



# With and Without You

a novel by Lowry Pei

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by Lowry Pei

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## PART I

### W I L L

When Susannah and I were lovers, the fact that she was married seemed irrelevant to me, except it limited our being together. I knew she could not love me any more than she did, husband or no husband, that he could not matter in the same way, that if she made love to David in the morning and me at noon it subtracted nothing from the truth of our love. She did do that, at least once; she told me so. But not to make me jealous, or threaten me in any way, simply as a curious, unexpected event in her life that she knew I would be interested in. Entertained by. We were complete, we were a world and though this world of ours was tightly bounded in time and space, nothing could make it less than whole.

At the time when I met Susannah, I sold anesthesia equipment, blood gas machines and the like. I was at Children's Hospital in Boston to replace a faulty gas chromatograph in a diagnostic lab, and I was passing through a waiting room and in a space off to the side of it, I saw this beautiful woman kneeling with four small children around her, one of them buckled into a contraption that was somewhere between a stroller and a wheelchair. Later I found out she was doing play therapy. I stood on the threshold, uninvited, and watched her. She seemed to be as oblivious to her own beauty as the children were, but seeing her had cut the thread of my life and I could not move until its continuity was restored. After a minute she felt me looking at her and turned to look back at me; she didn't seem offended or even surprised that I was standing there staring at her. It was as if we had an appointment. Finally she said, "Would you like to join us?"

On the day when I first kissed Susannah, we had known each other two months. We had lunch together in a different neighborhood, away from the hospitals (where David also worked), and we were walking up a side street toward my car. Abruptly I stopped walking and she stopped with me, as if we had gotten our cue from a prompter offstage. I put my hand up to her cheek as if I was brushing away something that threatened to get in her eye. I was like a teenage boy using a transparent pretense as an excuse to touch a girl, and she saw through that too and was beginning to laugh at me, but before I could complete the gesture or she could laugh we were kissing. The world fell away, there was no more pretense, only truth; when we could think again, we both knew what was going to happen between us.

I was twenty-eight years old when we met. I liked my body then. I felt, I see now, secretly superior to men my present age. The natural arrogance of flat-bellied youth. Not that I am, I suppose, repellent now, but I can no longer imagine that I'm attractive either. I feel I am sexually just a blank space. I provoke no response. When I was that age, the desire I felt for a woman was a joy in itself, independent of its fulfillment, which I didn't realize at the time because of what I took for granted: it was not unimaginable that she might desire me. And if she did, I knew I would be able to give her intense pleasure, sometimes more than she imagined I could – it sounds self-deceived, but I know what happened between Susa and me. No one can contradict that. I wasn't heavy around the middle the way I am today, and I was lighter still because I was single, unencumbered except by myself. That, of course, was no small exception when the loneliness would set in. And yet even when I was the most lonely and horny there was some part of me thinking, This can't go on forever. I masturbated often and hopefully, imagining a future lover. When I saw myself in the mirror, it did not seem impossible there would be one.

My fantasies were nothing compared to Susa herself. I never wanted anyone as much as I wanted her. When she and I were lovers, if I thought about her as I walked down the street, I started to get hard. We still share having been those two people, and though I don't know if I want to say it's always enough, I imagine it's more than many people have. Her body is different too now, of course; the suppleness is gone from her waist, replaced by a formidable kind of solidity. She was always strong physically, but now you can see that strength from twenty feet away.

The first time, she rang the buzzer of my apartment in the costume of a suburban wife, her hair in a purple ribbon, flat shoes, tennis shorts, wedding ring, pink cotton sweater over a lavender T-shirt, cloth handbag with leather trim, her invincibly innocent disguise. Most of those clothes and most of mine were on the floor before we left the living room. She never took her ring off. It was she who fucked me first, she who straddled me as I lay reaching up to caress her breasts and her sides, to bury my fingers in her heavy hair and fan it out around her head, she who did the irrevocable when she guided me into her, devouring me with her eyes as she took me in, savoring how she had me in her power. It was I who surrendered first and, it seems, forever. An "other woman" is known as a mistress, but the "other man" is no master. I was at her disposal and she knew it. Not that she never could be the one to surrender; there were afternoons where she would loll naked for hours to be stroked and tickled by me, photographed, fucked, cuddled, licked, adored, slept with, whatever I wanted. To caress herself and have me come on her. There was hardly even an "I" and a "she" at those times, our souls were so in tune. Once we had a naked weekend never leaving my apartment. I loved all aspects of her; I loved that her breasts were not identical, and that she had a crooked finger because it got slammed in a car door when she was twelve, and that she snored sometimes when we slept. The only thing I didn't love about her was that she was married to someone else. But I didn't hold it against her, either; I just wanted to sleep with her every night and make love to her every morning. It was inconvenient of her to be married, but if that was the price I had to pay, it was more than worth it. As for Susa, it was only a belief in being considerate when possible that made her hide our love from anyone. She really was innocent of it: not guilty, ever. She had no doubt that she was entitled to her loves, to her desires and their satisfaction, entitled to husband and lover both, and though I accepted that, she knew David never could.

I had no idea, of course, how final this was, no idea I was choosing, or being chosen by, the rest of my life.

Susa's blue gaze was always candid, no matter what, and it was as clear and direct as ever when she told me she couldn't see me anymore. I had never understood that she was entitled to do that also. She ended it because she got pregnant and she wasn't sure whether it was by me or David. Not that she didn't love me, but now that she was pregnant – well, didn't I see?

"What if it's mine?" I said, though I knew she didn't want me to ask that, and the thought of having a child scared me at that moment.

"He'd never have to know. Even if it were. It could just as well be his."

Or mine, I wanted to insist, the child of our love, we have to know, I have to, but the clarity and stillness of her already-made decision silenced me. There are turning points in life, but only a few. Maybe half a dozen moments when one can take action and it makes all the difference. I should have resisted, I should have been ungraceful, uncooperative; but I loved her, as she knew, and I did as she wished. I was the extra of her life, it seemed, the cherry on top, and she loved me but there is love and then there is the other thing. I came face to face with it right then, and apparently it had nothing to do with me.

I didn't know what loss was until Susa left me. After she closed the door behind her for the last time and, a few seconds later, I heard the outer door of the apartment building shut, the loss of her hurt so much it bent me double. Which is so odd to think about, since we're together now and I expect we will be until one of us dies. I know now we could never have stayed those two people anyway. But the loss is permanent too, as irreversible as the affair itself.

I married Connie a year after Susa told me we couldn't be lovers anymore. The decision to marry her is one I don't like to think about. It looks like a cliché, like "on the rebound," but "on the rebound" would seem to mean I at least *thought* I was marrying Connie because I loved her, and I'm not sure that in my heart of hearts I thought that. Which is something beyond stupid, truly culpable, a heartlessness that I don't want to know I'm capable of. Maybe I thought it would send a message to Susa: if she had the other thing, if it meant so much more to her than what we had, then so could I. I did send her an announcement when I got married. Perhaps I thought that would seal off our shared past, close it safely for good, but it didn't work. I tried not to remember our time together, but trying not to think about someone *is* thinking about them. I sent her another announcement when Amy was born. She didn't write back. I tried to interpret her silence and failed; finally I called her and we had an awkward conversation in which I was unable to say any of the things I had silently said to her many times, within myself. When Jocelyn was born, a couple of years after Amy, there seemed to be no point in contacting her again.

T A M

I start the car and as I drive away on automatic pilot, past the dubious used-car lot on the corner, past the tire store and the Star Market, memories besiege me. Everything Evan and I have ever done together rushes upon me, since the first time I spoke to him, six months after my father died. I shouldn't dwell on the memories, but it's impossible not to, now that I've seen his face again, and touched his hand, and kissed him whether I should have or not. I wish I knew the word to use to name this unnamable bond between us. And what will come of it. I wish I knew anything at all besides the fact that I will see him again, but I don't. God knows I've always tried too hard to reach into the future and make it be what I want, and I'm going to have to stop. Especially if it's all about karma anyway. Evan seems to really believe in that now, a secret orderliness below the messy surface of things. I don't think it's just an idea he's playing with. I have to admit something in me believes in that, too, which could be a reason why we loved each other in the first place.

I saw the invisible harmony for myself, just for one moment when I was an eight-year-old kid, and that seems to have been enough to make it stay with me forever. I was in the third grade, it was February and the teacher, Ms. Korder, was having us take turns reading aloud. Janie Kalishman, the worst reader in the class, was reading and while she puzzled over the words, the wait was driving me crazy. I had already finished the book and it didn't have much to offer. The PA system crackled and came on, which was some relief, and the principal asked if some fourth-grader would please –

It was like walking upstairs in the dark and miscounting and putting my foot on empty air. Everyone knew the next words were "come to the office" but just then the PA cut off. So did the lights, so did

the heat that always blew too hotly out of the vent under the chalkboard, and the air pump that supplied the aquarium filter. Ms. Korder walked over to the light switches and flipped them, frowning. "What now?" she said to herself, as if we were trouble enough all day and then *this* had to happen. Latisha Wallace, who had allergies, sneezed, but nobody said "God bless you." The red second hand on the clock was not moving.

Our door opened, and Mr. Castillo from the fifth-grade room across the hall leaned his head in, looking up at our lights and then at Ms. Korder.

"Yours are out, too?" he said to her.

She nodded. "What about..." she said, but she didn't finish the sentence. She moved toward the door, but on the way she remembered us; she gave us her strict look and said "Stay in your seats, please." She went into the hall with Mr. Castillo and because I was on the end of the first row, by the windows (we were arranged alphabetically and that was A), I could see the two of them, but no one else could. They stopped in the middle of the hall between our classroom and his. She took his hand and stood there holding it for a second; they spoke to each other quietly. She stopped being a teacher; she let herself float up, and kissed him on the mouth, so quick and astonishing I could have convinced myself it never happened. They looked both ways, up and down the hall, but only after the kiss. They said something else to each other, and then she turned back into a teacher on the way in the door. She looked at me and I thought she realized that I had seen what happened; I even thought that in that one glance we made a silent agreement that I wouldn't tell.

"That's enough reading aloud," she said to the class. "Keep your books out, please, and we'll have quiet reading time now until lunchtime. I'll tell you when to line up, if there's not a bell. And you can go to your cubby and get a different book, if you want. Quietly."

"Can we sit on the cushions?" Charlotte MacDonald said in a whiny voice, as if she expected to be told No.

"Yes, but remember, no talking."

I got up and went to my cubby and took out *The Trumpet of the Swan*, which was too hard a book for me at the time but I was a bit of a show-off. Instead of going back to my seat I rested the open book on the windowsill and stood there wondering if Ms. Korder would make me sit down. She didn't pay any attention to me; I was sure she was busy thinking about what just happened in the hall. I know I was; seeing the two of them made me think of my father coming in the door of our apartment. My mom hadn't gone back to work yet, because my little



brother Terry was only six months old, so she'd be at home when my dad got there. Sometimes when he came in they'd kiss, and when they did, she would float up the same way Ms. Korder did. But that was a domestic kiss. This was a kiss happening in the wild, and it was the first time I had ever seen that. Why would she kiss him in the hallway where anyone might see them, in the middle of a school day, with her class on one side of the hall and his on the other, probably waiting to erupt as soon as they were left alone? I thought I had the answer: they could hardly wait to kiss, and when the power went out, it unexpectedly gave them permission.

After a couple of minutes my best friend at the time, Ann-Lee, came with her book and stood beside me looking out the window without even pretending to read. After a bit she tapped me on the back of the hand and then pointed at something outside. It was sunny and cold out, there was unbroken snow in shady spots, and in front of the school, where the ground showed through, there were dark patches of beaten-down grass. The sun was shining on the slates of roofs, reflecting off windowpanes, off the chrome on cars and the brass knocker on a red front door, the same as any other sunny day but I could see it better with the lights off in our classroom. Ann-Lee was pointing to a tree in a front yard across the street. At first I didn't know what she meant, but she took my hand and silently aimed my finger and then I saw: the green bird was there. We hadn't seen it in weeks. It was about the size of a starling, except with a longer tail, sitting on a branch as if it belonged there. The first time I saw it, I thought it was a decoration until it ruffled its feathers and settled down again. It looked like a parrot, only smaller, with a little curved red beak and a glittering eye. It was as green as summer and it belonged somewhere that was always summer, not sitting on a leafless branch in February, but by now, after seeing it half a dozen times, all Ann-Lee and I could think was that it must live in the neighborhood. Either it escaped from a cage or its owner let it out to fly around once in a while, but that didn't seem likely. Was it happy to be free, or was it lonely and cold? A group of starlings flew up and lit in the tree where the green bird was perching, and it took off, flew up around the top of the house and came to rest on the peak of the roof. Maybe that was its home, I thought, and when it wanted to, it would go inside. I watched it sitting on that high roofpeak, looking around, and I felt I knew just how it was to be up there – how the top shingle on the roof felt under the green bird's feet, and what the street looked like, or what I looked like staring straight into its bright bird eye. It took off again and took me with it as it flew higher and circled, so that I felt I was lifted into

the air without fear, and I looked down and saw the way to my house like a line drawn through the city, from the front door of the school down one street to the next and the next, joining that part of my life to this part. There were other lines – my mom’s way to work, to the hospital where Terry was born, to the other hospital where my dad’s office was, the way to Ann-Lee’s house, and from her house to school, and all the other kids’ lines leading to school, and all of their parents’ lines, and all of their friends’. I could tell that everything was perfectly planned, so that things, or people, always coincided exactly at the right moment for whatever was going to happen; but there was no planner.

Later on that night, after I was in bed, I made the second part of the discovery. Something without a name made the lights go off, so Ms. Korder and Mr. Castillo could kiss in the hall, so Ann-Lee and I could see the green bird, so everything that happened at that moment could happen then, which included my seeing that that was how it worked. And the thing without a name didn’t go away when the lights came back on. That was the rest of what I learned: I could feel it was still in the room with me. It was as if a cat was lying asleep on the rug not making a sound, and it was night so I couldn’t see it, but nevertheless the room felt different because I knew the cat was there, alive with me. Before that night, there was no cat, and afterwards, for a while, there always was.

## W I L L

Some time after Susannah broke it off between us, I started selling X-ray equipment; then I moved into working mostly with MRI and CT scanners. The high end. I became more of a consultant than a sales rep, which meant I had gotten to the top of my profession, if one can dignify selling medical equipment with that name – unless I move into management, and I don't want to do that. I met David, Susannah's husband, in the course of my work, and he seemed to be a completely admirable man. I might even admit he deserved her. But so did I; at least, I deserved her as long as she felt I did. He was a doctor, an infectious disease guy to be exact, who was doing some kind of research on tuberculosis. I met him when I was setting up a CT scan suite at his hospital; but of course I did not tell him that this glorified salesman was his wife's ex-lover and possibly his daughter's father. I no longer wanted to admit that possibility even to myself; that further loss, if I let myself feel it all the way, would have been too great. I had a daughter of my own by then, I understood what that meant. Even if my particular gamete went into creating his child, she was his now and forever.

If I was trying to even things out between me and Susa by getting married, it didn't work; I ended up divorced and she did not. Afterwards, I saw my daughters, Amy and Jocelyn, far less than I would have liked, and Connie hated me a good deal more than she had ever loved me, unless I was unable to perceive the love at the time. That's admittedly a possibility. Ostensibly she hated me because I had an affair with another woman (who in any case proved less magical than I wanted her to be); in fact, she hated me because she needed to. She would never admit this, but I understood how she worked. She cultivated a cold rage because without it, her post-divorce self, which

frankly was a rickety construction, might have lost its so-called self-esteem. She would actually have had to look in the mirror and ask herself if it was right to move our children to Chicago, so that they could only see me on certain rigorously negotiated holidays and during the summers. She'd have had to ask herself if it was right to make them go to a new school, lose all their friends, lose everything familiar, just so she could have her revenge on me. That would not have been a pleasant question to face, so instead she had to hate me because it justified everything she did. I understood that. I hated her too, of course. But at some point I decided to quit fighting her at every turn, because Amy and Jocelyn were the ones who mattered. Not us. If Connie and I couldn't get what we wanted out of each other, that was really beside the point. Dealing with the intermittent flare-ups of border warfare was only one of the many aspects of our remaining job on this earth, which was to do the right thing by our children. We weren't married anymore, but divorce is marriage on different terms: we were still forever their parents.

Amy was ten and Jocelyn was seven when Connie took them to Chicago. Amy was a serious little girl with her mother's light brown, flyaway hair. She would get excited about something, quietly, and then deliberately set out to study it – that's the only word for it. I worried sometimes that maybe she felt she had to impress us that way, but it was also, unselfconsciously, what she really wanted to do. I remember her once, when I took them to the shore, spending half an hour with a certain green bug in some tall grass. Watching it crawl up and down stems, offering her finger to catch onto, transporting it to another grass stem to see what it would do there. Another kid would have gotten bored with that game in two minutes. Jocelyn, who was only six at the time, eventually came over and knocked the bug away and Amy was very upset. Jocie was always the rambunctious one, the sassy and distractible one. Amy made rules when they played together and Jocie broke them. It never failed.

## T A M

My father died one morning when I was fifteen years old. He was on his way to work, crossing Mass. Ave. There was a truck parked too close to the intersection, and when he stepped out past it, a van that was running a red light at thirty-five miles an hour hit him and killed him. One second he was alive, and the next he wasn't. At least he didn't see it coming. We know that because people saw it happen. He definitely had the walk light, the van definitely ran the red, he didn't look before he took that step and so he died. A woman who was crossing the street towards him saw the van coming, but before she could yell "Look out" it was over.

I wasn't there that morning, but I have been, many times. When I was in the second and third grade my dad and I crossed at that same spot every school day, together, because he would walk me to school on his way to catch the bus to the medical area. The same thing couldn't have happened then, because I would have been with him, holding onto his hand, pulling him one way and another, probably talking away as usual and telling him everything that went through my head, and when we got to that intersection he would have looked. Because of me. Being my dad, thinking he was protecting me, though I would have been the one protecting him, as it turns out. But when I was fifteen, I wasn't there, he was absorbed in his thoughts, and once he saw he had the light, he stopped paying attention and walked the last few steps to his death.

A woman in a blue suit came and interrupted my English class that morning, put a hand on the teacher's shoulder and turned her away from us and muttered to her. Their two heads were close together and bent forward. Then Ms. Lipkin turned around and pointed me out to the interloper. She walked straight to me, everyone watching, and said "Tamara Aller?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Ms. Costantino, I'm the assistant principal. I need you to get your things and come with me. Your mother's coming to pick you up. There's a family emergency."

"What is it?" I said.

Her eyes avoided mine; she looked guilty. "I can't be the one to tell you," she said. "I'm sorry."

"It's that bad?"

"Please come with me."

I caught Ms. Lipkin's eye as I left the room and in her look I saw it was that bad. I tried to think out what it must be as I followed Blue Suit Woman down the hall. It wasn't my mom, she was picking me up. Who, then? Did Grampa Tom die? Was that it? Or Nana, my grandmother I seldom saw because she lived in Milwaukee? She and Grampa Tom were the oldest in my family. My grandmother on my dad's side had died when I was twelve. It could have been Walt, Nana's husband. Selfishly, I hoped it was Walt because he wasn't my mother's father and I cared about him less than anyone else. But something told me it was one of the things I was deliberately not imagining. Waiting for the awful news to come and not knowing – but knowing anyway, as we walked down the empty halls past the trophy case and the bulletin boards, as I waited in the office for my mother to come – was like being pushed off the roof of a high building, and the helpless falling knowing how it would end. If worse minutes of my life are coming, I don't want to know about it. But there's part of me that's always living that day. It feels like that part won't ever grow older or leave that moment, as long as I live; it's not a helpful way to be, but it's the truth.

The driver was convicted of motor vehicle homicide, not that it did us much good. My mother and I went to the sentencing hearing and he cried and apologized to us before he got two and a half years in prison, which is nothing by comparison, but it was the maximum sentence. He was an ignorant loser stuffed into a too-tight black suit, like a hog dressed up. He blubbered, wretchedly, and so did his obese mother. His father sat there looking stunned. I would just as soon never have seen their faces. I hated him, naturally, but our pound of flesh, if that's what it was, didn't make me one bit happier. A couple of months afterward an especially tactless kid asked me if I wished he'd gotten the death penalty. It took me a while to discover what I really wished, and still do: I want him gone from my world forever. I wouldn't care whether he was alive or dead, if only I could be guaranteed that for the rest of my life I'll never have to be within a thousand miles of him.

Preferably not even in the same country. Exile for life was not on the list of available sentences.

This is what I've wanted to know more than anything, ever since my father died: what was he thinking about at the last moment, and in the moments leading up to the last? What was the dream of his heart that morning, the secret one he wouldn't have told anybody? I'll never know for sure, but I have always tried to imagine it, because ever since, I've felt I am his unfinished thought. That is my job in life: I have to complete it.

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We were lost after he died. What were we then? Not quite a family. There were three of us – me, my mother, and Terry, who was only seven – and even though we lived together, we were all separately lost when my father never came home again. The chair he always sat in was still there in the living room, and I couldn't stop expecting to see him there too. Nobody ever sat there, except once I saw Terry try it when he didn't know I could see him from the kitchen. He lasted about thirty seconds. I wanted to ask him how it felt but I didn't dare. It seemed as though we didn't have enough to offer each other, but there was no one else in our house to try to give it. At the hospital my mother was probably working with children who were going through the same things we were, but she couldn't do therapy with us. She didn't have a husband, Terry and I didn't have a father, we suddenly didn't have enough income and my mother was trying to make what we had stretch as far as it would go. I think she would have liked to curl up and hide from everything, including us, but she couldn't. She was beyond exhaustion and she still had to get us to school and go to work and come home and do something about dinner and put Terry to bed. I'm sure her heart was broken, but people don't always have the luxury of giving in to heartbreak.

I think what really got us through the first six months was my dad's father, Grampa Tom. He mattered a lot to me then, and he has ever since. One thing I secretly like about being called Tam is that it's only one letter away from his name. I know he helped my mother pay some of the bills, but nobody could help her with what she should say to us or do for us. I know it wasn't her fault that she couldn't do for me what I needed. The most that my mother could do, it seems, was to try

to keep functioning one more day, and then one more day after that; I haven't been in her position, so there's no reason for me to say I could do better. But I felt pushed away. Or possibly she did. She made me go to a therapist we couldn't really afford, who told me it was okay for me to be angry with both of my parents about what happened. But what my mother didn't understand was that I didn't want anybody telling me what is and isn't okay for me to feel. Not her, not anybody.

People used phrases like "had to grow up too soon," but I haven't lived another life to compare this one to. I was fifteen and if anybody thought I was acting grown up about all of it, that was an excuse, if you ask me, for not taking a closer look.



## W I L L

I was thoroughly alone and unattached – except to Amy and Jocelyn, of course – on the day I was reading the paper and saw that Susannah’s husband had died in a traffic accident, hit while crossing a street. Amy was twelve and Jocie was ten. They had been living in Chicago for two and a half years. My loneliness was like an uninvited guest who wouldn’t go home, watching me as I prowled among my possessions. I never consciously tried to pile up so much stuff, but I owned a house, and houses tend to fill up. I had high-speed internet, premium cable, a gas grill, a leaf blower, a weed whacker, a mulching lawn mower, a few hundred books, more CD’s than I could listen to, subscriptions to the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*, a mountain bike, a sea kayak, downhill and cross-country skis, call waiting, instant messaging, a pager, a fax, and a cell phone. More stuff than I was able to use. What it amounted to was clutter and distraction, which may be why I came to own all these things, because when I wasn’t distracted, I was lonely. Even the memory of Susa was faded and scratched. When you use the same memory too much, and I had, it wears out. It had been sixteen years since she told me we could no longer be together.

The good days at my house were those when Amy and Jocie were with me: some weeks in the summer, every other Christmas and Thanksgiving, sometimes during school vacation weeks. I saved up my vacation time for them. If people invited me somewhere while they were with me, they had to invite Amy and Jocie too, and I only went if I thought the girls would enjoy it. I never hired a babysitter. I loved the way the house felt after they’d been there a few days and settled in, loved seeing their coats and boots and scarves heaped by the front door, picking up their books and toys from wherever they’d dropped them.

Even hearing them squabble in their room was a joy as far as I was concerned. Jocie woke me up early in the mornings and demanded pancakes for breakfast. They got them; we were in no rush. But I missed never having a routine life with them, days of getting them off to school before I went to work. I was afraid they'd think of me as a kind of holiday entertainment, a Dad theme park. It was almost good when they got bored; it meant they were with me long enough to start feeling this was actual life. It was never long enough for me.

When I read the obituary I knew at once that I would call Susannah; the only question was how long I would wait. I tried to imagine how she felt; by then I knew a lot more about loss and about having a way of life torn to pieces. But my divorce had not come as a surprise. I couldn't fathom losing the person I loved (I had to believe she loved him) without warning, between one minute and the next. Or what it must be doing to the children – two of them now, the obituary informed me – he left behind. Now Susa was in a place I had never been, forced to be someone other than the woman I knew. I couldn't take the measure of the crisis in her life, but it reverberated in mine; behind the scenes of my everyday world, I was in a secret turmoil I couldn't mention to anyone.

I knew Susannah's grief would be as direct and genuine as anything else about her; and I knew that after some time she would go on with her life. I was still alive, too, trying to go on with mine. Hardly ever fully alive except when Amy and Jocelyn were with me, and middle-aged at all times, but still here on earth with her, still unable or unwilling to forget. Even so, why should I imagine that she would care whether I ever called her or not? Why should I, and our love, not be far behind her in vague and infrequent memories of that time of life which ends, irrevocably, when one becomes a parent? The only possible reason seemed to be that she was not so thoroughly consigned to the past for me, and since we had shared so much, why should we not share this? Such is the logic, if one can call it that, of a man who spends his nights alone.

I had waited a very long time, and I waited longer, more than another year, before I finally did call her. At first it was easy not to call: I knew it was too soon. But when would it not be too soon, and when would it be too late, those were the impossible questions. I had time to think of every way the call could turn out, time to play out every possible consequence, time to get used to every scenario I could dream up. Time, even, to date a woman I met through a friend and then lose

## W I L L

interest in her. Time to almost forget, and then remember: oh yes, I have to call Susa. After it reached that point, one night I at last picked up the phone.

T O M

It was the beginning of winter when David died. January. I went back to work about ten days later and was useless. I accomplished nothing for a month or more. No one seemed to care or even notice, because the city had already obligated the money to pay me and they assumed, foolishly, that consultants are worth what they get paid.

I was supposed to be working on some kind of policy paper concerning regional water use patterns and thresholds for declaring water emergencies. That was the type of thing I did at that early point in my supposed retirement. All I was really doing was staring at my computer in an office building in East Cambridge. I accessed some kind of database but couldn't bring myself to care about searching it. FEMA would not give a damn what I wrote on behalf of the city. I didn't have the words "civil engineer" on my résumé and that was what they cared about. I didn't have "free-lance dilettante" either, but it would have been closer to the truth. People believed I knew something and I let them think it.

I sat there and fiddled aimlessly under the maddening subliminal hum of the fluorescents, filing my e-mails into folders, cleaning up the desktop on my computer, and outside it snowed. The partition of a cubicle was between me and the windows, but I could tell from the gray light that it was coming down hard. After a while an announcement was made that the office was closing early because of the storm. I got up, looked over the partition; people were standing up, making predictable remarks about how long it would take them to get home. I tried to make an appropriate face when my cubicle neighbor complained about the traffic on 93. I put my coat on and walked down the stairs and out of the building. The snow was blowing and swirling, fat heavy flakes, a real show-stopper. People were using the word "blizzard," inaccurately. The

wind was not nearly high enough to warrant that. Cars that were moving were going about five miles an hour and parked cars had already begun to get plowed in. On the plaza in front of the building some genius had sprinkled ice-melting compound, heavily, as if this was really to the point. No doubt if someone were to test the dirt in the cracks between flagstones it would prove to be full of unpleasant chemicals leaching slowly into the ground water, but old habits die hard. Not one person in a thousand thinks about the water table. Red and green traffic lights shone dimly through the heavy snow. I waited for the light and crossed over to Emma's Pizza, where I habitually ate lunch. I don't know why I went in there except I was wet and cold; it wasn't lunchtime. It was about three in the afternoon, the dead time for them no doubt. I was surprised they hadn't closed too.

An odd thing was going on: Neil and his wife DeDe were standing at the front window with their two waitresses and a handful of customers, drinking wine out of paper cups, watching the storm happen. Neil had the bottle in his hand. He asked me if I wanted some and I accepted. We all kept looking up at the sky and out at the crawling traffic. Somewhere beyond our field of vision, a siren started up – an ambulance – and I imagined David's death. I wasn't there to hear the ambulance come with the paramedics who would find him dead from massive blunt trauma to the head. But I heard it over and over afterwards. I would hear the rush to the scene, and when they left the scene fast, I knew there was some hope for the person inside. But the slow ones, the ambulances with no urgency. Then I would know it was all over. This one was trying to go fast, but with the snow and the traffic it was sirening and barking its frustration, and I kept thinking You selfish idiots, get out of the fucking way.

More than anything on earth, I wished I had known David better. I thought he was always a little afraid of letting down his guard with me, and I never understood why. Maybe it was because he knew he mattered so much to me. When he was a teenager it made sense because what else would anybody expect? One-word answers to everything. But after that ...I don't know. He grew up, he got into science to a level where I couldn't follow him, and he got so damn busy, like everyone else. Americans work too hard. Medical school, internship, residency – when were we going to have long talks? I'd see him for twenty minutes here and an hour there, usually with Susannah and the kids, and when he talked about his life, either it was about work or his sentences started with "we."

The wine was tannic and harsh, and that was good, its roughness abraded the edge of my grief. I drained the little paper cup and Neil passed me the bottle; why did he do that? He hardly knew me. I poured some in my cup and passed it on. In our small knot of acquaintances and strangers, people barely spoke, in lowered voices. Some kind of unexplained decorum was being observed, as though we were aware of taking part in a ceremony but the event itself was invisible and the rules unknown. Then I thought, we're having a wake for David and they don't even know it. They didn't know him, did my face tell them everything? Some things in life are not explained, like their being kind enough to do that. If kindness is what it was. Or some other mystery I couldn't even name.

When I retired, most people I knew told me not to, and for quite a while, some still didn't realize that I had. I just stopped looking for more work. If someone called with an interesting project I could always say yes. For about six months I helped write a grant proposal for a nonprofit that built affordable housing, because I liked being the old guy in the room that people would listen to. I didn't actually think of anything they couldn't have, but the director said when I was at the meeting, it went a little better. There's no genius involved in getting the money, only work. They want to give it away. You talk to people at the funding organization, you let them coach you, you do your homework. That was my sole qualification for any job I ever had: I was willing to do my homework. That and a few other basics one would think anybody could manage, but apparently some people cannot. When you say something is so, have the evidence. Don't ask stupid questions. If you don't know the answer, say so. I didn't know that much, but I could figure out who to ask, and I suppose I could get along with them well enough to get an answer. After I quote-unquote retired I only worked with people I actively liked. When the affordable housing people got the grant they put a line in the budget for me with some vague title, and I got paid a little to go to the sites and help them plan. Sometimes I would talk to the permitting people if I had to, depending on what town we were in. Some of those town bureaucrats I wasn't willing to deal with at any price. Sometimes when I got to the site I would pound nails and leave it at that. Probably my number one talent. I could always do that at home, but it was good to have a change of venue once in a while.

When I retired, I moved out to the sticks because I wanted to look out the window and see some open land between me and the horizon. I sold myself on the move because my house in Cambridge was worth so much more than what I originally paid for it, the property taxes were so much lower out beyond the suburbs, Susannah and the kids would inherit the place. The usual justifications. What else I wanted out of it was not as clear. Perhaps, possibly, I moved so they would know they didn't have to take care of me, or entertain me. Or maybe I did it to be lonely. It seemed that way at times, after I did. Birds and trees are not family.

The house was built in 1877, and when I bought it, I decided my mission was to make sure it was still there after me. It appeared to be good for at least another fifty years unless some damn fools tore it down to build a "country estate." I was betting that wouldn't happen, because the center of town was right over the hill; I figured that Dogpatch, which was not its official name but should have been, could easily grow as far as my house. If the commuter rail started running a little more frequently, people working in Worcester would decide to move there.

At first when I retired I worried about filling up my time. It didn't take long to realize that I could never run out of projects to do. There was a lumberyard and a hardware store not too far away, and with that and a house as old as mine, I was pretty much all set. I thought at first I'd miss Cambridge but after a while I hardly ever went in except to see my family. Not that it was a difficult trip; it was only a mile to the commuter rail from my house. Or I could drive in, but I hated looking for a place to park there and I didn't like driving back after dark.

It was strange to go back into Cambridge, after a while. Strange to see all those people younger than me, starting their lives. They worked so hard at everything, even the things that weren't nominally work – socializing, being attractive, being happy, being unhappy – it was as if they already knew what I knew: they didn't have that long to get it all done. Get a job, fall in love, buy a house, change jobs, have children, have affairs, split up, marry again, more houses, more children, more jobs, I found it exhausting just to imagine it all. But they thought it would work the way they planned the first time, or if it didn't the first time then they thought it would the second, which is another way of saying that these people were younger than me. Younger is a relative term; women of fifty looked young to me. If a proposition is true, its opposite-converse is true as well: I looked old to them. Not that it mattered; I wasn't in the market for romance.

Admittedly romance generally was trouble for me – but yet and still, as a friend of mine would have said. Before she died from an infection after an operation that should have been routine. My son was working on more or less that very problem, or a piece of it anyway, before an idiot in a van killed him at the age of forty-nine.

So after that, romance...no. As for mutual caretaking, which seemed to be what people my age were expected to fall into instead of romance, also no. Though I didn't pretend to be enlightened, what I spent my time on was what some Zen book called hauling water and chopping wood. And fortunately I didn't have to literally haul water; I had an excellent well. I split wood for fun, and burned what I split.

Before David died, his family's life was self-contained and separate from mine; afterwards, Susannah and I were linked for good in a way that was different from anyone else. She had to manage everything with damn little backup, and I tried to provide what I could. All of a sudden she was raising two children on her own, and how do you get ready for that overnight? She had to work and find child care, transport the kids everywhere, help them with their homework, keep the house running, the show had to go on. I tried to help out with Terry especially, but boys sometimes take more energy than a grandfather has. It was different when Tammy was a kid. I still lived in Cambridge, and my house was within walking distance of theirs. I could go to her soccer games when David was at work and Susannah needed to stay home with Terry. Or take Terry with me too, in his stroller, so Susannah could have a couple of hours off from both of them.

She got David's life insurance, of course, but she knew she was going to need that to send the kids to college. It was a good thing they bought that two-family; the renters downstairs kept the mortgage paid. It wasn't as old a house as mine, but of course something always needed to be repaired; that's the way houses are. Being out in the country freed up a little money so I could chip in when Susannah ran short. I knew she didn't want to ask, but sometimes she had no choice. I didn't say anything about being paid back. I hoped she didn't think I expected her to repay me, I would have liked to make sure she didn't, but it seemed best not to bring it up at all, for fear of making one of us uncomfortable. She and Tammy and Terry were my reasons to live, and I didn't want anything to mess that up.



T A M

I started going out with Evan the summer after my dad died. My best friend Ellie and I were hanging out in Harvard Square with a bunch of people one night, watching the jugglers in front of the subway entrance, and Evan was there, along with his friend Josh who Ellie thought she liked. To keep Josh from wandering off I kept trying to talk to Evan, because wherever he went Josh went. I loved Ellie for many reasons, including just because I loved her, but one of the best reasons was that she kept dragging me along with her then and making me act like I gave a damn about anything. Otherwise I might have been lying on the floor of my room staring up at the ceiling, silently crying and letting tears run into my ears. Evan didn't know what to say to me, and I thought he was wishing I would stop trying to talk to him, but anything for Ellie. Then when she and I were about to go home he asked me if I wanted to hang out sometime. He mumbled it so badly I couldn't understand him until he repeated himself. I didn't care one way or the other, but I said okay.

Evan has green eyes – he's some part black, but mostly white – and he has the longest fingers of anybody I've ever known. In high school he tended to stand curled over a little bit, as if he thought he was taller than he really was and wanted to bring himself down to everyone else's level. He seemed to be embarrassed to smile for fear his dimples would show. When I first saw him that night with Ellie I didn't think I knew him, but then I realized he used to have long hair, past his shoulders. Wavy hair really shouldn't be that long on a teenage boy. They don't take care of it properly and the hair sticks out too far. Probably he wore it that way for protection – it kept everyone at a distance. But that night his hair was about half an inch long, which was a good decision.

A week later we went to a movie with Ellie and Josh and some other guy. I barely bothered to brush my hair before we went out. There was no reason for me to be all girly-girl with Evan, and I wasn't much good at that anyway, not like later, when I was Girlfriend Tam. At the time I was just a brown-haired kid who cared more about playing basketball than how I looked. Not that I didn't want, in some part of myself, to be gorgeous; I just knew I wasn't. I was in pretty good shape, better than I am now, on the tall side but definitely not willowy. My bones aren't made that way; I have big hands and feet and you can't hide that. I could pass for pretty sometimes, if I wore my hair down instead of in a ponytail, and wore makeup and didn't give away that I felt fake with it on. I always thought if anybody was ever going to think I was beautiful, it wouldn't be when they first saw me, it would take time. But I really didn't care what Evan thought of me that night.

At midnight Evan and I were by ourselves in the outfield of the baseball diamond behind Fitzgerald School – I could see my front door from where we were – and he said, “We could sit here for a while.”

“And do what?” I said. I heard myself sound unfriendly. But he knew where I was coming from, didn't he? Everybody knew I was the girl whose dad died.

“We could do nothing,” he said.

“Like how?”

“Like nothing,” he said. “Nobody knows how to do nothing. It's not all that easy.”

“Do you?”

“I'm working on it.”

“Why?”

He didn't answer, he just sat down on the grass. It seemed absurd to be standing there over him so I sat down too. “I don't really understand this,” I said.

“That's okay. Understanding it is doing something, anyway.”

“I knew you were really this strange geek boy,” I said, but I didn't mean to be as bitchy as that sounded. He just laughed. “Oops,” I said.

“Not a problem,” he said. I kept thinking What's the story on this kid, anyway? “Suppose we just do nothing for five minutes, and then we can do something if you want.”

“I have to go in pretty soon,” I said, not because I wanted to, but to preserve my option to end the evening at any time.

“Okay,” he said. “Then we'd better get started.”

I looked at him to find out what he meant, but he had already started doing nothing. He glanced at me, pleasantly, and then turned his gaze to the long irregular back of the row of townhouses across the commuter rail tracks. There were lights on here and there but most of the windows were dark. I could see blue TV light flickering in a couple of them. I was wearing shorts and the grass was itchy against my legs. I thought Pretty soon this will end and I don't have to do it ever again. If we had any sense we'd get a basketball from my house and shoot baskets on the courts. I was sure I could beat Evan at Horse. Or anything. But not just sit there. And if we were going to sit and do nothing, we could at least sit on a bench. There were plenty of them in the park, right across the street next to my house.

"Listen," he said.

"What?"

He didn't answer.

"Listening is doing something," I said.

"Okay, but listen."

What was there but the ordinary? Bug sounds, cars on Mass. Ave. a couple of blocks away, breeze blowing in the leaves of trees along the street, the door of someone's house closing, then the door of a car, then the car driving off.

"To what?" I said.

"Come on," he said. "Not to what. Just listen."

Surely, I thought, this kid is not as deep as he thinks. You have to listen to *something*. It seemed to me that possibly I heard a train in the distance, but after living that close to the tracks most of my life, I was pretty certain it wasn't time for one. The breeze picked up and I looked up at the sky to see if it might be getting ready to rain.

"I don't think I get this," I said.

"I told you it wasn't that easy."

I thought about whoever had driven off in the car and wondered where they were going at that time of night, if they had suddenly gotten a message about something terrible and sad or if they just had to have an ice cream or see their girlfriend, and how their life was just as big a deal, to them, as mine was to me but I would never know the first thing about it. There they were, living right on the other side of the baseball field all the time, and might as well be on the back of the moon. And people were all the time having their hearts broken and yet the houses stood there exactly the same, as if nothing much happened inside, and the people came out of the houses looking exactly like houses, letting

nothing show, and we all kept it up when really we wanted to tell someone, finally, what had never been said...

"What are you thinking?" he said.

But I couldn't say any of that to him. I hardly knew him. "None of your business," I said. Instantly I knew I hurt his feelings.

"Yeah, you're right," he said. "Well look. I guess you have to go in, anyhow."

"No I don't. Not yet."

"I thought your mom said twelve-thirty."

"She's asleep."

But it was too late to fix what I said. He stood up, so I did too. "Dja like doing nothing?" he said without looking at me.

"Kind of. I think I was just getting the hang of it."

He began sauntering in the direction of my house. I could hardly go slow enough to stay with him.

"Maybe you wanna try it again?" he said.

"Okay."

Eventually we got across the empty street and up to my front steps. "Well, goodnight," he said with his hands in his pockets, and turned and began walking off before I could react.

"Goodnight," I called to his back.

He took one hand out and waved without looking.

I put my key in the lock, but I didn't want to go inside. It would be stuffy and close and too full, I felt, of too many things. I didn't even want to be in my own room, let alone risk having to deal with my mother if she should be awake after all. I stood for a minute looking at the outfield, wishing I was still sitting there.

I couldn't get that evening out of my mind. The nothing part, sitting there for no reason, and then him walking off like that. I was rude to him but I must not have made him too mad, or why would he have wanted to do it again? And what did he want from me anyway?

Maybe nothing. Why should I want anything from him? I told Ellie what happened and she said, "He's just shy, that's all. He's always been that way. It used to be worse, he hardly even talked to anybody. I don't think he's ever had a girlfriend."

Shy, I thought. He's more than that. Complicated; and maybe he didn't want to let anyone figure out how he worked. So why would he pick me to join his club that had exactly one member? The last thing I needed was somebody else's weirdness to try to figure out. Terry was going around pulling up the neck of his T-shirt to cover his mouth and

nose whenever he smelled anything strong, as if it might be poison and that would protect him.

I knew nothing about what could happen. Before Evan, I went out with boys I could play basketball with. You can learn a lot about somebody that way, like whether they're willing to pass back to you after you get open, or if they just shoot it up there no matter what, because they have to be the star. But you can't learn what it would be like with someone like Evan. He made no visible efforts. When he walked down the hall between periods at the high school, he slid at a steady pace no matter how crowded it was, he slipped through openings that didn't seem to be there. If he had taken the trouble to learn how to play ball, he could have been one of those players who are sneaky fast, who show up somewhere on the court without anyone knowing how they got there. He had great hands, he could steal the ball from me and I was quick, but when I tried to teach him a jump shot that wouldn't embarrass me, I got nowhere. Instead he got hooked on shooting free throws.

The second time we went out I made him shoot hoops with me, even though he said he couldn't. I thought he was making fun of me, or playing some kind of joke. Who doesn't know how to play Horse? He acted like he'd never had a basketball in his hands, which I knew couldn't be true because he did grow up in the US of A. "Just shoot," I said, "come on."

"From where?"

"Anywhere, it doesn't matter, just shoot." He threw up a brick and I retrieved the ball and passed it back to him. "Try that again."

"How embarrassing do you want to make this, anyway?" he muttered. He shot again. Off the side of the rim.

"It's easier if you don't try to bank it in," I said.

"Show me."

I did and he said, "I concede the game. You won." He said this with a slight smirk, as if he won by saying it.

"No, you have to at least try."

"Trying doesn't do any good when you don't know what the hell you're doing."

"Okay then, I'll show you how. Come here," I said, pointing with my foot to the free throw line. "Right here. Now let me see you shoot it."

He slid his eyes sideways at me as if he thought I didn't know what I was asking. Then he shot, no better than before, maybe worse, stiff as a board and back on his heels.

"Evan. Bend your knees, for God's sake. Don't just shove it up there like that. If you don't bend your knees, the ball's never going anywhere." I gave him the ball back.

He held the ball and bent his knees maybe a half inch and said, "I just want you to know, I feel like a total dork right now." To be honest, he looked like one. But cute in a dorkish way. It was good of him to go along with me.

"Okay, look. Bounce the ball, and like, bend your knees some more. Come on, you can. Just look at the ball and keep bouncing. Okay, now. Look at the basket. No, keep your knees bent. Yeah. Now shoot it up there."

"Fuck," he said as it clanked off the rim. "I told you."

"No, that was better."

"Right," he said with another smirk.

I handed him the ball. "You," he said, handing it back.

I stood next to him at the free throw line, bounced the ball three times, bing-bing-bing, up. Good.

"You think you're gonna teach me that?" he said.

"Why not? They don't lock up the courts. We can stay out here as long as you want."

"As *I* want? I'm just not that coordinated, if you haven't noticed."

He was the only boy I ever heard admit that. "Come on, there's nothing wrong with you," I said.

He gave me the sideways look again, but he took the ball and tried again, three bounces and then shoot, like me. It went in. "Holy shit," he said.

"See?" I passed it back to him.

"See what?" he said, but he shot again, too hard this time and it was off the back rim. I retrieved it and we kept on like this for a while, him shooting and me getting the ball for him. It was about ten at night and still warm and there were a few other people on the courts; some guys were playing two-on-two. Evan began to get into it and forget about being self-conscious. He was a beautiful boy when he didn't think about himself, now that he wasn't living inside a pyramid of hair. I kept my mouth shut, with an effort. He muttered to himself a little when he'd miss. I liked the way he seemed serious about it, as if he wasn't doing this because I said to, or to please me, but because it was worth doing.

"Y'know," he said, not looking at me, bouncing the ball, "this is almost as much fun as doing nothing."

"Thanks a lot."

"Maybe it *is* doing nothing. Or it would be if I were any good at it." He shot it up and it went in.

I got the ball and kept it. "My turn," I said, putting myself next to him at the free throw line. But he took the ball away and shot it up again. Good again. I retrieved the ball and this time I bumped him with my hip to move him out of the way, but he refused to move over. "I can't shoot if you don't move," I said.

"Tough," he said.

I tried to bump him over again and this time he put his arm around me, held me around the waist firmly and without apology, as if this had been his plan all along, and my head felt giddy when he did that. As if it was part of the plan, I turned toward him and kissed him on the cheek. The instant I did it I was mortified; I turned away trying to pretend it never happened. "Now move over," I said, as if all I had done was obey some kind of etiquette. He did, and I concentrated as hard as I could on bouncing the ball and putting it up with good follow-through, then I ran after it and brought it back and shot again, still without looking at him until the second one went in. When I glanced up at him he was watching me like he suddenly remembered I was a girl.

I know I did. From one moment to the next, it mattered how I looked. We kept shooting free throws, taking turns, but after that I think we both knew there'd be more. I was waiting and so was he. We left the court and wandered over to a picnic table; he sat on the table, with his feet on the bench part, and I sat next to him, still waiting. He didn't look at me, I didn't look at him. My hand was holding onto the edge of the table between us, and slowly his hand crept over and covered mine. As if that touch was a secret from somebody. "Hey," he said just loud enough for me to hear, and I said "Hey" back and then we didn't say anything but just sat there with our hands touching.

How did he know that would feel exactly right to me?

\*

"Can I ask you something about your dad?" Evan said. It was later the same summer and we were sitting at the top of a hill in Danahy Park at night, looking down at the lighted windows and dark trees of the neighborhood below us. My mom would have worried if she had known we were there, but Evan and I had been going there for weeks whenever the weather was good. It's about the only place in Cambridge where you can be outside, on grass, and feel like you're above the houses instead of surrounded. Where you can breathe.

"Okay," I said, but my stomach tightened.

"Did he like you?" Evan said.

"What kind of a question is that?"

"No, I mean it."

"Of course he did. What do you think? He loved us. He was my dad, for God's sake."

"I didn't ask if he loved you, I asked if he liked you."

"Yes," I said. "He did. He laughed at my jokes."

Evan sighed.

"What?"

"I don't think my dad likes me one bit."

"Oh come on."

"No, seriously. I think I'm just in his way. I'm like a big fat fucking chore. He has to raise me and he's going to do it, but there's no fun in it for him. He never looks happy to see me."

