagination to find my mother's third husband. I didn't think I was supposed to see him, and yet I did. I went into the backyard of the Winchester house that same late April morning he had died. My mother was sleeping, and I was the one who went outside to see what had taken him so long.

Lucas was in the grass, both of his long legs slightly twisted at uncomfortable angles, his blue chambray shirt and cloth jacket soaked with dew on his left side, the side he was lying on. His eyes were closed and his mouth was open and his white hair—Lucas did have beautiful hair—spread across the black dirt at the edge of the lilac bed. I don't know what I'd been expecting. I thought I would be meeting him in the bardo, but what did I know about the bardo, or about his spirit for that matter? I knew this man in this body. I knew this yard. That's what I got.

I lay down beside him. This was my imagination, of course, so it didn't matter that the grass was wet. All my life I'd kept a distance from him, standing back an extra six inches, twelve inches, from what might be considered normal. What had started as a child's quiet protest became a space that stayed between us for the rest of our lives. He was never a danger to me. I just couldn't stand the change. Now I looked at his skin, his nose, his eyelashes, which were white and remarkably long. I put my hand on his shoulder. "You're dead," I said to him. "You had a good death, a sudden death but it was fine. Everyone's fine. You need to stop hanging around now. Mom's good. She sold the house. The new people need you to leave. We all need you to leave." I gave his shoulder a squeeze. "Goodbye, Lucas."

I wondered then if Buddy had gotten stuck anywhere, but I doubted it. Buddy loved his life, but he knew it was over.

When I opened my eyes, Eddie was watching me. "How was it?" he asked.

“Perfectly fine. Not what I expected. You?”

“I didn’t really know him, of course. The last time I’d seen Lucas, I was still at Houghton, so he was young then. But I told him we were thinking about him, and I told him he should go.”

“What about Mary Carter?”

“What made you think of Mary Carter?” Eddie asked.

“Death makes me think of Mary Carter. Do you think she was stuck in the bardo? Is that what happened to her?”

He thought about it for a minute. “I keep forgetting you knew her.”

“I didn’t know her.”

“You know what I mean, you knew *of* her. But the answer is no. That was a whole other circumstance. Mary wasn’t dead.”

I pulled out the bag of cherries I’d brought from home this morning. There should always be some small surprise. “But all the people who visited her were dead. Maybe they were stuck.”

Eddie took a handful of cherries, and I handed him a paper cup for the pits and stems. “I think she was about to die,” he said. “She was in the space between life and death when you can see the people who died before you. I guess that’s a kind of bardo, too. I should ask. I remember when my mother was dying and she said her sister kept coming to see her. My mother said her sister would sit on the edge of my mother’s bed and pat her ankle. ‘Everybody’s waiting for you, Rosalie,’ she’d say.”

“Well then, maybe it’s the same thing. Everyone needs someone to tell them they’re dead.”

“I guess that’s right,” Eddie said.

“So Mary Carter’s people got there too early. Or maybe she was about to die, but then the horse came back for her.”

“I told you that story when you were *nine*,” Eddie said.

“I’m still working through the details.”

Eddie sighed. “I know. I think about it, too.”

A late start invariably resulted in a late end. When finally the bags had emptied and the nurse removed the line and taped a cotton ball into the crook of Eddie’s arm, we went out through the waiting room to find that even the receptionist had gone. At the elevator bank, Eddie held my arm with one hand and his cane in the other. I kept his bag with his legal pad and *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* over my shoulder.

“Put me in a taxi,” he said, then yawned. “You’re not going all the way downtown and then coming back up to get the train.”

I pulled him into me. “That’s the way this day ends, on the curb out front. Goodbye, Eddie! Good luck getting home.”

A woman in the elevator looked at the two of us. “She’s not letting you go,” she said to Eddie.

“Not a chance,” I said.

“I’m going to be fine,” he said.

“If I had my way, you’d come home with me,” I said. “And if you didn’t want to come home with me, I’d go home with you. I’d sleep on your sofa, at least for the night.” Eddie had a good sofa.

“You’re not sleeping on the sofa,” he said.

“Then the least I can do is take you home.”

“You should have been a lawyer,” Eddie said.

“Do what she tells you,” the woman in the elevator said. “It’s easier.”

And so we went back downtown together, Eddie and I, book and bag and cane. Jonas, the doorman, ushered us in. “Big day, Mr. Triplett?” he asked. That was how tired Eddie suddenly seemed.

“Long day,” Mr. Triplett said.

“But Daphne’s looking after you.” Jonas was a big man, probably my age. He was wearing a white short-sleeved dress shirt, a black tie and hat.

“Daphne’s always looking after me,” Eddie said.

“I’m going to get him upstairs,” I said to Jonas.

“You’ve got company,” Jonas said to Eddie.

Eddie looked around the lobby, but there was only one woman there going through her mail, some variety of doodle waiting at the end of a leash.

“Upstairs,” the doorman said quietly.

We leaned against the back wall of the elevator as we rode to the sixth floor. There were no end of people who might have come to visit, but probably only one who had the keys. Only one person other than me who Jonas knew to wave up. When we went down the hall, the door was open or Skip opened the door—it was hard to say.

The living room was bookshelves floor to ceiling. Whenever I was in Eddie’s apartment, I was thinking about all the things I meant to read, though I wasn’t thinking about that now.

"I thought maybe you were dead," Skip said, and Eddie walked straight into him, leaned against him as one might a tree.

"Everything was late," Eddie said.

"You might have called," Skip said. He was in his sock feet. In the dim light he looked considerably less foreboding. I wondered if he'd been taking a nap.

"I might have, except I didn't know you were coming in."

"That was the surprise," Skip said. "I brought dinner."

Eddie's eyes stayed closed. "How big of a surprise? Is Polly here?"

"She's at Mae-Mae's. I told her I was coming in to check on you." Skip put his hand on the back of Eddie's head. "You got yourself a cane."

"I don't use it," Eddie said, his face still leaning into Skip's chest.

"I'm going to go," I said.

Skip shook his head. I want to say he shook it sincerely. "Don't go. We've got dim sum," he said. "There's plenty."

I wondered if he bought food the same way Polly did. I told him I had to get back to Bronxville. Jonathan was waiting with dinner as well.

"Jonathan," Skip said. "I liked him." He was remembering our disastrous, long-ago brunch.

I tugged the cane from Eddie's hand. He let it go. "Get some rest, okay?"

"She keeps saving my life," Eddie said to Skip. "It's not like this is our first go-round."

"She's a good one," Skip said, and then he looked at me over the top of Eddie's head, mouthed the word *Okay*?

I nodded. I kissed the side of Eddie's head. Somehow in that exchange, Skip gave my head an affectionate pat. I wondered what anyone ever knows about another person's relationship. Looking at these two men leaning against one another in the middle of the room like a couple of support beams, one of them too tired to even go and sit down, I realized the answer was nothing. I knew nothing at all.

I managed to make it down in the elevator, through the lobby, and out onto the street before I called my husband. "Are you home?"

"Of course I'm home. Where are you?"

"Everything was late," I said, and then I had to stop because I was afraid I was going to cry. I leaned against Eddie's building, much the way Eddie had leaned against Skip.

"Daphne? Where are you?"

“I just got Eddie home. I’m on my way to the station. I wanted to tell you I’m late.”

“Do you want me to come and get you?”

“No,” I said, though honestly, I wasn’t sure if I could remember all the steps I needed to retrace to get back to my own life.

“Are you walking?”

“Not yet,” I said.

“Okay, point yourself uptown.”

I looked at the street signs to orient myself. “Uptown,” I said.

“We’re going to walk until you see a taxi, then you’re going to get in the taxi and go to Grand Central. Or you can stay where you are and I can call you a car.”

“No, this is good. I want to walk.” How had I missed how hot it was? The day itself was hot to begin with, but now the pavement and the buildings were all releasing the heat they absorbed over the course of the day. At least the phone was cool against my cheek, the phone having spent the day inside my dark purse.

“When I would take Candy for treatment—” Jonathan said.

I stopped him. “It’s not the same thing.”

“Why is it not the same thing?”

“Because she was young and she was dying and you had two children and she was the center of your life.”

He ignored me. “I’d make sure they’d schedule her first thing in the morning because then it was easier for me. We’d take the girls to school and I’d bring her to the hospital. I’d go with her to chemo and they’d get her started, and then I’d tell her I needed to run upstairs for a minute. I’d tell her someone was coming in for a meeting or that I had a call to return. I’d tell her I’d be right back. Are you walking?”

“Jonathan, don’t do this.”

“Are you walking?”

“I am.”

“And Candy would always say, fine, go. I’d tell her I’d be right back and then I would talk to anyone who came in my office. I’d go looking for people to talk to so I didn’t have to go back down there and sit with her.”

“You did the best you could.”

“No, I didn’t,” he said. “Not even close. And the worst of it was her sisters could have been there with her, or her mother, or her friends. They

all wanted to go, and I said no because I was the one who took her to chemo. Everybody knew that. I took her there and then I left her by herself.”

“If the goal is to make me feel better, you’re not succeeding.”

“It’s hard to show up for someone you love when they’re suffering,” Jonathan said. “I think I could do it now. I think I could do it for you, but when Candy was dying, I was too afraid.”

“I know.”

“You do know,” Jonathan said. “That’s what I’m saying. Eddie is sick and you’re there. Same way you were there for Buddy.”

“Wait, there’s a taxi.”

“Okay,” he said. “Go get the taxi. Let me know when you’re on the train.”

I told him I loved him in my most rushed voice and then ended the call. I did love Jonathan, but I didn’t want to think about the ways he had failed Candy any more than I wanted to think about the ways Skip had failed Eddie. All I wanted was to be one more person on this hot and anonymous sidewalk thinking about nothing at all. Except maybe Whistler. Whistler, who had exceeded everyone’s expectations.

Interstitial

(Friday and Saturday, January 18 and 19, 1980. Winchester, Massachusetts.)

The hands on Eddie's watch glowed in the dark, two green sticks of illumination against the all-encompassing darkness. Timex. Takes a licking and keeps on ticking. Abigail had bought it for him for his birthday and he liked it. The casing was rugged and had an exterior ring of numbers to track Greenwich Mean Time in case he decided to fly a plane. "She bought you a Timex?" Skip had said to Eddie the last time they were together, the Timex in his hand. They'd split the difference on travel, each taking the train to New London in order to be home for dinner. Eddie had put the watch on the nightstand. Was that the last time? He did not mean if he made it out of this situation alive, he would break it off with Skip. He meant there was a possibility that things might not work out. That the outcome of driving up to a raspberry farm in the middle of winter, in the middle of the night to see the stars, could be his own death. He never thought that Daphne could die. His imagination was not big enough to encompass that. She would find a way out, but he was shattered and pinned and possibly freezing. The thought made his eyes sting, which was ridiculous. The last thing he needed to do was start crying over his own death. His missed potential. His unlived dreams. If they did get out of there, and he still put the odds in their favor, he should break it off with Skip once and for all, devote himself to Abigail and Leda and this one, this dream child curled against his chest beneath the silver space blanket. He would knock off the occasional pickups, too. No good would come of that. And he would write a novel. A great novel. Who gets such a chance at thirty-two? He thought of Robert Frost, "Wild Grapes," *And the life I live now's an extra life / I can waste as I please on whom I please.*

But if he could waste his life on whom he pleased, wouldn't it please him more to waste it on men? Survival could finally allow him to be gay

because he'd *always* been gay. Why was he married to Abigail? Why had he waited around for Skip? Couldn't a second chance mean finally, fully, living the life he'd been given, instead of contorting himself into someone else's expectations? Abigail deserved more than the half-life he had to offer. And Skip deserved Polly. That's right, Eddie thought. You heard me.

He needed to make a choice, go one way or the other instead of spending his life trying to cover all the bases. That was the problem.

No, that wasn't the problem. The problem was the temperature inside the car. He wished the watch—which was both water-resistant (not helpful) and shockproof (still running)—could tell him the temperature inside the car, or maybe he didn't want to know. One thing was certain: if they made it out alive, they'd have Buddy Zabriskie to thank for it. The space blanket was their salvation.

Buddy Zabriskie, my god, now there was a man. He pictured Buddy out on his boat, pulling up nets full of fish. Eddie told himself to knock it off. Daphne had her mittened hands beneath his arms. He had his hands (no gloves or hat, because he was an idiot) balled up in the plush fur of her coat. She was a scrap of a thing, but she still generated heat.

"Eddie?" Her voice came soft from underneath the silver blanket, like she was afraid of waking him.

"Awake," he said.

"I have to pee."

Coincidentally, this was the other thing Eddie had been thinking about, after thinking about Skip and Buddy and freezing to death in the station wagon. "Me, too."

"Really?"

What he didn't say, what he'd been thinking, was that if they gave in to nature and peed on themselves, their genitals would be frozen solid in twenty minutes. "Find the empty Coke cup."

Daphne, who had never been asleep, was ready for a task, and was ready to empty her overfull bladder.

"Be careful," he said when he felt her shift. "I live in fear of moving my ankle." How funny that he said it like that, exactly the truth, exactly what he was thinking. His ankle had a consistent throb, but he knew beneath that throb was a truly terrifying pain.

Daphne had been lying with her back against the driver-side door, her legs over Eddie's lap, her head on Eddie's chest, completely covered by the

silver blanket. She knew the Chevrolet like she knew the bedroom she shared with her sister. She knew where the extra cup was, the one without the ice. She knew how to stand up without jiggling Eddie's leg. She had shed her corporeal self and now was free to be a butterfly, disturbing nothing. She closed her eyes so as not to waste her energy straining to see. She couldn't see, she didn't need to. She put her hand around the cup. "Got it."

"Okay, good job. Now you go in the backseat and pee."

"In the *cup*?"

"It's been done before."

Daphne thought about this. She tried to work out the logistics in her mind. "What about toilet paper?"

"Napkins," he said.