"He doesn't look very happy, period," I said.

"I know."

My mind was on other things. I stretched out on the grass with my head in Evan's lap. His hand touched my neck, slid with the greatest care into my shirt, his fingertips under my bra. It was stretchy and made room for his hand. We had done this before and I wanted him to now, when I breathed I wanted to feel the sensitive pressure of me against the palm of his hand and know that he felt it too, that both of us were right there together.

What would my dad have thought if he knew I invited a boy to touch me like this? "I miss him so much," I said without thinking. Evan took his hand away, as if it were wrong to feel both things at once. "Don't," I said. "Stay there."

He said nothing; his careful fingers found me again. This was not something my dad would have wanted to know about. It would have been too hard for him. Would he have known instinctively when I lost my virginity? I hoped not.

"My dad always took me seriously, is the thing. You know? He thought about what I said. I mean he actually answered me."

"You were lucky," Evan said.

"I know."

There wasn't any need to say anything for a while. We were connected by touch.

"Do you think there's a soul?" I said.

"I think I do," Evan said. "There has to be, I guess."

"What happens to it?"



"After you die?" He sounded like he couldn't believe I would ask him that.

"Yeah."

"Now, how would I know that?"

"I read this thing about black holes, it says they think that when something falls into one, an image of it is still there, orbiting the black hole forever."

"That's spooky enough," he said.

"I can't get it out of my head." As I said those words tears came; they caught me unprepared. Normally, if I had some warning I could fight them off. I put my hands over my face; somehow it was terribly important that Evan not see this. Tears were hot on my cheeks. He pulled his hand out of my shirt and awkwardly bent forward and tried to put his face close to mine. "It's okay," he whispered.

I rolled over, away from him, got to my feet and ran away a few steps before I stopped with my back to him and tried to take deep breaths, hugging myself as if I were cold. I had to get control of myself.

"Come back," he said behind me.

I didn't look around right away. When I did, he was standing there with his hands in his pockets watching me. He looked like he would wait as long as it took for me to get myself together. He was more patient than I could ever be, and I realized the power of that. There was no fighting it; why try? I went and leaned my forehead against him, the two of us touching only there. He put his arms around me. "I have to not do that," I said.

"You're not allowed to cry?"

"I can't start, I might not be able to stop."

"You really believe that?"

Now that I heard myself say it out loud to someone, I wasn't sure I did. At least I wasn't going to have to find out right then, I could tell.

Evan kept holding me and I stood there, eyes closed, leaning into him, until I almost felt I could fall asleep that way.

\*

Evan and I used to call each other, instead of instant messaging, late at night on school nights so we could hear each other's voice, and talk about anything. Ellie, for one, who lost interest in Josh roughly two seconds after he started liking her. That didn't surprise me, I'd seen it happen over and over. As soon as a boy responded to her, she'd change her mind. But it made life awkward because Evan and I wanted to hang

out together all the time and she was my best friend and Josh was his. We talked about his friends, my friends, anybody we knew. Who fell into what really sick hookup at whose party, who got in trouble, who had an abortion, who paid for it. He wanted me to tell him my dreams and at first I wouldn't. But he told me some of his and made me interpret them, using a book he had, so after that I began telling him some of mine. But not the sexy ones, especially the ones about him. We'd play a game of predicting what we were going to dream, which made sense because it would be so late at night, and when we couldn't make up anything else, we'd listen to each other breathe. Once, I was talking to him after I got in bed, and I fell asleep with the phone on. We did nothing together and I got pretty good at it after a while. And we did everything. His parents both had reasons to go away a lot, and sometimes their trips overlapped. I knew what would happen when we had the place to ourselves. He wanted to touch me so much it was like nothing else mattered. I could have made him do anything to have me, some girls would have, but I never wanted to be that kind of person. He wasn't the first, he was the second but he should have been the first. The first time happened after a party where I had too much to drink, and it shouldn't have. It's something I'd like to forget.

We were kissing in his room; I had on a tank top and he kept sliding his hand up under it as we kissed. He acted as though I had to keep it on, as if someone might come home at any moment and catch us there. But we both knew no one was coming. I couldn't understand what was stopping him. It was sweet that he was that way, but finally I said "Why don't you take it off?" because I was beginning to think he'd never do it on his own.

He did, and when he looked at me, I felt prettier than I ever had in my life. It embarrassed me, not so much for him to see my breasts – he knew how small they are and I was already pretty sure he didn't care – but for him to see how much it mattered to me, how happy he made me by wanting me that much. To cover it up I tried to make it a game, I crossed my arms over my chest like I wasn't going to let him after all, but he moved my arms away gently and then he was kissing me again. I took hold of the hem of his T-shirt and pulled it up. "You have to, too," I said. He took it off and then we were skin to skin. He didn't have the kind of muscles that boys want to show off, but I could feel how tight his body was next to mine. We wanted to be lying together on his bed so much that we got there without knowing how it happened.

His hand kept going down me, his fingers sliding into my pants, but at first he didn't have the nerve, and then he did, to unbutton them

and pull down the zipper. It was like I had to wait for him to go first but then I could unbuckle his belt. It was awkward squirming out of our pants but we both tried to pretend it wasn't. His penis was stretching his tight white underpants and he was touching me on the outside of my panties and making them all wet and slick inside and didn't he know how easy it would be to pull that thin material aside and touch me for real? Didn't he recognize what the touching did to me? I touched him too, held onto the delicious hardness of him through his underpants. We kissed so much it wore me out; I had to stop. I got up and went to the window, looked down into his parents' back yard. I suppose someone could have seen me there all but naked, but I didn't think of it and there wasn't anyone in sight that I noticed. I had bigger things on my mind, like did I love him, because if I did I was going to let it happen to us now, this afternoon, if he still wanted to. Why did he let me walk away from him, now that he'd seen me and touched me like that? Did he not like me after all? Maybe he did it just to do it, all the time noticing every flaw. I actually ate food, unlike some people I knew, so I weighed more than 96 pounds...He came up behind me and put his arms around me, silently covered my breasts with his hands, and it felt so much like we belonged that way together that I could hardly breathe. I leaned my head back against him and we stood there like that for what seemed a long time. I could feel my heart beating extra hard under his hand, because it was there. Then he said "Listen, can we...can we be naked, and like, lie down together?" I don't think he would have had the nerve to say it to my face.

"Yes," I said.

We still stood there a moment longer, waiting, trying to get used to the idea of what we were going to do. Then I turned around and was facing him and he pulled my underpants down and I stepped out of them. I did the same to him. His penis was so alert, begging me to look and touch, and I did touch. The head of it was velvety, vulnerable-seeming, and when I touched him there it made him close his eyes. We lay down and kissed some more and he was on top, there was no anything left but just this, wanting this exact moment more than anything in the world. I opened my legs to him and he was rubbing himself against me awkwardly and I realized he had never made love to a girl before and didn't know how to begin. That made me all tender inside, a way I had not expected to feel, even with him.

"Please," he said, "please," as if I were telling him no. His eyes were closed and I could see he was embarrassed by his own desire and not knowing. I helped him a little and all at once he was in me, his eyes

flew open and looked into mine and right then he gave a piece of his soul to me, I know it. He'll never forget that as long as he lives.

He barely started to move inside me, I was just beginning to swim dizzily down into a dark ocean with him, and he came. Then he lay on top of me, crestfallen. For a second I was almost embarrassed to be there like that, but I had my arms around him and the weight of him on me was exactly right and I felt his shoulder blades, the smooth strength of his back and the knobs of his backbone and I knew that I did love him.

Now he really was self-conscious. "Evan," I said in his ear. "Are you happy?"

"Are you?" he said. "I never...I mean – "

"I know. No, look at me. Don't be all sheepish. It's so special to be, you know."

"What?"

"The first. You know I like to be first at things."

"Things," he said, "this isn't just *things*, is it?"

"You'll break my heart if it is."

"God, no. No way."

"Tell it to me," I said.

"Tell you what?"

"Don't you know?" I was sure he did. This is not a game, I thought to him.

"I love you," Evan said.

I held onto him with all my strength and rolled over on top of him and pinned him to the bed. "Yes," I said. "You love me. Don't forget that. And I love you, and I don't love just anybody who comes along." I said it lying on top of him, he breathed my words in as I said them, he only had to raise his head slightly to kiss me.

"I am so lucky," he said after we kissed for a while.

"I am," I said. He was hard again. In a few moments he was inside me and we were making more love. I held his little, taut boy butt in my two hands as he came into me. And I *was* lucky too, because I didn't get pregnant, and after that, usually, I was more careful, and so was he. When we could remember to be.

\*

I was sure Evan could tell me anything. He told me he never expected that I would actually want him. He told me the only thing that mattered to him was that I loved him. Boys just do not say things like

that; I wasn't sure I wanted him to. It felt like too much responsibility. He worried that I'd break up with him – which was totally unnecessary – and then he was the one who more or less left me.

He told me how he felt about being not black but not quite white, which was somewhere between proud and wanting to be left alone – by his parents especially, who couldn't stop harping on race and how enlightened they were. His mother was blond and had kind of a horsy face, narrow and long; his dad was black, though "black" is a peculiar word to use about Evan or his dad. "Latte" would be more accurate. In his dad's case, with an extra shot of espresso. When people first see Evan, they know he's not 100% white but they don't know what else he is. They guess everything, not just black but you name it, Native American, Filipino, whatever. So far as I could tell, most kids at the high school thought it was cool to be what Evan is – I know I did – but he didn't believe that, or he didn't want them to think anything.

Evan told me how self-righteous his parents sounded when they talked about other people's racism and what hypocrites they must be if they didn't know how fake their life was. They weren't really together, they just lived in the same house and were the parents of the same kid. How could they imagine he didn't see it? Only if they worked at deceiving themselves twenty-four hours a day. It looked like they were plenty comfortable, but he told me they constantly argued about money and all they really had was debts. Their house was like a poisoned museum, antiques and tense silence. He told me how different he felt from most other kids, how he hated coming to school most of his life and yet school was the only thing he was good at.

One day Evan came home and found his mom sitting in the kitchen with a man (a white man) and he knew. Not that they were doing anything when he walked in. But it was the silence, one heartbeat too long before his mom spoke to him, and the way she looked at the man first and then him and then introduced them with a laugh, like Oh what the hell, who cares anymore, that told him everything. It all came true the way he predicted: she was the one to move out, and his parents started fighting over the house and everything in it, and all of a sudden (but was it sudden, really?) they hated each other. He told me he'd hear his dad in the den pick up the phone and punch numbers and start to talk in his lawyer voice without even saying hello. And then he'd shout "Don't you hang up on me." Then slam down the phone. Then it would ring. Sometimes his dad would pick it up and there would just be silence. Evan couldn't tell whether his dad was listening to her talk or whether they were having a silent battle over who would cave in and

speak first. Then the lawyer voice again, that Evan said didn't even sound human, saying words like "Desertion." "Custody." "Court." "Judge." I could feel how those words would knock the wind out of somebody. But she knew how to make him lose control and start to yell, and once she had done that she would hang up while he was screaming You left your son, you left your son's father, you can shove up your ass everything you ever said...those things happened within earshot of Evan too many times, so when our being together got all awkward and complicated, and silences between us stopped being comfortable and lasted too long, I knew perfectly well what was hurting him.

It happens to most people, but not always that bad. He took it hard. I wanted to tell him it was better than having one of them die, but I managed to keep my mouth shut for once. He started hiding inside himself, and when I would see him I never seemed to say the right thing; after a while I hardly said anything, and he called me less and less.

Sometimes I couldn't help wondering if it was because I was white, like his mother. If that's the reason, I'd think, then...what? Go to hell would have been the logical thing, but I couldn't say that to him, and anyway I knew it *couldn't* be the reason even if he thought it was. It would just have been an excuse. When you love somebody, you love them, and when you don't you don't.

I tried telling myself it was stupid to still care about him, I couldn't bear to think of myself as a drama queen, but it didn't work. I kept thinking maybe he would come back out someday, maybe I'd get another chance. Ellie said at least I didn't have to try to make him feel better all the time, the way I would have if things had stayed the same between us. But it wasn't as though I resented his being unhappy, and it wasn't about trying, anyway.

I would see him in the gym shooting free throws when he couldn't seem to talk to me, and I'd wonder if he was trying to tell me something. I'd think in his direction: you learned that from me, remember?

The thing is, he did remember. But we weren't really going out anymore and I missed him horribly. More and more it seemed like I was never alone with him. He didn't break up with me, but I felt I was becoming one of the people he slipped past in the hall.

The guys I played ball with, some were sweet and funny, some were big, loud little boys, but after Evan became my boyfriend I didn't think about any of them when I went home. Maybe one or two of them would have liked me to, but I didn't. It would have been convenient, but you can't make yourself feel that way about somebody. I couldn't stop

thinking about Evan, perhaps because he picked me to talk to in the first place, or perhaps because he never seemed to feel I owed him anything. Maybe I already knew he was mine, even if he didn't.

\*

My mother said she liked Evan and I knew she meant it, but then she told me I was trying to save him and it wasn't my job. That made no sense to me at the age of sixteen. What did she think it meant to love him if I wasn't going to try to help him when he was in trouble? But I didn't know what to do or how to do it and it drove me crazy. I'm like my grandfather that way. He always wanted to know how something worked.

In my room I would reach into the pocket of my mind and take out the idea of Evan, or of Evan and me together, and I would turn it over in my hand like a shell brought home from the beach. I examined it, I polished it with my fingers, I breathed on it, I held it in my mouth and felt its ridges with my tongue. I knew him – how can I say this well enough? I don't know if I can. No one wants to say how unusual it is to know someone else, how seldom anybody really does. Even Terry, as much as I love him, has always been stubbornly himself in a way I don't quite understand. He holds something inside himself that is his alone, and he won't share it with anyone, not even me or Mom. Not because he doesn't love us, but for some other reason. Even the reason is a secret, but I think he's afraid that it, his secret treasure, might vanish at the touch of anyone else's awareness. I was like that with Evan, or the idea of him. I didn't want to tell anyone else how I felt about us, after my mother said that about saving him; and I couldn't tell him, because he wouldn't let me. But I felt him inside my body all the time, like something hard lodged just below my rib cage that poked at me and crowded me as I walked, or made my move to the hoop. If he hadn't seemed to turn into someone else, a silent boy who couldn't answer me, that hard little pebble would not have taken up residence in my side.

\*

I was in my room, sitting on my bed, half-heartedly reading *Lord of the Flies* for school; the phone rang and I slipped off the headphones of my CD player. My mother answered and automatically I listened with half my brain in case it might be for me. Nothing interesting. I heard her

say, "I thought it had to be you." Back to the island. I started to put the headphones on again. "But I didn't think it could be. How are you?"

Someone her age. Voice from the past. I wondered if it was someone who knew my dad.

"Where are you, anyway?" she said. "Do you still live in Newton?"

Newton. Who did she know in Newton?

"Oh, I have this funky little dance studio where..." She started talking about her job and I began looking for my place again. I was getting a little sick of the book being so damn Meaningful; it was hard to just read the story. I knew we'd have to write an essay about it, like all the other essays we'd been grinding out all year, like the essay on the AP exam. Now she was talking about Jamaica Plain and the schools not being so great down there. There was a silence while the other person answered.

My mom said "Oh" in a way that made me close the book. She was on guard, tense, something. "When?" she said. I could tell it mattered to her to know.

"Did you say kids?" my mom asked. "Do you have more than one?"

Was she talking to a man or a woman?

"That must be really hard for you." There was a tentative quality in her voice that I seldom heard anymore. It was as if my dad's death had removed the subtler shadings from her feelings.

"It's all right," she said. No mistaking that tone in my house; I knew she was talking about my dad's death, or getting over it, or something. Part of me resented her saying it was all right, even though I didn't know what "it" was and there was no justification for my getting pissed off.

"Tam? She's fine. I mean, for a teenage girl who has to live with just mom day in and day out. You know, she loves me but she sorta really can't stand me at all? But that's the way it's supposed to work." Thank you so much, I thought. So that's all I am? A teenager having typical teenager emotions? I was anything but fine.

"I wouldn't trade it for the world," she said.

I waited.

"So how did she get away with taking the kids to Chicago?"

"I thought in Massachusetts you couldn't just do that," my mom said. "Take the kids, I mean. I don't mean it was your fault or anything, it just seems so unfair."



Divorce, then. The person on the other end was the husband who got the shaft. What was he calling her for? And how would she know what was his fault, or not?

"I guess it's none of my business," she said, but I could tell she wanted to know, whatever it was. I idly read, for the thousandth time, the takeout menu from Armando's Pizza that was pinned to my wall. Next to the meatball sub Terry had written "Yum!"

"You don't have to," she said. The tone of her voice seeped into me, it told me things her words didn't say. But those things weren't in words either, they were a feeling in my stomach.

"I'm okay. Mostly. Sometimes it's like I'm just starting to come to. Sometimes I'm really fine, I sort of...forget – that sounds bad, doesn't it? I don't forget David, I never could, but you know, I forget to be unhappy. Isn't it that way for you with your kids?"

Did I, also, forget? Of course I had, sometimes, with Evan, when things were still right between us. What made it happen for her?

"You still have them, though," she said, and I knew she was referring to what we didn't have anymore.

"Why?" She sounded ready to pounce, like the irritable person I lived with, not like sociable politeness on the phone.

"It's okay. I don't need reminding, believe me. The worst is when people won't talk to you about it at all. When they pretend nothing's changed. That really pisses me off. I seem to have lost my patience after he died."

No kidding, I thought. And didn't have that much anyway.

"You – Will, I'm not talking about you. I'm just kind of tired of most people. I don't have the energy for them. I have to take care of myself and the kids, you know?"

Will? I thought. Who the hell is this Will?

"It's improving, bit by bit," she said in a voice that trailed off. "I'll get there." Maybe she was trying to convince herself.

"What do you know?" She sounded more awake. "You're just trying to make me feel better. Same as ever."

Why didn't I recognize his name?

"You always were a nice guy," she said. "I'll bet you're a good father."

"Oh, now – come on. I mean it. I'm glad you called me." And why was that, what was there in this phone call to make her glad?

"What about me? You have no idea who you're talking to." I knew she meant just the opposite.

"If you say so."

I waited.

"What," she said, and there was something guarded in her voice again, fending something off.

I waited.

"Okay." She sounded anything but certain.

I waited.

"Oh yeah, that little place that's downstairs, on Eliot Street? I know it." She was reluctant, I could tell. But she was saying it anyway.

"Um – Thursday?" I couldn't push it away – I was listening to my mother making a date. With some man, divorced with kids, someone she knew a long time ago. Before he was married, apparently, or before he had the children anyway. Before she married my dad?

"All right. Mm-hm." A year and a half, almost, since he died. If she had had anything like a date before, it definitely was under my radar, and I thought my radar was pretty good.

"Bye."

On Thursday, my mother was going out with some guy named Will, whom she apparently knew pretty well at some time in her life that I knew nothing about. He called her up out of the blue, he asked her out, and she said yes. Now that was a piece of news.

Was she going to come upstairs and tell me she was going out to dinner Thursday and I needed to watch Terry? I could say no, I could invent some obligation, but no I couldn't. I never could lie worth a damn.

I didn't want to imagine any of it, and then think what it would look like to Terry. Or would it be better for him. He wouldn't have to think about her and sex. But about Dad. Yes. He was a boy, had lost his dad and I probably didn't really know what that felt like to him, but if I didn't, who would?

I couldn't stop her from doing what she wanted, just like she couldn't stop me. She always said we were too much alike.

But she didn't come and tell me anything about Thursday. She went in her room and closed the door without saying goodnight.

## W I L L

We met for lunch, at a restaurant in Harvard Square that had no associations with our past, and no, she wasn't twenty-nine anymore, but I could still see her as she had been, that image refracted by the intervening time as if just below the surface of rippling water; and if she had been twenty-nine she would have been too young for me. A woman that age would want to get pregnant, and I had been through that part of life.

Awkwardly we talked about our work and our houses until she pulled pictures of her children out of her purse; she watched me closely as I studied the one of Tamara. I didn't see myself in Susannah's daughter, but I saw Susannah, as if I were seeing into the past that she and I might have shared if we had met when we were that young. And then layered on top of that, transparently, a girl I didn't know who was also the child I might have had. My oldest daughter. Maybe. All but grown up without me. I couldn't stop gazing. "So now you have two of your own," Susannah said, a bit uncomfortably. Did she know what I was thinking?

"Yes." I showed her their pictures out of my wallet, Jocelyn building a castle at the beach with her dark hair plastered wet against her head, Amy looking impatient in a polyester robe at eighth grade graduation. You could see, if you looked closely, that she had reached adolescence. It was awkward for me, and for her with me, when she started getting her period. I thought I'd do better with Jocie.

"Funny we should both have girls," Susannah said.

"Yes."

"She's going to be a very pretty young woman," Susannah said, holding the picture of Amy.

"You won't get an argument from me." But it made me wonder when Amy would have her first boyfriend and how I would feel about that. Probably I wouldn't even be there to react when it happened. All of that lost to me, by whose fault, mine or Connie's, it hardly mattered; assigning blame would not change what was. "I miss her a lot. Miss them both."

"I can tell." She leaned forward to hand me the photo, and after I took it she didn't sit back, or withdraw her hand, but only waited with her eyes on mine. I knew what she meant me to do; I just hadn't thought it would come that soon. I laid my fingers on her palm and she stroked my knuckles with her thumb. When I felt the sensation I remembered she always had done that in just the same way, and it was almost as though we felt at home with each other.

"I don't know what to say," I told her, because it was the truth.

"Say what you want. You don't have to act so – careful, it's okay, you don't have to pretend."

"Was I? I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It's okay, Will, there's nobody here but us."

Maybe careful was exactly what we needed to be. Regardless of what she said, I felt Tamara and Terry, and Amy and Jocelyn, and David's ghost all watching us as we sat in that restaurant with her stroking my hand with her thumb.

"I never thought you'd call me," she said. "How long has it been?"

"Years." I knew the number but didn't want to say it; the last time had been when Amy was less than a year old.

"I've missed you," she said. "But you probably didn't know that. I mean, why would you?"

It wasn't the words she said, as much as the way her lips seemed to form the word "you" in the shape of a kiss; for a moment the old Susa flickered to the surface, making the old irresistible claim on me, and then retreated, but that one glimpse sent me pursuing her. Words came without thought. "I always wanted it," I said, without even knowing what I meant. She smiled with the corners of her mouth. "I've never really stopped thinking about you."

"Never?" she said, tilting her head to one side, as if she had caught me in a foolish exaggeration.

"Oh come on, you know what I mean."

"But you could tell me," she said. "It's been a long time."

I felt light-headed, I became reckless. "Did I love you?" I said, looking her straight in the eye. I had to make her admit it.

"I always thought you did."

"Then I never stopped."

I had not meant to go that far, had not known that I would even want to so soon, and it happened before I could think. If she didn't want to hear that, if I didn't want to have said it, it was too late.

She reached over and laid her fingers on my mouth as if to silence me, and then withdrew her hand, looked away and made a little face between a wince and a smile, then bent down to fish in her purse, as if she wanted to hide behind the table. She turned away from me and blew her nose. With the back of her hand she wiped at her eye. "Ha," she said to no one, trying not to cry. I felt that I was out of practice at being with her. "I don't know if I can still do this," she said without looking at me.

She turned back toward me, blinking away a tear, her cheek hectic and drawn. Opened her mouth as if to say something but thought better of it, raised her hand to say Wait. Let out a held breath. "Too many feelings at once," she said. "I'm not as..."

"It's all right."

"Want to go?" she said.

"Sure."

I paid and we left the almost untouched plates. The restaurant was below street level; we mounted brick stairs up into a street where traffic passed indifferent to our moment. On the sidewalk I hesitated before I put my arm around her shoulders. She smiled up at me tremulously; when I saw that the smile was an effort I took my arm away. She grasped my hand and held on as we walked down the block toward her car. I seemed to be supporting her, lending her strength. Never this way between us before. Sometimes she had carried her beauty in secret, under the conventional façade, sometimes it blazed out before the world, but she had always come to me and gone away in sovereignty and glory. Now for the first time she trusted me with her weakness, and I thought this must be how she had been with her husband.

When we got to the car she turned to me and threw her arms around my neck and I held her. I couldn't tell what was happening, except that she needed it to happen; she held on longer than I expected, I was conscious of maintaining the embrace.

"Look," she said when she stepped back, but didn't go on. She didn't meet my eyes.

"I am."

"I just need to get used to the idea."

"God knows," I said. But I didn't know; she seemed to have decided for both of us, without telling me.

"Let me call you when I can. I will."

"Okay," I said.

She opened the door of her car, and I saw that I was not supposed to try to kiss her, and that she silently apologized for that. I didn't move closer. "See you," I said.

"Bye," she said in a muffled voice. I turned away, thinking I had something to get used to as well. Behind me her car started.

T A M

Thursday came without my mother having said a word about going out. Was I wrong after all about what she was saying? She had definitely arranged *something*. She came home from work at the usual time, she found me and Terry there, me listening to Pearl Jam and talking to Ellie on the phone, Terry building an impossibly complicated Lego castle on the living room floor. He wanted me to do it with him, but it made my brain too tired trying to visualize how to put the pieces together so they made a staircase sticking out of the castle wall. She looked worn down by the day, but that proved nothing. I volunteered to help cook dinner – even though it wasn't my turn – so I could observe her; I hung around the kitchen and talked to her about whatever came into my head, but I got very little for my trouble. She was quiet and hardly paid attention at all. She was extra-affectionate to Terry, it seemed to me. But she didn't say a thing about going out, or anything unusual. All she did was tell me to turn the music down.

Maybe it hadn't happened after all. Was that why she looked glum?

But after she kept on that way for a couple of days I could tell something was going on inside her, and sometimes Terry and I were no more than interruptions to whatever it was. She'd be there in the house with us, but if I said anything to her it was as though I threw the words down an elevator shaft written on a piece of newspaper. They took a long time to flutter to the bottom and she wouldn't answer until they hit.

\*

I was in the gym playing ball in the afternoon after school, four on four, and after we'd been playing for a while Evan came in and sat down on the bottom level of the bleachers and watched us. I could feel his eyes on me; he made me self-conscious and threw me off completely, I even double-dribbled. If he hadn't been in street clothes I would have tried to make him play, then I would have felt a little better about him being there in spite of his bizarre jump shot. A couple of people said they had to go home and the game broke up. I felt he made it happen somehow. I went up to him and said "Hi," and he said "Hi," and we looked at each other. He looked stuck in sadness and somehow, he made it seem as if I was the one who made things turn out that way. As if he was waiting for me to do something that I should have known to do; he wasn't going to tell me what it was, and until I did we couldn't talk. I couldn't stand that look of his, I walked away and drank out of the drinking fountain and I was about to leave the gym but I turned reckless inside instead and marched back to where he was still sitting.

"Evan, what?" I said.

He didn't answer for a while. "I don't know how to say it," he said.

"Look," I said. "Look, this..."

I climbed up onto the level above him and sat behind him and bent forward and put my arms around his neck and my head next to his and pressed my sweaty self against his back so that he had to feel me and know I was there. I could smell his familiar hair. "This is crazy," I said.

How much more could I have done?

"I know," he mumbled. He put his hands on my forearms, like he wanted me to stay and hold him that way, hot and sweaty as I was.

"Talk to me," I said in his ear. "What's happening to you?"

He didn't say anything for so long it made me want to push him off the bleachers, but I restrained myself. "I don't know," he said finally.

"How can you not know?"

"I'm sorry."

I didn't want to hear him say he was sorry. I let go of him and climbed down off the bleachers. When I did that, he leaned forward with his elbows on his knees and studied the floor between his feet.

"Evan, I can't do this. I don't know what to do."

"I'm sorry," he said again.

I had to leave. I couldn't stand to hear that. But I was damned if I'd be the one to say goodbye.



\*

Three weeks passed that way, and then one day as we were eating leftover chicken my mom said, "On Friday I'm thinking of inviting a friend over for dinner."

"Oh yeah?" I said. "Who?"

"His name is Will, he's somebody I knew a long time ago."

I couldn't very well say "Please don't." "How long?" I said.

She looked like she didn't want to be asked that. "Years," she said.

"What's gonna happen when he comes over?" Terry said. Such a smart kid, he asked the right question immediately.

"He's going to have dinner with us," Mom said. "That's what people generally do when you invite them to dinner."

"Why?" Terry said.

"Terry, please."

"No, I mean, why's he coming?"

She had her look of Don't push me too far. "Because I feel like it. Because I live here too, all right?"

"Are we gonna eat on time?" Terry was very concerned with doing two things on time: eating dinner, and going to bed.

"Yes, I promise," she said.

"So, is this like, a date?" I said. As usual, I thought better of blurting that out, one second too late.

"No." Her eyes darted toward mine and away again, warning me off that topic. Her eyebrows made the equivalent of a dismissive shrug.

"A *date*?" Terry said to me, giving me a wrinkled nose face that meant How could you be so dumb?

"So it's something else," I said.

She didn't make eye contact. "Enough," she said. "I'm done, does anybody else want more?"

"No thanks," I said.

"I'm tired of chicken," Terry said.

"I know, it's not that exciting. Anyway, it's your turn to cook tomorrow."

"Finally," he said. Once a week we had his favorite things: hamburgers cooked to death, frozen French fries, frozen corn, and canned peaches. He had to make dinner, and we had to eat it without complaining. But we did get him to stop drowning ours in catsup, the way he ate his.

So it was a date. As if it wasn't bad enough that Evan wandered off into his own personal hell, now it appeared that my mother was bent on getting herself a boyfriend.

\*

"But what did you expect?" Ellie said. "She wasn't going to just give it up for the rest of her life, was she?"

"It?"

"Sex."

"Couldn't she wait until I get out of the house?"

"*You* didn't."

"What?"

"You and Evan."

"That's totally different. Anyway, now..."

"I know," Ellie said.

"I guess it has to happen eventually. Just not now, damn it."

"How old's your mom?"

"Forty-six." She looked pretty decent for someone her age; she had a streak of gray in her hair, but it almost looked as if a stylist had done it on purpose.

"See?"

"See what?"

"That's not so old. My mom's fifty."

"How would you like it if it was her?"

"Tam, really, can you picture my mom being single?"

"I can't picture mine, but she is. It's too weird. You don't know."

"You could come over," Ellie said.

"I have to write a paper for History."

"No, I mean Friday. Maybe you could eat with us."

"That'd be running away."

"Come later, then. You could sleep over."

"Okay."

W I L L

T A M

Three weeks passed before Susa called; I was beginning to think she wouldn't after all. I went through all the permutations more than once: waiting for the phone to ring, remembering our time together, reminding myself that there is no such thing in life as a second chance, telling myself to beware of getting what I asked for, assaying my fantasies until I identified the constituent elements of need and self-deception, forgetting about the waiting and then becoming annoyed with myself for remembering again, for caring if she called or not. It was almost the end of school, when I would finally get to see Amy and Jocie. Then the phone did ring and she invited me to dinner; and she told me, apropos of nothing, that Tam was going to sleep over at a friend's house.

It was a long day, the appointed day, waiting for that evening to come. Beneath the appearance of work, an empty day of life in abeyance, as if the day were a little death. For seventeen years I had periodically repeated to myself the words "I loved her" – when I could not keep them at bay – and like a name repeated too often in the dark, they had become only a ritual sound. What if there was nothing behind them anymore?

By midafternoon a fast vibration would not stop humming somewhere between my heart and my gut. I was trying to price out X-ray systems for a group practice that had bought a new building. The humming vibration would not have shown up on any machine, but it prevented me from finishing a chore I could normally have done with half my attention. It felt as if my body knew more about what was to come than I did, and was readying itself for what it already understood.

I thought that instead of trying to work I should be making some ceremonial sacrifice, observing some ritual of commemoration or even grieving. If I came back to her for even one night, the parenthesis that was opened the day she left me would irrevocably close, the past would finally become fully past. Our old love, who she and I had been then, my marriage and divorce, the births of my daughters and every year of their lives up till now – all this would be thrust into the distance by my living a present moment with Susannah. That was what scared me. Nobody else could have made that happen but her. If I didn't turn my back and walk away, which was unthinkable, I would make love to her – whoever she was now. I would sleep in her bed, I would wake up with her and find myself in an unknown chapter of what could only be called my life. A now. I had grown accustomed to thinking that now was over, that everything had already happened, that the story that starred me was behind me and nothing remained but to play out my hand. If that was not so, if I was going to start living forward again, wouldn't it be disloyal to Amy and Jocelyn? It would feel like I wasn't the person I had always been for them. But I had no choice. If she offered, I would accept.

Or maybe there was no such risk, maybe nothing like that could happen. Maybe there was too much fact in our lives now to admit of the possibility of romance. Maybe we were other people who misleadingly carried the same old names. Besides, look in the mirror: maybe she would not want me after all, would have to admit her mistake with mumbled embarrassment. Or would I be the one to slip and let disappointment show? As I drove home from the office I played out in my mind a crushing scene of two half-naked middle-aged people realizing that all this would have been better left to the imagination. And then I would leave her house in the middle of the night like a burglar, and I, too, would have been robbed of memories and wishes, our past flattened for good.

But there was no way to know anything beforehand. Only time could bear us forward into what would come, only the hands of the clock turning and delivering me, finally, to the moment of getting back in my car, driving unfamiliar streets in Cambridge, the moment of standing at her door.

At a quarter to seven on Friday my mom was in the kitchen hovering over a pot of gumbo and I was in the living room pretending to be looking for a lost CD; actually I was lurking, waiting for Will to show up so I could get a look at him first, before she got in the way.

The doorbell rang. "I got it," I called; I heard her bang a spoon against a pot and it sounded like an irritated bang to me. She knew it had to be him.

I ran down the stairs and

Her daughter opened it, Tamara who might be, but I knew I must not think that, and

there stood the most boring-looking white guy imaginable, middle-aged, overweight, clutching a bottle of wine like a life preserver. At least he had hair. He was looking at me kind of wild-eyed, almost as if he was afraid of me. I had the advantage, but what could I do with it?

I saw she wanted to know who I was to look at her that way, to come at seven on a Friday night, to be cooked for by her mother; she was ready not to like me, not to want me in her life.

"Hi," he said. "Are you Tamara?"

"I'm Tam."

"Oh – sorry – I'm Will, I'm a friend of your mom's."

But friend of her mom's was much less than she already surmised. "Well, come in then," she said, as if she would have liked to stop me but it was too late now. She led me up the stairs and when she opened the door to their place I saw Susa drying her hands on a dishtowel that she threw hastily on the back of a chair, greeting me. I stepped into their home: the home of a shared life about which I knew nothing, and in which I was, as yet, no one.

"Will! Did you meet Tam already? Come in, come in." She seemed to be performing the part of hostess and it didn't look as if she was comfortable in the role.

"Yes."

"Did you have trouble finding it?"

"No, your directions were perfect."

"Come in the kitchen, I'm just about to serve up. Oh look, you brought a bottle of *wine*, you didn't have to do that, thank you." I couldn't believe the disgustingly gushy, girlish way she said that. When he handed her the

bottle she looked up at him all self-conscious and pink-cheeked, and her eyes flicked to me watching, and then back to him. She touched his arm to guide him into the kitchen, to get him out of my field of view, I was certain, not that I really wanted to see any of this.

In the kitchen she said something else to him in an undertone, a completely different voice, and he answered her the same way. I didn't need to hear the words and they didn't matter. The sound of those murmured voices told me that everything I suspected was true.

T A M

The dinner was awkward for everyone except Terry. My mother made Will tell me about his work, which was anything but exciting because he sold MRI and CT scan machines. On top of everything else it pissed me off that my mom would date a salesman, of all things, after being married to my dad who probably was one of the very doctors whose time Will would waste with his pitch. But Terry liked it, because he could ask Will a million questions about how the machines worked. Even I grudgingly recognized that Will knew how to explain it to an eight-year-old. A very smart one, of course. I kept watching my mom and thinking she was probably counting the minutes till dinner would be over. So was I. I got out of there and went over to Ellie's as soon as I could. And Terry, of course, had to go to bed on time or he'd get all tied in knots. As I knew from experience, by the time he had his bath and got read to, it would be pretty close to nine o'clock. So after that I knew they would finally be alone.

Did they both know what was going to happen then?

Much later than nine, after midnight, after it probably had happened, I lay with my back to Ellie, on her bed. There were two twin beds in her room, one of which was usually piled with clothes except when I slept over, but we were both on hers in our T-shirts and boxer shorts. We had been talking in the dark for a long time. As always, I turned out to be able to tell her the things I thought I couldn't say. I knew she wasn't asleep and would still listen, but I had run out of words. I was in love with Evan, who could barely speak to me, and I hadn't gotten over it and I didn't want to, and my mother had apparently, in the space of three weeks, decided to take up with this Will and was, for all I knew, with him in her bed right that second. My dad

was gone and when I saw Will sit down at our dinner table it was new and raw all over again that he was never coming back. I hated Will, who was an innocuous nobody as far as I could see but I hated him because my mother kept checking to see if he liked her, and I hated her for looking at him that way...Ellie's fingertips touched my hand so softly it was like a breath of air stealing through the room, wanting to comfort me, and the gentleness of her touch made tears slide out of my eyes. "Don't, El," I said before I could think; then I heard myself and thought how ungrateful that was. It was completely dark in her room, she couldn't see me nor I her, and that meant I could cry as if I were alone, I could let go. She tried to give me a hug but I wouldn't let her, for some reason I wanted to be miserable alone.

"Sorry," she said in a hurt voice, and turned away. We lay with our backs to each other as I got over my crying. My arm hung over the edge of the bed; my hand felt heavy and tingly, I could feel my pulse beating in it. I was wide awake and I was sure she was too.

"Don't be sorry." I didn't like hearing it from her any more than from Evan. Ellie didn't answer. I could feel the tense space between our two backs, but I didn't know the right words. Too much time passed.

I turned so I was lying on my back. "El," I said.

"What?"

I touched her T-shirted back and took my hand away again. "You're my best friend."

Ellie turned on her back with noisy thrashing of the sheets and then sighed, sharply. We lay side by side, not going to sleep, and after a while the uproar inside me quieted down somewhat.

"Why is life such a fucking mess?" Ellie said.

"I don't know." But somehow that freed me from where I was stuck inside myself. I wondered what she was thinking, or feeling, but I could feel sleep coming and I knew I would be too tired to answer even if she did start to say it. I just had time to get in the other bed before I conked out.



## W I L L

I sat in Susa's living room, faintly hearing her reading to Terry down the hall, and realized that in all the time I had put in trying to imagine what this would be like, I had never come close. After all these years, I felt it was happening too quickly. I had never thought enough about how it would feel to see Tam, or to be inspected by her. I felt her not liking me and it threw me off balance more than being with Susa did. I had barely recognized the existence of Terry, and here he was, a curious little boy actually talking to me. I couldn't begin to imagine Amy and Jocie meeting them. These children were Susa's life, and I was a clueless intruder, at least in Tam's eyes. I didn't know the language, the customs, I was there on mere sufferance – except I saw how Susa looked at me. Tam did too and I saw how much she wanted to get away. I was relieved when she left and I didn't have to be aware of her every second. It was complicated enough between me and Susa just being this much older, so obviously not being those two childless twenty-eight-year-olds who fell in bed together, who could never seem to have each other often enough. To do this dance in private would have been awkward. In the same room with Tam and Terry it felt much more illicit than our affair ever had. She loved them, they knew it, who was I to throw everything off balance by imagining she might love me too?

I heard a door close quietly, Susa's footsteps in the hall. Another door closed: she must be in the bathroom. The toilet flushed, faint sound of water running, silence. What was she thinking in there, and was it the same thing I was? Everything ends. The clock does not stop. We had to be naked together at least one more time. We could not do anything but this, no matter how it turned out.

I heard the bathroom door open, her feet coming toward me. She stood in the doorway, looking me over. What was I to her? A man she once knew? She was wearing blue jeans and a sleeveless top. It was a warm night in June. She had taken off her shoes. Maybe she had brushed her hair while she was in the bathroom. It was much shorter now than when we were together, but not so short as to look like she was still in mourning. "Would you like some more wine?" she said. The look on her face was almost ironic, like she was thinking, Isn't it silly to say these things, as if this were an ordinary evening? But what am I supposed to say?

"No thanks."

She came and sat beside me on the sofa and we looked at each other, for better or worse. Not that we hadn't been sizing each other up ever since I walked in the door, but we could finally do it without being watched. What she had been through showed on her, but I couldn't quite say how. Maybe her nose was sharper. The set of her lips as she examined me was not that of a young woman. I felt life had made her harder and me softer, and it wasn't a comfortable thought. But when she spoke she sounded embarrassed: "So what do you think?"

I offered her my hand, palm up, and she took it. We sat there looking at our joined hands.

"I think it's a whole different world," I said.

"You're telling me."

"Tam's not happy with this, is she?"

"I don't need her permission."

Of course not, and why should I want it, but I did. That was all backwards, especially if...I didn't want to let myself think that thought. "I don't think you ever needed anyone's."

Susa smiled at that and I glimpsed the younger self, still in her somewhere, as I felt it within me. If I didn't look in the mirror, I was still in my early thirties, inside. "You weren't exactly playing by the rules yourself, you know."

"I wanted you too much to have a conscience."

She disengaged her hand from mine, reached up and touched the side of my head with one finger. "Gray hair," she said softly, maybe regretfully.

"I like yours," I said. Her few streaks of gray were almost like highlights; the rest of her hair was darker than I remembered.

"Do you really? I can't decide whether to color it or not. Do I seem old to you?"

"We're still the same age."

"I didn't ask that."

"I'm the one who seems old to me, you don't."

She took my hand again and we sat quietly, waiting for more words to come. Susa moved over a little, leaned against me; I put my arm around her awkwardly, like a boy on a date. Her hand rested on my knee. I knew she wasn't comfortable with me but that seemed like too much to expect. Over her TV set was a print of the Edward Hopper painting "New York Movie." It's still there on that wall. It wasn't familiar to me then; now I know it by heart: the usherette standing alone, off to the side under a dim light while the movie plays in a darkened theatre, her hand to her cheek, lost in thought, stricken perhaps, even pierced to the heart – there's no telling by what. Perfectly dressed and made up, heartbreakingly beautiful, but somehow you know that's all a façade. Of course I thought of Susa losing David. "That's a hell of a painting," I said.

"Mm."

"Does it feel like that?"

"Sort of. I don't think she has children."

"Speaking of children, do you think Terry's going to decide to come out here?"

"No, he's very religious about going to bed. He hates to break his routine. He might call me. Maybe. I'll check on him in a few minutes." I heard the rest without her having to say it. And once he's asleep, then...but we can't start yet.

Abruptly, Susa moved away from me and stood up. "You sure you don't want some more wine? I do."

"Okay."

She went into the kitchen and returned with two glasses, handed me one, clinked mine with hers, now with a definitely ironical look in her eye. "I'll ply you with drink and then I'll have my way with you," she said.

"And what is your way?" It was thrilling to be flirted with by her.

She looked away and took a big swallow of wine. She shook her head. "I don't know, Will. Fuck it, I don't know anything. I don't know how to play, I forgot how. I'm not that girl you had the fling with anymore."

"That was no fling." And you were no girl, I thought.

"Okay, it wasn't." She put her glass down on the coffee table and turned toward me with a look that was almost angry. "Would you just hold me and let's not try to talk right now? Please?"

I put down my untasted glass and took her in my arms. It was awkward, our knees knocked together, it took a while to find a way. Completely out of sync, but we managed. Her face was against my shirt. I stroked her hair a little, I felt her warm breath on me. She was right: words were useless. Our bodies would have to understand each other on their own. We were both afraid. Was that it? But if we were just next to each other maybe we could get past that. Her hair smelled like shampoo. I touched her bare upper arms and her shoulders, the side of her neck, I spread my fingers wide on her back. Contact. You are here, we are here, we both know why. Life has had its way with us. Still is, right now. Susa raised her head and I kissed her, I disappeared into the kiss, my history evaporated. All gone, only this moment. We were just us again, but somehow she managed to break away. "I have to go check on Terry," she said.

I sat with my eyes closed, listening, trying to stay empty of self, to stay gone. Not think just listen. I heard a door carefully latch, her footsteps returning. She was in the door when I looked up. "Come on," she said softly, holding out her hand.

She led me to her room. One lamp was on, not too bright; she closed the door behind us. "We have to try to be quiet," she said. "Okay?"

"Okay."

I kissed her again, wanting to let go of everything but her and the moment, but I was too conscious of being in the bedroom she once shared with her husband and of Terry sleeping just down the hall. We kissed, and touching her, being touched by her, I felt familiarity for the first time. She tugged at my shirt, pulled it out of my pants. I unbuttoned her top and she shrugged it off. I needed so much to see her with no protective layers. Her body looked tense, almost as if carved from wood, and I wondered if grief had done that. She reached behind herself and unhooked her bra, took it off this shoulder, that shoulder, let it drop from her fingers, and with these everyday gestures she brought us back to where we started, as lovers. In the present. Her eyes were asking a question they didn't need to ask. She unzipped my pants and took hold of my penis as if she had to be certain I wanted her, and when she knew that, she lay down on the bed and waited for me to undress. "I'm not as beautiful as you are," I said.

"Stop it." I got out of my clothes as fast as I could and lay down next to her. She still had her jeans on while I was naked. The advantage was hers, as always. Her eyes were eating me up, did she want me or was she just deeply curious? I lay down next to her, I felt I could not touch her closely enough, I pressed hard on her breasts, her rib cage, with force I seized her by the shoulders while I kissed her breasts, as if physically I could break some barrier, as if the strength of my hands could batter down the wall of aloneness. She exhaled sharply when I pressed on her but she didn't complain, she just moved my hands away when they squeezed her too hard, she was strong too and her hands could break my grip. I unbuttoned her jeans, unzipped the rough zipper, the heel of my hand was against her belly, her hard pubic bone that pressed up against my hand pushing from above. I pulled her jeans and her panties off and finally we were equal in nakedness and I had her in my arms, the length of her touching all along the length of me. Her forehead was against my cheek. She was clinging to me, hiding her face from me. I held her against me and ran my hand down her back, I caressed her ass, again and again. My fingertips invited her legs to open, but she didn't want me to come in her yet. I could imagine why, but how should I know anything? "What is it?" I said. She wouldn't answer. Did I feel a tear on my neck?

"This is only the second time I've been with anyone since he died. The other time was so fucking awful. So...shameful. I didn't want it but I made myself try to want it, it was grotesque. No one knows it ever happened. I'd never tell anybody but you."

I felt as though I might have heard wrong. She trusted me, then? That much? "I can keep a secret," I said.

"I know. You were one."

"Not any more."

I felt her shake her head No. I wondered if after all, we were not in her bed to make love, if it was more that we had to be naked to say what needed to be said.

"I'm surprised you still want me," she said.

"Why?"

"I never thought you'd forgive me for leaving you like that. I wouldn't have."

"I tried to hate you, but it didn't work."

"I'm sorry. I had to make a choice."

Many things I wanted to say and couldn't. Was it the right choice? Of course she would say yes. Whose daughter was Tam? Of course she'd say David's. She would have to. This was her life. If she

asked did I regret marrying Connie I'd have to say no because I couldn't wish away Amy and Jocelyn. Susa, you broke my heart, but why even say it now, naked in bed with her? If we were together these things need not be spoken; if we were not, saying them would make no difference.

Susa propped herself up on one elbow and kissed me. "I shouldn't have made you think about that, should I?"

"It's okay, it's who we are."

She was above me on hands and knees. I cupped her breasts in my hands, her no longer tight belly, felt the sweet fuck-me wetness of her cunt.

"Will you let me try again?"

Did she want me to give my life to her all over again, already?

Even more basic. She needed reassurance. What I had never known Susa to need.

I took hold of her and she let me be the stronger. I put her on her back and the look on her face said it was this, not words, that she wanted. In a moment I was in her and we were making love again, her arms were around me and she was moving against me, the body could not lie. I had not been wrong, I had not been deceiving myself when I thought I remembered what was between us, it was only more powerful than memory could ever recall.