She knew where the leftover napkins from the chicken were. For that matter, she knew where the chicken was, though neither she nor Eddie wanted anything to do with it.

Carefully, carefully, Daphne flipped herself into the backseat, and, finding the most stable place to squat was on the left-hand backseat window, pulled down her navy tights with one hand and positioned the cup with the other. "Sing something," she said. Now that she was ready, she could barely hold it.

"*We are poor little lambs who have lost our way.*" Eddie belted it out like a Broadway audition, and she laughed.

They sang the chorus together. "*Baa, baa, baa.*"

"*We are little black sheep who have gone astraaaay . . .*"

Again, they baaed. The chicken place had upsized their drinks to extra large, standard practice when two drinks were purchased with the large bucket of chicken tenders, and thank heavens for it because Daphne almost needed the whole cup. "Wow," she said, pulling up her tights.

"Finished?"

"Now what?"

"Now you've got to empty the cup and give it to me. That part's up to you. Just be quick."

Daphne put the full cup at her feet, then raised both hands. She wasn't tall enough to reach the crank and so she stopped to assess the situation. She needed to be taller. She pulled out the armrest between the seats and

climbed up, then located the crank of the right-side back window directly above her head. Then she began to turn.

“Tell me what’s going on,” Eddie said.

The weather inside the car shifted as even colder air rushed in.

“I got it!” Daphne said. She could smell the trees.

“Now what?”

“Now I have the cup. Now I’m back on the armrest.” And then—pop!—Daphne’s bloodied head was out of the car. She tipped up her chin and saw the stars beyond the crosshatch of black branches. Oh, great and glorious night! Nothing had ever been as beautiful as this. Her hands were shaking and so she tipped her urine as far past the roof of the car as she could reach. At the last possible second, she remembered to hold on to the cup. In her excitement, she had nearly let it go.

She stepped back down and handed the cup and some napkins over the seat to Eddie. His fingers were nearly too frozen to manage his fly.

“You’re going to have to sing,” he said.

There was no doubt about her choice. “*See the US-A in your Chev-ro-let,*” Daphne sang with gusto. “*America is asking you to call. Drive your Chevrolet through the USA. America’s the greatest land of all.*” It was the girls’ favorite jingle—no one knew why. They sang it every morning when they got in the car to go to school.

“One more verse,” Eddie called out.

Which, of course, she knew, the last line being *Life is completer in a Chevy*.

Eddie laughed so hard he was lucky that nothing spilled. When he was done, she took the cup. She was brave about it and neither of them made a joke. She climbed back out in the night and poured it away.

“I feel like a completely new person,” Eddie said once she was settled back into her spot against him.

“Me, too,” Daphne said.

“I wish you weren’t here,” Eddie said. “I wish you were home, but since you aren’t home and you are here, I want to say I can’t think of anyone I’d rather be in a car crash with.”

“Me, too,” Daphne said.

Eddie pulled the silver blanket back over their heads. “We should try to get some sleep now.”

“Good night, Eddie,” she said.

“Good night, Duck,” Eddie said.

And this time Daphne did fall asleep, but Eddie did not because now he understood that there was only one way for this story to go. In the morning Daphne was going to have to crawl out the window alone and try to save them.

At the first crack of dawn they were awake. They might as well have been inside the giant freezer chest at the dock where the Zabriskies stored their fish. Fish shrink-wrapped in plastic and frozen into concrete slabs.

“Daphne?” Eddie said.

“Right here,” she said, and shivered.

“It snowed.”

It had taken Eddie several minutes of staring out the window to pinpoint what was different. In his defense, the light was dim and he hadn’t seen anything at all since yesterday and his brain had turned to ice inside his skull. Why couldn’t he see out the windows? What was that fluffy stuff?

Daphne pulled the silver blanket down, looked around. “Oh boy,” she said.

Had it snowed an inch? A foot? Was it snowing now? From inside the igloo of their existence, nothing could be known.

“I’m going to the bathroom again,” Daphne said. Now she knew the drill so she didn’t have to sit around thinking about it. She got up carefully. One of her legs had been at a weird angle and had fallen asleep. She wiggled her toes until she felt it coming back to life, then swung into the backseat.

“Sing, please,” she said.

Eddie had less energy now. “*Lambs, lambs, lambs, lambs, poor and lost, easily tossed, gone away, gone astray.*”

“*Baa, baa, baa.*”

Tights up, onto the armrest for the window crank, turn the crank, and then the block of accumulated snow came straight down on her head, snow down the back of her neck, down the front of her sweater. She shook like a dog.

“Careful!” Eddie said. He could feel the vibration in his leg.

“Sorry. It surprised me.”

“How much is there?”

Daphne went back to get her cup of urine then, stepping onto the armrest again, stuck her head into the snowy morning. She dispensed with the urine first.

“Hand me the cup,” Eddie said. “You can give me the weather report while I’m busy.”

She brought him the cup, then went back up, popping herself out into the cold winter wonderland. “Lots of snow.” Snow everywhere. Snow blown around and stuck to the sides of trees.

“More than six inches?”

“Maybe?” She didn’t know how to tell.

“Is it snowing now?”

“Yes.” Big fat flakes were wafting onto her sock hat. She remembered the cut on her face. Her face felt stiff.

“Can you see anything?”

“Trees.”

“Any houses?”

“Somewhere,” Daphne said. “Nothing I can see.”

“Can you tell if we’re near the bottom of a hill or near the top?” Eddie tried to phrase this one carefully, because what he wanted to ask was how well anchored the car appeared to be and did they have further to fall?

Daphne put a hand on either side of the window frame and pulled herself up farther to look.

“Jesus,” Eddie said, watching her dangle there. “Be careful.” From where he sat, she appeared to be weightless, boneless, her infinitely flexible self rising up through the window like smoke. Then she came down.

“About halfway? It looks straight going up and straight going down.”

None of this struck him as good news. “Okay, come get the cup and we’ll talk about it.”

Down she came to take the Coke cup in her mittened hand and was gone again, dispensing with his waste. Now he could see it snowing into the car. If they survived, he was going to talk to Abigail about signing Daphne up for gymnastics or ballet. He would pay for the lessons himself. This talent she had, something should come of it. Never had he seen a human being so assured in her own body.

She cranked the window closed and slowly worked her way back into the front seat, sitting in the wheel well on the passenger side.

“Don’t you want to get under the blanket?” he asked.

“I’m all wet from the snow.” She ran her mitten over her hat, flicking away the flakes.

If the car had opened up a break in the woods, the snow had closed it. If someone was looking for them, they were now harder to find. But no one was looking for them. Abigail and Leda would be waking up at the hospital now. Abigail might possibly call the house again, but when he didn't answer for the second time, she would be annoyed, not concerned. She would decide that in the future, he would have to call her. With everything she had to deal with, she would still be a good way away from worrying about the two of them. "So I'm thinking," he began.

"I'm going to have to find somebody to help us," Daphne said.

Eddie smiled at her, this remarkable, bloody-faced child. He was almost too moved to speak. "Yes."

"You can't go," she said. "And no one's going to find us down here. We could wait awhile, see if maybe it gets warmer, but it could also snow more, and that would make it harder to walk. Hey, do you think we could turn the car on for a little while to run the heater?" It had only now occurred to her.

"I tried," he said. "The car's dead." This wasn't true, of course. He hadn't tried, but lying was preferable to explaining his fear of fire. *Some say the world will end in fire, / Some say in ice.* What was it with Frost poems and car accidents?

"So what am I going to do?"

As if he knew. "You're going to pull yourself out of the window and go to the top of the hill. Check and see if anyone's in the farmhouse. Look there first. If no one's there, then you need to find the road. There are two roads, one on either side of the hill, and either one you walk down is going to bring you to a house in less than a mile. When you see a house, you knock on the door. If nobody answers, go to the next house. If a car passes you, wave at it like crazy so they'll stop."

All this time, Daphne hadn't been afraid. She was with Eddie, who might well have been her favorite person after her sister, and they were having a huge adventure. They were spending time together, solving problems, singing songs. She knew she could get out of the car. She could get up the hill. The rest of it she wasn't so sure about.

"What?" Eddie asked.

"I'm not supposed to go inside people's houses or get in their cars if I don't know them."

Ah, that. Sure. A lifetime of purposefully imprinted fear. "That's right," he said. "Everybody is always going to tell you that because there's a tiny

percentage of bad people in the world, and the bad people get all the publicity. Everybody's got to be vigilant against the bad people. I get that. But there are so many more people who are going to want to help you. I mean so, so many more good people that you couldn't begin to count them. If I thought somebody out there was going to hurt you, I'd say we were better off taking our chances waiting it out in the car. But I swear to you, it's mostly good people out there, with a few bad people around the edges. I'm more worried about you falling in the snow than I'm worried about you running into a bad person."

"I'm not going to fall in the snow," Daphne said.

"Then I think you're going to save the day."

Her departure was slowed by the argument they had about the space blanket. Eddie insisted she take it with her. The blanket would keep her warm and dry and make her easier to see from a distance. "You'll be a walking reflective blob," he said. "Everybody slows down for those."

But Daphne refused. "I've got my teddy bear coat, my hat, scarf, mittens, tights, boots, sweater, jumper. All you've got is your stupid jacket."

"I didn't think I'd be sleeping in a car," he said, though she was right. He had dressed for work. He was still dressed for work.

"So you have to keep the blanket."

"You're going *outside* in the snow. You're the one who has to brave the elements, find civilization and save us. All I have to do is wait in the car."

Daphne turned her head away, refusing to look at him. Abigail did the same thing when she was mad. "I'm not taking the blanket."

"*Your* father put it in the car for *your* safety, not mine."

"Dad would want you to have it," she said. This was probably true, as Buddy would weigh out each party's potential for survival and then award the blanket to whoever was weaker.

"Okay, Daphne, okay, I didn't want to do this."

"Then don't," Daphne said.

"I'm the grown-up here. I'm telling you."

It was a terrible breach of the trust between them, but it also made Daphne realize that all she had to do was leave without the blanket. She didn't have to win the argument. What was he going to do about it? Follow her? Make her take it? She rested the cup of ice and the bucket of disgusting chicken and their pee cup up against him.

"What are you doing?"

“Leaving.” When she’d climbed into the backseat, she leaned over and gave him a hard kiss on the top of the head. The space blanket discussion was finished. “I love you,” she said.

“I love you, Duck.”

She climbed up and cranked the window open, leaning back as the shelf of new accumulation dumped into the car. “I’m not going to be able to close this behind me.”

“That’s okay,” he said.

She lifted her torso through the window with the strength in her arms. For a moment her lower half dangled there, coat, tights, boots. He knew she was taking in the enormity of the forest. “Daphne?”

“Yeah,” she called.

“When you find someone to help us, tell them I’m your father, okay?”

They both knew what he was saying. “Okay!” she called.

“Be careful!”

One leg pulled up and then the other. Then, after another second, her face appeared in the open frame. “I’m coming back to save you,” she said.

“Whistler,” he said, and waved. Oh, he was terrified. He didn’t want her to leave. He wanted to hold her again, the two of them curled up together. Come back. Don’t go, don’t go.

Daphne smiled hugely, like the hard job had already been finished. Then she was gone.

Leda's forehead rested on the heels of her hands, her fingers buried in her hair. Maybe she was thinking of her own children wandering around in the snow, or maybe she was thinking of me. We were back on the couch in her living room. "You were nine," she said finally.

"Funny to think my bravest moment would come at nine."

"You saved Eddie's life."

I shook my head. "Eddie wouldn't have died."

"Why not? Were there enough chicken tenders to last until spring? You saved Eddie's life, you saved your own life, and no one ever said a thing about it."

"Well, there was a lot going on. You'd had surgery, and then Eddie had surgery, and then Mom threw Eddie out."

Leda raised her finger to her lips and I remembered to keep my voice down. Our mother was still asleep in Henry's room.

It was late September. All three of Leda and Steve's kids were off at school now. I was back at school, teaching my favorite AP British survey, two sections of American lit, and the perennially oversubscribed creative writing workshop. Jonathan was still the hospital administrator in Bronxville. Our mother had come to New York to see all of us, or she had come to New York to see Eddie and so we provided the backdrop. Eddie's white count had dropped to reasonable levels after his last round of chemo. Eventually it would come back up, but it hadn't yet. These were the good days. He was unsteady, but he held on to his cane. He had invited all of us to lunch at his apartment, even though Leda said that she would have the lunch at her apartment. I offered, too.

"Catering," he said. "All I'm doing is paying for it."

"But you don't need to do anything," I said.

"Daphne," he said.

And so I stopped. That's one of the things about age. If you're lucky, you learn when to stop.

It was Saturday, and Jonathan and I had come in early on the train. The morning was so bright and blue that Jonathan and Steve decided to walk a loop in the park. Steve claimed to have ideas about restructuring the Bronxville hospital's debt, but Leda and I suspected they wanted to get out of the apartment before our mother woke up.

"What did you think had happened to us after the accident?" I asked Leda.

She sat for a while, trying to remember what she had known when she was seven. One of the many things I loved about my sister was the way she managed to engage with every question. "I thought you and Eddie had done something stupid," she said finally, "going to look for raspberries in the middle of winter. And that he wrecked the car and broke his ankle and you cut your face. How did you cut your face, anyway? Did the windshield break?"

I shook my head. "I never figured that out. Did you know we were in the car overnight?"

Again, she stopped to consider the past, which was so far away from us now. "I don't think so. I don't think I knew any of it. Did you ever tell Mom what happened?"

"No, but she must have asked Eddie about it. I don't know, maybe she didn't. I remember Mom meeting us in the emergency room when the ambulance came in. Eddie and I each had our own gurney. I don't know why they put me on a gurney, but they did—"

"Because you were *nine*," my sister said. "And your face was bloody and you were probably hypothermic."

"Anyway, Mom took it badly. In her defense, she'd probably been thinking you were going to die. She wasn't in a good place to begin with. When she started screaming, it made me realize how calm Eddie had been through the whole thing, and how much that had helped."