T A M

I got home after noon the next day to find a note saying that Terry was at a friend's house and my mom was running errands. I looked for clues to the previous evening's outcome, but there was nothing to find. When my mom got home she asked me how I liked Will and I said he was okay, and I asked her how the rest of the evening was and she said fine. We didn't set any records for mother-daughter communication. But in the middle of the next week, after Terry was in bed, she said she was going out and I should keep an eye on him.

"You're going out now?"

"Mm-hm."

"Where?"

"I'm going to see Will." She didn't quite look at me as she said it.

"Really," I said.

"Really." That time she made sure she looked me in the eye. It didn't seem to me she wanted any further conversation on that subject.

\*

When she had left, I took a look in at Terry, who was sleeping all tangled up in his sheets (how did he get them twisted around him that way?), and then I sat in my room, on my bed under the team picture of the Celtics, and stared at my phone. Not for the first time. It had been an intolerable eon since Evan and I had really talked. That was bad enough in itself, and now I really needed to tell him something. There wasn't anybody else except Ellie I could count on to understand how I felt.

I called her, because I couldn't get up the nerve to call him, and blurted out that my mom had just gone out to have sex with her new boyfriend. "How do you know?" she said.

"I know."

"Well, you can't stop her."

"He's gross, he's like Mr. Potato Head," I said, which was unfair but what did I care?

"So? Maybe she likes that." Maybe she was used to it – my dad, it was true, didn't have the greatest shape to him. That was the last thing I wanted to think about. "Did you do the biology homework?" Ellie said.

"Yeah."

"Is there a difference between regular RNA and messenger RNA, or not? I can't figure it out."

"Oh please. I don't know. I don't think there is. Who cares? I've got other things on my mind."

"Maybe you should change the subject."

"Maybe my mom should. Listen, I just had an idea." It was still coming to me as I said it, more and more perfect. "If she's going to go do this whenever she wants, why can't Evan stay with me?"

"Are you completely nuts?"

"My mom likes him."

"Not that much."

"Look, it's fair and square. She sleeps with Will, I sleep with Evan. We're even."

"Crazy girl. You're turning into a head case over him. What do you think you are, his wife?"

I chose to ignore that. "You've slept over a hundred times."

"It's a little different, don't you think?"

"A little."

"Believe me," Ellie said, "she is not going to let Evan sleep in your room."

"It's only fair. Admit it."

"I'm not admitting it. You're mental. Give it up."

But I wouldn't. By the time I got off the phone I hadn't convinced Ellie, but I had done a pretty good job of convincing myself.

After that I had to call Evan. There was no other choice. If I didn't, I'd either start hating him or myself.

One good thing at least, his father didn't give a damn if anyone called late. He never answered a phone anyway unless caller ID said it was someone he wanted to talk to.

I pressed the numbers and I didn't know what I was going to say but I willed Evan to pick up. Not to just let me sit there and listen to it



ring and ring and then hear the little recorded voice saying You have reached the voice mailbox of...

"Hello." He sounded terrible but it was him.

"Hi Evan, it's me," I said. "Surprise."

"Hi."

I knew he didn't know what to say. "What are you up to?"

"Nothing. I'm watching some basketball game." I wondered if he even realized it was the NBA finals.

"I really want to talk to you. But I can't make it happen all by myself."

"I'm sorry," he mumbled. I wanted to say Come over here right now, but I couldn't. I wanted to tell him to come up to my room and lie down on my bed, where I was sitting at that moment, scrunched up against the headboard and willing him to say something more. If he was only next to me I'd hold onto him until he was a little better and could talk. Imagine if my mother came home and found that touching scene. She'd...what? I had no idea.

"I miss you. And don't say you're sorry, either. I can't stand it. I know you are. I don't mean to get mad but I can't hear that anymore."

There was a silence as if without "I'm sorry" he was stuck for words.

His brain was thinking so hard I could practically hear it. "Evan, listen to me," I said as if he wouldn't stop talking and I had to get his attention.

"I am," he said, and he didn't sound stubborn or sullen, he sounded so sad I could hardly bear it.

I had him on the phone and now I didn't know what to do, all I knew was I had nothing to lose. "Listen," I said, "you love me, remember? Don't you remember that? You couldn't have just stopped." But I couldn't help thinking how do I know? Just because I love him, it doesn't mean...

"It's so completely fucked up," he said, and my heart jumped because for an instant he sounded actually alive. Even furious.

"What is?" I said.

"My fucking family. Me. Whatever. This."

This? I could feel anger prickling at the back of my neck. It was completely fucked up that I called him and tried to drag him back to the world of the living? "What do you mean, this what?"

"Oh, great. Now I'm pissing you off."

"No, you're not."

"Come on, I know it's my fucking fault."

"Evan? Would you fucking stop that?"

There was a silence from his end that felt like it weighed four hundred pounds.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"If you say that again I'm going to hang up."

More silence. I picked at a rip in the knee of my jeans, still wanting to tell him to come over, and I still couldn't.

"Look," he burst out as if I was arguing with him at the top of my lungs, "*love* is fucked up, *they* were always claiming they loved each other, for Christ's sake! Now he says she never really wanted to be married to him, he says he spent the last five years trying to keep her from leaving. Isn't that just great? Who the fuck ever tells the truth around here?"

"What does she say?" I asked, then wished I hadn't.

"Screw her," he muttered.

"You don't have to tell me."

"She says she stuck around to make it easier on me."

"Oh, great."

"Yeah, thanks a lot," he said, and for a moment we were together.

"Evan?"

"What?"

"Don't you know I tell you the truth?"

"Fuck," he said quietly, reflectively. He used that word a lot. "I know," he said.

"What, then?"

There was a long silence. "What if *I* don't?" he said finally, and my heart seemed to shrivel up.

"What, you didn't mean it? If you didn't mean it..." I couldn't finish that sentence. I felt like I was going to start crying, or kill him.

"I did, I do, but what if it doesn't mean anything, what if people don't even *know* when it means anything? I mean, look at *them*. This is my so-called family that's so full of bullshit, why would you trust me?" he said, and it broke my heart temporarily and I couldn't be careful, if I ever was. I wanted to hold him so bad I almost couldn't talk.

"I have to see you right now. Please. Can you come over?"

There was a silence on his end. "Are you sure?"

"I am so fucking sure," I said. "Can you?"

"I don't know. I guess."

"Your dad won't flip out, will he?"

"He won't even notice."

"Hurry up, then."

"Okay," he said, and the phone went dead.

It was maddening to have my mother be right about me. Fine, I was trying to save Evan, what was so terrible about that? She probably wanted Will to save her. She was the one who said we were so much alike – that cut both ways.

It wasn't as though I had some saintly vision of myself, it was totally selfish. I couldn't stand it any longer if he didn't talk to me.

Somehow I must have done something right, or he wouldn't have said he'd come over.

Whatever you're doing, I thought to my mom, I don't want to know about it, just don't look at the clock. I have everything under control here, you stay there as long as you want. I need to be alone with him, is that too much to ask? But she could walk in any second, and I knew it. Not to mention Terry could wake up and wander out of his room and find us where, doing what? Really all I wanted was Evan to put his arms around me, but no it wasn't. I always wanted too much. I wanted him to be the funny philosophical boy he was before, and I wanted his parents to stop screwing him up, I wanted him all to myself and I wanted everybody to leave us alone, and...

The doorbell rang. He did hurry.

I ran down the stairs, trying not to make too much noise and wake up the downstairs neighbors, and Evan was there waiting on the porch. I snatched open the door without bothering to flip on the hall light.

"Hey," he said. He didn't smile but I thought inside he did, a little.

"Hey." All of a sudden I felt as awkward as I did the first time we went out, when he turned and walked off before I knew what to do or say. I could see I had once again gotten ahead of myself, imagining it was all going to be okay between us again because I said so, but with him standing in front of me I knew it wasn't. "Come inside," I said, "don't just stand there."

"It's nice out." Was he afraid to be alone with me?

But it was nice out, he was right. "Terry's asleep upstairs," I said, "I probably shouldn't go anywhere. I mean, my mom's not home."

"Oh. Out kinda late," he said.

"She's got a boyfriend."

"What a coincidence. So does mine," he said with a humorless attempt at a laugh. "Since when does your mom have a boyfriend?"

We were standing there as if we weren't allowed to move. I held out my hand to him. "Evan, come in here."

He let me pull him in the door and I closed it behind him, not letting go of his hand. We were in the dark downstairs hall with the umbrellas, and the tub of snow melter that no one had put away from the last winter, and Terry's bicycle. A bit of streetlight shone coldly in the beveled window of the front door, silhouetting Evan. I couldn't see how he was looking at me and maybe that was good, I couldn't stop to find out whether he wanted me to, I just put my arms around his neck and held onto him, and after a few seconds I felt his hands on my back, what I'd been wanting for weeks and afraid I'd never have again. He held me apologetically, and I wanted to say to him Just stop worrying about anything that happened between us, it's okay, it doesn't matter.

"Come upstairs," I said, even though I knew I shouldn't be telling him what to do.

He let go of me, and we climbed the stairs in silence. But inside the apartment it felt stuffy and too bright, the furniture crowded in on me and we couldn't seem to look at each other in the light. I stood waiting to see what he would do, and he stood waiting for me, and it was making me crazy that we were acting like that with each other. "Wanna just sit on the front porch?" I said, feeling desperate.

"Whatever."

We trooped back down the stairs. All the way I was making resolutions: slow down Tamara, just take it easy, stop trying to push the damn river.

He sat down on the top step of the porch and I sat down next to him. At least we were finally together. The neighborhood was quiet. In the houses across the baseball field, most of the windows were dark. I wanted to take his hand but it seemed to me maybe he couldn't stand it right then, maybe I shouldn't have hugged him, maybe the whole thing would be ten times harder than I imagined. "It's tough, huh?" I said, feeling that was a stupidly obvious thing to say. But I couldn't just start in about my mother and Will.

"I hate them." His voice made my stomach tighten.

"Oh."

"I *know*. You're not supposed to hate your fucking parents. Tells you what kind of person I am."

"God, Evan, could you give yourself a break? Go ahead and hate them, I don't care."

"Well, you should."

Maybe words were no use. I allowed my hand to rest on his back, and after a long minute, while I was thinking maybe I should just leave him alone, his hand moved over and rested on my knee, palm up. I covered it with mine.

"How's your dad doing?"

"Bad." Evan took his hand away and rubbed his head with it. "I think he spends half the night watching TV. The den's full of cigarette butts and Diet Coke cans."

"Does he talk to you?"

"About her?"

"Mm."

"No. Not much. I don't want to hear it. He probably knows."

"Except for the part about the five years."

"Yeah."

"You think it's true she wanted to leave all that time?"

"How the fuck should I know? They didn't exactly look happily married."

I barely saw her, a couple of times, when I was at their house. Disappearing into another room after a fake-friendly hello. Her hair always looked as if she just came from posing for the picture on a business card. Impossible to imagine her having sex at all, much less a secret affair that broke up their marriage. It might have spoiled her hair. And who'd want her anyway? "You don't sound like you really hate him," I said.

Evan sighed glumly. "I don't know. Okay, I don't hate him right now. I hate the crap out of them, though. Why'd they get married in the first fucking place? Just to prove they could?"

The question hung around our heads like stale cigarette smoke that wouldn't blow away. All I could think was, I hope I never make that mistake. I couldn't come up with anything to say, so I leaned against him, let my weight burrow into him, and he put his arm around me. His body had not forgotten that we fit together. His hand was on my skin, between my T-shirt and my shorts. I knew he remembered touching me there. And everywhere.

"People can see us," he said as if he heard what I was thinking. But he didn't take his hand away from my middle.

A car came down the street on the other side of the baseball diamond, and then the street between the outfield and the basketball courts, and before it turned the corner I recognized the sound of the motor. It was my mother. The headlights swung into the driveway,

lighting us up for an instant, making me straighten up and Evan take his arm away, and there was not one thing I could do about it. I knew she saw us and was thinking something that was none of her business.

She closed the car door with a loud creak. I was holding onto Evan's hand as if I could keep him, or the moment, from getting away, and it was already too late; she was there on the front walk. "Still up?" she said. "Hi, Evan."

"Still up," I said.

"Hi, Ms. Aller."

She opened the door and over her shoulder said, "There is school tomorrow, you know." I wanted to tell her there was work, too. She closed the door behind her, and I still had hold of Evan's hand, but he got up anyway.

"I get the picture," he said.

"Don't. Don't go yet. I hardly even got to talk to you yet." I tried to pull him back down to sit next to me. "You should just stay here tonight," I said. "With me."

"Uh...I don't think your mom's buying that."

"But would you? If you could?"

"Tam, come on, it's impossible."

I stood up and kissed him; I wasn't going to let him run away without that. He did kiss me back and for a moment I felt we were still together, exactly the same. I leaned my forehead against his neck; my nose was against his collarbone. "Evan, what you've been doing to me, I can't stand it."

"I just can't talk sometimes."

"I don't care. You have to, okay? You have to let me..."

"I know."

"I mean it."

"I know," he said again, and I thought he really did.

"Meet me tomorrow, after school?" I felt him nod his head.

"G'night," he said, and let go of me, already turning away as if being close to me was almost more than he could bear.

\*

Then I went upstairs and all the way up I was certain my mother was waiting to have something like a fight. But she was in the bathroom and I would have to wait to find out. I went in my room and stuffed things in my backpack for school, including my unopened math book, and thought, I'm practically seventeen for God's sake, I could be in

college, once I get there if I want to sleep with my boyfriend no one will stop me.

I could hear my mom tapping her toothbrush on the edge of the sink, and water running. The squeak of the faucet turning off. There was silence for a while. I pictured her looking at herself in the mirror, maybe brushing her hair, thinking about Will probably, did she have sex with him? Did she know that Evan and I...she must know, I thought, even if I didn't want her to. How could she not feel it? And if she knew and didn't say anything...she was okay with it? She knew she couldn't stop me?

\*

The next day Evan told me his dad was waiting when he got home, chewed him out for leaving without telling him and made him feel like a complete prick. "I mean, I should know, shouldn't I? How he feels?"

"You still have to take care of yourself," I said. "Did you tell him where you went?"

"Yeah."

"What'd he say?"

"Nothing."

I had never been able to tell if Evan's dad liked me or not, wanted his son going out with me or not. Would he rather Evan had a black girlfriend?

We were sitting on the steps of the library, next to the high school. Kids were straggling across the grass away from the building. Some were waiting at the bus stop; on the other side of Broadway I could see them crowding into Arturo's Pizza, where you weren't allowed during school hours. I never understood what the attraction was anyway. "Listen, last night, I meant it when I said you should stay."

"Jesus, Tam. Do you think you can just do whatever you want?"

"Sort of."

"My dad probably would have called the police." Horrible image of cops at the door at 2 a.m. Cop's hand on top of Evan's head, pushing him down into the caged back seat of the cop car. I hate this world sometimes, I thought. Evan laid his hand on the back of my neck and I scrunched my head back against it.

"All right," I said with my eyes closed. "Okay. Fine. It's impossible." But he kept his hand there and after a bit I leaned my

head against him. Maybe I was crazy to have these thoughts. Sick of being a kid. It was time for life to start.

"I guess we *could* go to my house," he said in as neutral a tone as he could manage.

"What good would that do?"

"You don't know?" he said, and that sounded like him. Finally.

"When?"

"Now?" he said. "I mean...only if you want to."

I felt I was actually alive. "I thought you weren't interested anymore."

"You'll find out."

"If the cops don't come."

But thank God, they did not; in his room he found out I was still his, if he didn't know, and he had not stopped wanting me. We were naked together for the first time in I don't know how many weeks; it seemed we were trying to make up for every missed opportunity in one afternoon. When I finally went to put my clothes back on, he started taking them off again, and I would have happily let him, but a door opened downstairs and we looked at each other, frozen. "Oh shit," he said. "It's my dad. What the hell is he doing here?"

We heard him moving around in the kitchen, closing the refrigerator door, and then footsteps coming up the stairs as I stuffed my bra in my pocket and buttoned my shirt as fast as I could. Evan pulled on a T-shirt and was zipping his pants when his dad said, "Evan? You home?"

"Yeah, just a second." He was looking for his shoes as his father opened the door, and I was trying to look as though I had been perching on Evan's desk all along, instead of having landed there a millisecond before he came in.

"Ah," he said, looking over both of us, and into Evan's eyes. "How are you, Tamara?"

"Fine," I said. "Mr. Banks."

"I'll see you downstairs," he said to Evan, and turned away.

We looked at each other as his footsteps descended the carpeted stairs, trying to guess what he saw, what he knew. Part of me wanted to laugh, part wanted to jump out the window.

"What does that mean, I'll see you downstairs?" I said in an undertone, when his dad's footsteps had gone around a corner.

Evan shrugged, closed the door, held me against it and kissed me. I no longer gave a damn what it meant. But then he took my hand and opened the door and led me downstairs, into the den where he



seemed to know his dad would be. Mr. Banks was watching the news on TV and when he looked up at the two of us, in the doorway, Evan pointedly did not let go of my hand. His dad used the remote to mute the TV.

"Congratulations," Mr. Banks said dryly, making eye contact with both of us. He let us squirm for a moment. "I strongly suspect you've made me an accessory to the delinquency of a minor. Or do I have your age wrong?" he said to me.

"Dad – " Evan began, indignantly, but his father raised a hand and cut him off.

"Don't. Do not say anything more. I'm responsible for whatever happens under this roof, and I am doubly responsible for whatever I knowingly aid and abet. Do you understand what I'm saying to you?"

He and Evan stared at each other until Evan nodded. Without knowing it, he was gripping my hand so hard it was hurting my fingers.

"How old are you, Tamara?"

"I'll be seventeen in a month." Thank you so much for rubbing it in.

He permitted himself a pained little smirk; then the poker face came back.

"I'm going to say two important things to both of you" – he made a point of looking into my eyes as well as Evan's – "then this conversation is over. One. I certainly hope you grasp the basic concept of cause and effect. You've heard that there are sexually transmitted diseases? Two. Teenage pregnancy is not a good way to get ahead in life. This is not something I want happening in my house." He held us with his gaze for a few seconds, letting the words sink in, and then looked away and picked up the TV remote. He thumbed the "Mute" button and the sound came on. Dismissed.

I knew Evan wanted to yell at him, but I pulled him away from the door to the den. Seething, he led me through the pantry into the kitchen and out the back door.

"What a fucking bummer," he said on the back porch. "Pompous bastard. 'Congratulations.' The asshole." I was still too humiliated to say anything. "He would pick today to come home early for the first time in a goddamn week."

"Stop," I muttered.

"Stop what? He can be such an unbelievable prick when he wants to."

“Don’t talk about it, you’re making it worse.” The joy of a few minutes before was gone already and I couldn’t see how I was ever going to get it back.

## T O M

One July day, while Terry dragged Tammy off down to the stream that ran through my land, saying they were going to catch a trout, Susannah told me she was seeing a man named Will. She blushed when she told me, which was not something she did very often.

"How'd you meet him?"

"Oh, I knew him a long time ago."

"Old boyfriend?"

That seemed to embarrass her. She nodded but didn't answer. Why wouldn't she have had an old boyfriend? She was a good-looking woman. Before David would have been a very long time ago. "How old were you?" She looked away uncomfortably and didn't answer. "It must have been strange after all these years."

"It really is. But then it's not, you know? It's something I can go back to. I don't think I could start something completely new."

"What does he do?"

"He's in the medical equipment business, MRI's and stuff," she said, sounding reluctant to tell me. I got it: too much like David.

"Huh. Small world."

"I know."

"Don't tell me he knew David, too."

She was definitely blushing again. "They met once. It was after...Tam was born," she mumbled.

"It's okay," I said. "I knew there'd be somebody eventually." It had been a year and a half since David died. "You can't just stick yourself on the shelf at your age, you're still young, for God's sake."

"Young?" She shook her head. "Tam's young. Not me."

"She meet this guy Will yet?"

"Yes, and she didn't appreciate it."

"She'll get over it."

"When?" I couldn't answer that one. "I really need to talk to her about all this, but she seems to be mad at me all the time and I don't know how to get past that. You know what I think? I think she's having sex with her boyfriend."

For a second that was unthinkable, and then it wasn't. "Really?"

"I'm pretty sure she is."

Was I actually that old? Old enough, in theory, to be a great-grandfather? "I hope to God she...it's hard to be careful when you're that young." Susannah nodded, grimly. It occurred to me to wonder, for the first time, if she had ever been pregnant when she didn't want to be. What was she like at Tam's age? "Or maybe ever," I added.

We sat in silence. Susannah leaned her forehead on the heel of her hand and did not look happy at all. I had enough sense to keep my mouth shut. After a couple of minutes she turned to me and said, "I didn't tell you the whole truth."

"About what?"

"Will. I don't want to even say this, I'm sorry but I have to. I couldn't live with myself if I lied to you. I had an affair with him before Tammy was born. I didn't want you to know that, but...I'm sorry, Tom." She was barely able to get the words out.

"After you and David were married?" I said. I wanted to make sure I had the facts straight.

"Yes." She couldn't meet my eye.

"Did he know?"

She shook her head.

I thought for a good long time. Unfaithful to David. That didn't go down well with me. But then think of their marriage, which I never questioned and I never thought they did. Everybody has their own way of being married. I wondered if David ever had an affair himself. I didn't think it would have been like him, but who's to say he couldn't? People do these things.

When David and Susannah got married, Sadie, my then-recently-ex, was busy telling the world what a raw deal she got being a woman and somebody's wife, and she had to dump a big load of that on Susannah. Great wedding present for them. I always thought Susannah managed to let it roll off, but maybe not. Maybe this was her answer. Anyway they had Tammy and Terry...more to a marriage than that, of course. I always thought they had a good marriage, but one never knows about other people's lives.

"Tell me," I said. "Were you and David happy together?" I had never asked her that question. I couldn't believe I hadn't, when I heard it come out of my mouth.

"Oh yes. Oh, don't think that. It wasn't like that. It was..."

I could feel her trying to get something out that would be the truth.

"You know the line about forsaking all others? When I said it, I didn't really...I was young." God knows that's the truth, she was barely twenty-six when she and David got married. "It wasn't because I didn't love David, it was just that way at the time."

I thought I knew what she meant. It was the 70's, and everybody seemed to be trying to do it with everybody else as soon as possible. I'm not claiming I was different. True, I didn't join the fun while Sadie and I were still married, but nobody offered, either.

"Then I got pregnant with Tammy, and – it changed everything. Then I was really married. All the way. And it was that way ever since."

"Honor bright?" I said.

Susannah nodded. She looked a little teary.

"I always thought you two had it right." Which was the truth.

"We did," she said in an unsteady voice. "This would never have happened with Will again if David" – she had to pause – "had lived. But now..."

"I know," I said. Of course she needed somebody. People do what they must. I knew one thing for sure about survival: if you keep on living, you're going to carry your private stock of guilt under your own special label. If this was hers, it didn't make her any different from the rest of the human race.

Anyway, Susannah and I were forever linked. It was too late to change that. "You want to have some iced tea?" I said.

"Thank you, Tom." She reached for my hand and squeezed it.

The kids came back in triumph with a closed-up box turtle bumping in their bucket. Terry nagged her about taking it home for a pet, and she kept glancing at me, adult to adult, to see how I was taking what she told me. Surprisingly well, I thought.

Terry and I made a corral for the turtle in a shady spot in the yard, a low fence of turkey wire that would keep him from wandering off. I told Terry to give him water in a pie pan and then go dig up worms for him. Susannah and I drank iced tea in the shade. Our glasses sat in puddles of condensation on the rusted metal table top. I could hear a cardinal whistling, and the ticking sound made by chickadees. She

didn't say any more about the man she was seeing, and I didn't ask, because Tammy was sitting in a lawn chair in the sun, within earshot, wearing the usual white baseball cap with the Red Sox "B" on it, reading a book and unconsciously playing with her hair. I could let my eyes rest on them, Susannah and Tammy, without embarrassing anyone because they were both within the pale of family.

Susannah looked sleepy and I was sure her confession had tired her out. It was Tammy I kept wondering about, how much she knew about this – surely nothing about the affair long ago, but how much about right now? And wondering how she felt about it, and how it felt to her to be herself now, if Susannah was right and she was having sex with her boyfriend. She didn't want to be called Tammy, only Tam, which sounded too short to me. She was not a little girl anymore. Anyone could see that. But I didn't bring up any of that to Susannah, because Tammy might hear, and it seemed that in our family we did our best not to ask questions. We waited, we wondered, we expected, but we didn't ask. It wasn't necessarily a good way to be, but it was our way. Although I was thinking Tammy might turn out to be the exception.

After Susannah got the kids in the car, minus the turtle, and headed back, I kept thinking about her having another guy on the side, a long time ago. It did seem to be more youth than anything else. And a sign of how much of her there was to go around...I hadn't known that about her. You definitely don't ask your son if your daughter-in-law likes sex. I was glad she trusted me enough to tell me she had the affair, though she probably didn't realize all that she was revealing.

I felt I should be more upset about the affair, on his behalf, than I was. What prevented me was the outcome: it didn't change what I had seen between them for all the subsequent years. Besides, a person who's never done anything they shouldn't have is somebody who never grew up. Why should Susannah have been any different? God didn't put us on earth with free will for nothing. It's sacrilegious and ungrateful to sit on your hands and not use it; people aren't born to win obedience prizes. It was my guess – and if you ask me, more than a guess – that most of the people who were ever married, including the women, had their little moment sometime with someone they weren't supposed to. I couldn't prove it, but I didn't have to prove anything to anybody anymore.

One Saturday later in the summer, Tammy called me up and asked if she could come out and talk to me. I was flattered, and also the question of what to do with the day was solved when I heard her voice. She took the train; when I drove up to the station to get her she was standing there looking serious and determined and sunk into herself, watching the toe of her sneaker while it pushed at the gravel. I had seen Susannah stand thinking just that way. She saw me and brightened up, slid in and gave me a peck on the cheek, turned on the radio and complained about what I listened to, tuned in some crappy pop station and then turned it off. By then we were at the house. We got ourselves situated on the porch, where it was shady, with glasses of iced tea, and she took off her shoes and curled up in her chair with her feet under her. "So," I said.

She stared off at the field for a while. It was in hay, and about time to cut it. The hay waved subtly in a slight breeze. I never got tired of seeing that.

"You came all this way," I said.

Tam took a determined breath and said, "You know I have this boyfriend, right?"

"I know."

"What did Mom tell you about him?" She seemed ready to pounce, or contradict.

"Not a whole lot. She seems to like him. She told me his name and I think she said his home life is not so great."

"It sucks," Tam said. She knew she could talk to me however she wanted. I didn't know if that was all to the good, but it was how I was with her. "His parents split up, not that long ago, they're incredibly mean to each other now, so you know...it stinks for Evan."

"I'm sure it does."

"For a long time he could barely even talk, he was so bummed out, and I thought he was just going to...I don't know, disappear on me, and I really couldn't stand that, I..."

I looked at her but she didn't go on.

"Don't laugh at me, okay?"

Did she really think I would? "I'll try."

"Seriously."

"Okay, I'll seriously try."

"*Grampa* – I mean it, come on."

"Spit it out, sweetheart."

"I love this boy, okay?"

"Probably more than okay," I said.

"And he loves me, too, I know it, I know he does, but it's just getting impossible because of everything and...this means so much to me, you don't know."

I thought I did. But maybe I didn't remember anymore the way it actually felt. "I wasn't always this age," I said.

Tam hugged her knees to her chest and rested her cheek against them, facing away from me. Then she looked up and gave me a glance that was almost fierce. As usual, I thought that when she grew up she would scare the crap out of some men.

She stared out at the field. "Can you help me?" she said.

How seldom anyone asked me that, about anything but some detail of a piece of work. Everyone thought I was the one who must need help. Or that I had none to give. "I don't know yet," I said. "Help you how?"

"I need to be with him," Tam said. "Away from all that. Just – just be. Together. I mean with nothing in the way."

It wasn't hard for me to hear what she meant, and it didn't surprise me either, because Susannah had prepared me for it. The rules had been different when I was Tam's age, but people weren't. You're young and in love and you want it so bad, but where the hell do you go?

Could I do this? I thought. Let them shack up at my house?

"So say it," I said. "Whatever it is you're really asking me." First off, she had to have the courage to say it out loud, or it wasn't even worth discussing.

"Can Evan and I come and stay here for a while?" she said.

I took off my glasses and rubbed my eyes, stalling for time. "What's your mom think about this? You run this idea by her?"

"No. Of course not. She'd try to send me to a shrink, or something. Or tell me I'm ridiculous. I don't know what she'd do. She's totally into Will right now, maybe she wouldn't care."

"So. You want to – up and leave. You and Evan. And come here for a while."

"A couple of weeks? Maybe?"

"Planning to tell anybody where you're going?"

Tammy looked at the porch ceiling like she was at her wits' end. She didn't want to admit it, but she had no choice. "Not really," she said in a barely audible voice, turning pink.

"Tammy. Sweetheart. This isn't a great plan. If you take off some day and your mom doesn't know where you went, who do you think she's going to call first? Me."



"She's got Will, she's happy all of a sudden, can't she just go live her own life and leave mine alone?"

So that's where the land lies, I thought. Not too surprising. "No, she can't," I said. "She's your mother. Whatever happens with Will."

Tam rolled her eyes sullenly, every inch the teenager.

I didn't want to rub it in, but she needed to understand. "Don't forget your boyfriend's got parents. I don't care if they split up, what are they going to think? Huh, that's funny, he never came home, but what the hell, he can take care of himself, he'll show up someday."

"As a matter of fact he can take care of himself," she said, and I thought, by God she does love him.

"Didn't your mom tell me his dad is a lawyer?"

"God! *Okay*, I give up, I'm sorry I ever said anything." For a second I thought she wanted to tell me to go to hell. "Damn it all," she said in a low wail and I realized no, she was trying not to cry.

"If I thought it would work," I said.

"I know. It won't. Fine. I get it."

"I didn't say it's fine. I have been in love before, believe it or not, even if I am so goddamn old, I know what it's like."

"What do I do, then?"

It seemed to me that we were on the verge of plain truth, me and this kid, my granddaughter. I loved her more than I could say and I would never willingly hurt her but the truth is not always easy. "Have you and Evan been..." I didn't know any good way to say it.

She turned pinker and wouldn't look at me. "His dad already gave us this lecture," she muttered.

"This is not a lecture." Put my damn foot in it. Of course I was no good at having this kind of a conversation. "Tammy, I just want you to be happy." I heard myself say that and thought that was making it worse, if anything. Shut up. No, don't. "You really love this guy, don't you?"

"Yes." In her voice I heard How many times do I have to tell you?

We sat in silence and I thought of being absolutely in love, when I was young enough to be that. There came to me a sacred moment in my life, a night I shared with the girl I loved just before I left for boot camp. "Don't let it slip away from you," I said. "Don't miss any of it. Every time you can have together – have it. That's all I know. What you regret, later, is all the things you didn't do."

She sat for a while with her forehead against her pulled-up knees. Finally she said "Thank you" in a muffled voice without looking

up. I didn't want the conversation to end, but it seemed to be over. Then she took a deep breath and raised her head. "It's taking too long," she said.

"What is?"

"For life to start."

"I know what you mean," I said. Which I did. Anyone would. I wasn't about to tell her that at my end of life, it sometimes felt like it was taking too long to get over with. Not while I was sitting there with her, of course. I thought for the hundredth time that maybe I really did screw up by moving out there, maybe I gave up way too many moments like this with her and Terry and Susannah. Or maybe, I thought, Tam is the only person left alive who would talk to me this way.

Later on I decided that what happened was, Tam didn't tell Evan about this visit to me beforehand, or her plan, and when she did he got scared. I never met him, it was conjectural, I might have been all wrong. But I could imagine her telling him how she wanted the two of them to run off to my place, and not tell anyone where they were going, and him thinking This girl is more than I can handle. Or maybe that was what I would have felt, when I was that age. I never knew anything about it for a fact, she didn't tell me. All I knew was that by the fall, they broke up, and she wouldn't talk about it. It did something to her that I couldn't put my finger on. She became guarded; she didn't want us to know. I knew that was a sign it was bad.

Sometimes I regretted that I didn't say yes to her and just let it happen. Let her bring her boyfriend out to my place, if she could have, and whatever would have happened then. If his lawyer father had called me up and threatened me, so what? I was too old to give much of a damn. Maybe they would have broken up no matter what, but that wasn't the point. I regretted that I didn't help her to do the crazy, risky, improbable thing. She had the guts to do it and not many people could truthfully say that. I wouldn't have made such a claim for myself. What I had the courage for was survival. Life was so messy and beyond control already, who needed to add further complications? Weren't there enough? To hell with big plans and ambitions, just get through the day. But Tam seemed like someone who would go the next step.

## PART II

### W I L L

The parenthesis closed. Years of waiting and imagining, an embarrassing number of them, were behind me from one day to the next, and as soon as they were behind me they were wadded up and thrown aside. Without effort, without memorial. The reality of me and Susa was in some way continuous, and a hiatus of a day or a week or seventeen years was of no interest once it was in the rear-view mirror. Everything about us and around us was different now, but in some way we were not. It was as if a life together which we didn't live had nevertheless gone on under its own power. Then we stepped back into it and that life carried us forward irresistibly. If we had some catching up to do, well, that was our job now. It would have been a walk in the park if it had just been about the two of us.

At the beginning we talked a great deal about our marriages, especially about Susa and David, what happened after she ended it with me, the loss of him and what it did to everyone. He had never told her that I met him; of course, there was no reason for him to. My marriage was not much to talk about compared to the divorce which was, in my case, the real till-death-do-us-part. We told stories about our children knowing they weren't just interesting stories, that these four children would have to learn to be together somehow. It wasn't easy. And of course I could not stop wondering about Tam. If Tam were to say to me "Are you my father?" what would I say? But she never would have. That was the last word she would have wanted to apply to me; it was clear enough that she would have been happy to see me vanish from Susa's life. Knowing that was a nagging ache. I don't want to say I loved her right away, but I knew right away that I would if she would let me. I

wanted to fix things between us and I knew she wouldn't even let me begin. I had no illusions of taking David's place, but she didn't know that. I only hoped that Amy and Jocie felt the same fierce loyalty to me that Tam felt for her father.

Susa told Tam and Terry that I had once met David. It may have given me a little bit of legitimacy in their eyes; perhaps they could imagine me vaguely in the position of long-ago family friend. I didn't want them to examine that notion any more closely. So when the subject of David would come up, if the kids were in the room I kept my mouth shut. And still do.

Amy and Jocelyn came to spend most of the month of August with me – an arrangement finally achieved after a prolonged struggle – and Susa and I wrestled with the question of whether they should meet Terry and Tam. We decided not to push it. Amy and Jocie met Susa, though. Amy had just turned fourteen and whatever I did was likely to make her squirm or roll her eyes. As far as both of them were concerned, it was embarrassing and ridiculous of me to be dating someone, and couldn't I just keep it to myself, the way I usually did? But Susa had raised a teenaged daughter longer than I had, and she knew a thing or two about how to act around them. I thought they would like her sooner than Tam would like me – leaving aside, as always, their mother's unknown contribution to the situation. I would never know what they would tell her about all this, and her commentary on it, nasty or neutral, would never be repeated to me. The girls had learned very well how to keep certain things compartmentalized. It saddened me that it had to be so, but it was our reality.

Terry got used to me much more quickly than I dared to hope. I thought it might be the worst for him, because he was so young when David died, but Terry is a very resilient person, I've come to realize. He copes, on his own terms, and in some sense without asking help. Not literally, of course – he's like any kid, he thinks his mom is on earth to make his day happen – but Terry wants to figure things out for himself. He doesn't tell you what conclusion he has come to, he just acts on it. So I don't know how he thought about me coming into his nine-year-old life, but somehow he found a place for me in it and put me there. I would have loved to know what that place was called, but I wasn't going to press my luck by trying to ask; I was just glad that pretty soon when I came in the door it was no big deal to him, just Will again, that's all. A few months after Susa and I got back together I helped Terry nail together an unsteady set of shelves he was making to store the elaborate

Lego spaceship he got for his tenth birthday, and that's when I knew it would be okay.

Of course Susa and I talked about living together; I think I wanted to more than she did, but that doesn't mean she wouldn't have, if it had just been about us. Given how it felt between us, it would have seemed absurd to maintain two separate places. But Susa couldn't even think of moving Terry and Tam out of the house where they had grown up with David, and as for my moving in, on the most practical level there wouldn't have been enough bedrooms. I had to have a place for Amy and Jocie to come to and live the Boston part of their life, with me, and my house was the place where the three of us were a family. I couldn't give that up either – not to mention how distasteful Tam would have found it if I had moved in. It was bad enough in her eyes when I spent the night. Tam wasn't happy with anything in her life at that point, and everyone knew it. You couldn't be in the same room with her and not feel it. It wasn't just me; she acted like she was living in a world of bad smells. Susa and I figured out at some point in the fall – far be it from Tam to tell us – that she and her boyfriend had broken up. The only things she did whole-heartedly were play basketball and apply to college. Luckily she's smart enough that she still got good grades, so she got into Clark and she seemed reasonably satisfied with that. I think mostly she just wanted to put everything about Cambridge behind her.

It was probably the worst possible time for Amy and Jocelyn to meet Tam, but they did meet that fall. The girls came to visit me over Columbus Day weekend. Susa and I didn't feel we could wait any longer because we knew that they were going to have to get used to it and the sooner they started, the better. I do think, though, that it may have gotten Tam and Amy on the wrong foot almost permanently. Amy was used to being the older sister and suddenly she found herself hopelessly outranked. When you're fourteen and you're not too sure of yourself, and you meet this disgruntled seventeen-year-old girl who doesn't particularly want to know you, and who's pissed off that she has to deal with her mother's boyfriend let alone his kids, and your dad has all but said that this person is now part of your life – it's not a pleasant experience. Thank God it was easier with Terry, at least. He and Amy didn't really take much notice of each other, and he liked Jocie. To the extent possible, given that she was a girl. She thought Terry was cute. She was going on twelve; she had started to grow and Terry hadn't. It was fun for her to have someone she could treat like a little kid.

Inevitably, Susa and I thought about getting married. But the kids weren't anywhere near ready for that, and neither was she, and we

didn't have a place where we all could live, and for that matter I felt a lot of resistance to going there again after what happened with Connie. Why spoil a good thing? So we created a pattern of life with our two houses and our unlegalized relationship and our poorly-blended families, and it perpetuated itself.

## T A M

For months before I went off to college, the only person I really ever wanted to see, besides Terry, was Ellie, and we were together too much. There's a weird way in which friendship curdles when you hover over it like that. You still love the person but you get all irritable and rubbed the wrong way, you bitch each other out and then you make up by writing notes in a private language, with references to things no one else would understand, and all this was too girly for me but I did it anyway and didn't like myself for it. Without Ellie I wouldn't have had any real friends, just people who thought of me as vaguely part of their group. I never saw Evan except from a distance and then I tried not to notice that I was seeing him, just like I tried not to notice that I missed him all the time. He took some girl to the prom, which shocked the hell out of me because I didn't think he'd even go. She was white, I might add. He didn't look like he was having a good time when I saw him, and I know I wasn't. Ellie wore a tuxedo and was my date, which wasn't such a good joke when I heard somebody behind us calling us fags. I turned around fast but I didn't catch whoever the jerk was. We had the whole Gay-Straight Alliance thing at the school but that was just preaching to the choir.

I don't know anymore how I managed not to get it about Ellie and me. Once at a party during our senior year she got drunk, and I suppose I did too, and she danced with me in a way that I wasn't sure she remembered doing, the next day. It was more than flirtatious. Did anybody else notice? Or did they just think she was trying to act sexy in the hope that boys were watching us? I remembered, but I didn't connect it with when we were fourteen and egged each other on to masturbate side by side on her bed. I think she must have known she was gay, but maybe she still wanted to not know, or not believe it,

because it would have been too hard, and maybe I was the same...it's all confusing. It didn't occur to me until a couple of years later that she was jealous of Evan, that she was glad when we broke up, and I don't know if it occurred to her, either. I didn't get it that when she was my date to the prom, it wasn't just ha ha, so much for your stupid rituals, so much for high school...I have no excuse other than being dense and young and preoccupied with my own troubles. I didn't mean to torment her, I didn't mean to lead her on.

Our second year in college, after she came out, she told me what it was like for her and I had the feeling I hate most of all, when I know I've done something I don't want to have done and it's too late to ever change anything about it. It's why I'm so bad at saying I'm sorry. I already hate myself for screwing up and I feel like if I say I'm sorry I'll be alone on an island of shame from which there is no escape. She was visiting me at school when she told me, sleeping in my room, and there and then, everything was possible if we wanted it. She kissed me and I didn't tell her not to, and the second or third time I kissed her back. Then it was too much for me, and she felt that. We lay in silence in the dark, not kissing any more, arms around each other. I felt I was hurting her all over again, worse if anything this time, and yet it wasn't even that I couldn't do this with a girl – I never had and I honestly didn't know if I could or couldn't, but – "I love you," I said, because I had to say something and it was true, but I heard myself sound desperate.

"But not that way," she said, stating a fact. She knew what she had felt from me. Of course she knew. How many times had she been through this?

"I'm sorry," I said, "please don't hate me, I didn't mean to do this to you again, Ellie, I'm so sorry." That was the most real apology I ever gave anyone, up to that point in my life.

"Ssh," Ellie said, and put her hand on my cheek. "Don't say that. You didn't do anything to me."

I didn't do nearly enough, I thought. But she had absolved me, all undeserving, and I had to take it.

So I suppose I understand how her girlfriend, Christina, felt about me later. If I was Ellie's Evan, sort of, then of course Christina feels uncomfortable when I'm around the two of them. Though she conveniently forgets that she would never have met Ellie in the first place if not for me inviting her to go out with us one time when Ellie came out from Boston College to see me. I had no intention of setting them up and maybe that's why it worked out as if I had. Christina is one



of the smarter people I've known in my life, even if she is pretty flaky, and I would think she would get it that I am not a threat to their relationship, but at least her jealousy tells me that she loves Ellie as much as Ellie should be loved.

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When I went to Clark I resolved that everything would be on my terms. Nobody in college would ever think my name was "Tammy." Nobody would tell me how to live my life. I would be straight-up me from then on. Of course in about two weeks I learned that maybe nobody would even notice I existed, or if they did, maybe nobody would like me enough to learn my name or tell me anything. I don't have a lot of talent for humility but I learned some whether I wanted to or not. At least it kept me from being one of those people I couldn't stand, who dealt with being in college by acting as arrogant as possible. As for being 100% true to myself, if I had known what in the world that self was, or if it hadn't kept changing on me from month to month, I might have had a better shot at being true to it.

I got a fake I.D., I went out to a few clubs wearing a slinky borrowed spaghetti-strap top and my lowest pair of jeans. Which was not only strictly speaking illegal but in some cases also probably dangerous. They say God protects fools and children, neither of which I thought I was (but that doesn't mean I was right), and drunks, which I definitely have to admit I sometimes was. I went to a couple of frat parties; playing drinking games and being hit on got old really fast. I got a boyfriend. Wrong word. I had sex with a boy, why, because I thought he was cute and nothing was stopping me. That too got old really fast. Return to previous square. Repeat. Meanwhile I knew if I didn't maintain a 3.0 I'd lose my scholarship, and besides that, I wouldn't be able to look myself in the eye.

I was determined to be my father's daughter: I took chemistry and biology, and being a lowly first-year, I had a four-hour chem lab on Friday afternoon, much to my disgust. I made it through inorganic, but I had to drop organic second semester, to keep from ruining my GPA. I wasn't good enough to make the women's basketball team. They let me on the practice squad, but after two months I quit. A week later I regretted it, but I was too embarrassed to go ask the coach to let me come back. I had a job checking I.D.'s at the front desk of the same gym the team practiced in and I had to beg the Athletic Department to move me somewhere else because I couldn't bear it when the girls I used to

practice with came in. I got B's and B-pluses but I could not seem to get A's, even when I knew I worked harder than some of the people who did.

I came home in the summer and found that I had a choice of hanging out with the same people I knew in high school, or...was there an alternative? There was for Ellie – she called herself a lesbian now, she had new friends who didn't like me because I was straight. I can't help it, I wanted to yell, and it isn't about you anyway. She had to sneak around behind their back to spend time with me, which pissed me off at them and then at her. Why couldn't she see how juvenile the whole thing was?

The person I wanted to see was Evan, but it wasn't up to me. Cambridge is not that big a city, but apparently it's big enough that if there's one person in it you want to run into, a long time can pass without it happening. Of course I basically never did anything but waitress and sleep, at least that's the way it felt. A guy I met at work invited me to go down the Cape with him and his friends for a weekend and I knew it was probably a terrible idea but I went. I ended up making out with one of his friends on the beach at 3 a.m., the guy who asked me there didn't like me anymore, the friend wanted me to sleep with him and I wouldn't. It was a very long ride back. I know, these things happen to everyone. That doesn't stop you from wanting to crawl under a rock when it happens to you.

In August a kid I knew mentioned that he heard Evan was in New York for the summer. Oh yeah? Doing what? Dunno. Maybe he was going to transfer to NYU or something. Or maybe New School. Where'd he go to college? Bennington. Really.

That was more than I had learned about Evan in the whole time since we broke up. My mind can get a lot of mileage out of one or two little facts. Out of them I tried to construct a picture of his life now, who he was, what he cared about, who he wanted to become...I spun this picture like a spider spinning her web, as though if I got it exactly right I could catch him in it, Evan himself, and reel him in, back to me.

Nothing happened.

Now that I wasn't going to be a pre-med, I didn't know what to major in. If I couldn't get through organic chemistry, that ruled out biology, and I didn't even want to try physics after everything I heard about it. I took an economics course for the hell of it and actually did get an A in it – there was nothing very hard about it, it seemed to me anybody could do it if they could graph a function. But I couldn't see

what was interesting about balance of payments and the Federal Reserve. Sociology was not overly thrilling either, but I started dating a guy I met in that class after we had a big argument about whether there is or isn't such a thing as race. After a month I was thinking this is my College Boyfriend. I took him home for Thanksgiving because he was from California, I watched the way my mom and Will and Grampa Tom looked at him – and at me with him – and tried not to draw any conclusions. I managed to get him and Terry outdoors with a football, but it only worked for about ten minutes. Otherwise Terry seemed to pay very little attention to him. And yet when I got home at Christmas he said, "Why didn't you bring Ricky back?"

"He has to go see his own family sometime, you know."

"Do you still like him?"

"Of course."

One night between Christmas and New Year's I ended up at a party at the house of a kid I barely knew from high school. Everybody was smoking dope, and after I got high, I started talking to a guy who went to Cornell, who had a Southern accent and was the friend of somebody's friend, and all of a sudden we were telling each other the entire story of our lives. I knew, not guessed but knew, that I could tell him anything – anything – no politeness, no rules. At one point we were sitting at the kitchen table and I was telling him about the day my dad died and someone who was there with us said "This is too heavy for me," and got up and left the room. There was no weight on me at all. And none on him. It was like we were free-floating souls, untouchable. We must have spent three hours looking into each other's eyes, but there was nothing sexy about it. We never touched on purpose. Eventually we went into the living room where some kind of stoner music was playing and sat down on the couch and I fell asleep without realizing it and woke up leaning against him – he was asleep too – and I got up without his noticing. I went to pee and wash my face. Outside the bathroom window I heard people getting into a car and thought What time is it? I've got to get home. I stood on tiptoe and peered over the curtain and saw a girl I knew about to get in, and I ran out and called "Wait, can I get a ride too?"

"Don't you have a coat?" she said.

"Yeah – don't leave, okay?" I darted in and pulled at the pile of coats in the front hall until I found mine. Then I stuck my head into the living room. My partner in revelation was still sound asleep and I thought a thank you and a goodbye to him, knowing I'd never see him again, leaving him there without regret.

How does Terry know these things? It only took a few weeks after school started again for me and the boyfriend to break up.