"What I want to know," Leda said, "is how you lived without Eddie after that? I mean, I missed him. When I got home from the hospital and he wasn't there anymore, I remember feeling incredibly sad, but to have gone through what you went through together?"

"I packed it away," I said. "I put the whole thing in a box and shoved it behind the hot water heater in the basement. Then I forgot about it. Isn't that what people do? They pack things up and then years later they hire you to unpack it for them."

“I guess.”

Into our conversation about the past, our mother appeared present tense in the living room wearing a matching nightgown-and-robe set, a dark green satin covered in yellow hibiscus. She looked at the two of us on the couch. “Why did you let me sleep so late?”

“We don’t have to be at Eddie’s until noon,” Leda said.

“Hi, Mom.” I admired her for bringing a robe. I would never think to pack a robe.

“I don’t want to go over there looking like I just rolled out of bed.”

Leda looked at her watch. “So you have two and a half hours to pull yourself together.”

“Did you ever think this might be stressful for me? I haven’t seen the man in forty-five years.”

“You’re here because you wanted to see Eddie,” I said. “But if it feels stressful, don’t do it. We’re going to go, but you don’t have to. Either way is fine.”

“I’m going to go,” she said. “But I think the two of you could be a little sympathetic.”

“Sympathetic to what?” Leda asked.

“Do you want coffee?” I asked. Didn’t Lucas make her coffee in the morning?

She nodded. “That would be good.”

I started to get up, but Leda put her hand on my ankle. My feet had been resting in my sister’s lap. “Mom?” Leda began. “Did you know that when Eddie and Daphne were in the car accident, Daphne went out in the snow by herself to find someone to help them?”

“The car accident?” Our mother was seventy-seven and her posture was perfect. For that matter, so was her face. She’d had work done, but that was decades before, and now she didn’t look done at all. She only looked beautiful. A case could be made that she looked better than Leda or I did, certainly better than we looked this morning.

“She was nine,” Leda said.

“Is this some sort of an ambush? I didn’t send her out in the snow. Why are we talking about the car accident?”

“Nostalgia,” Leda said.

“Well, don’t get me started. If you talk about the car accident, I’m going to get mad at Eddie again, and this is not the day for me to be mad at

Eddie.”

“She’s got a point,” I said, and got up to see if there was any coffee left in the pot.

I had invited our mother to stay with us in Bronxville, but she said that anyone who had the opportunity to stay in the city would choose to do so. The only advantage to Bronxville was Jonathan, as our mother greatly preferred my husband to Leda’s. Jonathan, she said, was naturally gregarious and fluent in all matters medical, a topic of conversation she particularly enjoyed, while Steve was remote and had a tendency to disappear even when he was in the room with you. Still, when everything went on the scale, an Upper West Side apartment with a park view and Steve made a more compelling package than Bronxville and Jonathan.

Even with the two and a half hours allotted, we ended up having to wait. Steve and Jonathan came back from the park. Steve took a shower and then joined us while we drank our coffee. We sat in the living room, my sister and I with our husbands, and waited for our mother.

“I’m going to call for a car,” Steve said, looking at his phone.

“Don’t do it,” Leda said. “It will only be more frustrating if the car is waiting, too.”

There was nothing particularly egregious about our mother’s behavior, but the four of us were out of practice. Steve’s mother had died when he was in college, Jonathan’s mother had been gone for two years, and Leda and I rarely had to deal with our mother because she favored her sons from her third marriage.

“My mother was the opposite,” Jonathan said. “If we were supposed to leave the house at ten o’clock, she’d be sitting alone in the car at nine thirty, waiting. As far as she was concerned, being on time was the same thing as being late.”

“Your mother was very conscientious,” I said.

“What about the happy medium?” Steve said. “The one where you leave the house at the hour you agreed to leave?”

But then she was there in her blue silk blouse and billowy trousers, two tasteful gold chains lying flat against her neck, impeccable makeup. “Is everyone ready?” she asked, as if she were the one who’d been waiting.

“We are now,” my husband said. He stood and held out his hand and she took his hand. She loved him so much more than Steve, who was on his

phone now, ordering the car. That was the way it went in families. Everyone had their part.

The four of us would have taken the subway to Chelsea, but there were five of us and so an extra-large SUV was ordered.

“Look at you,” Eddie said when we came through the door. He went right to our mother, took her in his arms. “Look at my beautiful ex-wife.”

I could see Eddie’s apartment through my mother’s eyes. She had always wanted to live in the city, but this place wouldn’t have been anywhere near big enough for all of us—that was what she was thinking. Raising her family, she would have needed Leda’s apartment. But now Chelsea was chic, and a place like this would be big enough if it were only the two of them.

There they stood, entwined, while Leda and I looked on and our husbands looked away. It had been one possible scenario—Eddie and Abigail—which could have worked had every single thing about them been different.

“I thought you’d be sick,” our mother said. “Daphne said you’ve been sick, but you look perfectly fine to me.”

“You’re very kind,” Eddie said. He continued to hold both her hands.

“The girls exaggerate everything,” she said. “The boys don’t do that. Turns out what they say about boys is true, they’re easier.”

“I’ve found that to be the case,” Eddie said, and our mother whooped out a laugh. He had caught her off her guard.

On the other side of the room, my sister put her hand in mine.

“You have wonderful children,” Eddie said, then added for good measure, “You’ve been a wonderful mother.”

Eddie had no idea if she’d been a wonderful mother, or he based his assessment on the years he had seen her in the role, or it was one of those meaningless things one says to fill a conversational space. Or maybe he was right. Again, I remembered what Leda had told me about bravery and resilience. Leda and I were happy, after all. We’d made good lives with men who loved us. We liked our work. We were, for the most part, remarkably untroubled by the past.

Eddie took my mother around the apartment. In the kitchen, he introduced her to Marta, his housekeeper, who had come to serve lunch and then clean up. Marta sat on a stool scrolling through her phone, and when he said her name, she looked up and waved. He showed my mother the

bedroom. We didn't follow them there, but we could hear them laughing. Jonathan looked at me in alarm. When they came back to the living room, Eddie took her to the case of books he had edited. She pulled one from the shelf. "*This* was you?" she asked, opening it up. A huge bestseller, prizewinner, a book that everyone had read.

"I didn't write it."

"But you brought it into the world." She hugged the book to her chest. "I loved this book so much." She put it back and took out another, marveling. "This one, too?"

"That one I may as well have written," Eddie said. "That one I take full credit for."

She shook her head. "You were a brilliant editor. Even when you were in that little closet at Houghton. You were better than any of them."

"I wasn't, but thank you."

"I'm serious. I envy you your career. After Lucas and I got married, I dropped out. They promised to bring me back to work on his books, but then there were no more books. The next thing I knew, I was home with two new babies. I didn't know anybody anymore. There was no way I could keep up." She couldn't stop staring at the book's cover. "I loved publishing. I wish I'd stayed."

He shook his head. "Publishing was ruined. Amazon, Germans, the end of antitrust laws, printing in China, take your pick. You left in the golden age. Keep those happy memories."