After that, the one consequence left from sociology was that because of it I was taking statistics, which was an excellent mind game but where did it lead? I could read the newspaper and see when people were clueless about numbers, but I wasn't going to college just to learn to read the paper, was I? I took a Women's Studies course from a very annoying professor, in which I learned there is such a thing as queer theory – a combination of words I would never have imagined together – which turned out to be actually interesting, but I seemed to be getting farther and farther away from anything conceivably useful. I took psychology because everybody else did, I took French and even I knew my accent was bad. I took World Religions and loved it, probably because as a family we almost completely ignored religion. The talk of our house tended toward the practical, even scientific; to talk seriously about the soul or spirit or God was silently frowned upon. The course reminded me of when as a kid I saw that there was a plan without a planner. An invisible harmony without a God to keep it in place. Whatever my moment of insight was worth, I kept it to myself. I still preferred that picture; the more gods a religion put in the heavens, the more it made me queasy. Even one god paying attention to me personally was hard to swallow. But if there was an order to things, always secretly at work, who was I to say it was not an awareness? If God was what we could not understand, it seemed rash to say anything about it at all. Buddhism might have been more my speed, if I had been raised with it, but it was too late to eliminate my attachment to the physical world. I decided that the soul was something I truly would want to study, if there was any way to do it, but religion didn't seem like the way. It got too wound up in the details of doctrines and practices that vaguely repelled me and seemed beside the point. What, then? Art, perhaps. If some kind of spirit wasn't accosting me from inside a painting, what was? There was art history, there was literature, there was philosophy – but philosophy books were almost unreadable – and the pragmatic side of me wanted to know, where would it get me to major in any of those things? As for making art, forget it. I couldn't draw anything more interesting than a diagram. All of which led back, eventually, to psychology. There was some stuff in it about the soul – in a way – not that anyone used the word – and then there was some science, but a kind of science that didn't require organic chemistry, and

it was acceptable to the part of me that wanted to think I was majoring in something that had some conceivable use. The worst part about it was that it was my mom's major in college, but I declared it anyway. Later, I finally took an American literature course and thought I should have majored in English, because I was getting tired of all things cognitive and neurological, not to mention statistical, but by then it was too late.

At a party the winter of my junior year I got into a long argument with a pre-law student named Jeff, and his petite blonde girlfriend, about whether gay marriage should be legal. The girlfriend wouldn't give a straight answer to anything I said; she acted like the subject repelled her. She stopped paying attention after a while, but the more Jeff and I argued, the more pissed off she seemed. Jeff lost me in the mazes of constitutional law; he cared about legal principles as much as I cared about what would happen to Ellie. It was already clear to me that he was someone you wanted on your team and not on the other side. The girlfriend was right to be angry; she knew what was going on, and there wasn't much she could do about it. She was playtime, I was something else, and I didn't say that first, Jeff did. After all he was no dope, his plan to go to law school was perfectly realistic and he was, in fact, a serious guy, plus being a real catch as a boyfriend. My roommate Steph said he must be part golden retriever because he was that big and made you feel that comfortable. He was casually strong without being boastful about it. The first time I was ever in his bed, I got there because he picked me up and put me there.

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My senior year in college, I finally did the obvious and called up Bennington and found out that yes, Evan was a student there. The next move, or even what I wanted from him, was not so obvious. I was not planning to break up with Jeff, but nevertheless I got Evan's phone number and I called it.

Recorded female voice: "You have reached the voice mailbox of..." Silence.

Male voice: "Evan."

"To leave a message, press 1 or just wait for the tone. For more options after leaving a message—"

I pressed 1, there was a beep and then I was alone with the silence on the other end, presumably recording the sound of me thinking. What the hell was I going to say?

I hung up and called again and listened until I heard "Evan" again. Why couldn't he have a greeting of more than two little syllables? I could barely be sure it was even his voice; I could learn nothing from it about who my message might reach. Nothing, either, about why I was doing this. I didn't press 1, the recording played itself out, the beep came again.

I hung up again. On my bulletin board I had a photo of the stream at Grampa Tom's place, one I took in high school, my eyes always rested on it when I was trying to think.

I had a boyfriend I felt lucky to have, I was going to graduate in six weeks with a B.A. in psychology, I was old enough to not need a fake I.D., I was in fact not a fake anything, so why was I calling up Evan? All I knew was I needed to check this off my list of life tasks before I graduated from college. One phone call, one cup of coffee, one drink, one something with Evan and be done with it. Definite, clean. Straightforward. I punched in the number again, phrasing a message in my head.

"Hello?" It was him. What do I do now?

"Evan?"

"Yeah, who is this?" He sounded annoyed with having his phone rung three times in a row when he didn't feel like answering.

"It's Tam Aller, I know it's been a long time since we talked but"

"Tam?" he said in a disbelieving voice.

"Yes."

"Whoa."

"Yeah," I said.

There was a lot of thinking going on at both ends.

"Um – how ya doin'?"

"Okay. I'm about to graduate. You must be too, huh?"

"Yeah. How'd you get my phone number?" What, did he wish I hadn't?

"Oh, somebody told me you went to Bennington. A while ago. A couple of years ago, actually. I just thought I'd give it a try."

"Where are you?"

"Clark."

"You like it there?"

"How many people do you know who love Worcester?"

He made a little snort of acknowledgement that I recognized.

"What did you major in?" I said. "Or do you guys even have majors?"

"Yeah, but we're too cool to call 'em that."

"So? What do you call it?"

"Oh...I'm doing this sort of art and society thing. It's like half art and half theory. It's just so Bennington it's, like, embarrassing."

"Studio art?" I didn't even know he could draw.

"Not really."

"Well, what then?"

"More like conceptual. And, you know, criticism. What about you?"

"I majored in psychology. Like twenty percent of the student body."

"Hey, nothing wrong with that."

"You know me. I don't like to be average."

"Who the hell does?" Evan said, and I felt myself get one step more comfortable with him.

"What else is going on with you?" What I meant was, did he have a girlfriend.

"Nothing, I don't have time for anything else, I'm trying to finish my damn thesis."

"What's it about?"

"Oh – fuck – you don't wanna know, it takes forever to explain it."

"I'm not all that stupid, you know."

"When did I say that?"

There was a brief silence and I felt that we were both realizing again who we were talking to. Trying to get the hang of it again. Trying to scope out what this conversation was really all about. But neither of us knew.

"Okay, so – your thesis," I said.

"Well, half of it is this conceptual art piece where I took these dead birds"

"Dead birds?"

"Yeah. Did you ever try to collect a bunch of dead birds? There never is one when you want one. And then I put them in various places and I took pictures of them there. Then I came back the next day, and I took another picture, whether the bird was there or not, like some probably got picked up and thrown in the trash, or they got eaten by some animal, or they got carried off by the tide, and some just stayed there. The idea was to keep photographing each one that's left, every day until it's gone, but – it's not gonna work, I have to turn this thing in and some of them, it'll take years, you know, bugs will have to eat them or something."

It is not that often that I'm at a loss for words.

"I told you it was weird," Evan said.

"Seriously," I said. "But why dead birds?"

"Oh, it's really about, like, nature and civilization, like I put one of the birds on the dashboard of an old rusted-out car that's sitting in a field, and...I don't know, I'm trying to write the essay part and sometimes I wonder if this whole project is really bullshit."

"If it is, it's really interesting bullshit."

"Thanks," he said opaquely. I couldn't tell if he was insulted or not.

"No, I mean really, I don't know anybody who's doing anything that's even – you know – "

"Half as weird as that. I know."

Both of us, I was sure, thought Now what?

"So – you going back after graduation?" I said.

"I guess. For a while. I mean, I don't really have a plan right now. Are you?"

"I don't know. I have this boyfriend" – did I really want to say this to him? Too late – "and we're probably going to go to France, but we've got to make some money first, so maybe I'll go home and wait tables for a while."

There was a pause, which I knew was not for him to think about my waitress career. "So – you're using 'we,'" Evan said.

"Well, excuse *me*," I said. What business was it of his anyway? Except I asked for this by calling him up. That wouldn't wash.

"What's his name?" Evan said.

"Jeff."

There was another silence. I felt like a jerk. I was sure he thought I called him up just to rub it in about the boyfriend. Which would be incredibly childish and unbearable, if it were true. I had to do something to prove it wasn't. "Do you think I'll ever see you again?" I said. "Like in person?"

"Um...I don't know. Is it up to me?"

Well, you broke up with me, I thought. "Let's say it is," I said.

"Okay. Sure. But I know Bennington isn't exactly on the way to anywhere."

"Maybe in Cambridge?" I said.

"Yeah," Evan said.

"But only if you want to."

"Tam," he said. "What do you think. Really." Something about the sound of his voice made me understand, in a way I hadn't, that he



was older now, just like I was, that there was more to him now than I knew, that I just dropped this phone call on him out of a blue sky and he could be thinking or feeling anything, I would have no way to know.

"I didn't call just to irritate you," I said, and at the same time I was thinking to myself, What the hell did you say that for?

"Good," he said. He was irritated, all right. Or was it something else? "Well," he said. "When you get home, then. I mean, give me a call."

"Okay," I said. You could ask me for my phone number, I thought. "You gonna be at your dad's place?"

"Yeah. I might have to go visit my mom first, I don't know. Before I get back to Cambridge."

"Where's she live now?"

"New York."

"Huh," I said. There were a hundred questions I wanted to ask, but I knew I should save them. "Well, I guess I'll see you in June, maybe."

"Yeah."

"Well. Bye then."

"Okay, bye," he said and the connection went dead. Great, I thought. He's relieved to get that over with. I knew I wasn't supposed to care that much how he felt but I couldn't help it. I wanted to see Evan right that minute, I wanted him to feel a whole different way about me than the way he sounded. But the more I thought about the conversation, the more I thought Figure it out. He doesn't owe you a thing.

\*

In June, when I'd been home about a week, I called up Evan's dad's house and a woman answered the phone who I figured must be Mr. Banks's girlfriend, or second wife, and she told me Evan was out of town. "Do you know when he'll be back?" I said.

"He said probably next week."

"Thank you," I said. But I didn't like the sound of "probably." And when I called the next week he wasn't coming till maybe the first week in July. The hell with it. I was engrossed in my trip with Jeff, studying guidebooks, listening to language tapes, I only had till August 1<sup>st</sup> to get my French together. I didn't need to keep calling Evan who obviously couldn't be bothered to call me. He knew where I lived.

Sometimes I wish I could stop trying to know how everything works. I thought I had everything covered for our trip to France, from the Metro to what to do if I lost my passport. I also thought I could speak enough French to at least meet my basic needs, but the fact was that even if I could say what I wanted, when a French person answered I was lost. It was humiliating enough when they switched to English as soon as they saw me get stuck, but what was worse, Jeff told me his French was only okay, and then we got there and he didn't just understand when people told him how to get somewhere, he exchanged pleasantries. He virtually chatted with them. I know I'm too competitive sometimes, but it made me ill.

It drove me crazy that it's impossible to do anything in France without having a big neon sign that reads "American" over your head. They always know. I figured out in about three days that besides not knowing how to dress, Americans are too loud and they take up too much space. Americans can't even sit on park benches without doing it in an American way. Jeff did not figure this out; he didn't care. The longer we were in France, the more the level of his voice made me cringe. I could see the French looking irritated, or just resigned. I was constantly wanting to get away from Americans and experience France, but as soon as I thought I'd have to accomplish something entirely in French I'd panic inside. Worry that I might have to make a phone call could ruin half a day. The weather was constantly changing in Paris and I could not figure out what to wear, I was always either too hot or too cold, and whichever I was, next to French women my age I looked like an overgrown eleven-year-old. We both did. Only Jeff didn't care how he looked. The more it bothered me, the more American he acted. We were always together, night and day, more alone together than we could ever be at home; outside our little American bubble was France. And mysterious French people, whom I seemed to understand less and less the longer I was around them. We went to the South, we went to Brittany, it was beautiful but everything was jammed, everything was expensive, and my French did not seem to be getting any better. I was still getting stuck and Jeff still had to take over. Which he liked. A lot. I hadn't realized that about him before. The effort to have a good time got a little desperate. Finally Jeff said to me, "Do you just not like anything you can't control?" Shit, I thought, am I that bad?

We were both relieved to get home and not be together for a while, but of course neither of us could say it. I had a feeling Jeff was especially happy to get away from me.

Once I'd been home for about a week I started to enjoy the trip. I told Jocie about watching old men play *boule* in Montmartre and what an old-style French café toilet was like and felt that I was very cool to be able to mention these things. I remembered moments that I hadn't known would stay with me: a beautiful big draft horse sticking his neck over a hedge to look at us on a country road in Brittany, a stand of lavender in bloom in a certain park, the sight of tile roofs and chimney pots outside our window in the middle of the night. It was never truly dark in Paris. A certain café waiter, out of his apron at the end of his shift and on his way to his motor scooter, nevertheless stopped to refill our water glasses, as if otherwise he would not have completed his night's work. But it bothered me that telling about these moments required the frequent use of "we." I did not take a trip to France. "We" did.

Which reminded me of Evan. Then I thought about how in France they sold pigeons in markets with the feet on, and quail with their heads. He would be interested in that, he liked dead birds. It was about six o'clock. Time, in France, for an *aperitif*. I called him and said, "Want to go have a drink or something?"

"Sure," he said. Easy as that.

We met at the West Side Lounge on Mass. Ave. As I was looking for a parking space I was thinking I could have told him Chez Henri just to be French, it's on the corner of the same block, but that would have been pretentious, wouldn't it? Who would get there first, would it be a shock when I saw him, would he have changed, of course he would have, I've changed haven't I...I came in the door and as the hostess was greeting me, holding menus, I saw him sitting at the bar, watching me, turning more in my direction. I couldn't see his face very well, he wasn't sitting under a light. "Thank you" I said distractedly and brushed by her, she probably thought I was rude. He held out his hand – we were going to shake hands? We did. "Hey," he said. He was smiling as if he thought this was all a good joke, what did he mean by that smile? I said "Hey" and sat on the stool next to him and we looked at each other. He was older and not as skinny and his hair was a little longer than I remembered, it still looked good. "I like your hair," I said. "Thanks," he said, "I like yours too." Mine was longer than the last time Evan had seen it, partly because Jeff liked it that way.

The bartender wiped at the bar top in front of me and said "What's your pleasure, my friends?"

Evan waited for me to go first. "I'll have a glass of red wine."

"Bass Ale," he said.

We waited without saying anything, sneaking looks at each other, while the bartender studied our I.D.'s. "Isn't it weird to be legal?" I said to Evan when he handed mine back.

"And out of college," Evan said. The bartender brought our order. I held up my glass and Evan clinked it with his.

"Did they like your thesis?"

"I guess. Except some girl who said it encouraged violence against animals."

"Hello?"

"Yeah. That's about what I said."

I felt I was staring at him rudely, but he didn't seem to care. He kept turning his gaze toward me, and then looking away, and back, as if he wasn't quite convinced this was really happening and he kept having to check. I realized when he looked away from me he was seeing both of us in the mirror behind the bar. My eyes met his there. "Is this weird, or what?" he said. I saw myself nod in the mirror.

"I tried to call you earlier in the summer," I said.

"You did?"

"Didn't anybody ever tell you?"

"Who'd you talk to?"

"I don't know, a woman. Twice. In June."

"Oh. Crap. Well, I was in New York anyway. I stayed longer than I meant to because a friend of mine let me use his place, I thought I'd try to get a job but — no luck."

"Who'd I talk to?"

"That was Sissy. My dad's..." Evan waved his hand, seeming to throw some vague notion into the air above the bar.

"Your dad's what?"

"I don't think they know yet."

"Oh."

"What's going on with your mom?" Evan said. Maybe he wasn't all that anxious to talk about his parents.

"She's still got the same boyfriend."

"Same as when?"

"Will. You met him, remember? Right before you broke up with me."

"I what?" Evan said, frowning.

I turned to look at him straight on instead of in the mirror. "What does that mean?" I said.

"Tam, I didn't break up with you," he said. "You gave up on me."

"Absolutely no way."

"I don't blame you, I was fucked up but – that is what happened," he said, turning away to face the mirror.

"Would you look at me?"

He turned back to me and looked me over point-blank and without apology, taking his time, his face serious and expressionless in a way that reminded me, for the first time ever, of his father. "I think the exact words you said were, 'I can't take this anymore.'"

"Because you didn't want to see me. I never saw you unless I made it happen."

"That's not true," Evan said.

How could he say that to me? I was there, I knew how it went. "I can't believe we're arguing about this," I said.

"You majored in psych, Tam. I was depressed. You know that, right?"

I remembered perfectly well the last time Evan and I made love and I knew on that day there was no way anybody could have called him depressed, but I couldn't sit there at the bar of the West Side Lounge and say that to him. I hadn't seen him in almost five years and regardless, I couldn't be bringing that up. I was with Jeff now and that was a fact of my life. "You were a lot of things," I said.

He turned away, frustrated with me I thought. "Aren't we all," he said and drank some of his beer.

I looked at the two of us in the mirror. What would anybody think if they saw us there at the bar, looking the way we looked? That we were a couple. Maybe a couple having a fight. It was the last thing I wanted to have with him. I put my hand on his shoulder and he watched me do it, in the mirror, and we sat there that way with me seeming to have a claim on him as I once did. I could feel him relax a tiny bit. I was glad Jeff was home in Connecticut studying for the LSATs and couldn't walk in and see this.

I took my hand away. "Tell me more about nature and civilization," I said.

"What? Oh." He brightened up a little and looked around at the scene in front of us, the rows of bottles, the bartender, us and the other customers in the mirror. "Well, there isn't any nature in here. So – just add a couple of dead birds, you know? It changes everything. Imagine a dead bird lying on the bar right in front of us. All of a sudden you aren't just sitting in a restaurant."

"In France," I said, "they sell pigeons in the market, I mean to eat, they're plucked and everything but they leave the feet on them. Big red feet, they seem too big for the rest of it."

"Did you take a picture of them?"

"No."

"Ah, too bad. I'd like to see that. But they wouldn't work in here because they're meant for people to eat. It has to be a wild bird. And it has to be a bird, too, it can't be a fish or an animal, a dead animal would just be gross and that isn't the point at all."

"Are you surprised that you turned into an artist?"

"Me? Please. Having peculiar ideas isn't the same thing as art." But he looked happy that I called him that.

"So what do you think you'll do?" I said.

"I have no clue. I'm probably going to end up painting houses or something. Cutting lawns. You know."

"That's why we went to college."

"Right," he said, as if I had stated what was self-evident. What could he mean? It reminded me of the first time he invited me to do nothing. I didn't know what to say.

I drank the last sip of my wine and caught the bartender's eye for another glass. Evan ordered another beer.

"Do you still do nothing?" I said.

At that he smiled, a real smile, for the first time. "I try," he said. "I can't believe you actually went along with that. Nobody else would."

"It was good for me." Would I still be capable of it? I hadn't tried in years.

"I've been studying *vipassana* meditation, actually," he said.

"What?"

"*Vipassana*. It's a kind of Buddhist meditation. I try to sit for twenty minutes every morning. In a couple of weeks I'm going on a four-day retreat out in the Berkshires. I've never done one before, it should be pretty intense."

"I don't know the first thing about it."

"Yeah, you do. We did the first thing, if you want to think of it that way."

"But that wasn't meditation, was it?" I had vague memories of the professor in religion class trying to define meditation and losing me.

"Well...we weren't watching our thoughts, if that's what you mean."

"You used the word, I don't know anything about it."

Evan said, "Awareness is knowing you're aware, right?" Was he showing off for me?

"That's arguable." I didn't major in psych for nothing.

"How?"

"You don't have to think about being conscious of" – I looked around us – "like that sign up there, to be aware that it's there. Or to be aware that it's red." I had done my senior research project on how we see color.

"That's just perception," he said, "that's not what I mean. A bird would know it was there, too."

"Not if it was dead."

He gave me a heavy-lidded sideways look that meant "Oh, very funny." I remembered it perfectly. "Think of yourself," he said.

"I try not to. I think about myself too much."

"Tam. Think about your," he paused, "self."

"Okay." I drank some wine and tried to think about my self.

"Now. What did you think of?"

"Oh sure. Right. Can you answer that?"

"Okay, so. See, you try to think about your self, and you can't do it. It gets away. All you can do is sit there and think, here I am thinking. That's *vipassana*, if you stay with it. Watching your thoughts. Then you start to learn things. Or unlearn things."

"Like..." I was expecting something out of a self-help book.

He gave me a little smile. "Give me a few lifetimes to work on it, and I'll tell you."

"How many lifetimes do you get?" I said, meaning to tease him.

"If anybody tells you they know the answer to that, they don't know what they're talking about."

"So are you saying you believe in reincarnation?"

Evan cocked his head a little to one side and kneaded the back of his neck. "I'm definitely not ruling it out," he said.

Was he really a Buddhist now? Hearing him mean it, in such a commonsensical voice, made a strange vibration happen inside me, a kind of readjustment. I had not realized that someone like me, a member of my own personal world, could believe that. "You're not going to tell me you used to be Isaac Newton or something, are you?" Evan said nothing in a "Give me a break" sort of way. "How would you know if there was such a thing?" I said.

"How would you know there's not?" he said. "Look, I don't really care about proving it. I just have to decide if I believe it or not."

"That makes it true?"

"That makes it what I choose to believe. If I do."

"But why would you?"

"I'm not asking you to," he said, sounding as if he really couldn't give a damn what I thought, and I felt left out and put in my place. Why would I matter to him anymore? I remembered Jeff looking relieved when he got on the train to go back to New London.

"I don't mean to be a pain in the neck," I said, "it's just a new idea." That brought a little smile to Evan's face and I knew he thought it was funny that I called it new.

"Look – would you rather believe that the soul keeps on learning from all the crap we go through, or not?"

"God, yes," I said.

"Somebody I read said that people have an aversion to futility. I know I do," Evan said.

I was watching the two of us in the mirror, and seeing us together made me feel as though this moment was, just possibly, not the other 99.9% but a moment of my real life. The girl in the mirror, why did she so obviously want to be sitting next to this boy, what would she do next? "Did you really not mean to break up with me?" I said.

I saw the boy's head tip a little towards the girl. He kept his eyes on hers in the mirror. "Of course not," he said. But he didn't come any closer to touching her, nor she him.

"If that's really true – "

He shook his head slightly. "Not if. It's true."

"What a waste, then."

They sat side by side, those two, as if stuck in helpless contemplation of what could never change. The bartender, perhaps seeing them, chose that moment to turn the music up. I realized that the bar area had filled up, that people were standing in a clump at the end of the bar, talking much louder than me and Evan. They were probably Harvard Law students. If Jeff got his way he would become one of them. Not something I wanted to think about.

"Do you think we should get something to eat?" I said.

Evan looked at his watch. "Damn," he said. "I promised my dad I'd eat dinner with him. Is this my only chance?"

"Well, if you can manage to pick up the phone and call me, who knows?"

Evan left money on the bar for a tip. I tried to split the bill with him, but he said "Put that back." Was he already getting paid for painting houses or cutting lawns? Another couple were poised to take our places when we got up. Almost all of the tables were taken now. The



waitresses had a busy night ahead. I would be doing the same thing soon, if I didn't find something better. We came out onto the sidewalk. "Which way are you going?" Evan said.

"My car's this way."

He turned with me – was he already intending to go that way, or not? – and halfway to the corner I took his arm, almost without thinking about it, almost truly spontaneous. I was almost the girl in the mirror, who did not have a boyfriend named Jeff. Evan acted as though my hand on his arm was the most natural thing in the world. We're growing up, I thought. We turned the corner onto a side street, quieter and darker. There seemed to be no need to talk more. In a few moments we were at my mom's car ("This is it," I said), looking at each other without further distractions or excuses, just ourselves, me and this boy, or man, whom I thought I knew but might not. Alive at the same time in the same place. What should we do about it? Before I knew what to do I was giving him a kiss. It started out to be a kiss on the cheek, but it didn't turn out that way. It wasn't proper and nostalgic and for old time's sake, the way it should have been.

After the kiss Evan stood looking at me and I at him. I didn't know what to do and I don't think he did either.

"I thought you had a boyfriend," he said. Why did he have to say that?

"I do," I said, because I didn't have a choice.

He put his hand to my cheek like he wanted to kiss me again, and then he took it away. "You don't even know," he said.

"What?"

I could see him deliberately not answer that. "Do you really want me to call you?"

"Yes."

"Okay. G'night," he said, already turning away.

"Goodnight." What I wanted to say was Come back. Your dad can wait a couple of minutes. If you want to kiss me, kiss me. But didn't I have a boyfriend? All right, but I wasn't his wife for God's sake, I was too young to start thinking like that, he didn't own me...but I said nothing and Evan turned the corner and was gone.

I drove back to my mom's place a little scared of what I might do.

\*

A cousin of Jeff's got him an interview for a job as a paralegal in Washington, D.C., and when he landed the job he asked me to come

down there and live with him. He asked as though we both already knew we'd live together sooner or later, so why not now? I had not gotten so lucky on the job market. Presumably I could waitress just as well in D.C. as in Cambridge, and look for jobs in a new place, and...all well and good, but. Yet it was true, what his tone of voice said. We practically had agreed, without ever quite saying the words.

At Commencement I had seen his parents and mine looking at us, and at each other, in a way that meant they were already thinking we might stay together. And I don't think anyone minded thinking that, even Grampa Tom, who always seemed unimpressed with any boyfriend of mine. If I went to Washington to live with him, it would be no more than anyone was expecting. It would be young couple starting out in life. And did I want that?

The only one who was smart enough to ask me if I was in love with him was Ellie. "I think I am," I said.

Ellie looked at me as if she wanted to say some things, but she was waiting for me to say them myself. I didn't, but nonetheless that made me feel a little bit less alone.

I certainly didn't have a better alternative up my sleeve. I could stay in Cambridge, live in my old room to save money, either reluctantly hang around with people I went to high school with or make excuses to avoid them, and compete with every new college grad in Boston for not enough good jobs. Wonderful plan. If I stayed I would see Evan from time to time – unless he left town – and there was no way he should even be a factor in my life. I didn't want to think about him in the same thought as going to live with Jeff. There was also no denying the fact that Evan and I had had dinner together and afterwards we ended up by my car again, kissing. I knew he wanted me though I felt him trying to hold himself back, I knew he wanted to touch me the way he did years before, and what I also knew was that I turned slightly so that his hand could slip inside my jacket as we kissed. Which I was not supposed to do. I knew that when I was kissing him I was sorry there was no place we could go to be alone together, and not question it, and let what would happen happen. But I tried to forget those things as much of the time as possible.

## T O M

Once Tam got old enough to be mobile on her own, she and I had an understanding that she could always come to my house when she wanted. She usually called and said "Can I come out?" but that was only a formality and we both knew it. She had a key to the place, and when the weather was good she walked from the train station. One of the private pleasures of my life was to know there was always a possibility that she would choose to appear unexpectedly. A few times I came home to find her already settled in, listening to the radio and eating out of the fridge. Once she was in college I told her to bring whoever she wanted; probably that had something to do with the business about the high school boyfriend that didn't come off. Sometimes she wanted to go somewhere off campus without having to go home, and without hurting her mother's feelings by telling her that; we agreed I didn't have to tell Susannah she was there. Also, her school was closer to my place than to Cambridge. One time she came with a pile of books, sat in my sunporch and read for two days, hardly said a word the entire time except when we ate meals, then went off and took a final exam. Having her in my house that way, it was almost like she was my own child.

When she was in her last year of college she came out a couple of times with her boyfriend Jeff, the one we all thought she might decide to stay with – I always assumed it must be her decision whether these things lasted or not. She seemed to me like somebody who should be in charge in life, and she thought so too. Jeff was not some pushover, in fact my guess was he liked her because she was that way, and though to me he seemed awfully young for 21, I could tell that he would grow up and pretty soon at that.

The fall after she graduated from college, Tam showed up one day and I knew something was on her mind, but she wouldn't say it. I knew how she worked. All I had to do was wait a little and not push her and she would come out with it suddenly, all in one breath. She wanted to know if I thought it was crazy for her to move down to Washington, D.C., to live with Jeff. "Hell no," I said, "if you want to do it."

She didn't appear to like that answer. She didn't say anything, but her face is not hard to read.

"You're old enough to make a decision like that. Probably some people who graduated with you went and got married a month later."

"They're nuts," she said.

"Maybe." Tam opened the fridge and then a cupboard. "What do you need?" I said.

"I was looking for something to drink."

"You going to drive back?"

"I'm not planning to get drunk, all right?"

"There's probably a bottle of wine in the pantry."

Tam never dragged her feet about doing me a favor when I needed one, and I tried to reciprocate and keep it all square between us. I didn't drink much myself, but I kept a couple of bottles of wine and beer around in case she showed up. Tam went and found some red wine that had been sitting there for a good while and I silently hoped it hadn't turned to vinegar. When she took the first sip, she didn't make a face. A good sign.

"Anyway," I said, "you didn't say anything about getting married. Or maybe you think that's what he's driving at?"

"No," she said. "Or not yet."

"I look at the two of you, it doesn't seem too crazy to go down there." Of course this made me think about when Sadie and I decided to get married. It was hard to remember that we were once in love, given how everything turned out, but we were. Those kinds of decisions were easier to make when you didn't know if you'd live or die, and love was easier to fall into. But the consequences were still the same.

"What do you see?" Tam said.

"What do I see when?"

Tam looked a little impatient. "When you look at me and Jeff."

"Oh. Well, you're young, you're healthy – smart – maybe not as smart as you think – " Tam had a very discontented look on her face. "What's the matter?"

"You know that's not what I'm asking, don't you?"

I hardly ever got mad at Tam, but one thing that did it was when I realized she wasn't sure I could still follow what was going on around me. "I know more than you think I know, apparently."

"That's not what I meant," she muttered. I wasn't convinced.

"Is that wine drinkable, or not?" I said.

"It's okay."

"Let me try some." She got down a glass and started to pour much too fast. "Take it easy, do you want me to pass out?"

"Boy, you're a cheap date," she said.

I took a sip. You could tell it was wine. "You know what I see? That boy's in love with you. Maybe he's smart enough not to tell you that every day, but he is. I'm not so sure about you."

"I'm not so sure he is, after that trip we took. You didn't see him after."

"I see you, though." Did she think she was just going to ignore what I said?

"I know," she said. Still discontented. We sat for a while separately thinking.

"Well, nobody's making you go if you don't want to," I said.

"But that's the problem. I don't know if I do or not, and why the hell don't I? Wouldn't you think anybody would just *know*?"

"No. Not right off the bat."

"Well, I would. I've gone back and forth over this a million times. You know what I even did? I made lists, for and against. It made absolutely zero difference. I can give you a dozen reasons why I should go live with Jeff, and a dozen why I shouldn't."

"Only a dozen?"

"Oh, you're a big help."

"Sweetheart, it doesn't matter how many damn reasons you come up with. Reasons aren't the reason when it's a real decision. You probably never had to make one before." Tam looked like she wanted to argue, but told herself not to. "When you decide, you'll know it. Quit driving yourself nuts."

"That's easy for you to say."

"I'm serious. Take your time. One day you're going to get up, you're going to say 'I'm going,' or 'I'm not going,' that's it."

"The day better come or I'm just going to flip a coin."

Always in a hurry. Maybe it was her age. Like me and Sadie – damn, we were young. Sadie was younger than Tam, she was nineteen, for God's sake. I was twenty-one and about to ship out. Not the best

time to make up my mind about something that would affect the whole rest of my life, but when is? If people always had time to think and if their brains weren't usually addled by something or other, they'd probably never do half the things that end up making all the difference. "You'll do the right thing," I said. Then I had the familiar feeling that finally, after much too long, I managed to say what I should have said in the first place, and look how simple it was.

"I hope so," she said, but she looked like she believed me, deep down. It popped into my head to tell her she was a miracle of creation. That would have made her think I really had gone around the bend.

Despite what I said to Tam about taking her time, I kept having to restrain myself from telling her to just go, and let the chips fall. For God's sake, I wanted to say, don't start being cautious at the age of twenty-two. But I knew I'd be talking to myself. I don't believe in advice, because I know how much mine is worth.

Once upon a time, it's true, I harbored grandiose notions of the ambitious things I would accomplish – everyone did when I was in college. I was secretly thinking I might become an architect, but before I could finish school I found myself in the Navy. By the time I got back from the Pacific, everything I thought in college looked juvenile. When you're belowdecks and the temperature's a hundred and two down there, the ship's rolling fifteen degrees each way and you know if she goes a couple degrees farther you'll capsize, and there's vomit everywhere – it's grow up or else.

But I found out I should be thankful I was in the Navy. I never had to shoot anybody that I could look in the eye. I survived with my arms and legs and my faculties, and just staying alive felt like a hell of a feat to me. I was one of a shipload of hard-ass returning vets, and when we saw the Golden Gate, we were all crying. That was the real truth of it. I didn't see it do anybody much good to have to go fight the war. It was good that we won, so that even worse didn't happen. But there isn't such a thing as good war.

When I came back, I believed in God but not in religion anymore. People who thought they knew what God's plan was were people I tried to steer clear of. Ministers would say things like "God works in mysterious ways" and then go right ahead and preach at people like there was no mystery in it to them. I got enough of that nonsense as a kid. When you're involved in a war you know that God is doing things, you see them happen right in front of you and you

know you'll never understand them. Who lives, who dies. If you live, if you still have four limbs and they all work, it's not because you deserve to.

When I came home I thought my military duties were over, but far from it. I found myself enlisted, for everyone's sake including my own, in a conspiracy of silence. So did we all. Insanity broke out temporarily, we said, but now we're normal again. Except we knew there was no such thing. But we knew better than to say that, because we also knew something about the alternative. We'd been there. This is what people don't get about the fifties. We knew we were skating on thin ice, and that would make almost anybody cautious.

Nobody knows the risks of caution until they've been all the way down that road and it's too late. Probably the last bold thing I did was to get married to Sadie, and though it ended badly, we were together over twenty-five years and I'd say that the middle twelve or so were pretty damn good, all things considered. All things being the war and Sadie having to raise David on her own for the first couple of years and me not knowing the first thing about how to be a father when I came back to civilian life. Plus the economy was tough. I had good reasons to be careful with a dollar and not to jump before I knew where I was going to land. I didn't have grand ambitions but I had a family to provide for and that was challenge enough. I knew where the dollar came from and I knew where it went, two concepts that seem foreign to a lot of people for some unknown reason. I was convinced that if I paid attention to this year after year, what I would have to show for it would be the well-being of the people close to me. I forgot to take into account the unhappiness and frustration. It seemed as though there wasn't even cause and effect, or there was and I didn't know how it worked. I couldn't say we got what we deserved, and I couldn't say we didn't get what we deserved. Everything happened.

The time for caution ended, but I didn't know it. Sadie did. Whatever was good about the fifties, which everybody forgot anyway, got lost in the sixties. Even the possibility of what was good about the fifties got lost. I didn't disagree with a lot of what people were after in the sixties, but they went about it the wrong way. We were more civil, and we were tougher – those things went hand in hand. Sometimes they were one and the same. One day, nobody thought that way anymore. Mention civility and people would seem to think you should go join the Amish.

Sadie, for one, was not very civil at all once she got her consciousness raised and bought the line that the institution of marriage was only a respectable form of prostitution. That offended me so deeply there was no way back. Of course it took a couple of awful years to get to the point where I said I wasn't running a goddamn jail, but if she thought that's what it was, then the fucking door was open. And she used it. The way it looked to me, idealism poisoned her life.



## T A M

Tom was right, of course. There was no way to make the decision come one second sooner than it wanted to, and then one day without effort it was made. I was going to Washington. Everyone accepted it so easily I almost felt insulted; apparently nobody in my family would miss me much. On the other hand, if they had tried to tell me it was a mistake I would have ignored them.

At first I thought moving to Washington, D.C., would be a lot easier than going to France, and then I thought it would be ten times more difficult. Jeff called every day, sometimes more than once, to confer about apartments. Promising listings turned out to be dumps, others were okay, maybe, but then what was okay? What could we afford? When were we going to move in? By the time we decided to take a place we were too late to get it. Should we just take the next one that sounded decent? The timing was bad because most leases ran out at the beginning or the end of the summer and now it was November. No, the timing was all right because there weren't as many people competing with us for a place. Set a date to have a decision made. That would make a difference. Jeff called from a pay phone to say he had just seen a place that was okay, it wasn't the greatest place he'd ever seen, it wasn't a dump, the guy was ready to rent it to us if he called him back. Let's just do it, this is turning into a full-time job. If you think so. Done.

I went down to New London to have Thanksgiving with Jeff's family and now the look they gave us was obvious: we knew it would turn out this way.

So now there was a spot on the map of D.C. that was "our apartment." More lists. I went through my mom's basement and Will's, looking in boxes that hadn't been opened in years: dishes someone got

tired of, unmatched silverware, nicked and slightly bent. Pots and pans not worn out (when do they wear out?) but replaced, steak knife sets with one missing knife, lamps without shades. The familiar presences of households that no longer existed, layers of someone's past, sometimes my own. Surely some of these things had been handled and used by my dad. Some, perhaps, by Will's ex-wife – judging by the expression on his face when he said "Take it all." Or maybe he was just eager to get anything out of his basement that he could. It was obvious he was unable to throw anything away; he was worse than my mom.

There was a specific date, right after New Year's, when my mom and Will would drive me down to Washington with a carload of stuff. It reminded me a little too much of being driven to college for the first time.

Telling my friends made me realize some people had me parked in a certain niche in their life. I was single, therefore I should stay that way; they were annoyed that I forced them to rearrange their mental furniture. It was like I chose to move to Washington with Jeff on purpose to inconvenience them, and where did I get off doing that? Then there were the others: Steph, my college roommate, told me I'd be married in two years. I said no way, that was her agenda she was talking about, but privately I thought she could be right.

Ellie and Christina had just gone through the phase Jeff and I were in, and were living together in Allston. They seemed happy enough, maybe just relieved to have the decision made and over with. Now that they lived in the same apartment it was clearer than ever that Ellie was the grounded one who kept Christina from floating off the surface of the earth. Somebody had to remember to pay the bills and keep food in the fridge, and that somebody was Ellie. Would I be that one in Washington?

The last person I told was Evan. I didn't think I was putting off telling him until I actually picked up the phone to do it and found out how little I wanted to. It had been a few weeks since we had gone to dinner, and kissed in a way that I was trying not to remember. After that, he called, we talked but I was busy, we couldn't get together, he left a message or two, I didn't reply. He wouldn't like the news, and how would I tell him in the first place? I certainly wasn't going to apologize for going to live with Jeff, but how would I keep from sounding self-satisfied and smug? And maybe Evan would quietly convey that this was predictable behavior, the next step on society's program: graduate from college, move in with boyfriend, marry boyfriend, boyfriend-now-husband becomes a lawyer...maybe, without

actually saying the words, he would contrive to let me know I was becoming a cliché.

If I couldn't deal with that I had no business going to Washington at all. When I got Evan on the phone he said he was just about to call me, he wanted to know if I wanted to go with him to the Plough and Stars, where this blues band called the Skinny White Boys was playing. Of course they weren't white. The leader was a guy he went to college with.

I said I couldn't go, even though I could have, and then I thought why the fuck did this have to be complicated? I said maybe we could have lunch, he said fine.

He was working at Toscanini's, scooping ice cream and making cappuccinos. "What are you doing now, anyway?" he said.

"Tonight?" I didn't have a story cooked up and for a second I thought he saw through me.

"In general. I mean besides being a waitron." That was a word he got from me.

"Well, see – here's the thing – I've been meaning to tell you this, but I'm moving to Washington."

Silence. Those words sounded different when said to him. "Washington," he said.

"Yeah. Right after New Year's."

"Aah, hm. Right. I'm sure there's a reason for this, it isn't just randomly Washington, is it. The boyfriend?"

"Yes," I said. The "the" offended me a little, but then I knew he wouldn't like it. "His name is Jeff."

"I know," he said. "You gonna live with him?"

"Yeah."

More silence.

"You know," Evan said, "my timing, I have to say, really, really sucks. I'm worse at love than I am at basketball."

"What do you mean?" I said. My voice felt kind of choked. I wasn't expecting that word.

"There are some things I wanted to say to you, like, I don't know...tonight? It doesn't matter, obviously."

"What things?" I knew I shouldn't ask that, but I couldn't stop myself.

"Come on, it's irrelevant, isn't it?"

"Evan, do you know how important you are to me?" I said that before I knew what I was going to say.

"No. That's exactly the problem, I have no idea. Tell me."

But I couldn't. I didn't know the answer, and there wasn't any room for knowing that in my life now. I never should have even let that come up. I had backed myself into an impossible position and the longer the silence continued, the more embarrassing it became. I almost said I was sorry. He wasn't going to fill the void for me; the question continued to hang. Finally I said, "I can't. Not now," hating the sound of my own voice.

"Life is fuckin' ironic, isn't it," Evan said. That felt like his way of letting me off the hook.

"Yes."

"Well – I guess I'll see you."

I was afraid what he meant was, Have a nice life. "You still want to have lunch?"

"Of course."

"Next week?"

"Any week," Evan said.

"I'll call you, then."

"Okay."

"I hope the band is good."

"Hm." As if he gave a damn now.

"Goodnight."

"Bye," he said. His voice sounded far away, as if he was already moving the phone away when he said it, putting distance between the two of us. No, I was the one who did that.

Things I wanted to say to you.

I would probably never hear those things. Well, that was my choice, wasn't it?

Or was it that I had unwittingly signed up for a situation where I was no longer allowed to feel what I actually felt?

I kept coming back to the same question: If I had the courage, would I have used the same word that Evan had? Maybe it was better for everyone if I didn't. Yes, but if it was true, if I did love him, as I had once so vehemently said as I lay on top of him naked, didn't I owe him the truth? I called Ellie and put this to her and she said, "You're being sentimental. And that's so not you."

"Oh come on. If I was so sentimental, why didn't I just go out with him the other night?"

Ellie, in typical Ellie fashion, dispensed with my objection by ignoring it. "Everybody feels exactly the same about their first real lover. Those are the rules. You know that, right? You never forget

them, you always think what if, what *if*...it doesn't mean you love them."

"No?" I discovered I didn't want to hear that.

"Don't you remember you just called me all excited about taking the apartment, like, a week ago or something?"

"No, it was before Thanksgiving."

"You sounded like you wanted me to throw you a bridal shower."

"*That* is totally false."

"Why are you getting embarrassed? I can hear you blushing. I'm right, aren't I? All I'm telling you is, you do want to be with Jeff. Everybody gets cold feet about moving in together, it's normal."

"Did you and Christina?"

"Of course."

"You didn't want her to find out what a slob you really are."

"Look who's talking."

That didn't tell me what I should do about Evan. I couldn't figure out what bothered me about talking to Ellie for a while, until I realized that now she was like the other people who were egging me on, yessing me to death about this. Oh don't have second thoughts, just go on and jump and think about it later. What I wanted to say seemed simple enough: What am I getting into here? But nobody wanted to be asked that.

The more I thought about what would start on January 3<sup>rd</sup>, the more defiantly I thought But this is *my* life, *mine*. Nobody and nothing is going to change that. If Jeff thinks he's going to tell me how I'm allowed to feel...then I would get stuck. He probably didn't think anything like that. And if it got me that tied in knots, why was I moving there?

I could call everyone back and say I changed my mind. I pictured the contemptuous look Jeff's parents would give me the next time they saw me, if they ever did. Was I moving to Washington for Jeff's parents? I had better not be.

Did I love Jeff seemed to be the question which I should have asked myself a few more times, apparently, before I said yes to this. When I did ask, the answer was yes. Was it still yes? How the hell could I even tell, with the rest of all this crap surrounding it now? Who could feel anything with these lists to be checked off, with these boxes of picked-over utensils to be packed? Too many damn arrangements, the lease, the security deposit, the gas and electric, the date to drive down, the number of boxes that would fit in the car, it was all logistics

now. Speaking of which I didn't have a job, a small detail that would need attending to, quickly and with health benefits or else this whole thing would look like bad judgment and personal failure. Frankly who could even think about having a relationship with somebody with all that hanging over their head? If I could just put it on hold until I got moved in, found a job, got everything squared away, then maybe I could look around and notice that I was living with Jeff and figure out how I felt about it.

I could see my mother and Will watching me, aware that everything was not hearts and flowers, not knowing what to say. I knew it was my decision, and I was beginning to wish it wasn't. They would back me up whatever I did, which in a way was no help. Maybe it would be better to think of it as resolved, final, over with. Not better at all, really reckless and stupid if it wasn't a good decision in the first place. Terry was fourteen and I wasn't about to ask his advice, even though somewhere inside he usually knew exactly how I really felt. He was staying out of my way because he recognized my mood and knew I could turn into the ogre sister at a moment's notice. Jocie had had a crush on Jeff since the first time she met him and she was too young to understand how I was feeling anyway.

In the midst of all this there was one thing I was sure I wanted to do and that was to meet Evan for lunch. No one was telling me I should do that. I was in Porter Square getting something xeroxed and it was around twelve-thirty and I thought, what's wrong with right now? I pulled out my phone and called him. "Hey," he said.

"Are you awake?"

"Basically."

"Want to get together?" I said.

"Sure, when?"

"How about now?"

"Uh...ten minutes?"

"I'll come over," I said.

Walking down Mass. Ave. toward Walden St. I asked myself if I was allowed to tell him what I was wrestling with. He was anything but objective. But what else were we going to talk about? Past the KFC, past the little city parking lot behind it where, years ago, our car was found abandoned, after it got stolen by some kid. Over the iron-sided bridge above the commuter train tracks. Past the convenience store that seemed to be the exclusive property of the black kids in the neighborhood. It was not a long way at all from Evan's house to mine, just back over the bridge, down a side street and through a bunch of

townhouses and you come out in a little park beside the basketball courts. Across the street is the little kids' playground and then my house. It was a cold day but sunny and there was a remnant of thin snow on the ground, persisting in the cracks of the sidewalk. I turned on Hubbard St. and in a minute I saw that he was waiting for me on the front porch of his house. He came down the steps. The unsaid words from our last phone call were between us. We both knew. He looked happy-sad to see me, exactly the way I felt. "Where do you want to go?" he said.

"Why not just go to my house? Nobody's home, we can hang out there as long as we want."

Evan didn't answer, but we were walking in that direction. After a bit I took his arm. I had gloves on and he was wearing a winter coat, and surely this was not too intimate. "What've you been up to?" I said.

"Not much. Working. Reading. Trying to meditate. No, that's wrong. You can't try to meditate, it doesn't work if you try."

I remembered him telling me about the retreat, what it was like to be there in silence with the teacher every once in a while saying, "Just sit."

"I think it would make me nuts," I said.

"That's what everybody thinks when they start. As soon as you make a space, all these thoughts come in and the first ones that come are exactly the ones you don't want. All the hard things come up right away. It makes you want to never do it again."

"But it doesn't keep on like that?"

"You never know."

"Hm." We crossed back over the bridge. "Are you getting better at it?"

"You're not supposed to think of it that way."

We didn't say anything for a while. I was remembering many times we walked between our two houses together. We passed the condos that used to be an elementary school. "So what do you think of?" I said.

"When I'm sitting?"

"Mm."

"Everything, but...well, you come up a lot."

"Is that good or bad?"

"It's supposed to be neutral," he said, but I knew it wasn't. I wanted to ask him what were the thoughts about me, but I felt it wouldn't be fair. On the short street before the townhouses, he stopped

unexpectedly. He took a deep breath. "Listen," he said, looking at me all serious.

I took my hand away from his arm. "What?"

"Maybe we shouldn't go to your house," Evan said. "I mean, look. I know if we go there I'll just try to get you in bed."

I had a moment of almost anger – I wanted to snap back Who says I want you to? – and then it dropped away and it was as though I stumbled and regained my balance, without having moved a muscle. The question became a statement. That was why we were going there, I saw that now, yes, why was I so slow to pick up on that? And he was saying he didn't want it to happen? I knew he did. We gazed at each other. Silently I was saying, I know too. We both do. This is our last chance. "Maybe that wouldn't be so terrible," I said.

He closed his eyes momentarily as if to steady himself. "You are still going to Washington, right?"

Don't, for God's sake. "Yes." Why won't you let us have this? This is the only time for us, this is all there is. I could see it was hurting him, and he was making it worse, rejecting the only thing we could have.

"This is too hard, Tam."

He knew all he had to do was keep walking toward my house. I wasn't going to beg him. I wasn't going to say anything, but I couldn't help it. "Then why?" I said.

"What do I do after you leave?"