"But what did I ever do with my life? I didn't *do* anything," she said.

"You've had a full and beautiful life," Eddie told her.

She ran her fingers across the spines like keys on a piano. "Nothing like this," she said.

Eddie, I knew, still carried the burden of the novel he had meant someday to write, while my mother regretted that she hadn't come up with more publicity campaigns. Still, from the perspective of a daughter standing in the living room of a Chelsea apartment, it didn't seem that either of them had done a bad job.

Marta brought the plates to the table. Four of us opted for orange juice and two of us went for mimosas, which were followed up with glasses of champagne. "I never understood the need to put orange juice in champagne because it's Saturday afternoon," my mother said. Eddie agreed.

“Did you know,” Leda said to the table, “that when Daphne was nine years old, she climbed out of a wrecked car in a snowstorm by herself to go find help?”

“Leda,” our mother said sternly.

“She saved Eddie’s life,” Leda said.

“That’s a little hyperbolic,” my mother said, holding her glass.

We all looked to Eddie, who smiled at me. “No, she did. Daphne saved my life.”

I had never thought of it that way, but if it were true, I would never need to do anything else.

“I didn’t know about it,” Leda said. “I thought I did, but all I knew was a story I’d made up when I was seven. Daphne’s been telling me what happened, how you were in the hospital with me”—she nodded at our mother—“and Eddie picked her up from school and they went to the raspberry farm.”

“I really wish you wouldn’t do this,” our mother said.

“Why not? I’m telling you, Daphne did the most amazing thing. She should have had her picture on the front page of the paper.”

“It was a terrible time,” our mother said, “and I don’t see why we have to dredge it up on an otherwise happy occasion.”

“I want to hear what happened,” Eddie said to me. I was across from him at the table. Leda was on his right side and our mother was on his left. “I never knew. We weren’t ever alone again, or we were alone for a minute when you would come to my room in the hospital, but we didn’t get to talk. I never told you how petrified I was after you left, or how much I missed you. That time in the car, before you came back, I think that was the loneliest I’ve ever been. Isn’t that funny? I felt like we’d been in that car together for months and then you shot out the window and were gone.” He looked at my mother. “She was afraid that someone was going to snatch her, that she’d knock on the wrong door or get in a car with the wrong person, and I said, ‘No, no, everyone’s nice. You’re going to find good people who want to help you.’”

“I remember that,” I said.

“Then I’m alone with my broken ankle and my foot pinned under the emergency brake, thinking, Someone is going to take her and lock her in a basement and I won’t be able to get her back.”

“I’m glad you didn’t tell me that,” I said, thinking of how his case for human decency had informed my life. I believed him, and by believing him, I had found it to be true.

“I had a pack of cigarettes in my jacket pocket, but I was too afraid of striking a match and blowing up the car.”

“What *happened*?” Jonathan asked. He was as scared as Eddie.

Leda looked at him. “You don’t know?”

“I knew Daphne was in a car accident when she was young, but I had it in my head that Abigail was driving.”

“That *I* was driving?” our mother asked.

Leda laughed.

“You make it sound like I’ve been keeping all this from you, but I’m not,” I said. “Who goes through life thinking about what happened when they were nine?”

“It’s all people think about,” Leda said.

Eddie put his hands flat on the table, like we were going to do this as a séance. “Tell us now.”

My mother shook her head. “Please don’t.”

“I’d like to know.” Steve, who had made it through the entire lunch speaking a maximum of two sentences, voted to hear what had happened at the raspberry farm in 1980.

“You don’t have to tell us everything,” Eddie said. “But I would like to hear the part I wasn’t there for.”

I looked at our mother. I didn’t blame her. We were having a nice time. “Mom?”

“Fine,” she said, but didn’t look at me.

And so I went ahead. “Okay, first off, I kept that coat until I left my apartment in Newton. I couldn’t make myself get rid of it.”

“What coat?” Jonathan asked.

“My teddy bear coat. Fake fur was all the rage among the fourth grade set in Winchester at the time. I had begged Mom to buy me one for my birthday, and it kept me from freezing to death.”

“An excellent investment,” my mother said.

“It was a magnificent coat,” Eddie said. He covered my mother’s hand with his hand. “I remember we walked over to Filene’s one day at lunch to pick it out.”

Our mother smiled.

When I went to stay with the Cathcarts, when Eddie and Leda were still in the hospital, Mr. Cathcart got all the blood out of the fur. I remember him standing at the kitchen sink, working on it with a bottle of dishwashing liquid, and by the time he was finished, it looked as good as new.

“The hardest part was jumping off the car,” I said. “The car was on its side, and I’d crawled out through the window on the top. I was afraid something awful would happen when I jumped, that I’d knock the car over. I was worried about your ankle,” I said to Eddie.

“With good reason,” he said.

“I was also worried about my own ankle. There was a lot of snow, so I had no idea what I’d be jumping into. I didn’t know how deep the snow was or what was beneath it. Anyway, that might have been the worst of it.”

Steve asked the make of the car.

“Chevrolet Impala station wagon, 1972,” my mother said.

He took out his phone and tapped it in. “The Chevrolet Impala wagon was 80.5 inches in width, so, six and a half feet wide.” He looked at me like I was still considering my options. “That’s a big jump.”

“I ended up going to the back of the car. I held on to the bumper and put my foot on top of the license plate. Anyway, that worked.”

“How do you *remember* this?” my mother asked.

“I had a lot of time to think,” I said.

I had never told this part of the story. Back in the day, I would have told it a hundred times had anyone asked, but no one did. Given all that went on in our house in January of 1980, it seemed worse than self-aggrandizing to list my own accomplishments. But as it turned out, the lack of telling had kept the story fresh. As I recounted my trip from car to civilization for the assembled luncheon, I began to shiver. I remembered the confusion caused by so many snow-covered trees and the panic I felt climbing up the hill, away from the car, away from Eddie, like I was an astronaut leaving the capsule to drift off into space. “The car hadn’t gone that far down the hill, but it was hard to climb out, you know? It was steep and there was so much snow.” And I didn’t want to do it. I didn’t want to leave him there.

When I got to the top, there was nothing but an enormous field of snow with snow coming down. I wasn’t six steps from the woods, but when I turned around, I wasn’t sure exactly where I’d come out and I couldn’t see the car. I thought about screaming to Eddie to see if he could still hear me, but I didn’t want to scare him. Even though we had driven a station wagon

into the trees, I knew I wouldn't be able to find this exact place again. I could find someone and bring them back to the top of this hill and still not be able to find Eddie. "Before we found the bandages in the back of the car, Eddie had used his tie to bind his handkerchief to my head, and the tie was still around my neck."

"The tie that binds," Eddie said.

"I took it off and tied it to a branch so I'd know how to find you."

Eddie shook his head in wonder. "If only my mother were alive so I could tell her what a noble purpose the tie she gave me served."

"You took the right Zabriskie sister to the raspberry farm," Leda said. "If Daphne had been the one to get appendicitis and you picked me up from school, we'd both be dead now."