I can't solve that for you, I wanted to say, and then I thought how cold I would be to him if I said that, and was I really turning into that kind of a person? Someone I didn't want to be? I wanted to tell him I loved him, and I couldn't because it would seem to mean all the wrong things. Instead of making him feel better it would leave us both worse off. Because I couldn't speak, I had to grab hold of him, pull him toward me, and then he was holding me and I had my arms around his neck. We were both wearing winter coats and I couldn't get that close to him, really, even when I was pressed against him, and maybe that was good or maybe it was terrible. Evan touched my face; he hadn't worn gloves and his fingers were cold as he touched my cheek and the corner of my mouth and my neck. I heard a murmur without words in his throat. We were kissing. What was the point of not having what we both knew we could have? If I said "Come with me," and took his hand and holding it, took the first step, he would not be able to resist and in five minutes we would be in my house and five minutes after that, in my bed. And it would be my responsibility, all of it, anything



that would happen then, to him, to me, there was no telling what that would be, and if he loved me why didn't he just tell me not to go to Washington? Probably because he knew me better than to do that.

We stopped kissing but we did not stop holding on to each other. I hid my face against the collar of his coat. "I don't know what to do," I said.

"Neither do I."

"A fine pair we make."

"I know," he said.

Somehow every embrace has to come to an end, even when you don't want it to. We stood facing each other; I was holding his cold hands in mine. "Do you want to get something to eat?" I said. It was the last thing I wanted, but I didn't know what else to say.

"Not really."

"What, then?"

"Maybe we can just take a walk," he said.

"You be the leader." He smiled faintly, as if he thought the same thing I did: why did I say it that way, like a little kid playing a game? That momentary smile made me feel what it had been, between us, before. I took his hand. We were walking away from my house; I was in the weirdest state of disappointment and relief and distance from myself, like my feelings had worn themselves out and now they had to take a nap.

On the bridge we stopped and leaned on the iron rail, looking down at the commuter train tracks, a weedy urban ravine between back yards, bordered by saplings and dilapidated stone walls. "When do you leave?" he said.

"The third."

"You got a place yet?"

"Yeah. Jeff got it. I haven't seen it." I leaned my head against his shoulder. "Do we have to talk about that?"

He touched my hair briefly, then put his arm around me. "How do you feel about it?"

"Scared." I hadn't known the truth was so simple until I said it.

"Of course," he said.

We leaned there for a while in silence. In the distance, there was a signal by the train tracks with a red light showing. I never understood what those meant. Every once in a while, in high school, Evan and I used to cross the bridge just as the train was going under it. By chance, or whatever. It made the whole structure shake under your

feet, it drowned out your voice, even the voice in your head. I would have appreciated having it come by just then, but it didn't.

"What are you going to do?" I said.

"I might go down to New York. I can't just hang around here and serve ice cream and espresso."

"No."

"I've got to make some kind of a decision pretty soon. I think my dad would help me pay for grad school, but I've got to figure out what kind. Or maybe I should just, you know, pick a place and go."

"Like where?" It occurred to me I could easily lose track of him, and I didn't like that idea.

"I hear there are a lot of places you can get a job teaching English as a second language. Like eastern Europe. Maybe Turkey. I hear Turkey is great."

"Leave a clear trail, okay?"

"Will you?" he said.

"All you have to do is call my mom."

Evan took away the arm that was around me and took my hand instead. I pulled my glove off so we could be touching. "What were the things you were going to tell me?" I said.

He was silent and I didn't dare look at him for fear of tipping a delicate balance. "Please don't make me say them out loud. Not now. You're leaving, remember?"

"I'm sorry," I said, which was probably as big a surprise to me as it was to him.

"No. You can't be," he said. "Either you're not sorry, or you're not going. That's it."

"Really? Is it that simple?"

"No," he admitted. I felt I had never been so close to him.

"Would you write to me?"

"Would you want me to? What'll he think about it?"

"I don't care," I said, but that wasn't true. "Anyway, would you? If you want to."

"If I knew your e-mail address."

"I'll send it to you."

We were quiet again. I could feel leave-taking sneaking up on us. And when would I see him again, and who would we be then? "I hate this," I said.

"I know," he said.

"Every time I say goodbye to you, you run away so fast."

"How else am I gonna deal with it?"

If I just kept holding on to his hand, we would not be able to part. That was silly, childish, we were not children. I was definitely not supposed to get teary over this, either. I didn't want him to see that. I turned away and he took hold of my arm and pulled me back. "I wasn't leaving yet," I said, sniffing.

"You know those things I was going to say to you?" he said.

"I hope I do."

"They're all true," he said, and leaned down and kissed me, and before I could hold onto him he was turning his back.

"Wait," I said. "Please."

He stopped and faced me, but there was nothing more either of us could do. "Bye," I said, and waved weakly.

The ghost of a smile crossed his face and vanished. "Bye." Then he was gone.

I stuffed my hands in my pockets and walked back to my house, slow, noticing nothing around me, thinking You asked for it Tam, you made your decision, now be happy.

\*

January 29

Hi Tam,

Apparently some things get harder with practice, like trying to write to you. This is not my first attempt. Don't like the idea of your boyfriend seeing this in your mailbox. Does he know your password? Now that's when you really know you trust somebody, IMHO. I know you wouldn't get involved with a guy who would read your mail, but I'm sure he's human...you can deal with it, anyway.

We had one of those snowstorms where it takes half a day to dig out your car, and if you don't, it gets plowed in to where you can hardly even see it. And of course after that the traffic & parking jerks give you a ticket for not digging it out, as if anybody could. Then most of the snow melted, then it got cold again and what's left is hard as a rock. You know how it goes. This isn't going to happen in D.C. I went over to the park on Raymond St. about midnight to watch it snow, it was beautiful

but I froze my butt off. If you were here I might have tried to get you to go with me. Type of behavior that makes my dad shake his head and look tired. Nothing I do makes a whole lot of sense to him. I gave him a copy of my thesis but I don't think he ever read it, my guess is he saw the pictures and couldn't believe he paid all that tuition for me to do that. Anyway he never said a word to me about it. Being around him makes me feel useless. Grow up, be a man, make a living, when I was your age, etc., etc. He doesn't actually say it, but he doesn't have to.

I'm still looking up stuff about teaching English overseas. There always seem to be jobs doing that in Japan, but I can't picture myself there. I could stay here and try to do Teach for America, but they stick you in schools where the real teachers are quitting. Americorps, City Year, I basically don't picture myself working with little kids, either. I worked some on a Habitat project in college and I liked that, but it doesn't pay a salary, obviously. One thing I can do is play the espresso machine like a piano. I read somewhere that some guy in Italy knows how to put the foam on a cappuccino so it makes a picture of a tree floating on top of the coffee. I have yet to figure that one out.

Is this what you wanted me to write you about? Sounds boring to me. Or whiny. I guess you're going through the same job crap I am, you don't need to hear about mine.

Are you okay, are you happy, can you tell? Sorry, stupid question. Sometimes you are and sometimes you're not. That's the answer, correct?

I try not to think in terms of happy and unhappy. One of the main points of meditation practice is you're supposed to see that these states are basically illusions. Self-created. As they say, thoughts come without effort and just the same way you should let them go. LOL – I never realized how hard effortless could be. When you meditate you have to do things that are intentional and at the same time, without trying. I think maybe this is the way you wanted to teach me to shoot baskets. Maybe you already know all this. You are the master of basketball meditation. A lucrative career possibility. See, now this message is good for something.

Thoughts of you do come without effort. I know it's ridiculous to say you miss somebody when you've hardly seen them in years, but I do. I think that's all I should say about that. It would be unskillful, as they like to put it, to say more. You being where you are, and with whom.

love, Evan

\*

February 20

Okay, I admit it, I was under the impression you were planning to write back. Maybe you don't know what to say. Maybe you're ecstatically happy and you figure I don't want to hear it, which might be true but then that would be pretty fucking selfish of me. I went out to hear the Skinny White Boys tonight and they got me up on stage with them, they introduced me as their token white guy. I tried to sing backup. If you think I had a few drinks first, you're right. Then they made me try to sing lead on "Stormy Monday" but I couldn't remember the words and the real singer had to take over. This guy with a shaved head who calls himself Cue-Ball on stage. They call it stormy Monday, but Tuesday's just as bad. Then I got stuck. God damn, I wished you could be there. You would love those guys. You might even have loved me. I thought you did, that's wrong, I know you did. Know or knew? Past or present? Know is present, but maybe the love is past. I'm flattering myself saying maybe. What the fuck am I thinking, writing this to you when you've already got a boyfriend and everybody knows it? I know it. That should be enough to stop me, but right now it's not. I am your friend anyway, love, Evan.

\*

T A M

March 17

Hi Tam,

Okay, I already knew I was being ridiculous, but when I got your message it kind of put me in my place. I know that probably wasn't the intention, but it was the effect. It's clearer all the time, I need to get out of here as fast as possible. The time since we graduated has not been good for me, in several ways, which I do not have to bore you with. I suppose there have been some benefits, especially the retreat, but on the whole it's painfully obvious I'm just hanging around Cambridge like I swore I'd never end up doing. I'm leaving April 1 for Prague. I signed up for a 4-week intensive course in teaching ESL. Accredited and so forth, therefore my father is willing to pay for it, mostly to get me the hell out of here. After that I'm thinking of trying my luck for a job in Romania. I gather the plumbing is awful but the people are friendly. Adventures seldom come with good plumbing.

So if you're ever in Bucharest, now you know who to call.

Evan

T O M

If I could have taken back one time out of my whole life when I was too cautious, of course it would have been with Maggie. After Sadie and I separated, I was working for the city of Boston on ways to make the Freedom Trail a little more attractive to tourists, and Maggie was a park ranger who got assigned to work with me. She gave me the special tour, which took several days: the restrooms and water fountains that didn't work, the places where people didn't watch their step and nearly turned their ankles, the storage area where they kept the signs that had fallen off, the signs that existed but no one ever saw them or they were just plain wrong, the fabulous array of graffiti. On the outside wall of one locked and non-functional restroom was written in six-inch letters, "Fuck me baby never stop," and without thinking, I read it aloud. "I beg your pardon?" she said. The way she said it made me laugh helplessly and that hadn't happened in a long time. She had thick, glossy black hair and at first I wondered if she was part Indian but she turned out to be Italian. She had a true Boston accent with the extra "r" on some words and the missing one on others. I found myself watching her face when I should have been taking notes. One day after work I asked her if she wanted to have dinner with me, and after dinner we didn't want the conversation to end, so we sat at the bar until the restaurant closed, and then we still didn't want it to. I offered to give her a ride home. I had told her about my marriage and what happened to it, and she had told me about the husband who left her for a younger, blonder woman. We got less and less talkative as we drove through Arlington and turned up a quiet side street. "This is my place, right here," she said, and I pulled over to the curb. I put the brake on but I didn't turn the engine off. I thought that would be too obvious, but who did I think I was fooling? Her face

was in shadow; her dark eyes gleamed at me, saying what? I wanted to believe I knew. I wanted to lean over and kiss her but I couldn't bring myself to make the first move. "Thank you so much," I said, feeling like a dope. "I haven't...I mean, this never happens."

"Thank *you*," she said. A little smile turned up the corners of her mouth. She didn't move, she just kept looking me over. I hadn't felt so awkward in decades. I thought she settled into her seat a little, as if making herself comfortable, planning to stay there a while. Then she said, "Does this mean it's time for me to go inside?"

"Maggie, I'm so out of practice," I said, bewildered.

"Jeez," she said. "I don't want you to *practice* on me." I wanted to sink through the floorboards. She got out of the car, shut the door, started to turn away. I was already berating myself. Then she stopped and leaned back in the open window to look at me. "Aren't you coming?" she said.

I caught up with her as she was turning her key in the door, and took hold of her, and we kissed for the first time half in and half out of her house. She was pressed up against her doorframe when we stopped. "That's better. Now I can breathe," she said.

That was how it began. I couldn't believe I was that fortunate. In the morning, when she was in the bathroom, I looked at the mottled skin on my arms in the light of day and thought, probably I'm too old for her. Then she came out again and looking at her, in her bathrobe with her hair up on top of her head, I was sure of it. But then she kissed me, and we were late for work.

I was fifty-three to be exact, and she was thirty-nine. I told myself those fourteen years made all the difference. I thought surely she could not actually love me, or not for long, she had to know that while she was at her peak of life and beauty I could only be headed inexorably downhill. I thought certainly she would want to have a child, or children, and I was too old for that, to be the father of an infant in my mid-fifties and an old man when that child graduated high school. I thought (how could I have thought it?) that I was doing her a favor a year later by nobly and selflessly letting her go so she could find a man her age and live the life she needed to live. It was inexcusable, what I did to her and myself. I never doubted for a second that I loved her, but she loved me and either I couldn't believe that, or couldn't trust it, or even worse, I wasn't willing to let her take the chance that she would willingly have taken. I wasn't willing to let her be in charge of her life, to risk it all because she was her own person and had a right to make that decision, which means that I didn't,



finally, love her as I should have, and maybe even that Sadie was right about me...

I could never stop remembering, and it never failed to hurt.

And what if the things I feared had come true? What if she had looked at me another year later and had seen that I was sagging and aging and then didn't want me anymore? What if she had left me for a man her age? What if we had had a child and two years later I keeled over from a heart attack? So what? That year, or two, or three, would have been more life than I ever had without her.

I was a fool. Life itself offered itself to me and I turned it down. I knew there were no second chances, and I did it anyway. How could I? It's simple. I was a coward. I lacked the guts to think of myself as someone who could be loved by her. I couldn't imagine I deserved such good fortune, and for that exact reason, I didn't. By doing that, by being that, I earned my own derision and contempt, and while I dwindled away into a feeble remnant of a man, I lived with regrets that were as youthful and potent as the day they were born.

T A M

Living in Washington with Jeff was like taking Adulthood 101 and hoping I would pass. I waitressed for a while and then I found a job in a bookstore which, if it didn't pay as well, was a lot less tiring physically and more like a place I wanted to be. If I had to work retail I'd rather serve up books than food. You don't have to fawn on the customers as much, which is a fair deal because they don't tip you either. You get to act more like an actual person while you're at work. There are weird hanger-arounders in bookstores of course, mostly men looking at photography books of nudes, but they're quiet and I preferred them to waiting on people who've had too much to drink and snap their fingers at you or yell from across the room.

Jeff and I did an extremely credible job of acting like a responsible young couple who pay their bills, take care of their apartment, show up for work dressed like grownups, go out on weekends with a little money in their pockets to spend in places frequented by the other young adults. At least, that was the way it felt to me at first – acting like – because it was all a new game and I wasn't used to thinking of it as my personal reality. Eventually I realized that everybody I encountered was willing to be convinced by my act. But Jeff and I could still be kids, too. We could go to a park and end up playing Ultimate Frisbee with a bunch of people we didn't know, get tired and dirty, eat charred hot dogs from a sidewalk vendor and it would be a perfect day. He would give me sudden piggyback rides in downtown D.C. He bought me a baseball glove, and who else would have done that?

During the fall, before I moved down there, Jeff had applied to a bunch of law schools, and in the spring he got accepted to several of

them, including Northwestern. "It's definitely the best one," he said. "But it's in Chicago."

"I know," I said.

It was April, Saturday. It was already warm in Washington at a time when the weather would have been awful in Cambridge. There were leaves on the not very many trees we could see from our apartment. We had been living together almost four months, I had found the bookstore job, we were beginning to settle in. We had had a couple of fights, nothing drastic even though they seemed that way at the time. There were still more days when we made love than when we didn't. Everything was going beautifully.

We both knew what he was saying to me. I was sitting at the kitchen table wearing the long T-shirt I slept in and Jeff was making more coffee. He had his white terrycloth robe on. We had made love that morning. The way he handled me physically made me feel light and small. We were entirely familiar to each other, his body was an aspect of my daily life like the apartment or the weather. I could read his mood in the way he unlocked the door. I knew what kind of toothpaste he liked, I knew he would do the laundry because he didn't trust me to take his shirts out of the dryer before they shrank. I knew when he made a decision he stuck to it. He wasn't yet saying he was going to Chicago; he was waiting and I knew it was my move. It wasn't that I had to say right then that I would go with him, or not go with him, but he was waiting for me to say something that meant we were deciding this together. So many things piled up right then, in that instant. If we were deciding together then weren't we already together, wasn't the decision already made? I could not imagine that we could sit there at the kitchen table, drinking our coffee, me feeling the particular lovely tiredness in my hip joints that came from making love with him, and decide we were going to break up. Neither of us was ready to give that up. Then it would be written that we would move to Chicago together. We would live together there, in a new city, I would find a new job, we would assemble a way of life there, and it was hard to imagine, given all that, that we would do anything but get married. I would be Jeff's wife, he would be my husband. We had never said a word about that aloud, but I knew we both had thought some. Or I all but knew. There we were in that moment and I think it came faster than either of us was ready for. When he said "but it's in Chicago" and I said "I know," it probably took five seconds before the question hung in the air unspoken: so are we going to get married?

I know I didn't want to have to answer that, and I don't think he meant to ask it, either, but there seemed to be no way back from that precipice. Except to say nothing. Which is what we did. Tiny things, a word more or less, make all the difference, break the back of people's love for each other. Not that anybody knows it at the time. Silently we rowed backwards from that moment, that question, drinking our coffee and avoiding each other's eyes, trying not to know that we were rowing backwards from each other.

Later, of course, we found ways to talk about his going to Chicago from a different distance. We found neutral words, neutral phrases that supposedly left the question open and everything still possible. I never acknowledged that I was not going with him until much later when we both already knew, silently, that I was not. I put off saying it as long as possible because I knew that once it was out in the open, the air would begin to go out of every day. But the process of deflation had already begun, regardless. It makes me sad to remember this part of our time, and disappointed in myself for dealing with it in such a spineless way. I was exposed: I wasn't as grown up as anyone thought.

At the end of August we moved out of our apartment and went separate ways, Jeff to Chicago and I back to Cambridge. We were both sad and at the end, relieved. Jeff had more to look forward to than I did; I had no plans except to go home because it was where I came from. There was no real reason for me to stay in Washington; I had not developed a love for the place itself, it was interesting but that was all. Being in the South, even though Washington is not the real South, made me realize I was more of a New Englander than I knew. If I was going to complain about the weather, I wanted to complain about snow and ice, not about the humidity and the temperature being 99 at the same time.

My mother and Will offered to drive down and get me, but I said no. It was too symmetrical, too much like regressing to square one. I managed to give away much of the stuff that had filled up the trunk of the car on the trip down; I shipped back the things I cared about, and took the train.

You get a long time to think when you're going up the Northeast corridor on Amtrak, and there I was in a state of betweenness and knowing it, one chapter of my life over (the first in which I had been an official adult) and the next one not yet begun. I

missed Jeff and yet, even though we had talked about visiting each other, I knew it was over and I accepted that. We still might see each other and sleep together a few more times, because we knew how to be together that way, but it was over. Our relationship seemed to have neither succeeded nor failed, but some third thing that I didn't know the name of. I, personally, didn't seem to have had any alternative but to do as I had done, and yet this was hardly something to be glad about. I was twenty-three, with a little bit of life experience now, alone on a train to Boston, where I would have to start again, find a job, find a place to live (I wasn't going to live at home, that I knew), try to find people to care about who, I hoped to God, would one day care about me. Or decide to go elsewhere and do the same, but with no one I knew nearby.

I couldn't tell if that would be better or worse. I did not look forward to being looked at by my family. Jocie would be there, just about to leave for college; I was sure she'd be wondering how I could mess up so bad that I let Jeff get away. Evan would not be there to look at me any way at all, and maybe it was good for him to be gone from Cambridge, but I could have used a talk with him. Though it would have been awkward at first. I hadn't meant to put him in his place, as he phrased it in that stiff and fairly awful little message he sent me saying he was going away. All I did was write him about what I was doing in Washington; there was no reason for him to get his feelings hurt. He'd be happy Jeff and I didn't work out – but he wouldn't find out because he was in some unknown location on the planet, having left no trail at all despite what I thought he promised me, and I was the predictable one.

I started asking myself where I was going to live, where I could possibly afford to live, and this made me think about how I was going to have to find roommates, people I did not want to see sitting around the kitchen in their underwear, people whose music I did not want to have to hear, who I did not want sharing my space. But I would have no choice. I would have to go back to some scrounging, student-like existence, after living with a guy I liked sleeping with, in what had been, after all, a pretty decent apartment that belonged to the two of us and no one else...I was going backwards in life at a colossal rate, this was failure after all, with no qualifiers. No one had told me it was so hard to be in your twenties, and I had a feeling it was only going to get harder.

## W I L L

As we left Brunswick, Maine, after driving Jocie to Bowdoin, Susa said, "Now there's only one to go." Only Terry left living at home. Amy was a junior already, studying nursing at Wisconsin, and now Jocie had started college. I was very glad she had ended up in the Northeast. She might even come down for weekends. "Life's speeding up on us, isn't it? It seems like about two weeks ago she was eleven."

"We've only been together two weeks?"

"Very eventful weeks."

We drove for a while in silence. The usual signs: It's the Law in Maine – Fasten Your Seat Belt.

"We could go to L.L. Bean's," she said.

"Please."

"Let's stop in Portland for a few hours. It'll be like a little vacation."

"Just don't buy anything. We've got two tuitions to pay, now."

We were having a drink on a pier at the harbor. "How do you think Tam's doing?" I said. She had just arrived back from D.C. the day before, and I thought she felt that we all ignored her because of Jocie's leaving for college. "Did you learn anything on the way back from the station?"

"Not much. I wish she'd really talk to me for once."

"She could still change her mind and move out there."

"I don't know if that's still an option. I don't think she wants to, anyway."

"What happened to them?"

Susa shrugged her shoulders. "Maybe they're too young."

"I'm kinda sorry it didn't work. Even if Jeff is a lawyer in the making. He's a sweet guy."

"Maybe it did work," she said. "Maybe it was what it was and that was exactly what it should be. How do you know?"

"Okay."

"She's only twenty-three. What if Amy decides to get married three years from now?"

Susa likes to win arguments; I like to avoid them. "I just hope Amy's taste in boyfriends improves a little before she does that. Why does she like them so boring?" We had met the current one, Phil, when we went out to visit her in Madison. He never loosened up once during an entire dinner out.

"How do you know he's boring? Maybe he's fine when he's with her. He's just afraid of you."

"Me manly dad, alpha male. Too scary."

Susa giggled. "Well, he is kind of a shrimp next to you."

"Sweetie, just because I'm fat doesn't make me life-threatening."

"Oh cut it out, I like you just fine."

We sat over our coffee and one more glass of wine, after dinner. Apparently we had not started being frugal yet, tuitions or not. "Do you ever wonder what would've happened if we'd gotten married, you know, a million years ago?" she said.

"I can't even imagine it. Everything would have been too different."

"Would you have? If I hadn't been married already?"

"In a minute," I said. "You know that."

"You wouldn't have Amy and Jocie."

"True, but..." We shared a look: we might have had Tam.

"Do you still think about whether she's yours?" Usually that subject was off limits, but for some reason, that night it wasn't. She hadn't asked me that question in several years.

"Of course. What do you think? I'm not going to stop. But I know she can't be. I mean even if she is."

Susa thought about that for a bit. "What would happen?" she said.

"If..."

"If you knew Tam was your daughter."

"No. The question is what would happen if Tam knew. And I don't want to find out. It's taken this long for her to finally be okay with me being here at all."

"It's not that bad, hon."

"Really?"

"This is hard on you, isn't it?" I nodded. "Well, you have two daughters who love you, so..."

"I know. Don't get greedy."

"That's not what I'm saying."

I might never have known her at all, I thought, I wouldn't have if David had not died, and that was definitely something I could not say aloud. She was David's daughter, Susa loved him, his death wounded both of them deeply, and I...I probably couldn't come close to mattering that much, even to Susa. Certainly not to Tam. It's Terry, in his mostly silent way, who is my stepchild in all but name. He and I have never said a word about that, but we know.

What I wouldn't tell anybody, including Susa, is that I know Tam really is mine. Or I should say I "know" in quotation marks. There's no knowing for certain without tests that will never be done. But I feel it – I felt from the start that we are far more linked than she wants to imagine. In truth, sometimes I think it was Tam I needed to get back together with, more than Susa. Not that I knew that until it happened. And if I'm right, why doesn't she feel it? This is my ingenious theory: she does, and that's why she's never really been comfortable with me. If I were just that guy Will that her mother got involved with, the way I am for Terry, then it would be fine by now. But I'm not.



## T A M

Despite my resolutions, I did have to live at home when I first got back. It reminded me that everyone else's life went on perfectly fine without me. Terry may have loved me, but he didn't need me around to be a tenth-grader, and my mother had gone back to school to get re-certified to do play therapy. Teaching dance was too difficult at her age, she said, but she seemed to be working harder now than she ever had. Terry had gotten my room, which I didn't know he wanted, and while Jeff was starting law school, I was sleeping in Terry's old twin bed amidst jumbled boxes of my stuff, some from childhood, some from Washington. I felt like the house was saying to me, You're not wanted here anymore.

Only until I get a job, I told it, then I'm out of here. And no waitressing. Why did I go to college, if that's what it comes to? I got a research assistant job, working for a B.U. psych professor part-time, not enough to pay the rent on a room let alone an apartment. At first I thought he was just socially inept and then I realized he was trying to hit on me, so I quit. I signed up with a temp agency and got three days here and a week there, answering phones, filing, copying, sampling an unappetizing buffet of office politics. I ran into a girl I knew in high school – but didn't know quite well enough to have known better – who needed a roommate because one of hers moved out to live with her boyfriend. It seemed like I was going to have to cave in and do it sooner or later, so I took the vacant room. In a week I knew the other two girls were just putting up with me to get some help with the rent, and somehow I managed not to find out, until after it was too late, that the one I didn't know, the one I privately called Attitude Girl, had this dope-smoking loser boy sleeping there with her almost every night. As I found out one night at one a.m. when I came out of my room in a

T-shirt and my underwear, to go to the bathroom. "Sweet," he said, checking me out, and I almost committed a flagrant personal foul of the elbow to the windpipe variety.

I got bumped up from temporary receptionist to administrative assistant, on the regular payroll, at a biotech company. It seemed to me that half the people I was supposed to be administratively assisting drew large paychecks to drink coffee and talk about projects they were going to do one day. The other admin in my section, who had been there for a while, seemed to think it was pretty weird that I actually wanted to get some work done at work. Her job, apparently, was to let male coffee-drinkers sit on her desk and look down her blouse. I told myself if I could be an admin at a company that did things I would never understand, I could be one anywhere, so suck it up and keep looking. Supposedly you're an adult, just be one and survive. But as Evan had said to me, people have an aversion to futility, and what else could I call this?

Jeff and I started e-mailing each other when he got to Chicago – he started it, actually. His e-mails were full of places and people I couldn't picture, worries and the occasional triumph I couldn't share. I kept wondering when one of the other students would become his new girlfriend, and whether he would tell me or just write less and less often until I figured it out, a thought that pissed me off, but really, how was I entitled to anything from him? I could have gone to Chicago, I could have at least said I wanted to, it had all been my choice and what the hell could I have been thinking when I gave up that for this?

But I wasn't thinking, I decided without deciding. Like going to Washington in the first place, only moreso. No matter what Grampa Tom said, I resolved the next time I had an actual choice to make in life I was going to have some reasons for making it.

Possibly if I went back to school...but where was the money for that going to come from? In less than three years, Terry would be starting college, and yes, he was smart and would probably get some kind of scholarship, but still. I would have to figure this one out on my own. Step One, then: go to work for a university. At least that way it would be cheaper to take a class. The first inkling of a direction since I came back from Washington. I started applying for admin jobs at various schools and in December one came through at B.U., so thank God I could give notice to the biotech geeks and stop watching them flirt with Miss Cleavage at the next desk.

In December, too, Jeff came East for Christmas. Before he did, he asked me if I wanted to see him and I said of course I did. He came

to the apartment – where we were keeping a little bag of ice sitting on the thermostat all the time, because it was the only way to get the heat to come on – and spent two nights with me. The roommate with the stoner boyfriend was gone for the holidays so he didn't quite get the full flavor of the place, but it was enough. From time to time I was sure I could see him thinking, *Is this really what she wants?* I told him I was getting out as soon as I could find something – I had to say that much to save face. The topic of choosing where to live was not one either of us wanted to dwell on. I noticed he wasn't inviting me to come to Chicago, but then I wasn't volunteering, either. The same silences as before, but with a new one on top of them: we both knew this was the last remnant of our time as a couple. When we were about to make love on the second night, I almost asked him if he really wanted to, but I managed to stop myself. I knew he'd say yes and pretend it was that simple. It would make us both uncomfortable and nothing would be gained. He did want to, so did I, but it wasn't for us, the two people in bed that night in a poorly heated Brighton apartment, it was in honor of two others we had been and the fact that those two had once been in love, or had thought they were. It was embarrassing not to be them anymore, embarrassing to remember what we had said now that we could no longer say it. I cried when he left in the morning, but I was relieved that moment was behind me.

Every year, during the holidays, word gets around Cambridge that people who graduated from the high school are going to get together at some bar. Usually on Christmas night. There's more than one place to meet. The people who graduated around 1990 used to go to the B-Side – I heard Ben Affleck brought Jennifer Lopez there when they were together – and the ones my age usually go someplace in Harvard Square.

Amy and Jocie weren't with us for Christmas – they alternated years between their parents. Neither were my mom's parents, who said they were too old to get through airports at the holidays; but Tom was there, as always. I missed Jocie more than I did Amy, and I'm sure Terry did too, because he couldn't sit there and talk to her about music all through dinner. They both had the same favorite band, Radiohead, which was a little too melancholy for me. They liked PJ Harvey – Jocie especially – and Coldplay and Moby. They hated Barenaked Ladies and NSYNC. The only bands they disagreed on were U2 and Madonna. At the time, that was maybe the one kind of conversation that Terry was really good at having, and Jocie may have been one of

the few girls he could actually talk to. It's true she was pseudo-family, but at least she was one step removed – like a cousin – and relatively normal. Good practice for him. I didn't want to come home one day and find out he'd turned into a Goth with safety pins through his ears, just because he had a hard time talking to regular people.

My mom and Will always cooked Christmas dinner together, and Grampa Tom would sit in the kitchen with them and watch. He seemed to enjoy that part of the day a lot, but I would always wonder what he made of the way they went about it. There were certain ways she had to have things, so all the decisions were hers and Will did what she told him to do. Not that this could have come as any surprise to Will. He caters to her a lot more than she acknowledges, or even realizes, if you ask me. She doesn't seem to appreciate it, but that's his fault, he's made it her reality that she can take for granted. She has some kind of hold on him that I can't explain except by saying that he loves her. Does she love him? She says she does. But when I say I love someone, I want the two of us together to look different from the way they do.

Sometimes doing Christmas made Will grouchy, sometimes whatever might have annoyed him rolled off, sometimes he pretended to be cheerful about it but you could see him pretending. On this particular Christmas I'm sure he missed having Amy and Jocie there. The holiday seemed thin without them, and that only reinforced my mom's idea of how it should be produced. I helped, too, of course. It was easier when she would transfer her perfectionism to setting the table and we could be in the kitchen without her. Will asked me if I wanted a glass of wine as casually as he would ask my mother; I had become an official grown-up in his eyes, and he had become...what? Someone I could take for granted in a different way. It wasn't like he didn't have a personality, but he didn't have to be the center of attention. He was more like Terry, and I was more like, I hated to admit it, my mom.

When Tom fell asleep in his usual chair after the dinner was cleaned up, and Terry started reading a book that he got for Christmas, and my mom and Will were sitting with their feet up looking tired, I figured we were done and went out to the appointed place, a bar in Harvard Square called the Red Line. I didn't see any movie stars but I did run into a girl named Emma, one of those people you remember seeing every day for years, whose name you know because you seem always to have known it, but that's all you really ever learned about them. We started talking about an English class we'd been in together,

and then about college, and then somehow I found myself telling her the whole story of me and Jeff. We were on about our third *Cosmopolitan*, but more than that, Emma is a person people tell things to and I was no different than everybody else. Without even asking yourself if you should trust her, you do. I've seen it work a hundred times by now. I told her how I had needed to sleep with Jeff one more time even though I knew it was over.

"Would you again?" she said.

"Maybe," I said. She gave me a look that's really Emma, a sparkly and mischievous look that seemed to mean many things, as if we had already been friends for a long time. Like she could see right into the part of me that was remembering sex with him. "All right, yes."

"That's more like it," she said.

Emma is tall, taller than me, has a long oval face, straight ash-brown hair, and blue eyes with the longest eyelashes of anybody I know. They don't need any help from mascara. When she looks at you full on, her eyes seem to take all of you in and give you all of her, which I think is why she so often looks away, or down at her hands, when she's talking to people. It makes her seem shy at first, but later I realized it's not that – she can't change how open she is and she needs to protect herself somehow. She isn't the prettiest girl in the world and she's not trying to be, but sometimes I think she is the most beautiful. I wish she could see that about herself. Later, when we lived together and she was in love with Brian, I sometimes saw her look at him in a way that almost made me feel I was intruding where I didn't belong, like that much love shouldn't even be seen by a third person.

That night I didn't know her and yet I did. It reminded me of the guy I told everything to when I was high at a party, my sophomore year in college, except that I knew I'd never see him again and I didn't care. Not Emma. I felt jealous when a friend of hers joined us, relieved when the friend turned out to be living in Maine. This, too, is why she looks away; people want her all to themselves. I was standing there with Emma and the friend, Margie, trying to listen to what Margie was saying about her job teaching middle school in Ogunquit. I thought it sounded like an impossible task and also I was getting bored with hearing about it, but Emma seemed to be enjoying every detail. They were obviously close. It wasn't easy to talk with more than one person over the noise in the bar, and we were huddled close together trying to hear. I noticed Emma kept looking over my shoulder, maybe at someone else she knew? and she saw me noticing and said, "There's

somebody over there who keeps staring at us, I can't think of his name."

I tried to turn and look behind me but when I turned, I bumped some guy's drink and had to say excuse me. "Where?" I said to Emma.

"I don't see him now." The place was jammed and behind us, at the door, more people seemed to be trying to crowd in. Margie said to Emma, "So where do you live now?"

"Somerville. Near Teele Square. It's not a bad place but I just lost my roommate, he finished his master's and now he's outta here."

"Were you two...?"

"No, no, he's just my roommate, that's all. He's in the same program I'm in, it was his place first." Emma was getting a master's in art history at Tufts.

"So are you gonna keep it? Do you like Slummerville?"

"It'd be better if it had some more trees. But it's fine. It's real, you know? Old ladies peek out at you from behind their curtains? It's a neighborhood. I don't think you can do much of anything on my block without people knowing about it."

"Doesn't that bother you?" Margie said.

"No, it's safer that way. I feel like it is, anyways. I mean, it's a city, it's not like where you live."

"Where I live, guys get drunk and fool around with other guys' wives and get in fights. Because there's nothing else to do in the winter."

"Good thing you're not somebody's wife," Emma said, and the way Margie rolled her eyes I knew there was a whole story behind that.

"I need to get out of Maine so bad. Can I come down and move in with you?" she said plaintively, and when Margie said that I thought No you can't, I'm going to. Just that quick.

"Sure," Emma said. Damn!

"If it wasn't for my contract...I don't know, I've gotta make some decisions," Margie said. "Next summer, I guess."

I looked at Emma to see if she was disappointed, but if she was she didn't let it show. I couldn't wait any longer. "I'm looking for a place," I said.

"Really?"

"Yes, I live in this dump in Brighton with two girls who can't stand me. Plus one of them has this awful boyfriend who's always there when I don't expect it."

"Come over and see the place," Emma said.

"Seriously?"

"For sure. Come tomorrow, if you want. It's not very big, but it's – oh, you'll see. I don't have an awful boyfriend."

"How about a nice one?" Margie said.

"That either."

"You?" Margie said to me. I shook my head. "Here's to being single, then." The three of us clinked our glasses. For the first time in too long, I felt included in something besides my family.

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Emma's was sort of a miniature apartment, stuck up under the eaves of a three-story house. Servants' quarters, maybe, in some previous era. Everything about it seemed improvised. The steep stairs came up into a space that was the kitchen and was trying to be a living room too, but didn't feel quite like either one, and off it were two bedrooms with sloping ceilings and narrow dormer windows, where a person could stand up straight in about half of the floor space. The bathroom between them was like a long closet that sloped down at the far end to a little window almost at floor level; the shower was an old claw-foot bathtub, not long enough to stretch out in, with a curtain hung from a ring that appeared about to detach itself from the ceiling. It was sure to be hot in the summer and when Emma turned on a faucet to make tea, I could see the water pressure wasn't all that great either. I loved the place at first sight.

Such a funny position we were in. Interviewing someone as a potential roommate is always peculiar, but this was something between that and a first date, if friendships had to go through first dates. Thank God they don't. It was like we were sitting down at her kitchen table to find out so much more than whether I could be trusted to pay my half of the rent and keep the bathroom clean. More than each other's dietary laws or what kind of music we liked or whether we slept in on weekends or how late to play the stereo and the TV. Not that those things don't matter. But they could be asked and answered directly and meanwhile, the other, which could not, was being said too.

"So shall we?" Emma said. She knew I'd say yes.

"Let's."

I wish other things could be that simple.

It was the Friday after New Year's, I was on the Green Line on my way home from work, and my cell phone rattled in my coat pocket.

I don't like answering it on a crowded trolley car, but I flipped it open. The number wasn't one that I knew. Too much trouble, I didn't answer. When I got off at Park Street, I took it out again and there was a message. The flow of the crowd carried me along as I listened. "Hey," it said, and I was almost certain at once, and almost didn't want to be. "Hey, it's Evan. I came back for the holidays. I don't know if you want to get together, but...well, do you? I'm leaving in a couple of days. So, um. I'll try you later."

I descended the stairs to the subway platform, passed by people running for the train that was in the station below. It would be full and it would pull out anyway before they got there; I didn't bother to hurry. Came back for the holidays meant he had already been in town for what, two weeks, and hadn't called. Couldn't be bothered, or what? Of course, that message of his, the one he wrote after he tried to sing with that band. I didn't really know him anymore. Maybe. But I remembered kissing him, almost exactly a year ago. Could picture the exact spot on Hurlbut Street where it happened, the second time, after we had dinner together. And wishing there were somewhere we could go and be alone. He was leaving, for where this time, there would be no point.

No point in not, either.

I was tired, nearly all my stuff was in boxes, I had to move into Emma's over the weekend, it wasn't a good time.

He could carry some of it up the stairs, couldn't he?

If he didn't want to, he could always say no.

Saturday, when Evan rang the buzzer at the apartment in Brighton, I was being contemptuously ignored by Attitude Girl and pretending I didn't notice it, rearranging the contents of the last box of random things off the top of my dresser, from the medicine cabinet, the pantry. There were some spices I knew I had paid for, still in the kitchen. I deliberately hadn't packed them because I didn't want to go through the hassle of having her claim they were hers, which I knew she would, but I was thinking about grabbing them at the last minute, on the way out the door. The buzzer went and I ran down the stairs and opened the door; Evan was there in a black fleece that looked new, maybe a Christmas present? He looked like himself only a little older, maybe. His hair was a little longer than I remembered, it looked good that way. He had a neatly trimmed mustache he hadn't had the last time I saw him. "Hey," he said, "how you doin'?" I thought he couldn't decide what to do, give me a hug, shake my hand, kiss me, what, so he



didn't do anything and I didn't either. "I just really need to get out of here," I said.

"Okay," he said and I led him up the stairs and showed him where my boxes were. There was some very feeble excuse for civility between him and the now ex-roommate, then he picked up three at a time and was halfway down the stairs before I could follow. His dad's Volvo wagon was outside, illegally parked. It seemed to take ten minutes to carry out the contents of my room. Was that really possible? Like I had never lived there at all. My mom's voice echoed in my head: Always leave a place better than you find it. Which would mean what? Vacuum my room, clean the woodwork, wash the windows? Now that my stuff was in Evan's car I couldn't bear another minute in there. I ran up the stairs and said, "I'm gonna go now, I'm leaving you some of the spices." I could see the argument we weren't going to have cross Attitude Girl's face. "Okay, bye," she said indifferently, and I bolted.

Evan was in the car already. I got in and let my head fall back against the headrest and said "Thank God."

"Man, you weren't kidding," he said.

"No."

I looked at him, he looked at me, we both smiled, the situation seemed funny now that I was out of there. "Thanks," I said.

"No problem." He looked over his shoulder and then pulled out.

"The quality of my life just improved about a thousand percent."

Evan held out his hand in a give-me-five way and I did. I felt as though I had just seen him the week before, or yesterday. Why did I think it would be any other way? Didn't matter.

"So come on, tell me about Europe."

"Where do I start?"

"You went to Prague, didn't you?"

"You'd love it. It's so old, we just don't have old places like that here, you can really feel the difference it makes."

"I know. Like Paris. You're still there? In Prague?"

"I wish. Everybody wants to live there if they can, you know, the competition is pretty stiff. Among us expats."

"Is that what you are now? Funny word."

"I know."

"So where are you, then? You claimed you were going to Romania. Not that I ever heard one thing from you after you left."

"I did go there, but Romania's a pretty tough place to live. I'm glad I went, but it wears you out after a while. People are really poor there. Everything's difficult. You don't realize how difficult until you get there. I may not have been poor, but boy, was I broke."

"So what did you do?"

"I tried to teach English, of course."

"No, I mean to stop being broke."

"Oh. I had to get my dad to wire me some money. I didn't want to, but I didn't have a choice. Then I got on a bus and went to Istanbul, because I could see I'd never make enough to live on in Romania, nobody there had any money to pay me with. It wasn't their fault."

"You're living in Turkey?"

"Yep."

And I thought going to France was a challenge. How the hell did Evan do it? "Don't tell me you speak Turkish now."

"Like about two hundred words. A lot of people speak some English."

"So what do they need you for?"

"They want to speak it better than I speak Turkish. Everybody's into it. They want to join the EU."

We got off Storrow Drive at the Larz Anderson Bridge and waited for the light. "Are you just going to keep doing this?" I said.

"I don't know. Yeah. For a while. It's kind of sketchy, you have to work under the table, but everybody does it."

"This all makes me feel boring and tame."

Evan slid his eyes over at me. "Please," he said. The light turned green. "Skip that and just tell me how to get there."

Carrying my boxes up the stairs was a lot harder than going down had been, especially the last flight, which was not only steep, but narrow with tight corners. I began to wonder how some of the furniture had ever gotten up there. Emma wasn't there to meet Evan, she was in New York seeing a show at the Met. Once we hauled everything up we flung ourselves down on the couch whose back leaned against the stair railing and just breathed for a while. I had had the foresight to go out and buy some beer and I offered Evan one. "Hell yeah," he said.

We sat side by side drinking Sam Adams out of the bottle and I told him about my crappy fall and how I lucked out meeting Emma at the Red Line.

"I saw you there," he said.

"You did? Why didn't you talk to me?"

"Were you talking to a tall white girl with kinda light brown hair?"

"That's Emma. She saw you looking at us, didn't she?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Why didn't you come over and say hello?"

"That place was crazy, I could hardly get in the door."

"Oh come on," I said. I remembered in high school how he could slip through a crowded hallway without slowing down.

"I didn't know if you'd want me to, that's why."

"Evan, really." My hand settled on his leg like it was entitled to rest there whenever it wanted, saying Pay attention. Said it not just to him, but to me, too. I had not thought that I would touch him. We were both silent, paying attention to how natural it felt. Evan's hand covered mine, then I turned mine palm up so we were sitting there side by side holding hands and not looking at each other because, I think, we didn't dare. I remembered leaning on the bridge over the train tracks with him, a year ago December, and holding his hand then. From that moment to this, all at once no time had passed. Evan took a sip out of his beer and then, bending forward, carefully put it down on the floor. Then he turned toward me, was facing me, his hand touched my cheek. Something in me knew that would happen, when he put the beer down. As we were about to kiss I reached out blindly to put my beer bottle on the arm of the couch and it fell off, hit the floor – "Oh damn," I said. "I have to clean that up."

Evan let me go, sheepishly I thought. Did he think I did that because I wanted him to stop? I found a sponge and mopped up a puddle of spilled beer, did a good job, I didn't want Emma to be sorry she let me move in. Evan was watching me but I didn't look at him; my mind was racing with him and me and what now. I knew what now, didn't we both? Stop now or not at all. We were too old not to know. It was obvious. Wasn't it? I threw the sponge in the sink, rinsed off my hands, dried them on my pants as I stood in front of Evan, who was still looking up at me. We regarded each other without holding back, we did not have to be polite in our looking and seeing anymore. The question hung in the air, openly: Would we, or would we not? Nothing in me said stop. His face was different, he was not a boy now. Did the mustache mean he now called himself a man, or was he like me? I still hesitated between woman and girl. In France some had called me *mademoiselle*, some *madame*.

Evan reached up and took my hand and pulled me down next to him. In a second I had him in my arms and we were kissing, falling into it, everything gone but this. Now that I let myself want him there was no measuring it out. He was touching me where he wanted and in the midst of the touching he took my hand and guided it down until he could place it frankly and without apology on his hard penis. I could feel through the material of his jeans how much he wanted me. He would never have done that before, I would not have been ready to have him do it. His hand slid up under my sweatshirt, under my stretchy bra, his fingers belonged on my skin. How did he know what I wanted? He had always known. Did I teach him?

"Let's go in my room."

We got up from the couch. Only for a moment not touching, then we were in my room and he took hold of the hem of my sweatshirt; I held my arms straight up and he pulled it up and off. And then my bra that did not have to be unhooked. I had tried not to be aware, when I put it on, that this was why I chose it. Now it was gone and did I look different to him now? He seemed to want me just as much. His touch made my fingers fumble as I undid the buttons of his shirt. He took the shirt off and his body was totally different from Jeff's, more exposed somehow. The size and strength of Jeff's body was like a thing that he wore, but Evan truly had nothing on, he was all unprotected and available in a way that made me want to be pressed against him. Between us, his hands unhooked his belt as we kissed and in one motion his pants and his underpants with them were around his ankles, he struggled out of his sneakers and socks and kicked them away and was naked, so visibly wanting me. There was a thin black fur of hair below his belly button that I did not remember from before. I stroked him there, took hold of his stiff penis while he undid my jeans and guided them down me. The last time we were naked together, we were still in high school. He knelt in front of me, I put my hands on his shoulders and pulled my feet out of my shoes and my bunched-up pants, and then he held me with his face against my belly like he could not get close enough. I held his head against me; I could feel his breath on me. I pulled him up to me and while we kissed he slid my panties down and then they dropped to the floor and we were lying down together, at last, on the bare mattress of my bed. A button in the mattress pressed against my hip. He still knew how to touch me, and I him. "I love you," he said. My heart was pounding.

"Come inside me," I said.

"I don't have a condom."

"I don't care." I knew I should – where had he been, who had he been with, who had I been with..."I probably have one somewhere, but don't look for it, just this time..."

He came into me and I held onto him so hard at first he could barely move inside me, I said things to him that I don't know what they were, and it felt like he had me once and for all, like he was in me so deep it made me his for good, and so did it make him mine, he could never leave me even if he tried because we were one body and one heart.

Afterwards we lay facing each other, breath to breath. His fingertip slowly traced my side, my waist, my hip, as if I was his horizon. "You're the most beautiful woman," he said.

"Have you seen all the rest?" At that moment, I knew no one could compare to what we had.

"I don't need to."

I got up and found a comforter, threw it over him, crawled under it with him and he held me, one hand in my hair, the other against my back pressing me to him. We rolled slowly over so that I was on top.

"God, Tam, you don't know..."

"I know." Of course I did, my body knew, now.

"I've been wanting this forever."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"I was afraid to."

"Silly."

"Why didn't you come to my house that day and make love to me and tell me not to go to Washington?"

"Would it have worked?"

As I lay there on top of him it felt as though anything else would have been impossible. Suppose we had been naked in my bed and he had said, Don't go.

"Would it?"

"It might have."

He made a soft sound of regret in his throat.

"What if I tell you now?" I said. "Not to go back? Will it work?"

"Yes."