"What happened?" Jonathan asked for the second time. (Later that night, at home in our bed, he would be nearly angry with me, asking why I hadn't told him before, like maybe he would have been able to find me, to help me. He was afraid, that was all. "The thought of you dying as a child," he said, but that was the end of the sentence.)

"There was nothing in that field," I said. "No house, no road, just white. I wondered if Eddie was wrong about the farmhouse, or maybe this wasn't even a raspberry farm, not that I knew what a raspberry farm was supposed to look like, but I would have thought there would be something there. And if this wasn't the raspberry farm, then there might not be two roads. But it was cold and the wind was blowing the snow hard and so I decided to walk straight, figuring I was bound to run into something."

Years later, in school, they showed us a movie about Shackleton's disastrous trip to the Antarctic and how his ship became trapped in the ice, and I sat at my desk with my eyes closed, and when I couldn't stand the sound of the narrator's voice another minute, I ran out of the darkened classroom and threw up in the hall.

The landscape was flat and wide. The snow came up to the middle of my calf and drifted into my galoshes. I thought of how much colder it would be in the station wagon with the back window open and the snow coming in, and I tried to go faster. Then I did see a house, a big one, and I ran to it, but there wasn't anyone in there. I banged on the door, but I could tell from looking in the windows. I went out to the barn, not that I thought there would be people in the barn, but I thought maybe there would be a horse.

"A horse?" my mother asked.

“That’s a different story,” Eddie said.

Marta was standing in the doorway to the kitchen, listening.

The barn was locked, too. Everything was locked for the winter. When I came back to the house, I couldn’t remember what direction I’d come from and my footprints were gone. I finally decided to walk back towards the woods, thinking that if I walked along the edge I’d find the road.

“I can’t stand this,” my mother said.

And again, Eddie touched her hand. “She’s right here,” he said.

“I won’t make this long,” I said, “but I found Eddie’s tie hanging in the tree. I felt like I’d been walking for an hour and somehow I’d come back to the exact same spot. I thought about going back to the car and resting for a while. I was tired then, and my feet were frozen.” I looked at Eddie. I was that girl again, and he was waiting for me to save him. “I didn’t want to disappoint you,” I said.

“Not possible,” Eddie said.

We had driven off the road—that’s what I had failed to factor. If we had driven off the road, then the road couldn’t be that far away. As soon as I’d had the thought, I found it. There was a wide break in the trees and the snow was smooth. I would have sworn it had been years ago that we had driven up to look at stars, but it had only been the night before. “Doesn’t that seem impossible?” I said to Eddie.

He nodded at me, but he didn’t say anything.

“You were right about people being kind, even if you were making it up. The first house I came to was close to the road, a small yellow house. The lights were on. The woman who answered took one look at me and pulled me inside. She started calling for her husband, whose name was Frank, and I remember there were two little girls, and when they saw me, they started crying, screaming, really. There was a big dog and the mother was trying to hold the dog back and yelling at all of them to stop and calling for her husband. Such a long stretch of silence and then all of that. Then Frank the husband came out. He had been shaving. He had a towel around his neck and shaving cream on half his face and he kneeled down in front of me and said, ‘What happened?’”

“What a question,” Eddie said.

“And I told him there had been an accident, and that my father was still in the car, and the mother looked at me in complete terror and she said, ‘Dead?’ And then all the barking and screaming stopped for a second, or it

probably didn't stop, but it did in my mind. I felt so lucky, and I told her, no, no, not dead, but you were stuck. We needed help."

I wish I could remember their last name. Frank had a cool head, I remember that. I asked to use the bathroom, and it seemed like by the time I came back there was an ambulance and a police car and a fire truck pulling up to the house. I know it couldn't have been that fast, but that's what it felt like. Frank was dressed and ready. He'd wiped the rest of the shaving cream off his face, and I could see the tracks in his dark beard that the razor had made. His wife said I should stay there with her, and before I had the chance to object, he said no, that I was the one who knew where the car was. And I did know. Frank and I got in the back of the police car and the two policemen asked me questions about what time the accident had happened and why we had been up at the raspberry farm to begin with.

"We were going to look at the stars," I said, and the officer who was driving nodded and said he used to bring his kids up there sometimes to look at stars, and Frank said they went there, too. I told them to make a right at the top of the road, and then I showed them where the tie was in the tree.

"I bet the cops loved that," Eddie said.

"They didn't let me go with them to find you. I'd turned into a child again. They didn't want me out in the snow or they didn't want me to see the car. Maybe they thought you were going to be dead. They said they'd be able to find you."

"And so they did," Eddie said.

"I wanted to go," I said, but that wasn't true. I was grateful to have been forbidden, to be made to sit in the overheated car. I couldn't imagine how they were going to get him out of there.

"Policemen, firemen, three guys from the ambulance, quite a party," Eddie said.

"I stayed in the police car with Frank, and he told me a whole story about how he had worked at the raspberry farm every summer when he was growing up, and how he was always scratched from the canes and sunburned and bitten up by mosquitos, but then he got older and got a real job and he missed it. He said even now, every summer, he wished he was picking raspberries."

"And while he was telling you about the raspberries, they were down the hill cutting Eddie out of the car," Jonathan said.

“Some parts of the story do not bear revisiting,” Eddie said.

“It seemed like it happened so fast,” I said.

Eddie said that was not his memory.

“The whole group came out of the woods together,” I said to Eddie, “carrying you on a stretcher, and I got out of the car and ran over so I could hold your hand. I had never been so happy to see anyone.”

“Was it still snowing?” Leda asked.

“It snowed forever,” Eddie said. “I think it snowed all week.”

“They put us in the ambulance side by side,” I said. “You looked terrible.”

“So did you,” he said. “Shockingly bad. I think it must have been the lights in the ambulance.”

I smiled. “That must have been it.”

Jonathan refilled my mother’s glass of champagne, then handed the bottle to Eddie.

“Please tell me that’s the end of it,” my mother said. She looked as though she would not have survived another word.

“Yes,” I said. “Ten minutes later we were at the hospital. You met us in the emergency room and that was that.”

“That was that,” my mother said sadly.

They took Eddie off to surgery. They sewed my face back together. There was nothing left to talk about. A plum torte sat in the middle of the table, but none of us had the will to push ahead to dessert.

“Someone think of a better ending to lunch,” I said. “I’ve ruined it.”

My mother, who was a great one for handkerchiefs, took hers out of her pocket. “You lived,” she said, “both of you. What sort of better ending are you looking for?”

When it was time for us to leave, Leda admitted she still had work to do on her column, which was about how to deal with the anger that came up around the uneven distribution of inheritance.

“Goodness,” Eddie said. “Go, go.”

Steve said he would take her home.

My mother wanted to go to the Met. “That’s where she found you, isn’t it?” she said to Eddie.

“In Contemporary Art.”

“What do you think?” I asked Eddie. “Are you up for it?”

“It’s perfect. By the time I come home, the wonderful Marta will have set the whole place right again.”