I didn't think he was going to say that. Especially not so easily. For a moment I was afraid. I didn't want to claim him that way, didn't want us to claim each other like that, and it would be so easy to slip and do it. And then would it get to be like me and Jeff? "I don't want to talk about leaving at all," I said. But even when I said the word, our no

longer being next to each other felt like something that might happen in ten years. Not the day after tomorrow when I knew his plane would take off.

"Good," Evan said.

For a while we lay there in silence, body to body, breathing and daydreaming together, soaking up such fullness of touch, what bodies were made for and almost never get. Then he began caressing my back. His fingertips on my behind. I could feel his penis taking shape under me.

"I have to go pee," I said, and rolled off and got up. I looked back at him, watching me and getting hard. "But I'm not going anywhere else."

What happiness to walk out of my new room naked, knowing that my lover was there in my bed, and in a few moments I would be back there with him and he would make love to me again.

I peed, and washed myself a little, and thought to look in a certain box. "Look what I found," I said, coming back into the bedroom. "A present." I held up a condom in its wrapper. "We could open it together."

"I have to pee, too," he said. He kissed me as he went by.

"Don't take long."

I lay down and put the condom on the floor next to the bed. Hearing him pee on the other side of the wall was another intimacy we hadn't shared before.

When he came back, he started at the foot of the bed, at my feet, as if he were a blind man memorizing my entire body, as if the only way he could ever get enough would be to touch me everywhere and keep the memory forever. He tried to put his tongue inside me, he sucked and tongued me in a way that made me come, my fingers clenched in his hair. He kissed my nipples, my neck, my ears, he rubbed my breasts with his hard penis and pressed it against my sternum. I moved down in the bed and took the so-definite shape of it into my mouth, I curled my tongue around the tender edge of the head of his penis. He didn't know that I knew how to do that. He didn't have to ask me. There was not even such a thing as his desire and my desire anymore, there was just ours without boundary. What I made him feel, I felt. I knew it was the same for him.

I tore open the condom package and put it on him, kneeling above him, and then I came down on him, making him moan and arch his neck back. He held my sides as I rode him, he reached up wanting to touch my nipples. I caught his hands in mine, pressed his arms back

against the bed. He was mine, the shape of him was mine, his male body so unable to hide how much he wanted me. What only I could give him. I could do what I wanted with him and he let me. Then I let him take charge of me and he laid me down and was above me, playing with me, his penis glistening with our wetness and then inside me. I stretched my arms up above my head and closed my eyes and sailed through black space with him in me and in me, and when he came I reached up and pulled him down on top of me, held him as close to me as he could ever be. We lay like that for a long time before our hearts and our breathing calmed down. I loved the knobs of his backbone, one by one. I loved his shoulders.

When he was lying beside me, no longer in me, I heard him say "Hm."

"What?"

"The condom broke."

"Too bad." I couldn't care.

The afternoon had passed and it was dark. We fell asleep holding each other.

When we woke up and I finally found the light switch, it was nine-thirty. I felt as though we had lived together for an indefinite time. We were both hungry, and we put on our clothes and went out to look for something to eat; we found a little Chinese takeout place a couple of blocks away that was open. The proprietor was listening to whiny Chinese music on his radio at subliminal volume. He looked at us, I thought, as if he knew exactly what night of our lives we were in, and when we got back to the apartment and took out the food, there was a small fragrant carton of black tea leaves with it. No charge. I found a bottle of cheap red wine in one of my boxes and we had it with spring rolls, fried wonton, and cashew chicken.

"You could have called me sooner," I said.

"I was crazy not to."

"If you can get on a bus to Istanbul, you can pick up the phone and call me."

"There are internet cafes there, if you wrote me I could pick it up." So that meant he was still leaving? I hadn't told him not to...but the notion of his leaving was purely theoretical, a dot on the horizon, powerless to harm.

"Do you remember my e-mail address?" I said.

"Yes."

"So use it."

"I promise."

"The last time I wrote to you, I wasn't trying to put you in your place, you know that, right?"

"I knew I looked ridiculous. You were living with somebody."

"That's over now."

"You sure?"

I felt I could tell him anything. "He came back East for the holidays and I slept with him. Before Christmas. That's how I know. I could tell it was the last time."

He dipped a wonton in hot mustard and ate it as he thought about that. "Were you in love with him before?"

I reached into the container and tried to fish out a cashew with my chopsticks as I thought. It kept slipping away. I could tell Evan the truth, but what was the truth? "Yes. Once. But maybe not when I went down to Washington."

"Then why'd you go?"

"Because...I wanted to get started, I guess."

"On what?"

"Life. Being an adult. It was, like, my next assignment."

"Some reason," Evan said. I knew he meant we could have been together instead.

"Isn't that why you went to Europe?"

"I had to keep up with you."

"No, really, it wasn't just that, was it? Come on." I didn't want it to have been that.

"Okay, but that's the part that...you really wanna know the truth?"

"Only the truth tonight, nothing else."

"I only went that far away because of you. To get the last word, or something. To impress you...dumb, huh?"

"I am impressed."

"Please, it's embarrassing." Evan poured some more wine into his glass and mine. We were side by side on the couch with the food in front of us on a box of books. I leaned against him a little and drank some wine.

"I shouldn't matter that much to you," I said. "It's too much." But some part of me wanted him to say No.

He said nothing for a while.

"That was another reason to go that far away," he said.

"Did it work?"

"What do you think?"



I knew he meant today, tonight, but that wasn't what I was asking. "No, when you were there."

"Mm – sort of."

"Oh. I heard it. I heard that. You had a girlfriend, didn't you? What was her name?"

Evan chuckled. I poked him in the ribs. "Her name."

"Teresa."

"Where?"

"Prague. She's American, she comes from San Francisco, we were in the same program."

"Are you going to see her when you go back?"

"I don't even know where she is now. It was just a...thing. What's the matter, are you jealous?"

I knew I had no excuse to begrudge him a – thing, while I was living with Jeff.

Evan said, "Truth, remember?"

"Yes. A little. I know it's not fair."

"Good," he said.

We were silent for a while, Evan poking around for the last bits of cashew chicken.

"When you went to D.C.," Evan said, "whenever I thought about you I felt like I was making such a fool of myself. Like, who am I? Am I anybody? Or am I just here to obsess about Tam? It really pissed me off to catch myself like that. I had to do something about it."

"Oh," I said. Of course. "You were pissed at me, too," I said. "Right?"

"Yeah." I could tell he didn't want to say it, but he didn't hesitate.

"Now?" I leaned my head against his shoulder.

"I love you, Tam."

"What does that mean?"

"This."

"But say it, if you're still angry at me."

"It isn't the right word."

I waited.

"Sometimes it seems like you're just – exempt. Untouched. Like you have something protecting you that I just don't have."

Was this me he was talking about? Or was that who he wanted to be?

I put my glass down on the floor and knelt on the couch facing him. I thought we were so open to each other that words should have

been superfluous, but it wasn't so. "This is all I am. I'm just a person, this is all I have. I'm the same as everybody, when my feelings are hurt I cry, I'm just – this, you've seen everything, there isn't any more – if you want me..." I couldn't go on. Evan took me in his arms and held me curled against him, with my head against his breastbone. He kept stroking my hair. "Tam," he said. "Tammy." I didn't even mind when he called me that. Then he said nothing and we were quiet together and I was in kind of a trance, broken by needing to blow my nose. I got up and went in the bathroom and did that, splashed water on my face. My hair was a mess. I knew he didn't care.

"Boy – what's in that wine?" I said. "Too much drama, huh?"

Evan smiled, shrugged his shoulders a little. "I can deal."

I threw away the Chinese food containers and sat back down next to him, with my feet on the box of books. He put his arm around me; my hair tickled his nose and he brushed it away. I said, "What happened with your dad and his girlfriend?"

"Sissy? They've split up. I think. He doesn't exactly tell me these things."

"Did you like her?"

I could feel him nod. "She tried to make him have some fun once in a while, maybe that's what he couldn't take. He's kind of impossible that way. He's like, 'Fun? What are you calling fun? I don't do fun, fuck fun!' And he wants everything in the whole house a certain way. I used to think that was all my mom's doing, but it wasn't."

"Your dad has always seemed so scary to me."

"He isn't really. He's just not very happy, that's all. I don't think he knows how. It's like he'd have to let down his guard too much."

"Hard way to live."

"Hard to live *with*," Evan said. "What about yours, your mom and what's his name?"

"Will. They're like – I don't know why they don't just get married."

"You want them to?"

I thought for a while. Did I? If it would make them happy? "It's kind of selfish, but I don't want my mom to do that with anybody else."

"Mm."

I knew I didn't have to say anything else, but to him I could. "It never ends, that's the thing. You can't go telling people about it all the

time, and I don't even think about him every day, but it never ends. It's just part of me."

Evan said nothing for a while. Then he said, "Missing him."

"It's more than that."

He was silent, and I remembered how he would wait as long as it took for me to find words. Was he still the same?

"I can't explain it," I said.

"... 's okay."

"In college, it seemed like so many girls thought their dads were completely clueless, or maybe their dad left and now they're pissed off at him forever, changed their name so they wouldn't have to be named after him, I mean, that's worse, I know. But this is different. They'll find out."

"Do you ever want to start over?" Evan said.

"Start what over?"

"Everything. I mean, like, a new life. Like right now, just start. And make it what it should be."

"Can people really do that?"

"I don't know. But do you ever want to?"

"I don't think so. Because then I'd lose everything I had."

"Well, I do," Evan said.

"But who would you be, if you gave up everything in your whole past?"

"No, that's not what I mean, don't you know what I'm saying? Maybe it's impossible. That doesn't matter. I'm talking about a completely new beginning."

"Reincarnation will take care of that for you."

"Yeah. Maybe," he said. "I think it will. But if it does, I won't still be me. Once I get to my next lifetime I'll be somebody else. I want to do it in this one."

"You want a lot."

"I know. I'm a lousy Buddhist."

But I remembered being the one who wanted the impossible. It wasn't just him.

"If we were together," I said, and then heard myself. Too late to stop now. "If we were together, would you always want something else?"

"Are you kidding?"

"Answer me."

"No, I wouldn't. I'd want you."

"Are you sure? Maybe it would be better if we weren't, then I'd be the something else and you'd always want to be with me."

"Don't play games with me. Not about that."

Was I hurting him? "I didn't mean to." I almost said I was sorry, but I turned to him and kissed him instead. Then we didn't have to say any more about being together or not being together, because we were.

After a while we made some of the Chinese tea and took it in the bedroom with us. This time we made the bed before we got in. We meant to drink the tea in bed together, but I barely had a sip of it before we turned out the light and fell asleep.

All night I was aware, in my sleep, of his body next to mine. It felt as though we'd never be apart. As long as we were touching or within easy reach, blessed by the presence of each other's nakedness, the possibility of being deprived of that touch and that presence seemed not to exist. My body could not imagine any other state of being because that one was complete and it was what I so deeply needed.

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In the late morning, when we finally got out of bed, we went out and bought some provisions at a White Hen Pantry. It was sunny, cold and windy, the sky was the harder blue of winter, its brightness also contained dark. When we got back to the house and climbed the stairs together and put the key in the door I felt it was our place now and secretly, whoever lived there, it always would be. We made breakfast and then he helped me unpack my boxes and fit my things in among Emma's. Would there be room for his too, if he were staying? We could make it work somehow. Evan was making us more coffee when his cell phone rang. It was his father, wanting the car back.

Oh.

"Well, he wasn't expecting me to keep it all night when he said I could take it. Of course, neither was I." We shared a look. Who knew that every expectation would be so beautifully overthrown?

"Does he have to have it right now?"

"Pretty soon, I guess."

"And then..."

This was not as happy a thought.

"I have to pack," he said. "And have dinner with my dad."

"What time does your plane leave?"

"Eight. In theory, I'm supposed to show up at the airport at six a.m."

"You're kidding."

"That's what I said, too."

Not as happy a thought at all.

I went up to him and put myself next to him, into the embrace he gave me, that nothing in either of us said anything but yes to. When we were together soul to soul like that, the outside world vanished, but no, it didn't, it wormed its way in between us, inside us now. In eighteen hours...he knew, I knew. "Oh crap," he said.

"I know. Don't go yet. He can wait a little. Can you come back tonight?"

"I don't know. I'm sure he wants me to sleep there. I mean, you know." Yes, I knew why. But Evan's father had been his father for all of his life. I had only been his lover, like this, for one night and didn't I need him more?

"Come anyway. Stay with me. You can call a taxi from here."

"Tam, I love you so much." But did that mean yes or no?

"Then come back later."

"All right."

"So we don't have to say goodbye now."

"All right."

"Go pack, and hang out with your dad, and come back here and be with me."

"Okay. Soon as I can."

We kissed.

"See you later," I said.

"Later." He kissed me again, let go of me, clattered down the steep stairs. I heard the house's front door bang as he left. I was alone in Emma's apartment, now my apartment too, alone with myself for the first time as...what was I now? His lover, no, that did not go deep enough somehow...his woman, his girl, the right combination of words would not come. *I* was different, was not the Tam I had been the day before. I looked at the clock: twenty-four hours ago at this time I had not kissed him yet, it had not begun. I curled up on the couch. I was suddenly dying to tell Emma what had happened, then glad she wasn't there, I needed to be alone and still and guard something that was becoming, was happening in me. Who was I now?

What had happened to us in high school was not like this. Nothing was like this.

Did this happen to other people? To everyone? If I could be sure that it did, it would be like knowing their innermost secrets.

I let myself dwell on exactly how we had made love, let myself sink into it, savoring the soreness left by so much lovemaking, thinking tonight, we'll be so gentle with each other.

A little undeniable voice pointed out that I could be pregnant. In moments I saw myself the mother of a baby of unspecified sex. A terrifying infant, red mouth open, crying, needing. By September. In another instant, getting married to Evan, how would it happen and where, his father and my mother looking at each other warily, trying to make nice, trying to make the best of a bad situation. What would my mom say when she found out, how would she look at me? Disappointed. The worst. I remembered Mr. Banks saying "teenage pregnancy is not a good way to get ahead in life." Not much better at twenty-three, me with a job that would barely support me, and Evan...how could I even be thinking this? Slow down, for God's sake. When people *try* to get pregnant it doesn't happen in one night.

Suddenly I remembered Ellie saying to me years ago, "What do you think you are, his wife?" When I told her my plan to have Evan sleep at our house. Maybe she was right, not that either of us knew it at the time.

Couldn't I just love him? Wasn't that enough? It was all I needed. To love him and to have him be there. Why did there have to be anything more?

But there would be much less than that. In the dark he would get up, out of the private warmth of our shared bed, and the taxi would come, and he would go down the stairs. He would turn his back on me. He would take himself away and when his plane landed, he would be in a place I couldn't even picture, and his touch, his presence, everything would be gone, until...there was no until. Until he decided, if he decided, to come back.

And for me, after he went, then what?

I began to understand why he didn't make love to me that day before I went to Washington. But I couldn't refuse that now, any more than I could give up breathing. And that day, why didn't he say to me, "Don't go"?

Why didn't I say it to him?

I could.

He told me it would work.

Why didn't he make up his mind, himself, not to go, instead of waiting for me to say it?

His plane ticket was paid for, it cost seven hundred dollars, it would be like tearing up the money.

But. But if this was...it, then...

We were twenty-three years old and we had been lovers this way for one day, how could we make a decision like that?

To get my mind off it I went in my room and started arranging. I had bought the previous roommate's bed and desk, and he had left behind homemade wooden shelves that fit the short walls at the bottom of the sloping roof. The room had a tiny closet, about two feet deep, and this was his solution. I could put my clothes on them, at least for now. Maybe later I would get a dresser and put it in the dormer alcove under a window. Maybe just put a mirror there, where I could see. The bed was a mattress and box spring on the floor. I made it, neatly, thinking of us getting in it again. I opened boxes until I found a tiny lamp I kept beside my bed at home. Its stem was a brass dolphin standing on its tail, and it had a miniature pleated cloth shade over a flame-shaped bulb. I plugged it in next to the bed; it would be just enough to see each other by, when we were there together. I found some of my other favorite objects, like the mug with the picture of Magic Johnson on it that my dad gave me for my birthday when I was eleven, which I had kept pencils in ever since. There had been a Larry Bird one to go with it, but it got broken. I found the picture I took one summer of the stream at Tom's place, with his house in the background. I found my old white Red Sox hat, my camera, my clock, a box of matches from Café Sushi and a takeout menu from Armando's Pizza. I began to feel at home and like the Tam that I knew, instead of freaking out about getting pregnant and having to get married. I kept looking at the clock and waiting.

Evan came back around ten, leaving at home a father who was not very pleased with him ("but he's just going to go to bed anyway," Evan said), and this time Emma was there and she knew all about what was going on between us, or as much as I had been able to say. Also she got to see for herself. The buzzer went, I let him in and met him on the stairs with his suitcases, and kissed him there before we went up, each lugging one of his bags. We came into the apartment and Emma was in her old pink bathrobe, looking tall, straight up and down, and we put down the suitcases. "Hi," he said shyly. I took his hand. "This is Evan," I said. "Show and tell."

"Hi, I'm Emma," she said. "The roommate." Her face looked like our happiness was funny to see, from the outside.

"I know, Tam told me."

"I hear you guys had a housewarming."

"That's an interesting word for it," Evan said. He sounded embarrassed and proud.

"It was you I saw at the Red Line, wasn't it?" she said.

"Yep."

"And there was Tam telling us she didn't have a boyfriend."

"I didn't. Not then."

"So I hear you're going to Istanbul tomorrow?"

"It looks that way," he said. Which was not the same thing as yes, I noticed.

Emma seemed to want to say something and then think better of it. "Well, I've got to write a paper," she said. "It's due in the morning. Nice to meet you."

"You too."

"Good night," I said as she closed the door of her room, and self-consciously Evan mumbled the same. We looked at each other impishly. "Did I pass the test?" he muttered.

"I think you did." We held each other and I felt as though I would fall into him. It was like the dizziness of standing on a height, holding onto him so that I wouldn't lose my balance, but he was the height and the depth of space into which I might fall. Don't leave, I thought. Don't leave. I wanted to say the words. No matter how impulsive it was, how sudden, tear up the ticket. And then what? My Grampa Tom voice inside wanted to know how it would work. I wanted him too much to think about that. "Come in my room," I said.

In a few minutes we were in bed again, kissing skin to skin.

"Be careful with me," I said, "I'm kind of sore. But don't stop."

I opened the condom package and put it on him. He came into me so deliberately, like he wanted to make entering me last all night.

I knew it when he was about to come, the heat of it spread through my body in a wave, overpowering and yet afterwards, as we held each other, I still needed more.

I was embarrassed to ask but I couldn't let there be embarrassment between us about that. "Touch me a little," I whispered in his ear. I guided his fingers, I silently taught him how, and when he understood I took my hand away. I was falling into his gaze; he saw me come.



We were in each other's arms, breathing each other in. I thought, We will always be together. Thought those words again and again. I wanted him to hear them.

"I love you, Evan," I murmured. I knew he wanted me to say the words and I knew I had not. It would have been wrong not to. When I said them I remembered the first time we ever made love, and saying it to him then. What I wanted the words to mean then was true now. I knew I could never take them back. Regardless of where he might be, where I might be. Did he know that? If I said that to him, it would be like letting him go away from me as if I didn't care, as if he didn't care.

"I love you too," he said. "Do you remember when you made me tell you that?"

"Of course." There, he did hear what I was thinking, he knew.

There was nothing in the world but the two of us in this bed.

And a plane was leaving with him on it at eight in the morning.

It wasn't like the night before. That fact hurt now and it would hurt more. How could he do this to me? It was just an airplane ticket. Or pride. Or something between him and his father, something he had to prove, there was no longer anything like that between us. "You're not going back there to impress me, are you?"

"No," he said, and I could see it was hard for him, too.

"Why then?"

"It won't be that long," he said.

"How long?"

"Six months? A year?" Why was he asking me, it wasn't my decision.

"Do you know how much I'm going to miss you?"

Why were we talking as if he had no choice but to go? I turned over, away from him, I didn't even want to turn my back on him in the same bed, how much worse would it be when he was thousands of miles away? He put his arm around me, gathered me to him, as if I were the one about to get away and he was holding me back. He held onto me hard, fiercely, even angrily. Feel it, I thought. Feel what it's like, see how you like it. I could tell from the strength of his arm pressing me into him that he hated it.

I turned back to him and kissed him. He had his hand in my hair. "God, Tam," he breathed, holding me next to him. Tenderly now. I could feel his heart thumping hard and slowly against me. Painfully. I was his, didn't he know that?

"I don't want to go," he said.

"Then don't."

At once I could see in his eyes the same confusion I felt. To get away from it I burrowed into him, put my face against his chest. "I know it's not that easy," I said. "I know I shouldn't..." If I loved him I should let him decide. Let him do what he needed to do. How could I not? Anything else wouldn't be love.

"I don't know what to do," Evan said.

"Neither do I." But then the part of me that wanted to act strong said to him, "Before this happened, a decision was all made, it must have made sense." It was only an act.

"It did," Evan said, which I did not want to hear. "But everything's different."

"It's only been a day and a half." Why did I have to say that out loud?

"Or seven years. Depending on how you look at it," he said. But I knew I had made him think about a day and a half. To me it sounded like I had said You can't trust this, and that was the last thing I wanted to tell him. Or even worse: You can't trust me.

"If I don't go," Evan said, "it's, like, a lot of pressure to be right about this. You know?"

Yes, as soon as he said it, I knew. It would all have to work to justify the decision, to make it not have been rash and immature. Anything that didn't go right for us would be held against us by some invisible prosecutor, proving the case that we had no judgment, that we jumped way ahead of ourselves and now we would have to pay. We would have to swallow large helpings of disapproval, of "I told you so," and then what if we couldn't look each other in the eye anymore, what if, in the end, we no longer wanted to be together?

"Maybe too much," I said.

We were quiet for a while. If staying risked spoiling everything, then go. Let it hurt, too bad.

"There's no right answer to this," Evan said.

I remembered Tom's lesson: this was a real decision. But knowing that didn't help.

"Should we turn out the light?" I said.

Evan looked around the room, at my clean clothes now stacked on the low shelves that lined the abbreviated walls under the eaves, at the not yet unpacked boxes pushed into the corners. "Do you have an alarm clock?" he said.

So.

I got up and found it on the desk, and he watched me do that naked. Do you miss me yet? I thought. I miss you. I handed him the clock. He set it and put it on the floor beside him. I managed not to watch too closely, but I heard the click when he pulled up the alarm button.

I turned out the light and we were in darkness except for some streetlight that came up into the dormer windows, faintly illuminating the narrow alcoves they were in. I stretched myself along the length of him, put my leg over his, my nose against his neck. In the dark he held me.

"Tam," he murmured. He didn't go on.

"I know."

I turned a little, made myself still more comfortable.

"I like sleeping with you so much," I said.

"An' you."

I could feel myself beginning to slip under. "Goodnight."

"Goodnight."

Later, at some unknown hour, I woke up lying with my back to him. What woke me was the touch of his hand, his fingertips, on my cheek, so tenderly it made me cry, silently. He felt the tears, tried to wipe them away. I took his hand and kissed the salty pads of his fingers.

The alarm went. It was still pitch dark. Instinctively I tried to reach for it, but it wasn't there on my side, and then I felt him turn over and heard his hand hitting the floorboards as he felt for it. The beeping clicked off. If he went back to sleep, and I didn't, would I be morally obligated to wake him? Or would he have decided not to go after all?

Evan groaned and sat up. I couldn't do less; I reached out and turned on the dolphin lamp.

"I so don't want to do this," he mumbled.

"I know."

But he did stand up and stumble out of my room, into the bathroom. I heard him peeing. I got up and put on my robe; my feet were cold on the floor. I looked at the clock: five-twenty-five. I pushed my hair back, went out and drank some water at the sink. I turned on a light above it. I must look awful, I thought, running my fingers back through my tangled hair. I heard Evan splashing water in the bathroom, it sounded like he was washing his face. His two suitcases were still by the door, where we had set them down when we came in.

He came out of the bathroom and I thought he looked very fine naked and half-asleep. He went into my room – not our room now, my room – picked his clothes up off the floor, pulled them on hurriedly. From his pocket he took his cell phone and, standing in the doorway of my room, called a taxi. He seemed to be only half conscious, automatically going through motions already planned. Maybe that was the best way to get through this.

“Want some orange juice?” I said.

“Sure.”

I poured some and handed him the glass. He drank half of it and held it out to me. “Want some?” I drank the rest, then I put the glass down on the table and moved into his arms. We held each other, swaying slightly.

“I hate this,” I said.

“Me too.”

We kissed and as we did, his hand came inside my robe and cupped my breast.

Outside, there was a faint beeping, the hoarse bleat of a taxi horn, unmistakable.

“Tam, I love you so much,” Evan said.

“Don’t stop. I won’t.”

“I couldn’t.”

“And for God’s sake, when you come back, don’t go away so soon.”

Evan smiled faintly, sadly. The taxi beeped again. “I guess I gotta go,” he said. I kissed him one more time; he picked up the suitcases. “Damn it,” he said.

“So long,” I said.

“So long.” He clumped his way down the stairs with the awkward bags, turned to look up at me at the stairs’ turning, then he was gone. I heard his footsteps all the way down, the suitcases sometimes bumping a step, the distant front door closing. I thought I heard, in the quiet of the night, his steps on the front porch. Then nothing.

\*

All day after Evan left I was wondering where he was, if he had arrived yet, knowing he must be as tired as I was – tired, crossing all

those time zones – and then he had to deal with being in a foreign country. Trying to picture him on a plane. Mostly I saw him looking up at me from the turn in the stairs. And then going away, gone.

After work I could barely make it up the stairs to the apartment. I flopped on the couch without even taking my coat off. Emma emerged from her room holding a book, with her finger in it marking her place. “How are you?” she said.

“Completely wiped.”

“So he actually left,” she said.

“He did.” Saying it made my heart sink, yet it was a slight comfort to be able to say it to her.

“I didn’t think he was going to.”

“Really?”

“I wanted to ask him why but it seemed kind of pushy to say that.”

“You should have,” I said, sitting up long enough to struggle out of my coat.

“Didn’t you?”

“We talked about it forever, there’s just no right answer.” I could hear Evan saying that.

“I can’t believe he got on that plane,” Emma said. “I don’t understand how people think sometimes.”

\*

January 10

I’m sitting in an internet café and looking out at the rain and the traffic thinking what the hell am I doing here? All the way here, when I wasn’t asleep, I was thinking about you. And asking myself why the fuck did I leave. Except like we said, the pressure if I stayed. I feel as though I’d do anything to have us be together, and then in some fucked-up way it ends up that what I have to do is go away so we can’t be. I didn’t want to go. You know that, right?

I almost missed my connection in Paris. You know how at Charles De Gaulle they announce your plane in this voice you can’t hear? Well, I’m sure it would help if I knew French. Anyway, I was sitting there in a catatonic state and nearly let

T A M

the plane leave without me, which would have been all I needed.

I hope this thing doesn't delete my message. That's what happened the first time I tried. For some reason it cuts you off and you never know when. Weird keyboard, too. Even the so-called European version.

I should send this just to make sure something gets sent. Then write more.

I love you.

Evan

January 10

Dear Tam,

More message. I got a different computer. I want you to be reading this right now and answering it. What time is it there? You must be in bed. I should be in it with you. Very hard to stop thinking about that all the time. No, impossible. It's chilly and raining, noisy, crowded, people drive insanely, it's city life to the max. It seems almost impossible that right now, while everyone driving by is honking his horn (people honk here every time they breathe), you're sleeping in that room on the third floor in Somerville and it's so quiet there and I was just there with you three days ago. I know I already tried to say this when we were together, but you are always with me somehow. I mean you always have been since the beginning. I never know how to say it. There's too much noise here, I won't be able to now either. Sometimes I'm afraid I want too much from you and it's going to drive you away. I try to think that means it's good I had to go away, but it's not. No one else knows me the way you do. I was very alone here before, and now I'm not so alone, because I keep the idea of you with me all the time, but an idea is not you, I know that. I can't say this right.

Tomorrow, or maybe even this afternoon, I'm going to start trying to get in touch with a couple of people I contacted before the holidays. See if they're still interested. Put up notices here and there. Also I have to find a place to stay that isn't a hostel, although it's interesting in a way. Backpackers from everywhere. People keep trying to guess my background, the #1

guess seems to be Lebanese. Or Egyptian or Palestinian. The weirdest was Vietnamese. Come on! What were they thinking? Did they ever meet somebody who was?

It sounds so weird to write to you and start "Dear Tam" like some letter-writing lesson in fourth grade, but "Hi" definitely isn't enough. I hope "Dear Tam" doesn't sound cheesy to you, it doesn't say enough but at least it's something.

I love you,  
Evan

\*

January 10  
Dear Evan,

There – does it sound cheesy?

Actually, it doesn't make me feel like the fourth grade, it feels grown up. Like, I can say I have someone who's dear to me.

I miss you as much as I thought I would and I hate it. But I know what you mean about not being as alone as before. I know it couldn't be the same for me since I'm like two miles from home and you're in Istanbul, but it's not so different either. I have you with me, too. I want to think I do. Emma has to hear about you a lot, but she doesn't seem to mind. I like her more and more. Thank God I'm not living with those wenches who hated me and missing you this much at the same time, I'd probably snap and murder one of them. I know which one, too. Or else her doper boyfriend. I really wanted to wring that kid's neck.

Please, please, please do what you need to do and then come right back here. And don't take one minute longer than you have to.

I think I'm going to sign up for a course, maybe Women's Studies, so my brain doesn't completely atrophy. At work I'm still cleaning up the mess the admin before me left. As far as I can see, she just kind of hid anything she couldn't figure out and hoped nobody would find it. Once I get some kind of organization going in the office I'm going to need more to think

T A M

about. Besides you, I mean. Or us. I don't want to think this to death. You know.

I would feel uncomfortable writing that I love you all the time in every message, it would turn into a routine and wear out. So I'm not going to. But remember it. Just know it. It's the truth and it's not going to change.

Tam



## T O M

Tam came out one afternoon in January, unannounced. It was sunny, the barometric pressure was high, there were only a few fair-weather clouds. The yard and the field past it had a covering of snow; the kitchen windows were flooded with brightness. In the field, yellow stubble stuck up through the snow, bent and broken, too randomly scattered to give an impression of rows. The field sloped downward slightly, away from us looking out the kitchen windows, down to the creek bed and a line of dark trees. After it, another brilliant white field and then the trees started in earnest up the hill, real forest, or more accurately, my neighbor's woodlot. It was as black from my vantage point as any forest need be. My eye sought refuge from the brightness in that darkness along the edge.

The kitchen, too, was bright; the bars of burning sun on the old white wainscoting, on the chipped porcelain of the stove and sink, almost made up for the drafts that leaked around the frames of the windows. There was always a window that needed new parting bead, some of the sash cords were broken, a little weatherstripping would work wonders. But most of the time it was easier to put another stick of wood in the woodstove. I knew that letting everything go to hell around me was a sure sign of being too damn old. Before Tam showed up, I had been telling myself to go out and see if I could find some more split wood in the woodpile, and if there wasn't any, saw some into chunks on my table saw. I'd rather sit with her, of course. Anyway, later on, the sunporch would be reasonably warm – warm enough to work there, at least. Most of my tools were there because I saw no point in working in a dark cellar when I didn't have to. Besides, with my knees, I wasn't eager to lug things up and down the stairs. There was no one to tell me not to fill up the sunporch with sawdust, if I chose to.

Tam made some coffee and sat at the kitchen table with me. At first she had a lot to say about how she found a new apartment with a new roommate she liked a lot, and then without warning she seemed to forget about what she was telling me. She sat there daydreaming. "There's something on your mind, I know it," I said, "but I have no idea what it is."

She didn't answer for a few moments, just stared off into the distance. "I'm in love," she said quietly, without looking at me. A tiny smile came to her face when she said that, a smile she couldn't help. She didn't try to hide it, either.

"Want to tell me his name?" I knew she did.

"Evan. He was my boyfriend in high school. I wanted to bring him out here, remember?"

"I sure do. And I didn't cooperate, did I? Maybe I should've."

"It probably wouldn't have worked," she said. I could hear that there was no longer any pain in that memory for her.

"I thought that was over a long time ago."

"Me too. But it turns out it was just the beginning, really." She turned her gaze on me for a second and I thought somebody should paint her just as she was at that moment. If anyone could. I knew I'd never seen her light up like that when she told me about anyone else. That thing in women that men fall in love with – she *was* it, right then.

"I can see it," I said.

"What?"

"You. How you feel about him."

"Is it that obvious?"

"It's beautiful. How about if you bring him out here and let me meet this guy? Since I never got to before. My own fault, of course."

"God, I wish you could. He's not here, he's in Istanbul teaching English. He just came home for the holidays, that's how it happened."

"He what?" For a second I didn't think I heard right. "Istanbul?"

"Yes."

"Why Istanbul, for crying out loud?"

"I guess Turkey's a beautiful country. Anyway, he likes it."

What did that have to do with anything? "So when's he coming back?"

"I don't know."

In about two seconds, we had gone from something that made complete sense to me to something that made none at all. "You don't know?" Tam shook her head. "Well, make him tell you then."

I could see she didn't like that one bit. "How do you propose I do that?"

"This thing between you two is mutual, right?"

"Yes," she said indignantly. I didn't mean it to sound the way it probably did, but I couldn't help it. Sometimes I think I really don't know how anything works anymore.

"Take it easy. You can get him to tell you. Believe me." If he was half as in love with her as she was with him. "It's his decision, he's not in the Army waiting for orders. Nobody shooting at him over there, either."

Tam looked impatient and maybe a little flustered. "I don't think it's my job to make Evan do anything."

"Up to you," I said. "So why is he over there again?"

Tam was at least as stubborn as me. "It's something he needs to do. And besides. If he just tore up his plane ticket and said he wasn't going because we spent the weekend together – I mean, how does that look? Who does stuff like that?"

"How old are you? Thirty-five? I thought you were twenty-four."

"Twenty-three."

"All the more reason. He's the same age as you, right? I don't know what there is in Turkey he needs to do so bad."

Tam didn't answer me. I had a feeling she didn't know either.

"Let me put it in this way. When I was twenty-three, if a man finally got the girl he was in love with, he didn't go off to the other side of the world the next day unless somebody made him."

"Fine. Maybe a few things have changed since then. Just think whatever you want." What the hell was I doing hurting her feelings? I had no business getting into an argument with her over this. Idiotic. Neither of us knew what to say. Finally I reached over and patted her shoulder, feeling useless. She shook her head and sighed. "Crap," she said. "This upsets me, you know?"

"Sorry. I get protective sometimes. And it's not like you need a whole lot of protecting."

"I just miss him," she said.

"Have you told him that?"

"Yes."

We both contemplated the outdoors for a while, letting the conversation hang. What could be wrong with this kid? "That boy should get his butt back home," I said.

The next morning I went out to look at the sumac I was going to have to cut down in the spring. The only thing good about it was the way it looked in the winter against the snow. That and Norway maple were my enemies the rest of the time, the kudzu of the Northeast. The little stream that cut across my property, a minor tributary of the creek at the bottom of the field, was running under a thin coating of ice, air bubbles wobbling along pressed against the ice like faces against a window. I was still thinking about Tam and her boyfriend, and I still didn't get it. I knew some men would run away from the very thing that makes life worth living – shit, I was that man, but that didn't mean I understood it. I saw two cardinals, Mr. and Mrs., and a flock of slate juncos; I should put out seed for them, I thought. I was standing looking down from the top of the steep bank near the culvert, which is where the sumac always grows up, and I thought I was on solid ground but apparently I was actually perched on a tuft of grass, and when I shifted my weight my feet went out from under me and I slid down the bank. I tried to grab onto some stems as I went by, but I only succeeded in getting myself turned around and sliding down headfirst on my back until I was almost in the stream. My hat came off, my clothes were full of snow, snow down my neck, my ankle hurt, I was lying there upside-down, head practically on the ice, looking up at where I came from. The sky was blue with high thin clouds in a ribbed pattern. Too high up to see them move. Somewhere across the field a crow cawed. I couldn't see the house, or anything man-made except the culvert a few yards downstream. Could have been out in the middle of nowhere. I started to think what it would be like to die that way, out in the fields taking a walk – it could happen – say I broke my ankle and couldn't get back up the slope. Maybe if I started to yell, someone would notice after a while, but what if I didn't? What if I chose not to? You have to die of something, and there would be worse ways than out there under the sky, cold though it might be. I was cold right then and I knew in a minute, no matter what I thought, something unthinking was going to make me get up and scramble out of there and go inside, and it would make me try to even if my ankle were broken and I were a mile from my house. The will to live can be damned awkward and undignified. Embarrassing, even. But for a moment I felt myself in place like an animal, looking up at underbrush, invisible at the base of things, under the open sky. No cutting of sumac, no plans, no house, no anything. Just light and open. Fresh. As if seeing had just begun.

Snow down my neck forced me to wriggle my way around till I was on my hands and knees, and then stand up. Just as I expected. Back to the human trudge. I worked my way down the edge of the stream, breaking through ice into mud in spots, until I reached a place where the bank was not so steep or high and climbed out. Back inside to sit in front of the woodstove and dry out. But I kept thinking how pleasant it was to be upside-down like that, feet toward the sky, to fall right out of my own life.

T A M

For weeks after Evan left, when I was walking down a busy sidewalk, I kept seeing him out of the corner of my eye, or the back of his head half a block away.

After I told Tom, and he made it sound like either Evan didn't love me or he wasn't a man, I didn't feel like telling anyone else in my family. They would find out soon enough when he came home.

I had gotten along just fine without him for years, but that was before I gave myself to him with nothing held back and then he left. I missed him so much it made me feel as if something was wrong with me; I wanted to think of myself as a stronger person than that. But if there's anything I don't handle well, it's being left. I know perfectly well it's because my dad died when I was fifteen, but that doesn't stop it from being so. And meeting Evan was part of that same time, the first thing that brought me back into the mainstream of life. It was our losses that enabled us to love each other, I think. We both knew the things that couldn't be told.

\*

February 14

Dear Tam,

I hope you got what I tried to send. There's no way I could time it to arrive today. If it hasn't come, it will soon.

I know this is a crappy excuse for Valentine's Day. Next time we'll have it together and we'll do it right. Maybe now we can share knowing that.

I'm getting to the point where I almost have too much teaching I could be doing. It's amazing how many people are learning English. That guy Selim, the one who picked up my flyer at the internet café, must like me. He seems to have told every kid he knows that's learning English to look me up. I think I'm going to end up with this group of Turkish yuppies as my friends in Istanbul, which is pretty weird but worse things could happen. At the school we have these hilarious conversations where they try to talk about the news of the day in English and I try to correct them and teach them idioms and stuff, but since I know about six words of Turkish, half the time I can't find out what they really mean to say. I have way too many people in my classes, but most of them really want to learn. I drill them on verb forms and stuff. Prepositions, which are impossible. Of course, what they want to learn may not be exactly what the school is trying to teach them. Selim is obsessed with cars and he now knows various useful English words like grille, hubcap, gas cap, bumper, and hood. Though if he goes to England, hood will be bonnet, won't it? I am not qualified to teach British, that's for sure. I don't really know what anyone's learning. Sometimes I think all they're getting from me is a totally random collection of phrases and vocabulary items. Of course they all want to learn swear words and how to talk about sex, at least the guys ask me these things when women aren't around. I think they think they'll impress the girls with them later. Good luck guys, they'll find out.

I wish you could meet some of these people. And just be here. The weather is more like March or April than February, in terms of Boston. They say it should stop raining all the time fairly soon. We could walk along the waterfront and talk about what next in life. That's what I imagine myself doing, with you, when I'm in a place where a person can think. We talk about how it will be when we're together. I know it'll be regular life, but then, it won't.

love,  
Evan

T A M

\*

I am proud not to be the victim of things like Valentine's Day. I bend over backwards to not care about it, but it still pissed me off that he had to have his personal growth seven time zones away. I gave him what I could never take back and he ran off to Turkey. I needed his physical presence and he had taken it from me.

Did he still believe that I was exempt from getting hurt? That he could just do anything and it wouldn't matter?

I knew it wasn't fair to think like this. I needed something else in my life, a goal that had nothing to do with him, but I couldn't find it. The end of the winter in Boston is always a grind. If it hadn't been for Emma, there would have been nothing good about it.

\*

March 17

Dear Tam,

The weather's finally starting to improve. It isn't raining all the time anymore, it's warming up. It's very humid here, you know you're on the sea. I got on a bus the other day and went down the Black Sea coast a little ways, and hung out there for the day and came back. It was beautiful sitting in a café looking at the sea, drinking wine, thinking maybe I could entice you to come visit me. Things are amazingly cheap here but the money is in amounts like 500,000 or 5 million. Some people here get pissed when I don't pay them in euros or American dollars. The economy is apparently royally screwed up, but I don't try to figure it out. If I get paid, great. Sometimes people like me get screwed out of most of their paycheck because we don't have work permits, but so far that hasn't happened to me. I'll have to leave the country next month, just cross the border and re-enter so I can renew my tourist visa. It's what you do here.

I have to say that course you're taking reminds me a lot of why I got tired of theory after a while. It's exciting at first when you learn all this new lingo, you feel like you've suddenly got a new part of your brain, and then maybe there's overload or something. Too many new paradigms one after another. I began



to think maybe they aren't so brilliant after all. Just complicated ways of saying things people already know.

Every day and especially every night I think about having you next to me. I really mean it about coming over here. Seriously. Think about it.

love,  
Evan

\*

I let Emma read that e-mail and waited to see how she'd react. When she looked up from it, she said, "So are you going?"

"Would you?"

"Why not?"

"Um...money? Like, way more than I've got in the bank?"

"You've got a credit card."

"Would you do that? Just charge it and say the hell with it and go?"

"You love him, right? I know you do."

Of course, yes, so why didn't I just go? Was it *that* important not to run up a balance I couldn't pay off the next month?

"No, what I'm asking you is, do you think he still cares about me?"

"Oh." I could see that hadn't crossed her mind. "Don't you?"

"I don't know what to think. I mean if he really wants this to happen, why is he over there?"

"You could go ask him that."

"Just cross the border and re-enter," I said. "That's what you do here, he says."

"Mm."

"What's keeping that from going on forever?"

"Nothing, I guess. Except him. Or you."

"Maybe he really doesn't need to come back at all. Maybe we just had great sex for a weekend and that's it."

"Come on, you don't really think that."

"I'm scared," I said.

\*

March 19

Dear Evan,

I've thought a lot about this and I really don't want to be putting pressure on you, that's exactly what I don't want this to be between us. But it would really help me if you could tell me when you're coming back. I'm starting to feel like you could just stay there indefinitely and maybe you even want to, I'm afraid to write that down but it's what I feel sometimes, please tell me that's not how it is. Unless it's the truth. I know what we said and I understand why you felt you had to go, but how long does it take is the question I guess. I shouldn't be asking this, I know.

I wrote that much and then I sat for a long time hunched over my computer. Wouldn't it sound too needy and weak, wouldn't it be just plain unfair? He was the one who kept on wanting to be with me, he said, the whole time we were in college, while I just went ahead and forgot about him. No, not forgot. But it didn't stop me from being with someone else – only with Jeff it was never like me and Evan, nothing ever was. Evan had to learn how to live with us not being together. Now it was my turn, and if I loved him didn't I owe him that much, to be as strong as he was? The last thing I wanted was to always be on his back, crowding him, tugging at him and going notice me notice me, that would drive anyone crazy, that would drive him away for sure.

I wish I could talk to you face to face, and everything else, I know how it would be. I remember everything we said and did, I know you do too, it's hard not to have that when I know we could but I love you.

Tam

When he read that message, did he know I was putting on a brave face when I wrote the words "I know you do too"?

\*

March 20  
Dear Tam,

I don't know how to put into words how much this means to me. How much you mean to me. No way on earth do I want to just stay here, without you. If you were here, maybe. The end of this year is as long as I can even imagine without you, it's much too long and I basically hate it. But I am trying to establish something about me, something I need to know that I can't even figure out how to say. It's like asking whether I have what it takes. But don't ask me what "it" is. I wish I knew. I'd tell you if I could. I'm just trying to get to a point where I can feel solid, like okay, I'm competent, I have resources, I can handle it. That's all I want here, really, is to know that and then it's over, I'm done. But to me it's like I can't really ask you to be with me until I'm worth it. Tam, I've loved you ever since we were in the 11<sup>th</sup> grade and I know this isn't going to change. I know that. It's just a fact. In my life, this is for all the marbles. I have to get it right.

Evan

\*

I read that and it filled me with love and frustration, anger and admiration and fear. How could he say he "basically" hated it? What did that mean? And why was he proving something that didn't need to be proved? He already was stronger than he knew, if he could do this at all. This test he was making himself pass was doing things to me he didn't even realize. He said he loved me and I knew he meant it, but maybe for him love was something I barely even recognized, a terrifying thought, and worse, maybe he loved the idea of loving that way more than he loved actually being with me. How could he need that – getting it right, whatever that was – more than physical presence in the same place on the earth? What could love possibly mean if it didn't mean two people together? Was that too simple for him to understand?

\*

In April Emma met Brian. Now she was the one who brought home this guy, show and tell, who was obviously falling in love with her. About time somebody got the picture, I thought. Was he good enough for Emma? I reserved judgment on that. She definitely thought so. On Sundays the two of them would get up late and make a huge breakfast and ask me if I wanted some, but after the first time I found some reason why I had to go out. I was happy for her but I couldn't be in the same little space with that. It was like a remedial lesson: see, this is the way it looks when two people are a couple.

They started dragging me along with them when they went out. I met people I wouldn't have met otherwise. Brian had this friend Dave who I kept seeing when I went out with them, he was a good six inches taller than me and looked a little bit like Ichabod Crane, or as Emma would say, like an alien. But he was a sweet guy who didn't hit on me and I could tell he had some kind of a soul inside. One night in May I went a graduate student party at Brian's apartment, and after I had a few drinks inside me I told Dave about me and Evan. We were standing on the back porch, on the third floor of a triple-decker a lot like where I grew up. I wasn't freezing to death, which is not something to take for granted in Boston in May. The smokers had smoked their most recent butts and gone back in. I leaned on the wooden railing at the end of the porch, in shadow, and Dave perched where the railing met the wall. He listened, which is also not something to take for granted. "So," I said. "You're a guy. You tell me. You're in Istanbul, you've got this girlfriend in Boston, there's some fucking good reason why you don't come home, what is it?"

"Um – I'm out of my fucking mind? I've got this to-die-for girlfriend, what is there to think about? Get on the damn plane."

We leaned on the railing in the darkness. "No flattery, all right?" I said.

"You wanted to know what I really thought," he said.

"Is that it?"

"Yeah."

This to-die-for girlfriend. How I liked the sound of that.

"If you were single," Dave said.

"Don't, okay?"

He was silent for a while. "Okay."

"I really appreciate it," I said.

"Okay," he said again.

I did like Dave, but not that way. That wasn't the problem. The problem was, I could tell that if Dave had been somebody else, I might not have told him to stop there.

Brian and Emma's friends made me part of their circle. They were mostly grad students, most of them had as little money as we did, their apartments, like ours, were improvisational dwellings. They had movie posters on their walls, or Einstein looking goofy, or pictures of bands. Their bookshelves were all full; some of them had stacks of books on the floor, leaning against the walls. They had parties nearly every weekend that were all the same party, the same people, the same music, the same cheap liquor and sometimes someone passed around a joint. Only the address changed, the layout of the messy apartment, the location of the bathroom. I became one of the people who usually came, who knew where the bathroom was. One weekend in June I was at the party, again, and for some reason Emma and Brian weren't there. If they had been, if I had thought they might see me, it would never have happened. I found myself talking to a big guy with a curly beard named Eric, who had no idea there was an Evan in my life, who was funny and friendly and openly attracted to me, and some way I ended up kissing him. I could hardly believe I was actually going to in the instant before I did, but I kissed him and I liked it. A lot. I went home and thought maybe he would forget about it and I would forget about it, but then he kept calling me. And I couldn't hide it from myself: I wanted to say sure, let's hang out. Knowing where it would lead.

A voice inside said that if I loved Evan I would tell him all of it.