And so we went, Jonathan, Eddie, my mother, and I, into the taxi and out again, up the stairs and through the ticket line. Half of the tourists on the island of Manhattan had decided to see the Met that day. Eddie had forgotten his cane and I had forgotten to remind him. He held my arm. When finally we had made it through Medieval, he stopped. “The two of you,” he said to Jonathan and my mother, “are going to have to go ahead. Daphne and I are going to sit on that bench right there.” He nodded his head to the far corner, past the choir screen from the Cathedral of Valladolid. “You take all the time you need, and if we get tired of waiting, Daphne will send a text to say she’s taken me home.”

As Jonathan readied himself to present an alternate plan, my mother interceded. “That was my favorite thing about you,” she said to Eddie. “One of my many favorite things about you. You always knew what to do.”

“Always,” Eddie said.

“We won’t be long,” she said. Then she folded her hand into my husband’s arm, and off they went, the two of them, while we laid claim to the bench.

“Such a nice man, Jonathan,” Eddie said.

“He is.”

“Your mother will have a better time with him anyway.”

“And we’ll have a better time.”

“People are art,” he said. “It’s enough to just watch the people.”

“Are you all right?” I asked him.

He nodded. “A little too much activity, that’s all. Nothing like trudging through the snow.”

“The past will take it out of you.”

He held my hand. “My brave girl.”

I looked out at the paintings of dragons and saints. “When I was walking through the field, I kept thinking about Mary Carter and her little dog, and how great it would be to have a dog come bounding through the snow to see me through. I’d never had a dog, and certainly not a horse, and at that point I didn’t know a single person who had died. That’s what it means to be nine. You can’t come up with any dead people who would show up to help you die in the snow. I kept wishing I’d asked you if you knew any dead people.”

“Plenty,” Eddie said.

“I would have borrowed some.”

They kept the light low in the museum, enough to see the paintings but not enough to leach the color away. We watched the never-ending stream of people pass through the choir gate, half in one direction and half in the other, and I thought about the wedding at the Plaza. What a night that had been! We needed to find another wedding we could go to, just for half an hour or so. Surely Eddie could manage that. We would drink champagne and dance, or we would watch them dance. I had been a teacher at a girls’ school for a long time. I could find a wedding, and if I couldn’t find one, I could put one on, or ask Polly to do it. She would be so happy to do that for Eddie, but then she would insist on keeping all the dances for herself.

“What if,” Eddie said, “you wrote it all down?”

“Wrote what down?”

“Everything. Mary Carter, the raspberry farm, the car accident, the snow, the two of us. You could change the details. That’s how people do it.”

“So you do it. You’re the one who wanted to be a novelist.”

“We were both going to be novelists.”

“I was nine,” I said. For today, that was my excuse for everything.

“You’ll be the writer and I’ll be the editor.”

I looked at him. “What are you talking about?”

“Immortality,” he said.

“How so?”

“Because in the book, I don’t die. In the book, we’re sitting on this bench, talking about a book about the two of us, and then the story stops with us waiting for Jonathan and your mother to come back.”

“It just stops?”

“Well, there would be a little something at the end, a denouement. Maybe the character looks back.”

“Hasn’t there been enough of that?”

“Never enough of that. I’m going to use your shoulder. Do you mind?”

“Help yourself,” I said.

Eddie rested his head against my shoulder. “I didn’t realize I was so tired. I need to close my eyes for a minute.”

This minute. He was right. Stop everything here. “What about the book?” I asked.

“You’re the smart one,” he said, yawning. “You’ll figure it out.”

(Saturday, January 19, 1980. Winchester, Massachusetts.)

Before the firemen and policemen cut Eddie from the car (they took the windshield out, that's how they did it), the ambulance men had stabilized his ankle with an inflatable cast. Daphne couldn't stop staring at it. "If I fall in a swimming pool on the way to the hospital, my foot will float," he said to her. There was some discussion among the various county employees as to whether Daphne should ride in the police car or the ambulance, but Eddie shut it down. "She stays with me," he said. The next thing Daphne knew, one of the men lifted her up and put her inside the ambulance, then they slid Eddie's gurney through the wide-open doors.

"This is a lot nicer than our last place," Eddie said.

Two of the men got in behind them and the third one got in the front. They closed the doors. The man then lifted Daphne onto the second gurney, covered her with a blanket, and strapped her down. "Like a big seat belt," he said.

"I can—" she started to say, but then gave up after those two words. There would be no telling them all the things she had already done.

"Always wear your seat belt," Eddie said.

Then they were driving away. Through the back windows, Daphne could see the red lights spinning out across the snow.

"Could you ask the guy in the front to turn the siren off?" Eddie asked. "I have a headache."

The siren snapped off just like that. Eddie turned his head to the side and looked at her. "I made up the headache," he whispered.

"Good," she whispered back. There was no one out there to alert anyway.

"You are a bloody mess, Duck," Eddie said. "I hope they can get you pieced back together right."

It made her laugh.

One of the men took Eddie's blood pressure, so the other one asked if Daphne could get her arm out of her coat so he could take hers.

While struggling to free her arm, she suddenly remembered Frank. "I didn't say goodbye to Frank!" She was horrified. How had

she forgotten Frank? She wanted to ask them to go back, but she knew they wouldn't do it.

"Who's Frank?" Eddie asked.

"Didn't you see him? It was his house I went to. He was the one who called the ambulance, and then he came with me to wait in the car. He used to work at the raspberry farm." All her life she would remember Frank, his kindness.

"What a good man," Eddie said. "Once we're better, we'll go back and find him, tell him thank you." He closed his eyes. "Is there anything in this bus for ankle pain?"

"Hang on, chief. We're only a few minutes away," the ambulance man said.

"Is there a child's cuff on your side?" the other ambulance man asked.

The first one looked, but he couldn't find it.

"Do you know what my daughter did?" Eddie said to no one.

"Don't tell me she drove the station wagon off the road in a snowstorm," the first ambulance man said.

"That was me," Eddie said. "But she was the one who rescued us. She climbed out of the window and jumped off the car, climbed up the hill in the snow, went door to door until she found Frank, then she brought Frank and all the rest of you back to save me."

"Well, that's something," said the second ambulance man, the one that Daphne thought of as hers. He patted the blanket that covered her.

Then the ambulance went over quite a bump, which was followed by a fishtail on the ice. Eddie made the smallest sound and Daphne reached out her hand to him and he took it. Hand in hand, they remained for what was left of their time together. She was already missing the station wagon, those frozen hours when they had almost died. It was the happiest she'd ever been.

"Line up all the daughters in the world," Eddie said to the ambulance men. "You're never going to find a girl as good as this one."

About the Author

ANN PATCHETT is the author of novels, most recently the #1 *New York Times* bestselling *Tom Lake*, works of nonfiction, and children's books. She has been the recipient of numerous awards, including the PEN/Faulkner, the Women's Prize for Fiction in the UK, and the Book Sense Book of the Year. Her novel *The Dutch House* was a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize. Her work has been translated into more than thirty languages, and *Time* magazine named her one of the 100 Most Influential People in the World. President Biden awarded her the National Humanities Medal in recognition of her contributions to American culture. She lives in Nashville, Tennessee, where she is the owner of Parnassus Books.

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