He had gotten himself a cell phone that worked in Turkey, but talking to him that way was almost worse than not. There was never a right time. He taught in the evenings; when he went to work, I was eating lunch. Anyway there was no point in calling him when he was on a bus in crawling traffic. When he finished teaching I was still at the office, and I couldn't talk to him there. When I got off work it was midnight for him, and if I could find a place to be alone and collect my thoughts it would have been a good time to talk to him, but I'd be tired then and it would be my turn to deal with rush hour. By the time I got home, he'd be falling asleep. If I called just before I went to bed, I'd wake him up at six or seven in his morning. The best I could do was set my alarm extra-early and hope to reach him in the afternoon when he wasn't already in the middle of something, and then the connection

would be bad anyway, I'd say something to him and after it there would only be a blank.

I couldn't say it over the phone. I sent him an e-mail that said I was starting to really worry about us and what would happen to us if he stayed over there a long time. The coward's way to put it.

June 21

Dear Tam,

Listen, you know how it is. I'm yours whether you want me to be or not. And I know you love me. You told me to remember that and trust that and I do. I know this is hard, but it's not forever, I'm really starting to get somewhere with about a third of my students and I want to see some real progress before I leave here. Accomplish something, then pack up. It's going to work. You'll see. When I get back it'll be like I never left.  
love, Evan

But I didn't know. The words felt empty to me, for the first time they were just words. I couldn't hear him say them, I couldn't tell that they were from the heart the way I always had been able to. What if he didn't mean what he said, what if the real meaning was This girl and I are having a...thing and I don't want to come home while it lasts? For one second I believed he could mean that, and I saw that that second could expand until it took everything away from me; then somehow I pulled myself back into the world I knew. It was like having to restart my heart.

But I couldn't make that second go away.

Eric called me yet again. I told him I couldn't talk to him. I thought he would get off the phone and stop calling, but Eric was about seven years older than me and instead he asked me what was the matter. I said I couldn't tell him. He said he would be happy to listen, really. "Look, Eric," I said. "I shouldn't have kissed you. It was a mistake. I have a boyfriend. I think I have a boyfriend, I haven't seen him in six months. You shouldn't have kissed me but you didn't know and I didn't tell you. I can't talk to you right now. Maybe it's better just to not have anything to do with me."

He said nothing for a few moments. "I don't know if I believe that," he said. I didn't answer. "I assume you have my number, if you ever want to call me." I still didn't say anything, but it was true, of course his number was in my phone. I could have hung up, but I didn't. I waited, he waited. "I don't think I'm ready to give up yet," he said.

I said, "I can't talk now."

"Okay," he said. "Bye."

There are things that are impossible to justify in life. They happen anyway. I had enough to drink one night that it became plausible to pull out my phone and call Eric and say if he really wanted to hear about it, then fine, and start telling him what happened between me and Evan, how it was all my fault, no, it was just as much Evan's fault, it was even Eric's fault for kissing me but how could he have known. Somehow then it made sense that Eric would volunteer to be my designated driver, come meet me and take me home safely, but then, surprise, he asked me if I wanted to come to his place and if I hadn't gotten sick in his bathroom I would have ended up in bed with him. Instead I slept on his couch in my clothes.

I went home and wrote Evan an e-mail :

I almost slept with somebody. I'm sorry. But you have to know. I'm not okay.

Tam.

I clicked on "Send" and dread filled my heart. In Istanbul, it was early on Saturday night. He wouldn't get his e-mail until the next time he went to an internet café, and he'd be out with his friends tonight so he wouldn't see it. Tomorrow, then, at the earliest. And then what? How long would it take for him to know what he wanted to say, and how would he say it...How would I sleep, waiting for the shoe to drop?

At twenty to seven my cell phone went off and before I rolled over and looked at the number I knew it was him and I wasn't ready for this but I never could be.

"Hey Tam." When I heard his voice I was overwhelmingly sad.

"Hey Evan." There was a long, hissing silence.

"What happened?" he said. So there would be no preliminaries.

"I was at a party and I –" I couldn't get it out. "I so don't want to say this."

"Just say it." He sounded exhausted too.

"I kissed this guy."

"What guy?"

It was worse to tell him than I had imagined, by far. "His name is Eric, he goes to the Kennedy School."

"And then what?"

"He kept calling me, I tried to get him to stop but he wouldn't, then I got drunk and I, I called him and...it almost happened. But it didn't, I promise."

There was another silence. "Yet, anyway," Evan said.

"No. It's not like that. I don't care about him, he doesn't matter, I–"

"It matters to me, Tam, do you still love me or not?"

"God, yes."

"Really?"

"Really," I said, but I wasn't sure I would have believed myself.

"You have a weird way of showing it."

"Evan, all this time I've been waiting for you to say when you're coming back, and you never do, I can't keep doing this."

"Wait, what? You can't do what?"

"Are you seeing somebody over there?"

"Hell no, is that what you think?"

"Are you telling me the truth?"

"Fuck, Tam, of course I am, I don't lie to you."

"You know when I told you I needed you over here? I wasn't kidding."

Silence. "I need you too," he said.

There was a longer emptiness. We were going around in circles, the words didn't mean anything. "I don't know what to say."

"Tam, listen." Was he going to tell me now? That he had a girlfriend? "I told you. This is it for me. I mean it. That isn't changing."

"So does that mean you can just slide off to any old corner of the globe and stay there and be perfectly happy without me?" I couldn't help starting to cry, I could hardly get the words out and I wasn't even sure if he understood them.

"No, it doesn't," he said, in a cold angry voice. "So is this how you're going to solve the problem? Sleep with this guy Eric?"

"Fuck you, Evan, I'm not."

"Must be nice to know you can whenever you feel like it."



Selfish little bitch, I thought. Look what you get. "Fuck, Evan, I don't want to do this, I love you, don't you understand?"

"I so don't understand what the hell is going on here."

"No, you really don't," I said and there was no sound at all coming back to me through the phone, the connection was dead. He hung up on me, or did it just quit, let him not have hung up on me...I punched the keys to call him back.

He picked up. More silence, but different. I knew he was listening as warily as I was. I heard him breathe into the phone. "Look. Tam," he said. "Can we just back up a little?"

"I hope so."

"Do you remember who you're talking to? Do you remember what happened between us?"

"Do you? I'm a living person, I'm flesh and blood, I have needs, I would never say this to anybody in the fucking *world* but you, don't you understand that?" I had started crying again, no matter how much I tried not to. "I'm not just some goddamn *idea* of yours."

"I'm guessing these needs are going to be met," he said coldly.

"Oh, *fuck* you."

"True or not true?"

"Evan, you left me and that is not okay."

"You can't deny it, can you? You're going to do it. I can't believe this is happening."

"...neither can I."

Another gap.

"This has suddenly turned into the worst fucking day of my life."

"I don't want it to be this way," I said.

"Then change it," he said.

"Evan –"

"I don't know how you can do this to me," he said, and the line went dead. I stared at the phone as if that would cause it to come to life again.

I ended the call.

Let him take a deep breath and call me back. Let it ring now. Count to ten and then it will ring. To twenty.

Nothing.

I curled on my side, holding the phone, and cried. I tried to hold it in, not to be loud, but I couldn't help it and Emma heard me, she came into my room in her long nightshirt and knelt on the bed, put her hand on my head. I was sobbing and gulping for breath and trying to

apologize for waking her up while she shushed me. She rubbed my back in circles like you do when you're trying to help a child calm down. "God, Tam, I didn't know it was this bad, why didn't you say something?"

I was too ashamed, I thought, but I couldn't get the words out. Too ashamed of being such a fucking loser.

He sent me an e-mail that read:

I would never have believed you could do something like this. I must not have a clue, everything I thought was true must have been delusional. If you can't be trusted, then I know nothing about anything or anyone, and anything can happen.

That was all of it. It wasn't signed.

For two days I tried to write an answer. I told him how he fucked up the best thing either of us would ever have with his ridiculous idea of getting something right that didn't even matter, I told him he didn't love me and didn't know what love was, I told him how much I didn't want any of this to happen but if he was just going to walk away and disappear over the horizon there was nothing else either of us could expect. I told him if he didn't understand this, then some essential part of him must be missing and I felt sorry for whoever was going to fall for him next. The more I wrote these things, the more miserable I felt and I deleted all of them.

I wanted to call him up and tell him I just snapped momentarily, I was temporarily insane and now I was back to the real me, and I would see him in six months and we would be okay, really, I got my act together and there was nothing to worry about. But I knew those words wouldn't come out, or if they did, they wouldn't convince him.

I checked my e-mail twenty times a day, but nothing else came from Evan.

Eric called; I told him I couldn't see him. After all the crap he had put up with from me I almost thought of him as a friend; I told him that, too. Which must be why, just before he went back to his post-doc at Berkeley, I did sleep with him after all.

Emma and Brian were essentially living together, back and forth between our place and his. Every once in a while she would ask me if I'd heard from Evan and I would say no and she wouldn't push it. Brian

was working on his Ph.D. in Economics but he wasn't snotty about it; I would ask him to explain the economic stuff in the newspaper, which turned out to be most everything after talking to him for a while, and he was pretty clear most of the time. I thought he would make a good professor. And Emma would probably work in a museum or a gallery, or get a Ph.D. herself eventually, and they would go to Europe a lot and have this very cultured type of life...I was happy for her and at the same time something about it was not for me. There didn't seem to be any edges in their life, everything was rounded and cushioned.

I was working in the marketing department now and this was definitely not going to be my life, building web pages, cajoling quotations out of the faculty for the viewbook. Keeping the content aligned with the demographics and the messaging system, as the V.P. for Marketing would put it. Looking for ways to be almost creative. Almost was not enough. I was acquiring transferable skills and waiting for a better direction to become clear. Fall semester started. I had not been thrilled with the cultural theory course, but at least it gave my mind something to do. I signed up for an American lit course. When I called my old roommate Steph, she talked about her apartment and her view of Twin Peaks and the very best place in the Mission to eat truly Mexican fish tacos and the cost of living in the city and her search for a better job and usually some guy she went with to some other incredibly cool place that she would also tell me about – Point Reyes, Muir Woods, Mt. Diablo...if I asked her should I move out there, of course she would say yes. Half the people I knew from college had gone there. Eric would be happy to hear from me. Maybe that would be the right idea.

"Would you rather I moved out?" I said to Emma one evening as we were drinking tea at the kitchen table. Brian was at his place writing a paper. "Then you and Brian could have this place to yourselves."

The instant I said it I could see that she was hurt. "Is that what you want?" she said.

"No way, I just thought maybe you might. Actually, I'd hate it. I'd miss you too much." I hadn't realized how much until that moment.

"I'm not married to him," she said.

"Well, not yet. Only because you haven't figured out what color the bridesmaids' dresses are going to be."

"Oh please. You'll probably get married before I do."

"How do you figure that?"

"Because you're not trying to."

"Are you?"

"I don't know," Emma said. "Do you think I should?"

What a question to ask me, of all people. "You look very happy to me right now," I said.

"Ssh. Don't jinx it," Emma said.

On September 11, when everyone saw the towers fall on TV and my imagination could not take it in, when the fighter jets screamed low over the building I worked in and scared me so much I almost dove under my desk, when people were in the halls with gray faces not knowing where to go, I thought of Evan. Where was he, had he seen it yet? If not, he would. Would his students try to talk about it in halting English and would he be able to stand up in front of the class and act like this was just the news of one more day? Someone said Palestinians celebrated in the streets when they heard about it. And Turks? What about the Turks? They were Muslims too. Maybe today Evan should say he was Lebanese, or stay off the streets. I went home and Brian was there, I could see that he and Emma needed the reassurance: you're right here, we're together, you're okay. I called my mom's house, I called Grampa Tom, we said the same things everyone had said all day. In bed I felt the most alone I had felt since my dad died. I needed to know if Evan was okay, and finally I got up and sent him a two-line e-mail asking him to please just let me know he was all right, no nothing about us or the word love, just signed Tam.

For a long time I sat staring at my computer, in a trance of tiredness, as if he would answer any moment, trying to think what time it was for him, probably every American in Istanbul was trying to get online at once, or calling the consulate, looking for their passport, their ticket home. I realized that if I had gotten pregnant when Evan and I were together in January, the baby could have been born that day. That was unimaginable, too. There was no reply to my e-mail and finally I was exhausted enough to lie down and sleep.

In the morning I opened the paper and saw the photographs and started crying, Emma did too, we gave each other a hug before I went to work. During the day there was a message:

People here are very kind. I'm fine. I'm glad you are okay. E.

For days reading the paper made me cry. Everyone's emotions were raw, American flags were everywhere. I felt the tribal feeling: this happened to *us*, they hurt *us*, what do we do now? I talked to people at work I had never spoken to before. In a coffee shop, a guy I knew only

because I bought coffee from him every day told me that two friends of his had died in the attacks, and without hesitating I gave him a hug. I had to.

There was going to be war in Afghanistan. There were maps in the paper every day. The American military wanted to use bases in Turkey. If Evan said he was fine, he was fine. I did not want to think about him, obviously he did not want to think about me. Being single was extra lonely, everyone needed somebody to be next to. Was Evan single? Afghanistan was not right next door to Turkey, but it was in the region and this could not be a good thing, could it, for Americans living there. The helplessness was awful, knowing that they were still digging at Ground Zero, being me was useless to anyone. But people couldn't crawl into their holes and stay there, that would be giving in. Aliveness mattered, aliveness was Fuck You to the terrorists.

I found myself in a long conversation at a bar with a guy named Sean, a graduate student friend of Brian's. His field was international relations and he had a million opinions about what was going on. Then I had another long talk with him another night; the third one led to my going home with him. Having sex with him made me cry and I don't know what he thought, he probably got the entirely wrong idea. It took me a while to recognize that what I was feeling was grief.

I felt a new part of myself appear one night in a club, dancing with flying hair. Nobody noticed right away except me. Then she went out and got an ankle tattoo. She was always up for something; she was never the first to say it was time to go home, she wanted to leave while the party was still fun and go on to another party that was more fun. Unlike me, this other Tam had mastered the trick of appearing to be in charge of her life. It was surprisingly easy, once she got the hang of it, to look like life was her new car and she walked up to it full-grown, got in the driver's seat, and started to drive. I christened her Girlfriend Tam because she had plenty of prospective boyfriends. She figured out what they were waiting to be dazzled by: the whole point, in a way, was to keep them from thinking that she was anything but a magic being who appeared in the world a young woman in her twenties. It should never cross their minds that she had once been a child. If she ever had parents and depended on them to make her a world, that was something to be mentioned only in passing. Just enough to establish that like everyone, she had a past and a family but it was nothing any guy needed to bother his head or heart about. The truth was, Girlfriend Tam gave very little of herself but maybe the guys who were attracted to her didn't know any better or expect any more. I think Emma was surprised and

disappointed when Girlfriend Tam began showing up on a regular basis, but she was tactful about it.

These were the rules of dating Girlfriend Tam:

Pay her the attention she deserves, know what you want and know what you want is her.

Don't be all weaseling around saying you'll call. Just fucking call. Or don't. Make up your mind.

Don't play games, if you cheat on her you're gone. There are no second chances.

Always use protection.

She might sleep over at your place, but you are not invited to sleep over at hers.

Treat her with respect and be grateful to have her, because she won't be with you forever. She will be momentarily flattered if you say you love her, but she doesn't plan to fall in love with you.

Enjoy her now.

Except the truth was that Girlfriend Tam never actually believed she was so special.

Girlfriend Tam never mentioned Evan; she didn't know Evan and Evan, thank God, didn't know her.

War began in Afghanistan. An American was caught fighting for the Taliban. Prisoners were put in cages at Guantanamo Bay. Unknown names suddenly mattered. Places impossible to picture. "A lawless mountainous region on the border with Pakistan." Who could picture that, or any of it? Who was driving the car now? Not me, not any of us. We were all in the back seat and it was accelerating, destination unknown, destination secret, the only thing I knew was I didn't want to go there and nobody was giving me a choice.

## PART III

### W I L L

Who am I to have regrets? I got what I wanted. I could also say, what I wanted got me. It's not that I'm sorry I found Susa again and ended up having this be my life and my family. I wouldn't have it any other way, and I can't imagine any other, now. This seems like the only possible outcome.

It's peculiar, though. It's like life swallowed me up. For a good while I was the outsider in Susa's family. Tam wasn't crazy about having me suddenly a part of their lives, I knew that. But then while I wasn't looking I became like the furniture, or a public utility. Their Will. A guy who surfaced in their lives one day, out of the confusion of life going on, at random as far as they were concerned, but nevertheless theirs. Oh, Will will take care of that. Will can drop you off there. Ask Will to fix that, he knows how. Even Tam would say those things sometimes. It isn't that I mind this, I like being able to do these things, I like being relied upon, I want Tam and Terry to make use of me in the affectionately selfish way children make use of their parents. The way Amy and Jocie do. It's just that I *am* this now, if that makes any sense. If some social scientist were to ask me, What are you? I'd say I am Amy and Jocelyn's dad, Susa's partner, Terry's more-or-less stepfather, Tam's...it would be hard to find words for that. I wouldn't tell the whole truth. Follow-up question: But you, what are *you*? And I would say, Didn't I just tell you?

This is the interesting part. Before Susa and I got back together I could only describe myself as unhappy. Lonely, disappointed in what my life had become, missing Amy and Jocelyn too much of the time, missing life itself, it seemed to me. There was nothing so terrific about

that. But I was me. The loneliness and disappointment were sharp and definite, and their sharpness told me there was such a thing as me. Somebody had to be there to have this dream which so plainly had not come to pass, there was somebody who held onto a conviction that life could and should be something greater and more to the point than this. Somebody who had certain imaginings about the possibility of love and intimacy. Then I found that Susa was single again and all that changed. It's not that I am anything but grateful for this life. But I'm lost in the pattern of it. I can point to everyone in it but myself.

Susa and I have begun to think about finally selling our two houses and buying one. All this time there have been good reasons why we had two places, Susa's in North Cambridge and mine in Jamaica Plain. One of them was that Susa didn't want to move Terry out of the Cambridge schools, and I understand that. Another was that it took a long time for the kids to buy into being together. I can't say I blame them. It was never their choice. I think Amy was the last to accept it, if she has. But we've gotten to the point where we can have Thanksgiving together and not feel that it's a sad parody of family life. Sometimes I still feel that Amy is almost left out when the four kids are together, but now I think it's the way she wants it.

At any rate I kept the house in J.P. But now Tam's grown up, Amy and Jocie are both in college and Amy is about to graduate. In a year, Terry will graduate from high school and as Susa says, it will be our turn. This is assuming we have a couple of nickels left after paying all this tuition. But both her place and mine have appreciated in value enormously, and if we sell them both we should be able to buy one and have something left over to get Terry through school with. We might even get married. Unless the world gets still more screwed up and all bets are off.

Susa has been talking for years about cleaning out the basement and going through everything that is stuck away here and there throughout her place, in what seems to be lifetime storage. Sometimes she gets up a head of steam when she's straightening and organizing and says she's going to tackle all the old boxes, but in the end she never has, probably because I've never wanted to help. I have my own basement to go through and sort out, and the thought of doing them both is overwhelming, so somehow that means we never start on one. But now that we're talking about selling there's no choice. We certainly aren't going to move every bit of the accumulated crap of the last thirty



years so we can keep it in some other house's attic and basement. I admit I have a hard time throwing anything away, but I'm not going to carry it to that extreme.

So one day, Susa finally did persuade me to go through some old boxes gathering mildew and the peculiarly adhesive grime of basements, a substance that seems to be composed of spiderwebs, plaster dust, and mud. In one of them I found her husband's old medical books and notebooks. I wasn't surprised she had found them impossible to throw away, and I had no idea what she would want to do with them now. He was hers, theirs, and I was in no position to make any decisions about something of his.

I pulled out a notebook and opened it out of curiosity. Who wouldn't be curious, in my situation? It was a "Composition Book" with a black-and-white marbled cover, warped with age and faintly mildewed. Its faded price tag said \$1.19. In the square on the cover where the owner was supposed to put his name or the subject, there was "Dr. David Aller" and the number 23. David's handwriting, which I had seen before, was dark and confident, legible even though the notes looked written quickly. I idly turned pages. I have a few narrow slices of medical knowledge related to what my equipment can do; I know how not to sound ignorant in a conversation with a doctor, but that's it. I knew I wouldn't understand if I tried to study his notes. Diagrams – blobs connected by arrows: cells interacting, exchanging ions perhaps. Chemical notations. The sort of thing I don't have a clue about, really. But seeing it made him more real to me than he'd been in a long time.

Then I turned a page and it was in a different color ink. Written at a different time, I thought. His handwriting looked subtly different.

It said:

*It's like this: You're driving down the road, you come around a curve and there isn't even one of those useless signs that say WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK. Rocks fall before you know it, they hit your car, they land in front of you and behind you, you aren't going any farther. You aren't cruising around the next bend in the road like you always have. With your baggage in the trunk.*

*You can't hang around or a rock might fall on you. You have to get out and walk, and carry what you can, or have to. Maybe you never get around the bend, but you can't go back either. Which way, then? You can either climb up the side the rocks fell from – proven to be*

*dangerous already – or choose the other side of the road and go down.  
What's down there? You can't see.*

*Does everybody have this problem being this age?*

Holy shit, I thought. I glanced at the next page, I riffled through the rest of the notebook, and there seemed to be more of this stuff that wasn't biology or chemistry. Talk about real. It almost scared me. Was I allowed to read this?

Those words, coming from Susa's husband, were thrilling and humiliating. I thought, Hell yes, I've had that problem. I instantly recognized the feeling of being fifty years old. Or approaching it, because David was forty-nine when he died. But I hadn't been able to put words to that feeling until David found them for me. So was I, all along, just a version of him? It made sense that Susa would pick me for the same reasons she picked him (I had no doubt she had done the choosing). She had a husband, and a backup husband...good planning on her part. He was the starter, and I came in off the bench when needed. But the thrilling part was that what he wrote seemed to speak directly to me. All this time he had belonged to everyone in Susa's house but me, and suddenly I was included and more than included. Tam and Susa were women and Terry was a teenager; I knew there were things David could only share with me. I sat down on a box and turned pages. Susa's name caught my eye.

*The human condition is one of aloneness. I don't know why it is slightly comforting to put these words on paper. Writing this down does not change it, and no one will read the words. No one should. They would only make Susannah unhappy, and they certainly wouldn't do Tammy or Terry any good. Primum non nocere. The only acceptable reader would be someone outside our family, and why would they care? When this is full I'll have to dispose of it, somewhere safe. Demonstrably, this is a pointless and dangerous activity; nevertheless I continue.*

*The other day I was waited on at a store by a woman who was dressed in a way that told me a) she knows she is very attractive and b) she wants men, or at least one man, to see it too. She was fully present. She wasn't just a clerk, she was a woman. She wasn't afraid to look me in the eye. I felt the possibility, which I am not used to feeling. Though I'm sure I wasn't the man she meant to attract. No rings on her fingers.*

*If I were single I would have left wondering how I could see her again, maybe I would even have gone back to ask her that.*

*If I were single now, I don't know what would follow. I know too much now about what comes later. The fantasy cancels itself out before anything happens. Is there any returning to the simple version of that dream? I'm not sure it's even a good idea.*

*Maybe when S. met the guy, she gave him the message that same way.*

When S. met the guy.

When S. met the guy...my thoughts raced ahead. It fell into place: she had an affair (I knew, if anyone knew, that she could), David found out...everything made sense. And who was this guy? I felt weirdly jealous of this nameless, faceless man. If she was going to have an affair, why didn't she have it with me?

When was all this, it couldn't have been long before he died, but years ago now. Nine years since he died. I was older now than David lived to be. Maybe ten or eleven years ago, S. met the guy.

But I was the lucky one, to be still alive, to be still trying to understand. Nothing turns out the way we expect, but that wasn't the point. I wondered if it would be unkind to show the notebook to Susa, or more unkind not to. Rummaging among the papers of the dead. It couldn't hurt me, but what about her?

I kept reading. A long page about desire, very analytical. Maybe when you are capable of thinking about desire, you don't have desire. Just the memory of it.

*I don't know what to make of any of this. Also, after this many years I don't know why it should matter. We were young, etc. It's not as though I never found anybody else attractive. People will do what they feel they have to do. I never felt I absolutely had to. Obviously she did.*

*Why did she tell me? She kept it a secret this long. Wanted to be closer to me, she said. That may have been a mistake. Maybe when two people contract to stay together for the rest of their lives there must be unmentionables. She said she felt I was slipping away from her, which I didn't notice at the time. Now I do.*

No, I thought. I can't show her this.

Wait. She kept it a secret this long, David said. We were young, he said.

Oh God damn it. Why didn't she tell me?

*Can love of the romantic kind be mentioned in the same breath as work and being a parent? Admittedly what I am working on seems far-fetched to some people I respect, and it may never pan out. But I never tire of it, though I am tired of writing grant proposals. The more we learn about the exact mechanism of the transfer of plasmids, the greater our chances of finding a way to disrupt it. If it is not too basic a process to be interrupted without also killing the living system in which the pathogen exists. Slowing the spread of drug resistance among infectious organisms is admittedly no cure, but buying time is worth almost whatever it takes. The stakes couldn't be higher. Vancomycin-resistant staph infections would be essentially 100% fatal. But maybe there is no such possibility as the one I imagine, or maybe I am not the one who will ever find it.*

*On the other hand, I am incapable of letting it go. I must know if there is anything to this idea or not before I do that.*

Fine, well and good, he didn't fix antibiotic resistance and nobody else has either, but what about Susa and the affair?

*Some men invest their deepest hopes in women through the medium of desire. I would like to think some women still do the same toward men, but maybe they once did and are now deciding not to.*

*The aloneness is a powerful fact.*

*It was before we became parents, of course. Yet what made her do it? Did she love him?*

God damn it. She told him about us. All those years later, she told him about us, what the hell did she go and do that for? There was more, but I closed the notebook. Why didn't she tell me this happened?

There must be unmentionables, David said. He was right about that. Evidently there were some between me and Susa: she couldn't admit to me she spilled the beans. Why not? She's always known that I would accept pretty much whatever she does. More than I should, maybe, but that's the way it is. But she probably couldn't stand to admit she fucked up this way. Or it was plain old guilt. Did he die while they were in the middle of having trouble about this? That would be the worst. Until I read the notebook I had thought that David's death was

something we had dealt with and finished with between us. But now I saw that it still wasn't over.

I sat and tried to puzzle out how it must have gone. He had his troubles, but he kept them inside. He kept quiet, but she could feel something was wrong. No doubt she read his mind at least as well as she reads mine.

Where are you if you can't say how it really is to the person you're with? Lost. Stuck. You aren't where you think you are. David seemed profoundly discouraged. Maybe it was absurd, but I felt I owed it to him to complete the saying. That was why I handed the notebook to Susa later that night, even though by then I had read the rest.

T O M

I knew that one day soon I was going to have to give up and leave my house. Or just leave the world, period. I knew I was too old to take care of the place, but I didn't want to admit it to anyone for fear they'd put me in one of those holding pens where people sit around watching "The Price Is Right" while they wait to die. Susannah wouldn't have wanted to do that to me, but I knew they didn't want me coming to live with them. I knew what they had in mind and it wasn't me living on the first floor of whatever house they were going to buy, which was where I'd inevitably be stuck, given the state of my knees. They definitely didn't want an in-law apartment where their living and dining room should be. They wanted to retire after Terry and Jocelyn finally got through college and they were finally finished paying tuitions, and have gin and tonics on the patio with nobody bothering them. They wanted to go down the Cape whenever they felt like it and not worry about whether I was going to fall down, break my hip, and be stuck on the floor to rot till they came back.

I seemed to be getting older faster all the time. All I had to do was turn my head too suddenly, or even look up at the ceiling sometimes, and I got dizzy. I couldn't climb on a chair and replace a light bulb. I knew I had a problem when I couldn't replace a damn light bulb. There were days when I wanted to say the hell with it, walk out the front door, throw the key in the bushes and keep going. But I didn't know where I'd go, and I probably couldn't walk far enough to get out of sight of the house. I'd be like a little kid who runs away to the back yard. Cute when a little kid does it, pathetic in an old bastard like me.

The trouble was, how would I ever know when it was time to call it a day? And I knew that by the time it was time – even assuming I

had a plan for how to make my exit – I could easily be too out of it to pull it off. Forget which bottle of pills to take, or even worse, not be able to get the damn cap off. I didn't have the bottle of pills anyway. And didn't know if I could use it, if I did.

Sometimes I got short of breath and had barely enough strength to get up out of a chair. I felt light-headed once in a while for no good reason. I had one attack of dizziness that lasted half a day. I didn't try to move and that way I was able to wait it out. That was exactly the kind of thing I didn't tell Susannah. She knew I hated doctors, but she wouldn't have asked, she'd have made me go.

I couldn't understand why Susannah never looked any older. She was thinking about retiring and to me she looked about forty-five. Maybe it was all that exercise she got teaching dance and working with little kids, or maybe it was just being around kids, period. I could have used more time around some little kids in my life. Tam was old enough to have a child, but that didn't appear to be on the cards. It was evident that something, she didn't say what, had gone wrong between her and that guy Evan, because there were other men in her life. But never the right one. Whenever she said she was dating some guy, after two sentences I could tell it wasn't going anywhere. Tammy wasn't that good at hiding things and I don't think she tried to, at least not from me. Who the hell was I going to tell? I wasn't going to call up the boyfriend and tell him not to get his hopes up too high. I knew most men weren't good enough for her, but I'm sure they didn't. When she was in college, the first time she brought a boyfriend home, next to her he seemed like he was still in junior high. Did he know it? Of course not. He thought he was hot shit. That was a problem a lot of young men seemed to have. The only hot-shit thing I could see about that one was, he was going out with her.

So I was biased. That was my prerogative, she was my granddaughter. I wouldn't have minded a bit, though, if she'd been able to hurry up and find Mr. Right. She was old enough, it wasn't too soon. "Marry in haste and repent at leisure." People seemed to know better than that finally, they were waiting longer and longer. Trying not to make the same mistakes they saw their elders make. At least people didn't have to drag a relationship on and on just because they slept with somebody.

Susannah came out from time to time to look around and get disgusted at the way I lived. She thought I didn't notice her sniffing

things, but I did. She believed I was going to die from eating moldy food that had been sitting in my fridge too long, to which I could only say, I tried that and it didn't work. If she had understood how difficult it was for me to prepare food, she would have known why I didn't throw cooked food away. If it was a little off, that wasn't going to bother me. Nothing tasted like much anyhow.

For a long time she nagged me to get somebody to come in and clean. I told her ten times I didn't want somebody I didn't know barging into my house. One day she lectured me about my bathroom and then to top it off, she got the cleaning supplies from the kitchen and started scrubbing. It was humiliating. I knew I sometimes missed when I urinated, but for Christ's sake, I did not want Susannah cleaning it up. It was my bathroom, I could stand it. There was another one upstairs for people who couldn't. I went in another room and tried to pretend it wasn't happening, but it didn't work. I could hear her sloshing water into the toilet, and so forth, talking to herself in disapproving tones. Luckily I couldn't make out the words.

Finally she came out and said, "All right, that is somewhat less barbaric."

I said thank you, but I couldn't look at her.

"Something needs to be done about this," she said in a way that tolerated no contradiction. Then she went and hired this person, Claudia, without telling me. I almost bit her head off the first time she showed up and told me what she was there for, which was not very conscionable. But Claudia was pretty tough and she pretended it never happened. Actually, though I hated to admit it, I started looking forward to her days. She came every two weeks and while she cleaned she talked. It beat the crap out of TV.

Some January weekend Susannah showed up, looking tired and on edge. We had a little chit-chat that neither of us was very interested in and then she said "I have to tell you something," a statement that I've never known to preface anything I wanted to hear. I sat and waited, not having a choice. "Remember I told you how Will and I got together, originally, I mean when David and I were first married?"

"I do remember a few things, even now, yes."

"Tom, really, that wasn't what I meant."

"It's what I meant," I said. Then I thought nobody ever gives you any points for being a grouch.

"All right. Please. Anyway. I didn't tell David about me and Will. Not when it happened. But I told him later. Not that long before



he died." Neither of us liked to say that kind of thing plainly, but what were we going to do? "I only told him because I wanted to be closer to him. I know that sounds backwards. But I mean it was a long time after and I never looked at anybody else, I just wanted him to know it because it was the truth about me. I loved him, you know that."

She wiped at her eye and I was glad she still missed him. I waited for her to open her pocketbook and take out a tissue. "How'd he take it?" I said.

She shook her head. "I shouldn't have brought it up. Anyway. I'm telling you this for a reason." She reached into her bag again and pulled out an old notebook. "Will found this," she said, handing it to me. "I've thought a lot about this. It's not easy stuff, it's very personal, but it was his. I think you should have it."

\*

I had to study the notebook under a strong light, but I could read it. It didn't take me long to find the part that made Susannah give it to me. I read through the whole thing in one sitting. I couldn't stop, even though at times I wished I could close it for an hour or a day and just think.

*The show must go on. For whom? Essentially everybody. Duty calls. Some days are better, some worse, but why compare? What keeps the human race going is, we can't stop needing what we need, we can't stop trying to get it. We know it probably isn't possible, but we're just dumb enough, or smart enough, to try. To give up would be the worst of all. Maybe the worst must happen in the end, but what about until then?*

*Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be. How much more obvious can self-deception get? Whistling past the graveyard.*

*Maybe self-deception is the best approach. We're not going past the graveyard, we're going to it.*

Did he have some sort of premonition? I never believed in those things, but it was hard to ignore what was right in front of my face.

*I seek more than simply a better accommodation to living with disappointment.*

That stopped me for a long time. It was terrible that my son felt he had to write that not long before he died. I understood exactly how it felt. So much that I did not know, would never know. I thought that except for being cut short, his life was what a life should be. But maybe it wasn't. I didn't want to believe that.

*Hope is the key. The gap in the horizon, the one degree out of 360 that is different. The hitherto undetected pathway. Possibly hope comes from mystery, arises because some things cannot be known.*

*I'm painted into a corner. And when you are painted into a corner, the only way to get out is to make a huge mess. Footprints all across the nicely painted floor.*

All this because Susannah told him about the affair? That didn't seem like enough of a reason, there had to be something more.

*I will never stop being Tam and Terry's dad even when they grow up and have their own lives, what's between us is absolute, nothing can change it. I wish I needed nothing else at this point. It would be a favor to everyone if that were true. I'm sick of being a self that has unfulfilled expectations. I have to ask what good it is doing anyone. What could be adaptive, helpful to the organism, in possessing this attribute? Arguably, nothing. If true, what follows? This anomalous trait – the capacity to expect of life, or of others, what they cannot give – must be on evolution's To Do list, yet to be ironed out.*

*It's ridiculous that I am complaining. I am better off than most people on earth and most people who have ever lived.*

*Some things can't be said without humiliating yourself, yet they need to be said.*

I recognized so clearly the way that he thought. He was hard on himself. Tough-minded. He pressed the questions one step further even though he knew the territory was uninviting. I admired him. I missed him. I would never have imagined him saying what he was saying.

*Dreamed I was pushing a hospital laundry cart full of water down a city street. The city was theoretically Boston. It was hard work pushing, the cart was heavy, typical legs-in-cement sensation. There was water on the street as well, but not deep, it was not the reason I was having so much trouble. Twice this water in the street deepened and began to flow, carrying me and the cart along with it, so that pushing it*

*became effortless. After the second time it stopped, I wanted it to continue, I talked with an unidentified person in shadow who said it happened from time to time but there was no way of knowing when it would happen next.*

*There is something ironic about wheeling water. Why not just pour it?*

*Could the motive have come down to desire? That is definitely not enough of a reason, but nothing happens without it, everyone knows that. Desire is necessary but not sufficient.*

*Desire leaves too much unaccounted for. It doesn't explain why men do not desire all women equally and vice versa. If this were only about reproduction, then most individuals of the opposite sex and of reproductive age should be equally desired. Why not the vast majority, leaving out only those in whom one detects some sort of unfitness? Some probability of producing a child that will not thrive?*

*One could go on adducing explanations: hormones, pheromones, psychology. Mother and father, projection, neurosis, needs rooted in one's history, attaching themselves to an available object with the right, let's call them, receptors.*

*Is that an accurate picture?*

I thought, nothing could be more David than this.

*If it is, then most of what's said about love is an elaborate con job, and a great deal too much has been said. For this to be the case, human beings must have been systematically hoodwinking themselves on this subject over a period of centuries. If so, did they do it knowingly? No. It's impossible to imagine that while Shakespeare was writing Romeo and Juliet he was thinking "I'm really putting one over on those suckers." He meant what he was saying. If done unknowingly, how could the same lies have been told so consistently over so much time? That requires positing some sort of invisible controlling force, which seems to be a popular point of view right now. Nonetheless, it is muddy thinking and won't bear careful examination. The hypothesis collapses under its own weight.*

*That, in turn, suggests there is such a thing as love, over and above, or different from, all other facts which may be true about human psychology and physiology.*

*I am still no closer to saying what it is.*

*Maybe love is irrelevant after a certain point in life. Or at least overrated.*

What a rotten place for him to be in when he died. First I was furious at Susannah, then I thought how she must have felt reading it. It was a punishment without his having meant it that way. And maybe she didn't even deserve one, maybe he would have gone through this at his age regardless.

*Again – after this many years, after Tam and Terry, what if she did love him? It didn't seem to me that our life together turned out to be missing anything. Unless I simply failed to notice. And now, if things are missing, I chalk it up to life itself.*

*The note in my locker:*

*I want you to know so you don't have to guess. I don't want to take a chance on you guessing wrong. I'm not taken. Are you?*

*Those were the exact words. I didn't keep the note and it wasn't signed anyway, but I knew it came from her and I wasn't about to forget what it said.*

*She was standing beside me and the students went out of the room. We were alone for thirty seconds. The patient was there but sedated. Without preamble I said to her, I'm married. Without even how are you. That was what I said instead of how are you. Of course she knew already, I wore a ring.*

*She said That wasn't what I asked.*

*She has a man, I said.*

*You know that? Did she tell you that?*

*No, but I think maybe she tried to. There are reasons why I think I'm right.*

*Are you going to tell her about this?*

*Nothing's happened.*

*But if it does.*

*She hasn't told me.*

*But I know you. You're too honorable not to tell, aren't you?*

*I don't know.*

*Medicine is exhausting. Especially at that point in your career. There's too much stress. You feel no one outside the profession knows*

*what you do, no one understands it or visualizes it accurately. You know where the boundaries are with patients and why they are there. But with an equal, a colleague, someone with whom you're on the same team that mucks through the same muck together, there could be intimacy if you were awake, if you had more than thirty seconds. There are no secrets about so much that's human, everything about the body and death is out in the open, everything about your own strength and weakness, determination, self-doubt, skill, failure, you share all that, which is more than you share with almost anyone. When you're beyond tired, how do you censor, how do you not just act? Or maybe you're too tired to do anything but collapse. Which is it? Does the exhaustion prevent you from doing what you shouldn't, or does it let you? Does anybody understand that just plain tiredness is more of a factor sometimes than what you think you believe? Does anybody know that the main thing that makes people behave properly is enough sleep? The parents of newborns know, and people in certain professions, like this one. And people fighting wars. Otherwise I doubt that people find out how tenuous the boundaries are. Or they do and then they forget.*

*When she tried to tell you, what did she say?  
I can't talk to you about my wife, I said (that was a mistake).*

*I felt something, I don't know what it was. It wasn't that Susannah didn't want me to make love to her. She did. Something was different, but then, things change. I didn't expect everything to stay exactly the same between us. Nothing ever does. So it could have been just us.*

*Some days that one seemed meant for me. I know she thought she was. That is a strange concept, but at the time it wasn't a concept, it was an almost irresistible feeling. People are not for other people's use or satisfaction, no matter what we may think sometimes. People are not here to make other people happier, even when they'd like to be. That is a distressing fact, otherwise known as adulthood.*

*Life is compromise.*

*What did she want from me?  
She wanted me to want her, I know that.*

*I should never have gone to her place. I didn't know she was going to pull her sweater off over her head as I stood there by the door. Don't go yet, she said.*

*Please, I said. I wanted to touch her and I was afraid of everything that would follow when I got home, if I did.*

*She was watching me half-naked and half-smiling. What could she have been thinking? Maybe that by putting my hand on the doorknob behind me, and turning it, I was admitting how much power she had. She came to the door to close it, without covering herself. Anybody could have seen. She didn't care. She terrified me sometimes.*

*Sometimes I think what she wanted was for me to break her heart.*

*Who knows what is in somebody else's?*

*She wanted a kind of transcendence, maybe an impossible kind. Maybe there is only the impossible kind. It seemed she would do anything for that. But would I, that was the question. Would I give up a way of life, would I give up honor, respect? Would I be willing to give up Susannah? Maybe she would be willing to give me up, I couldn't tell. Maybe our marriage was not what it seemed, maybe it was not marriage after all.*

*I think I understand better now what she wanted. For her it took the form of desiring a lover. For me, now, not that form so much as the desire for knowledge no one has. Now I think the same longing takes multiple forms that look completely different but are not. I very much doubt whether anyone can fulfill it. This explains why religions continue to exist. Two possibilities: either people recognize the longing and the emptiness as their own, or they don't. I think the ones who don't are worse off, but maybe not. When do we tear off the disguise and start to live? We don't. I feel that I can see all the way to the end of life and know, not guess at, not fear, but know the inevitable limitations. To be young was to hold an unspoken almost violent conviction that I would transcend them. To have lost that conviction, to be convinced that what I imagined will not happen and what's worse, probably never could have happened – is to be old or, at any rate, definitively not young.*

That was the last page of his writing. Oh my, I thought. Oh my oh fuck. What the fuck now.

I went in the pantry and found a bottle of wine I had been keeping for visitors, opened it and poured what I knew was too much for me.

I could see why Susannah felt it would have been wrong to keep it from me, but I wished she had. It hurt too much. No. The opposite. I wouldn't have given up for anything the chance to be alone with him one more time. Especially in that way, so close to him, a way we never were in life.

This woman in his life – definitely another doctor, probably a resident, like him at the time. And did he have an affair with her, or not? I couldn't tell. Maybe whether he slept with her didn't matter. No doubt this was bothering Susannah a lot. Taste of her own medicine, of course.

So much fucking sadness in life. He was one of the luckiest men I knew of, or so I thought, and look at this, even the troubles of lucky people hurt. Well, I knew that. But not about him.

So goddamn old and useless, what could I do about this? Nobody could do anything about it, but what the hell could I do *with* such knowledge about him? And not just him but them. My son, my daughter-in-law, the generation that succeeded me, the parents of my beloved grandchildren...I already knew perfectly well that life was messy and disappointing, there was nothing new here. Absolutely untrue. Everything seemed altered at the root. If he had lost his hope, so then, it seemed, years later in reading this I too had lost some hope I didn't even know I had.

I drank the wine, I went to bed, I had to get up to urinate of course, then I couldn't sleep. Pretty much standard procedure, except for the wine. I sat staring out at the dark. It was a cloudy night and there were not many lights visible, mostly just a faint glow reflecting off the clouds from Dogpatch over the hill. I kept thinking about hopes, my hope, investing hope in women through the medium of desire. Yes, I definitely did that once upon a time. More than once. Did DNA mean that David had to live some version of my experience? Surely not, but what he wrote there sounded more than familiar. One plunged ahead, or not. In retrospect, to plunge was the better choice, blindly made though it was. Somehow recklessness was greater wisdom than caution. Was that right? Maybe not. I couldn't make life prove anything that sounded like an answer. Regrets certainly were no answer to anything. Continuing to live was not an idea, it was

continuing to live. But since I would soon stop continuing...It still didn't mean that all this would add up to something. No pithy last words. Disappointing those assembled to see me off, no doubt.

God damn it, I thought, why did David have to die before me?

I have lived too long.

One thing I knew I must never allow myself to do was to start feeling sorry for myself. And I could see I had started. I couldn't go down that road, there was no end to it.

David was so David in that notebook. Trying to figure everything out his way, even though anybody else would have known it was stuff that wouldn't figure. He had great confidence, but I suppose at the time he didn't know it. He always believed, deep down, that he could understand everything if he tried hard enough, and God knows he worked hard. Susannah teased him about being so rational, but she loved that about him, too.

I kept trying to remember if David ever dropped any hints about having such a hard time. If he did, they would have been about two words long. It was exactly the kind of thing he didn't like to talk about. Still, I thought I remembered him bringing up something about how his mother and I split up. When was that? It would have surprised the hell out of me if he was thinking about getting a divorce. That would have been the last thing he'd willingly do. And as for Susannah, I knew how she felt when he died. She couldn't have faked that. If they were having trouble right around then, I had to believe that only made it harder for her afterwards.

Strange to think of my son with this woman I never met, who was not Susannah. Either falling in love with her, or almost falling, I couldn't tell. To think of him and Susannah both on the brink, how it all could have come apart, and then there never would have been a Tam or a Terry, maybe never children at all – that seemed impossible, as though life could only have worked out the way it did. Not true, there were real choices. Damn few left in my life. Maybe there were never that many that really made a difference, but the ones that did changed everything. David made his choice and Susannah hers, they chose each other and everything followed from that. Everything seeming so solid, like a granite curbstone, immovable except by heavy equipment, or in this case, death. Solid followed from the most ephemeral, certainty from the greatest doubt. Stability from the most unstable. Why so upsetting, then, to remember where it came from? Those were things we could not talk about. Maybe fear was still lurking there, maybe resentment, anger. Fear without a doubt. No one



likes to admit to fear, but I learned not to trust people who don't have any. When that woman scared David, it sounded like that was very good judgment. But that was going in circles, back to caution and all that didn't work about it. The question was when to trust your fear and when not, the question was always choice, staring you in the face and no one to help you make it. No one could. If you did not choose, by hesitating you chose the worst of all: too late. Those words I hated more than any others.

I woke up stiff and aching and found that I had fallen asleep in my chair. That, too, was typical. It was still dark. With considerable difficulty I made my way to the bathroom and then back to bed.

## S U S A N N A H

I knew David and I weren't in a good place as a couple when he died. It tormented me then and it tormented me again when I read what he wrote. I didn't know how unfinished things really were between us. But at least now I knew some of what was bothering him was just life itself, and I couldn't have done anything about that. Contrary to what David thought, his notebook did no harm to me. It didn't forgive me, but it didn't blame me either; it asked questions that no one could answer. It hurt like hell, but after a while, I think reading it helped me in a way, if anything could.

When I read the notebook, I fell in love all over again with David's devotion to finding things out, especially the hardest possible things, the impossible things. When he tried to explain love and desire, right there in front of me was his faith that he should be able to think his way to the bottom of anything, or that someone must be able to even if he couldn't. That quality always made me want to take care of him.

He always knew he couldn't think his way to the center of me; if he hadn't known that, I wouldn't have been able to love him.

One question he asked I could answer: did I love Will? Yes. And he loved me. It was such an unfair deal that he got – no lover, no daughter, and to top it off, divorce. One man got marriage the way it should be, and one got it the way it shouldn't. I was responsible for that, in the end. Some things cannot be put to rights. Of course I didn't know that divorce would be the eventual outcome for Will, but knowing him I might have guessed.

What got David into a funk in the first place turned out to have had nothing to do with me, and if I had known that, I might have kept my mouth shut. Obviously I was pretty stupid to tell him about me and Will. I just wanted him to know that there was absolutely nothing hidden between us, I thought that would help him but it didn't work. It made him go back over whatever happened with that doctor – or didn't happen – and that only made him feel worse. Why didn't he just have her when she wanted him that much and was willing to go that far to let him know it, why didn't he have five-star sex with her and let himself enjoy it? Because he was David and ashamed of how he felt. Maybe if he had thought he deserved his doctor-lover...but David was not born to think that way.

Even if he had let himself have her, the aloneness that made him so unhappy would still have been there later on in life. He sounded as if he suddenly noticed it, in his late forties, and it surprised him. As if he had never felt it before, which is hard to understand, but maybe that was just how single-minded and focused he was. He had us, he had his work, and he didn't need anything else, until one day he did.

Or did he sleep with her, was it symmetrical after all? It was only my assumption that he really was too honorable and therefore he didn't. I couldn't believe that he would have; if he had slept with her, it would probably have meant he had decided we were going to separate.

The truth was, I saw when I read the notebook, we *were* separating. We came closer than I realized. Tam was what people call a divorce baby, except the opposite because it worked and we stayed together. She was our marriage baby. Mine and David's – or she would have been mine and Will's. What a choice to have to make. I was sleeping with two men, I was pregnant, this meant I would be married to one of them, which would it be? I loved them both. Not the same way, but it made no sense to compare.

I wanted them both and one cannot have a life like that, except, in fact, I did. It was so definitely not what a woman should want, much less have. Supposedly. But it felt exactly right for me, until I got pregnant with Tam. I look so average now, mother of two, working, going back to school, rushing from task to task, I am virtually the average American woman of my class and age, even being with Will

but not married to him is completely unexceptional these days. No one would look at me and imagine that was how it once was.

When I was young I didn't want anyone's advice. I had no intention of conforming to what others thought I should want, or should be. Let them know nothing, let them think nothing, just let me live, was that too much to ask? So I could only ask myself the hard question: which one, Will or David, I was more willing to give up. Or if not willing, able. And if not able, I still knew I had to. What was perfect for me could never have worked for a child.

I could have chosen Will. It would have been harder, of course. No, that's not even true. If I had chosen Will the difficulties would have been mine to go through; I chose David, so the mess was Will's. In all unfairness, he paid the price for my staying married to David. After the choice was made it became the inevitable. For a long time it seemed pointless to think about what if, but the notebook made me do that again.

I knew Will, too, was still thinking about it, still digesting it. He finally actually knew David, in an intimate way – knew things about David that even I hadn't known before. Now he understood better the man I married. Will's a romantic, not a scientist, but I knew he would think about this every bit as long and determinedly as David did.

If David had lived, who knows – they might have become friends. How incredibly peculiar *that* would have been.

I don't feel as though I've done anything to deserve to have so many choices in life. I have just had them. Tam probably thinks I'm much too privileged, too damn entitled. Maybe Will does too. Most people seem to feel life happens to them – Will certainly does – and they live that way, they accept that they have to live that way. What else did the notebook say but that life happened to David and he had to accept it no matter how little he wanted to? I can only wonder if it feels that way to Tam. It's been so long since we really communicated.

Of course, given how everything turned out, I had to ask myself if I deserved Will. It didn't seem like I could claim that either. There's no way I could ever be the woman he fell in love with, not anymore, and he must know it. I wonder if he has always been a little

disappointed, ever since he got me at last. Maybe he still sees me as I was, under this. It's lucky for him if he does. It seems as though the way he's made is, he fell in love with me and then he was done falling in love, that was it, there could never be any going back or moving on. I would never have had the gall to ask for that from him. But that's who Will is.

## T A M

My mom and I more or less took turns on alternate weekends going out to visit Tom. Half the times when I drove out, I wished he hadn't moved so far away, and the other half I was glad for the break from the rest of my life. We both knew he probably needed more taking care of than we were giving him, but we didn't quite want to talk about it, because that would have meant changing so many things. Also we both knew he would never admit he needed it. As far as Tom was concerned, asking for anything was an unacceptable sign of weakness and his job was to take care of us, not the other way around. Which seemed to let us off the hook to a certain extent.

Driving out to visit Tom was the opposite of being Girlfriend Tam, especially on a Saturday when I had been her on Thursday and Friday nights and knew I would be her most of Saturday night too. It was the beginning of February. Yes, Girlfriend Tam had a date lined up for Valentine's Day, who was in fact Sean, the friend of Brian's I had slept with in the fall. He got credit for being persistent. It was surreal to me, but people were starting to think of us as a couple and I was going along with the program. My resistance was the invisible kind, inside. The day was sunny and cold. There had been a thaw, the snow was all gone except for what lingered in the ruts of harvested fields and among stands of trees where sun could not melt it. Now everything was frozen hard again and the air was so clear it almost gave me a headache to look up at the sky.

I pulled up in Tom's yard next to his pickup and his woodpile. There was still a good amount of firewood, maybe enough to get through the winter since he didn't depend on it to heat the house. Three black bags of trash in the back of his truck, a tangle of old electrical wiring, what looked like motors, the bent skeleton of a lamp.

A dead-looking toaster. I wondered if that meant he didn't have one anymore. Also maybe we should make a dump run.

I knocked on the kitchen door, heard nothing from inside, opened it. Knocking was a formality anyway. Probably he was half-asleep. I scoped out the kitchen quickly – yes, he still had his toaster, which looked almost as old as the one in the truck. I knew my mom believed he was living in squalor and was going to poison himself sooner or later with spoiled meat, but in my opinion she exaggerated. His kitchen looked pretty decent. There were a couple of dishes from his lunch in the sink. I didn't check the fridge, the way she would have the second she walked in. That seemed rude to me, treating him like he was incompetent.

He was in his usual chair and obviously I had waked him up. "Grampa," I said, "don't you think it's kind of hot in here?"

"Nope."

"Well, I do." Actually it was incredibly stuffy. I threw my coat on a chair. In the next room the TV was playing to itself. It had gotten to the point where he never turned it off except to go to sleep or when people came to see him. Even then, sometimes he didn't seem to notice that it was on. He must have seen me give it a look, because he said, "Turn that damn thing off, okay?"

I did. I tried the remote first and it didn't work, which happened regularly.

For some reason I never felt like sitting down when I first arrived at Tom's place. I wandered around his living room, idly picking up familiar objects and looking at old *New Yorkers* that were piled up all around. He always sat in the same chair next to his desk, where he had his lamp and his magnifier and his stacks of one thing and another – newspapers, bills, books. He was very organized. I couldn't figure out why my mother didn't seem to notice that. His mind was fine, it was other parts of him that weren't.

"I just came out to see how you're doing," I said.

"Kind of a long drive for that," he said, which was his way of saying he didn't want to be reminded he needed help. "Your mom was just here yesterday."

"She was? What was she doing here?" It definitely wasn't like her to be driving out to Tom's on a Friday.

"She wanted to bring me something."

That didn't make a lot of sense; I could have brought it out to him, whatever it was. It seemed to me he was annoyed, or

embarrassed. Maybe it was some medical thing. Bodily functions. Not something I wanted to know about.

"You know, you really ought to go outside for a little. Get some air. It's beautiful out. There's no snow on the ground, you're not going to slip on anything."

"Maybe you're not," he said. "Besides, my knees are not so beautiful today. There's always the sunporch."

"All right." I tried not to watch too obviously as he painfully hoisted himself out of his chair. He pushed himself up with a hand on each arm and then transferred his grip to the edge of the table. I could see how fiercely he was bracing himself as he straightened up all the way. I always felt I should be close by in case the hand that was stabilizing him might slip. But what about when he was alone, which was virtually all the time? When he had his feet under him I said "I'm thirsty, do you want anything?"

"No."

"How about tea?"

"Okay." If he had said no to that I would have brought him the tea anyway. No was the ritual answer.

I filled the kettle and turned on the stove, but nothing happened. Great, I thought, how long has this been going on? I tried lighting it with a match, but I knew if gas were coming out I should be able to hear it and I couldn't. No luck. Tom had made his way to the sunporch and sat down there. "So," I said, coming out on the porch, "when was the last time you cooked anything?"

"This morning. I had oatmeal."

"Well, your stove won't light."

"Try using a match."

"I did."

"Damn. You smell any gas?"

"No. I think it's out."

"What would you think about calling up the company? Their number is on that list next to the phone in there."

I got them on the line and pointed out that my grandfather was eighty-two and I didn't want him out here by himself without a stove. If they thought I meant there was no heat in the house, let them think it. It got them to say they'd come and refill his tank. In fact he had oil heat and it worked only too well, in my opinion. In his fridge I found some cans of Diet Pepsi and took one.

"You drinking this stuff now?" I said, back on the porch.

"Your mom left those here a while ago."



"Pretty bad, isn't it?"

"You don't have to drink it."

I sat down on the creaking wicker loveseat. "What else doesn't work around here?"

"Well, there's my eyesight, there's my short-term memory – you offering to fix them?"

"I'm really a pro at plugging in extension cords."

"You could see if you can get the remote to work on the TV."

"It's the battery."

"How do you know that?" His tone suggested that I was being a smart-ass.

"It's always the battery."

We sat for a bit and looked out at the brilliant afternoon. Red leaves flashed in the sun from the sumac down by the creek. A jet trail silently crossed the sky, heading west. Crows picked at something on the ground among the stubble in the fields. "I saw the groundhog again this morning," Tom said. "I think he's living under the back porch. I heard a lot of scrabbling around down there."

"Wait, you saw the groundhog on Groundhog Day?"

"Believe it or not."

"Did you take out your .22 and try to shoot him?" He hadn't done that in years. It was a long-running battle which the groundhog had won by attrition.

"Somebody confiscated my ammunition, otherwise I would have." He sounded grumpy but looked affectionate. He knew perfectly well I was the somebody.

"Listen, how about a run to the dump? I noticed a lot of stuff in the back of the truck."

"It can wait."

"Really, come on, let's go before it gets to be too late. I'll drive if you want. I just need to move around, it's my day off, you know? I spend all week in the office."

"Well, if you put it that way."

We went to the dump and heaved our trash in various piles; I was extra-aware of the unevenness of the ground, worried about Tom keeping his balance. Of course on the way in and out we inspected the usable stuff people had left by the gate. Old windows and doors, a waffle iron, a supposedly working cheap black-and-white TV, one chair out of a dinette set, a white metal kitchen cabinet. Nothing we needed, but always fun to shop the dump.

"You're lucky you live out here," I told him on the way back. "The rest of the world's really getting fucked up."

"I know. I get the same news everybody else does."

"Yeah, but when you walk down your road you don't look up and see the Pru or the Hancock building and imagine a plane crashing into it."

Tom grunted and shook his head a little. "They showed that thing too many times. It wasn't good for morale. If this is a war, somebody better start thinking about that."

"Is this what wartime is supposed to feel like?" I said.

"I don't know what the hell this is. How many troops has bin Laden got? Three dozen? I don't know why it takes the whole damn U.S. military to catch the guy."

"What, don't you want them to?"

"Of course I do. And then I want them to lock him up for the rest of his life and make him watch speeches by George W. Bush twenty-four hours a day. Don't execute him, that would just give him what he wants. Make him suffer."

"MTV. Endless Britney Spears videos forever."

"Would he hate that as much as watching W.?"

"More."

When we pulled into Tom's yard the propane guy was there; he had just finished filling the tank. I told him I'd light the pilot lights and Tom told him I knew what I was doing, but he came in anyway. I had forgotten that the water heater was gas, too. When he was done and had left the bill, I put water on for tea. Tom and I sat at the kitchen table. I always liked being surrounded by the old wainscoting in his kitchen, and the glass-fronted cabinets full of dishes I'd been seeing all my life. "I hate all this war talk all the time," he said.

"Sorry."

"Not you, sweetheart. The people running the show."

"Is anybody really running it, do you think?"

"That is a damn good question," Tom said, which Sean would have agreed with. But I was not going to bring him out to meet Tom and talk it over. Girlfriend Tam didn't do things like that. "Some people think they are, but they're wrong. You know what they're going to accomplish? I do. Some of the people who go over to Afghanistan will come back alive, and some of them will come back dead. And if they come back alive, they'll probably never like themselves for it." I knew he meant himself. "Nothing you can do about it," he said.

"At least what you did really meant something. That's a lot more than I can say."

"Tammy, you mean more to the people who love you than you could possibly imagine." I knew he meant well, but there was something truly depressing about having to be told that I mattered to my family. Was I that bad off?

"You know, I feel completely pointless right now. Everything's going to hell and I'm not doing anybody any good, all I do is work to pay the bills so I can work some more and pay the bills. I mean, who cares? Really."

Tom looked tired at that and I thought, too late, it wasn't very nice of me to ask him that question. He often complained of feeling useless. "You might want to have a little patience with life. Everything can't happen right when you want it to."

"I suck at having patience."

Tom studied me for a while. The closer he looked, the worse I felt. "Is there something going on I don't know about?" he said. I didn't want to say and it must have shown on my face. "Okay, don't tell me," he said.

"I feel like I've made a mess of everything, you know?"

"Nope, I don't. What's everything?"

"I just told you. Besides which I'm dating some guy I don't even care about."

"What happened to the one who went overseas?"

"I broke up with him."

"Hm." Tom didn't look surprised. "Well, you must have wanted to."

"I didn't."

"He take up with somebody else?"

"No. I did." I couldn't look at him. "I met this...guy I was attracted to, and when I tried to talk to Evan about it, we ended up breaking up."

"For Christ's sake, Tammy, if he didn't have the sense to come home, it doesn't matter anyway."

"Oh, that's easy for you to say."

"So, is that all?"

"What do you mean, *all*?"

"You meet some guy and before you know it, it happens. Big deal. You're young. It's human. What do you want to be, better than the rest of us?" The honest answer would have been yes. Which was really not something I wanted to know about myself. I said nothing.

We seemed to be at an impasse, but it wasn't like either of us to give in. "The first thing you ought to do is forgive yourself."

"I don't know how. And I don't think I should."

"Oh come on. Don't get moralistic on me. Where'd that come from, anyway?"

"Well, maybe you don't think it matters, but I do. And if he ever does come back from Turkey, now he won't give a damn about me."

"People get over these things."

"Grampa, you don't understand," I said, knowing that sounded childish. Poor me, I give up, feel sorry for me.

"I know, I probably don't understand anything. Too damn old." He knew that would make me pull my act together. "You still love this boy? The one in Turkey?" he said.

"Yes."

He thought for a while, and I waited. I had not said that out loud to anyone, even Emma, so I didn't know what came next. Besides, it hurt.

"Well, I don't know why you do. I don't know what's so wonderful about him. But if that's the way you feel, you'd better call him up. Tell him what you told me."

I tried to imagine it and couldn't. "You think it's that simple?"

"I didn't say that, sweetheart."

"What if he tells me he hates my guts?"

"Maybe it would mean he gives a damn."

I could come up with half a dozen crushing things Evan could say to me, all of them justified. Or he could have a girlfriend. Or he could not care if I lived or died. Or I could not have the courage to try it, and then be even more disgusted with my cowardice. That I couldn't bear, either. Thoughts were suffocating me, I had to get out and breathe.

"I don't know, Grampa. Maybe. I think I'd better get home, it's getting late."

"Well, before you leave, would you mind looking at something for me? I got something from the oil company that's printed in the smallest damn type, I can't read it. Take a look on my desk, it should be right on top of the bills. You know where I mean?"

"Sure." I went into the living room and looked there. Either this thing wasn't on the pile of bills, or I didn't know what I was after. "What does it look like?" I called.

"It looks legal," he said. "Manila envelope."

I scanned the desktop and didn't see it, so I opened the desk drawer in front of me. Old mechanical pencils with the names of companies he had worked for. The stapler which he must have bought before I was born. I opened a drawer to the side, where I knew he kept his meticulous records of everything about money; still no manila envelope from the oil company, but something else caught my eye. An old notebook with the number "23" and my father's name written in the square on the cover. Idly I opened it. Medical school, maybe? Or later on, maybe this was his research? "Hey, where did you get this?" I said.

"What?" Tom called from the kitchen.

I didn't answer, busy turning pages. I flipped to the back of the notebook and there I read, *won't bear careful examination. The hypothesis collapses under its own weight.*

*That, in turn, suggests there is such a thing as love, over and above, or different from, all other facts which may be true about human psychology and physiology.*

*I am still no closer to saying what it is.*

My father wrote this?

*I don't know what to make of any of this. Also, after this many years I don't know why it should matter. We were young, etc. It's not as though I never found anybody else attractive.*

I must have said something aloud. "What?" Tom said from the kitchen. I heard his chair scrape back, and him standing up.

*People will do what they feel they have to do. Obviously she did.*

*Why did she tell me? She kept it a secret this long. Wanted to be closer to me, she said. That may have been a mistake. Maybe when two people contract to stay together for the rest of their lives there must be unmentionables.*

I could not understand what these words were referring to, or I did not want to, and Tom's slow steps were coming toward the living room, making it harder to think.

*She said she felt I was slipping away from her, but I didn't notice that at the time. Now I do.*

*Maybe love is irrelevant after a certain point in life. Or at least overrated.*

*I didn't need to know, as long as I didn't know. Except it is the truth. I've never turned down a piece of the truth.*

Tom was in the doorway. "What have you got there?" he said.

"I don't know, exactly. It's something my dad wrote. Where did you get this?" Grampa Tom stood and looked at me in the most somber way and said nothing. "Have you had this all along?"

"Give that to me," he said, in a voice that, about anything else, I could hardly have disobeyed. "Now."

"Why? What is it?"

"Your mother gave that to me. Not to you. It would be much better if you would leave it alone."

"Grampa, this came from my father. It's his. I'm not going to just forget I saw it."

"I know." His look said that was my problem.

"Have you read it?" He nodded. "Who'd he write it for?"

"No one. Himself. Definitely not you."

"It's a journal?"

"It's things that were on his mind."

I looked down at the page, at the line I had last read. *I didn't need to know, as long as I didn't know. Except it is the truth. I've never turned down a piece of the truth.* "I have to read this," I said. I wouldn't be his daughter if I didn't, now that I had started. "I'm going to take this home. I'll bring it back to you later."

"I'm asking you not to do that," he said, looking me in the eye.

If it had been something of my mother's I would have handed it over. "I'm sorry, Grampa," I said. "But it's as much mine as it is yours."

Tom winced a bit at that, and sat down heavily in his chair. "Shit," he said to himself, quietly but violently; then he looked up at me. "Well, I guess you're an adult. I sure hope you are."

That scared me a little. But I wasn't going to change my mind now.

"I'll see you soon," I said. I leaned down to give him a peck on the cheek the way I always did. He gripped my arm; his hold was still strong. "I'm only asking you one thing in return," he said. "Be kind." He let me go and looked away, pretending to ignore that I was leaving. It was what he did; it never failed to make me feel the heartlessness of leaving him there alone. Now compounded by this book in my hand that said something he didn't want me to know. He couldn't stop me but that didn't make it okay.

It got dark on the way back. I didn't turn on the radio; my thoughts were plenty to keep me busy. What was sitting on the passenger seat beside me was making my heart race. Sean and I were

supposed to go out, have a couple of drinks, go to a movie or else to Johnny D's to hear music, eat somewhere, end up at his place for the night. But that was the last thing I wanted to do. I wanted to stay home with my father's notebook and do whatever I had to do once I started reading the words on the pages, which probably included crying. I didn't want to read it knowing that as soon as I closed it, I'd have to get ready and then go out with Sean. And act like Girlfriend Tam. I couldn't be her for him, or watch myself do it. Especially after that conversation about Evan.

I called up Sean and told him I was sorry but some stuff had come up around my grandfather's place that I had to deal with right away, I couldn't meet him for drinks and I wasn't sure when I could meet him later, and wouldn't it be better maybe to just get together tomorrow? He wasn't happy with this. I could tell he knew he wasn't getting the whole truth.

I paced in the apartment after the phone call, trying to calm down. Emma told me a new installment about the girl in her program who had a painfully obvious crush on one of the professors – a woman – how she had begun imitating the way the professor dressed and talking in the same pet phrases. But I kept being distracted, knowing the notebook was in my room. I was thinking of pouring myself half a glass of wine and drinking it before I started to read, but then I went and picked up the notebook without meaning to and opened it, and before I even sat down, I was reading.

*Grow old along with me, the best is yet to be. How much more obvious can self-deception get? Whistling past the graveyard.*

*Maybe self-deception is the best approach. We're not going past the graveyard, we're going to it.*

Can I really read this? I thought.

*I seek more than simply a better accommodation to living with disappointment.*

*Hope is the key. The gap in the horizon, the one degree out of 360 that is different. The hitherto undetected pathway. Possibly hope comes from mystery, arises because some things cannot be known.*

*I'm painted into a corner. And when you are painted into a corner, the only way to get out is to make a huge mess. Footprints all across the nicely painted floor.*

The rest of that page was blank. I was able not to turn the page and go on. There was more before and after that, but I wasn't sure I wanted to read any more, ever, or if I wanted to have read that much, but it was too late and I could never un-read those words.

I closed my door and curled up on my bed, holding the closed notebook with my finger still between the pages where I stopped reading. What I had read was inside me. It was a bad feeling in my stomach, a feeling that spread to my chest and made it hard to breathe.

He was there, I could feel his presence, my dad was with me again and he was so unhappy. It hadn't occurred to me that this could happen. But why couldn't it? He was a person like other people, wasn't he, no, he was my father and if I was going to be given one more time with him why did it have to be this?

Grow up Tam, crying isn't going to bring him back. All his troubles have been over for a long time now.

That only made me cry harder.

When it passed I got up and blew my nose and splashed water on my face and looked at myself in the mirror, miserable creature, if Sean could have seen me he would have been glad he didn't have to try to deal with this. Not that I would have let him. Emma could see I didn't want to be asked anything; she pretended not to notice I had been crying.

If my dad had a midlife crisis or something, what was so surprising about that? But I couldn't bear the thought that maybe when he walked out past that parked truck, he didn't look because he was trying to think his way out of the corner he felt painted into, that maybe he had died feeling that unhappy.

I always think of my dad's soul hovering around the moment of his death, not forever I hope to God like the image that orbits the black hole, but for some time, watching, unable to alter what happened, seeing his body that he had just left because it died, thinking so sadly about everything and everyone he had to leave behind. Reading the notebook gave me an awful thought: what if instead of sadness at having died, he felt relief?

There are some things a person cannot think for more than a second.

Momentarily I was blank; then I wasn't. The notebook was still on my desk, it was mine now, for the rest of my life I would know it existed and sooner or later I would have to read it. To put off that moment seemed absurd. All I could do was read on.



*I will never stop being Tam and Terry's dad even when they grow up and have their own lives, what's between us is absolute, nothing can change it. I wish I needed nothing else at this point. It would be a favor to everyone if that were true. This is why I am tired of being a self. I have to ask what good it is doing anyone for this self to have unfulfilled expectations. What could be adaptive, helpful to the organism, in possessing this attribute? Arguably, nothing. If true, what follows? This anomalous trait – the capacity to expect of life, or of others, what they cannot give – must be on evolution's To Do list, yet to be ironed out.*

*It's ridiculous that I am complaining. I am better off than most people on earth and most people who have ever lived.*

*Some things can't be mentioned without humiliating yourself, yet they need to be said.*

As soon as I so faintly heard my dad's voice saying those words, I closed the notebook. I don't want to know what they are, I thought. I don't want to and I don't have to, ever. I shouldn't have kept reading. Except the sentence about me and Terry, I wouldn't have missed that for the world. There was no way out, I was going to have to read it. Tom told me not to, maybe he had better reasons than I knew, but it was too late.

For an instant I was almost ready to call up Sean and go have several drinks and do anything he felt like, be Girlfriend Tam and put it off for one more night, mention nothing, make it not have happened for a few more hours. But then I knew I couldn't call him. It wasn't that I thought I'd slip and tell him about the notebook. I knew I couldn't tell him, ever.

I needed to break up with him, didn't I?

It was a relief to think that, instead of trying not to. The notebook, waiting to be read, blotted out anything else I might have felt about that abrupt and final decision.

I came out of my room; Emma was making a salad. "I thought you were going out," she said.

"Yeah, no. I begged off. Sean's kind of pissed, but you know. Too bad."

"Do you want some of this? It'd be easy to make it bigger. I was just going to throw some feta cheese in it and maybe we still have some leftover chicken."

I searched the fridge. "Well, there's one piece of chicken, that's about it. And there's some beets."

"Oh, that's fine for me. You know Brian, we'll be having a pizza in a few hours no matter what."

"How come you're not getting fat?"

"I am."

"Yeah, right. Here, let me do the rest."

Emma took a turn looking in the fridge and found some olives. She threw a bunch of them in, I put the salad on plates and we sat down at the table.

After a few bites she said, "So are you okay?"

"Um – I guess."

"That good, huh?"

"I found this thing today at my grandfather's, this notebook, it belonged to my dad, and I haven't finished reading it but – there's some stuff in it that might be, like things I don't want to know?"

"Oh." We ate salad for a while.

"I could really use a glass of wine," I said. "You want one?"

"Sure."

Sometimes, for a joke, I would do my fine-dining act for Emma, pour a little in her glass and make her taste it while I showed her the label. She played along very well. Sometimes she sent the bottle back, which showed good taste since we only bought cheap wine. I wasn't in the mood for that game tonight. "I was thinking of asking you to read it for me," I said. "Tell me which parts to skip. But I wouldn't skip them anyway."

"How could you?" Emma said.

Brian came and got Emma and they went out. The apartment was mine for the night. I turned off my phone. I washed our few dishes and looked out various windows at the neighborhood, waiting for something inside to tell me I was ready to read all of it. For a while I sat at Emma's desk as if there in her space I could get away from being me. Her room was like mine, equally odd-shaped with sloping trapezoidal walls. She had a slightly better closet, but otherwise there was very little to choose between the two. She had put a poster of Velazquez's *Las Meninas* above her bed and next to it, a tiny Japanese wood block print, her favorite art object. Tacked to the bulletin board

above her desk, among the notes and postcards, was a pen-and-ink drawing she had made of her desk and her bulletin board with slightly different clutter and her own hand drawing the drawing. It looked like a sudden impulse that she dashed off without even noticing her own ability. I admired it without the slightest envy; I knew I couldn't even begin to do that. Hanging on the back of her door was a Celtics T-shirt, originally Brian's, that she slept in sometimes; there was a short green candle in a candle holder on her bedside table and I assumed it was there for the purpose of romantic nights. They had been together how long now? Ten months, more or less. She knew how. She would never have to make my mistakes.

I closed the door to my room, as if someone might still interrupt me, and sat down at my desk. All right. Find where it begins, and read.

I read the notebook all the way through, and then I had to go back and read again, stopping at certain parts and hovering over them as if I could make the words say more than they said. The problem was not that I didn't understand what my dad was saying; it was that I did. My mother had an affair with some guy, early on in their marriage, before I was born, and he did the same with a doctor he worked with. Because of her? My mother went first, and when this other woman came on to him, he was in no position to resist. She set betrayal in motion, and he replied. How could she do that? I wanted to wash my hands of her, walk away from her, be cold and distant and correct. That was impossible. I couldn't keep that up for five minutes. I couldn't remove myself from Terry, how would he feel, I didn't want him to know about this for fear it would make him an even more silent kid. But I knew and I wanted more: what was she after? What could she possibly have wanted, to make her cheat on my dad that way?

Tom was right, it would have been better if I hadn't found this, but once I did I had to read it. I didn't want to know any of this. It was reading ahead in the book of life before I was ready. Not just her, damn her, but my father's unhappiness, his disillusionment that sat on my heart and wouldn't budge. Would I have to live under it from now on? If he was right, then in the end what did it matter if anybody loved anybody, or thought they did, in that way, because it came to the same thing regardless...just have children, that was what mattered and lasted. Not love, so-called, between equals. Have children, have work you care about, the rest is disappointment. I was in a kind of fury, hating the words I had read, his declaration, of what? Adulthood. Futility. *I was* the child, was this what I was born for?

I wasn't given a choice. Nobody was. Grow up, deal with it. The alternative was, don't grow up. Some people did choose that. I was not cut out to be one of them. Maybe I could pull it off: I could be Girlfriend Tam. For how much longer? Girlfriend Tam could only be young or she would become grotesque. Maybe five years, then it would be over anyway. I did not want to think like this, did not want to have the power that my dad's notebook seemed to have given me, to look back on my own life before I even lived it. It was squeezing the life out of my life, I could no longer even make my own mistakes, much as I hated them, because even the mistakes weren't mine but everyone's. Or my mother's, which I really hated. How different was I from her, I as much as cheated on Evan didn't I, all I did differently was break up with him before it actually happened. It was all me, he didn't quit on us. So I was her? My dad would not have done it first, I knew that, or else the worse truth was I wanted to believe that. If he, too, was not what I thought, then where was I but in a kind of limbo. If they were unknowns, unknowables, I could be anyone. We all could be anyone. This kind of freedom was a form of horror. Suddenly I understood Evan: he wanted this, he was this already, before I had a clue what it meant. He wanted a completely new beginning, didn't he, to cut loose from whoever the past made him and become...anything, himself, what did that mean, himself. Was there a self to become? Or only endless shifting, floating, falling? He wanted this. I could not get my mind around that. He *wanted* this horrifying state of being. So then, when he said he loved me, when I thought I loved him, did I even have any idea who he was, or was that, too, an illusion, as my dad all but said? When I did such a lousy job of dealing with his absence and caved in to my own loneliness, was I missing anything but my dream of who he was, was there even an Evan to miss or was that name just a label? Just because his name stayed the same it didn't mean there was the same self behind it. He could have become anyone, in Turkey. A person could become anyone without going anywhere, living on the other side of the same block, or in the next room, or right next to you in the same bed. So when I told Tom I loved Evan, Tom who had lived through all this and more than I could imagine, what could he have thought? That I didn't love Evan, I loved his absence. And why not? I am absence's daughter. Why not absence's lover as well? If girls grow up to want someone like their dad. I always thought that formula was too simple but now it looked like it might be true.

But Tom said call him up. First he asked me if I loved Evan and when I said yes he said call him up. As if my saying that meant

something. Or was he only indulging me. Maybe it was the same as saying Look, you're too young to understand it any other way, so go ahead and act on what you think is real, even if it's really not, you have no other choice. Ever practical, my Grampa Tom. So why wouldn't he be practical about despair?

I felt robbed of everything that mattered. It was all in shreds, I had nothing to stand on and no one beside me. Things were worse for many people on earth, and just like my dad I knew that was so, but being aware of my own selfishness only dug my hole deeper.

Eventually, somehow, I fell asleep.

When I woke up I wished I hadn't.

I dragged myself through Sunday, talking to no one except Emma, a little. She knew I was having a bad time but I couldn't tell her much of it. The part about Evan I could find words for, how he wanted this terrifying kind of freedom and I could not stand it. She was smarter than to tell me I was wrong, but I knew she wanted to because she still wanted it to work out for us, and her believing in that possibility comforted me a tiny bit.

Monday came. I got up, I got ready for work, I walked to the subway, routine secretly exerted its sustaining force. I caught myself thinking: now what? In the background of the day's work this thought continued to unfold, ever so gradually. Life continued, under new conditions: now what?

That night I studied my dad's notebook until I had certain passages involuntarily memorized, not that I wanted to remember them at all: *Mother and father, projection, neurosis, needs rooted in one's history*, the very thing I didn't want to think, that I would be forever determined by the two of them, knowing what I knew now. I had read my Freud when they assigned it and I wished I could un-read some of it, but you can't do that, *attaching themselves to an available object with the right, let's call them, receptors*. Was that what Evan was, the available object with the right receptors? Then all this drama didn't matter. None of it did. We drew our cards and were forced to play them. Or we were the cards, only imagining ourselves the players scheming to win the game, all of the story we told ourselves about ourselves a mere by-product, an epiphenomenon as some depressing theorist called it. *The fantasy cancels itself out before anything happens. I know too much now about what comes later. Maybe when two people contract to stay together for the rest of their lives – was that all it was, a contract? nothing more sickening than a prenuptial agreement, divorce in advance why did anyone bother to get married after that? there must be unmentionables*. So much for truth,

then. *Wanted to be closer to me, she said* but how could anyone be close to anyone if all this was true. Except to their receptors. Let's call them receptors. Oh yes, let's. Where was the receptor for the soul? For the truth of oneself? *The human condition is one of aloneness. I don't know why it is slightly comforting to put these words on paper.* Believe me, dad, it isn't comforting to read them *there must be unmentionables* and he knew these were some of them, it was my own, I was going to say choice, to read them, but really not. It was no one's choice, no one intended it, it was the order of things. *WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK.* How many times, when we were driving on a highway, did he point out the absurdity of that warning, our velocity being what it was, and that of the hypothetical falling rock constantly accelerating, how vanishing an instant there would be to notice and turn the wheel, by the time you read the sign it would be too late. Should that rock be falling, whether it would hit you or not was in all likelihood predetermined *That requires positing some sort of invisible controlling force,* we would not have agreed about that if we had ever talked about it *we can't stop needing what we need, we can't stop trying to get it. We know it probably isn't possible* We know: certainty; it probably: uncertainty. Uncertainty trumps certainty, therefore we do not know that it is impossible, *I am incapable of letting it go. Possibly hope comes from mystery, arises because some things cannot be known. The hitherto undetected pathway* must lead to something more than a receptor or there is no hope in it at all: *I'm not taken. Are you?*

That stopped me every time. Was I taken? Yes or no, check one. Yes, by Evan, forever *I know too much now about what comes later* so then to check no was the one choice I still did have since he, so clearly, was not taken by me whatever I may once have thought *I am incapable of letting it go. I must know if there is anything to this idea or not before I do that. Some men invest their deepest hopes in women through the medium of desire.* Was that what Evan did with me? And did I rob him of those hopes? Then what an asshole I was. *I would like to think some women still do the same toward men* apparently I did, without knowing it, but that was a basic mistake – unless uncertainty trumps certainty – and if I still could, what then, not about “men,” not about a category, this isn't science, what about one person, Evan, unique *I am incapable of letting it go.* did I think I could? Was I taken? Yes. No. I could not spend my life on an absence. I had no choice, my father was an absence *I am incapable of letting it go. Mother and father, projection, neurosis, needs rooted in one's history, attaching themselves to an available object with the right, let's call them, receptors.*

*Is that an accurate picture?*

So much for hope if it was.

*Sometimes I think what she wanted was for me to break her heart. I would like to have back the hopes Did I do that to Evan? Or to myself Who knows what is in somebody else's? Could he have wanted me to, it didn't sound as though "that one" had much of a heart for my father to break but I knew Evan did and no one could really want that if they were capable of feeling it. Did I do that to him? People are not here to make other people happier That is a distressing fact, only to make them unhappier then? where was the logic in that? maybe the truth was that nobody "made" anybody anything, we were just here interacting within a plan we would never understand, and what we each made of these interactions was entirely up to us The aloneness is a powerful fact Who knows what is in somebody else's? otherwise known as adulthood. the same longing takes multiple forms This explains why religions continue to exist.*

But I didn't have one. Except this, maybe: *Primum non nocere*. I didn't know Latin, but I knew that. "First do no harm." If that was my one scrap of religion I had failed. I had done harm, hadn't I? There was no denying. And here was another: *You're too honorable not to tell, aren't you?* I couldn't be certain whether my father turned out to be that or not, but I was not too honorable, that was a demonstrated fact. What became of my loyalty to the truth? *let's call them receptors. To be young was to hold an unspoken almost violent conviction that I would transcend them.* My dad was right, but was I still young? *WATCH FOR FALLING ROCK.*

But I was incapable of letting it go *suggests there is such a thing as love, over and above, or different from, all other facts We know it probably isn't possible if I was still young, the crucial word was "probably" The gap in the horizon, the one degree out of 360 that is different. Or even one 360<sup>th</sup> of that one degree out of 360. Even one vanishingly small sliver would be enough, if the possibility remained of slipping through that infinitely improbable gap. The whole difference between hope and despair teetered on that "if." The balance shifted from minute to minute. I was exhausted and there was no real rest.*

I took the notebook to work with me and copied all the personal part. I wasn't taking any chances of letting this get away from me, too. Also, I had told Tom I would give it back. I wasn't sure if I could part with it, but maybe to him I had to. It would come back to me in the end. Not a happy thought, but Tom would die one day and nobody else was getting the notebook, I would make sure of that somehow.

Maybe there was, in fact, no choice. Maybe where my dad was when he wrote the notebook was where we were all heading. In which case, what? I could try to pretend I didn't know that and make the most of the time in between, except that pretending was against my principles, if I still had any that I had not violated. Girlfriend Tam, case closed, nothing was stopping me from being a total fake. *To give up would be the worst of all* and Girlfriend Tam was just a different form of giving up *either people recognize the longing and the emptiness as their own, or they don't*. Fine, great, I own it. It's all mine.

I came out of my room and there were Emma and Brian sitting on the couch in old gray sweats watching a movie and eating take-out pizza. It was as though they had been a couple forever and always would be. They reminded me of me and Jeff; I had given up exactly that, for an illusion if my dad was right but there was also no going back to it without a different kind of pretending. Were she and Brian pretending, then? No. In my selfishness I had been thinking of asking Emma to read the notebook, so we could talk about it, and I saw that slipping those poisonous thoughts into her heart would be the worst betrayal. This, at least, I would manage not to get wrong. *When do we tear off the disguise and start to live?*

About ten the next evening Emma stuck her head into my room. "Hey," I said.

She was holding a book. "Listen, you took theory...Would you tell me if you can understand this?"

"Okay."

"The real of art is ideal impurity conceived through the immanent process of its purification. In other words, the raw material of art is determined by the contingent inception of a form. Art is the secondary formalization of the advent of a hitherto formless form."

"No. Are you kidding? What is that, anyway?"

"It's by this guy Alain Badiou, he wrote this thing called 'Fifteen Theses on Contemporary Art.' I'm supposed to give a presentation on it the day after tomorrow."

"Good luck."

"Do me a favor? Tell me I don't have to pretend I get it."

"I'll write a note to your professor."

"What happened with that thing you found, of your dad's?" she said.



It was a good thing I realized she shouldn't read it before she said that. "It isn't happy stuff. It's about how my mom had an affair when they were first married, and he did too, and how incredibly disappointed he was, it must have been not that long before he died, and how people can never really..." Don't go there. "He was having a very hard time."

"Must be tough for you to read that," she said.

"It is." But saying it like it was his problem and not everyone's helped a little. "There's so much I didn't know, he never talked about anything like that. I mean, nobody would, to their kids, but it's just so weird to read it now and think – I didn't really know him as well as I thought. I always thought he had the most methodical life, he knew exactly what he was going to do and every day he did it. He was that kind of a dad. Organized. Well, maybe my mom was the organizer, but he was like the last word. Everything seemed so...you know, stable."

"Maybe that's just what parents have to do. Make it seem that way. It must be hard sometimes, keeping up a front."

"So is that what it means to be a family, everybody has to pretend all the time? You have to hide everything real?"

"I sure hope not. Not all the time. I'm not signing up for that."

"Does Brian know how lucky he is to have you?"

"Tam. I can be such a pain."

"Funny I never see that. Living with you and all."

"Do you think about your dad a lot?" Emma said. "I mean, usually? Before this thing showed up?"

"Do you?"

She looked flustered. "I'm sorry, maybe I shouldn't have said that."

"No, I mean it. Do you think about yours?"

"I don't know if I think about him that much, I just have him."

"Exactly," I said. "Me too. I just have him. Only he isn't living anymore."

"What is that like, though?"

"In my family we have a million little stories about him, stuff he said, all his weird mannerisms. That's what my dad is now, mostly, those stories. There'll never be a new story about him. Except for this."

"Not one you wanted to hear," she said.

"No. Also I probably think about death more than other people. Where the soul goes after you die. I wish I knew things like that."

"Boy, so don't I," Emma said.

"You know, I go by the place where it happened all the time. It's not that far from our house. It's the strangest thing, Em, I can't explain what it's like. You know how people name intersections in memory of so-and-so, like every street corner has to be Somebody Somebody Square, and they put plastic flowers on the pole by the sign, and the plastic flowers get all gritty and faded and look kind of stupid and sad, and pointless? We could have done that, at least I think we could, at the corner of Walden St. and Mass. Ave. Which would have made it even weirder to go by there. Now nobody knows but us. It's so ordinary, there's a KFC on the corner, I mean you would never think there was anything interesting about that corner. It's about seven blocks from my house. And that's the exact spot where my dad died. For no reason. Or was there one. Are there reasons, or not? And is like one percent of his awareness still hanging around there, maybe knowing that I'm driving by, those are the kinds of things I have to think about."

"Yow," Emma said quietly. She thought for a while, leaning in the doorway of my room. "Do you think it is? Still there?"

"I don't know. Maybe I just want to. Or maybe I don't want to. Who'd want to hang around that intersection forever? It's boring. There must be better things to do with the afterlife than that. Watching traffic go by."

"You're a trip," Emma said.

"Death is a trip."

On Friday I broke up with Sean. I thought surely our phone conversations and e-mails during the week must have made him see it coming. I drove to his block and sat in my car, replaying in my mind many things but mostly the past year and a little more, since Evan had left for Turkey, and how badly I had handled most of it. Sean was expecting me, but he didn't know what I had made up my mind to say, and it was two hours before the time I said I'd come over. He might be in, he might not. If he was, he was. Just do it. I rang his bell.

The door buzzed and I pushed it open. Up the stone steps, into his hallway. I knocked on his door and he opened it, looked quizzically pleased to see me. "Tam. Cool. What's up?" He went to kiss me and I sidestepped it. "Wait," I said.

I was just inside the door. If I didn't go any farther I would be able to make a clean getaway. "Listen, Sean," I said.

"What, what's up, come in and close the door."

"I can't right now."

"Something wrong?"

"I was hoping I'd catch you."

"Um...aren't we going out later?"

"No."

"We're not?"

"Look," I said. "I know this is kind of...all I can do is say it. I don't think we should see each other anymore."

Sean lowered his head and stared at me from under his eyebrows as if he were looking at something dangerous. "What? Why not? Tam..." He kind of bleated my name. "What happened?"

"I, um, this, I mean...look, this doesn't work for me. It has nothing to do with you, it's not your fault, Sean. You can't do anything about it, it just doesn't work." He had no idea there was such a person as Evan and I wasn't about to tell him now.

"Wait a minute, didn't I just see you a week ago? In fact, unless I'm really severely mistaken, didn't you sleep here? What happened?"

"Please," I said. "Just do me one favor, please. Say anything you want, but please don't tell me you love me."

"Why not?" he said, but I thought I could see in his eyes that he didn't really need to ask.

"Because you don't."

"Shit, Tam..."

We looked at each other. He didn't contradict me and he could see I didn't want him to. "Yep," I said.

"You're wrong," he said, too little and too late.

"You still have the spare key to my car."

He looked pissed all of a sudden in an everyday way, as if I had interrupted him while he was grading exams and now I was wasting his precious time. "It's on my dresser," he said. "I'm sure you can find it."

Did he want me to have to remember when Girlfriend Tam first went into his bedroom, with him, the two of them stopping to kiss halfway between the living room and there? I did, but I didn't let the memory slow me down; I picked my car key out of his pile of keys and change, and came back out without looking at anything else. I knew there were a couple of things of mine in the bathroom he would have to throw away, but I wasn't about to stop to find them too. I hadn't meant to come all the way inside if I could help it.

He was blocking the way to the door, and he put his hands on my shoulders in a now-now-little-girl way that I hate. "Does it really have to be this way?" he said.

"It really has to," I said. "I have to go now, okay?"

He dropped his arms, disgusted. "I hope this makes you happy," he said.

"Happy...no. It just is."

"Why?"

"Sean. You know why. I told you why. Do you want me to say it again?" He couldn't look at me. "I have to go," I said, opening the door. "Okay? So." I took a breath. "Goodbye."

He shook his head, still not looking up. "Bye," he muttered. I had to turn away and get out of there quick, I was beginning to feel bad for him. Had to get out of his building, out under the impersonal sky, down the block to my car, close door, drive off, the sensation of relief would come soon, wouldn't it? Congratulations, I thought to myself, you were a complete bitch. Cold and horrible. You totally blind-sided the poor guy, and what the hell did he ever do to deserve that? He took me out, he introduced me to his friends, he acted like he thought I had a brain in my head, he wanted me...what does he get for all this? Not good enough, screw you.

I tried to think my way off the hook. Of course what happened between us wasn't enough and I knew it, even if he didn't. Now he can go meet somebody who thinks he's the answer. Then he'll thank me after all. It didn't really hurt him half as much as he thinks. By next week he'll figure that out and he'll be fine. Maybe even glad I saved him the trouble of being the one to break it off. I had to do it, I didn't have a choice, I felt like I couldn't breathe. It wasn't even a thought, it was physical.

Try as I might, I still felt like an awful person. I should come with a warning label. Date At Your Own Risk. If anybody was ever going to want to again.

And now I had to figure out what I was going to do about Evan.

\*

The day after I broke up with Sean I brought the notebook out to Tom. When I handed it to him, he took it and held it in his lap, looking up at me and saying nothing. I sat down, not knowing where to begin, feeling strangely awkward as if Tom were not my own grandfather.

"You don't have to tell me anything about this, but I wish you would," he said.

"It's so hard to talk about," I said.

"I know. We never have. Well, your mom did tell me a little, quite a while ago, when she and Will first got back together."

I sat there and it was like those words didn't make sense as a sentence. What did Will have to do with it? Then I saw what Will had to do with it.

"Oh, shit."

I stared at Tom, and he at me.

"You didn't know," he said. It wasn't a question.

"No."

"God damn it, I didn't think I could make it any worse and now I've gone and done it."

But I didn't want him to talk, I didn't care about how he felt or who did what except for one simple thing: it was Will my mother had the affair with in the first place. And this same Will was the next thing to my stepfather, the man in a father's place in my family, my father's family, she did this knowing exactly what she was doing, after he died. "Oh *shit*," I said again.

"I thought you must have figured that out. Your mother is going to kill me. And frankly, I wish she would. She only gave me that notebook because it was his, she never meant for you to know any of this."

"Okay, so...so nothing about my family is what I thought it was, it's all just a bunch of lies?" That last word made me start to cry. "What am I supposed to do now?" Tom got up from his chair and came over to me, patted me on the back as I sat there, bent over crying and trying to stop.

"I'm sorry, Tammy."

"It's not your fault, Grampa, it's all *her* fault, I can't stand her, how could she just *do* this?"

"Ssh," Tom said. "It'll be okay."

"It won't, how can it?" I sat there sniffing for a while and he kept patting me. "I don't know how I'm ever going to look her in the eye again." I got up and went in the kitchen, blew my nose on some paper towels, wiped my face, looked out the window and tried to breathe. Some crows who were out in the yard flew up as a group, cawing, made a sweeping turn and then came down in the field. One stayed behind, then flew after them in a hurry as if it were saying Wait

for me. "God damn it all," I said to the frozen landscape, my breath fogging the pane. "All. Every bit of it."

"Sweetheart?" Tom called. "Come back here."

"I'm coming."

I sat down with him again, but didn't look at him. "How did she let herself get away with this?" I said.

"The first time, or the second?"

"What's the difference?"

"Oh, there's plenty of difference."

"I can't stand any of it. Who is she, anyway?"

"She was just trying to make it. The second time, I mean. Just get through life, you know? There would have been somebody else if it wasn't Will."

I didn't want him to say Will's name. "Then it should've been somebody else."

"It was familiar. He was. I'm sure that helped."

"Too familiar," I said.

"Honestly, I think she's done about the best she could."

"Why are you forgiving her? She cheated on my dad, don't you care about that? Wasn't he important to you?" As soon as I said that, I knew I shouldn't have. "I'm sorry," I said. "I didn't mean that."

"It's a damn good thing you didn't," he said angrily. "You are in no position to say that to me."

We both tried to get a grip on ourselves, not looking at each other.

He said, "What's important to remember is they had a good marriage."

"She must not have thought so."

"Marriage isn't the easiest thing in the world, you know. Wait till you try it. Maybe they both had a hard time getting used to it at first. Most people do. I'm talking about later on."

"I'm surprised there was a later on."

"People are tougher than you think, Tammy. They have to be. People get over things."

"Or they don't." It seemed to me there were things no one should get over.

"Would you rather they got a divorce? You'd never have been born."

"So what? What does that prove? It doesn't mean they had a good marriage, just because they had me."

Tom looked me over in a disagreeing way that turned into straight-up disapproval. "Tammy, you're not going to like this, but you're very young and there are still a few things you don't know. Also you can't see yourself right now. A certain amount of humility never killed anybody."

That hit me exactly where I lived and I felt like the lowest piece of crap on earth for a second. Such the fucking ungrateful child. "Sorry," I muttered, but it was grudging and he knew it. What the hell could he expect? This wasn't something I could get over in ten minutes.

He nodded a few times and sucked his teeth. "Okay." He still looked pretty unhappy with me. I began to wonder how I was going to walk into my mom's house after this, how I was ever going to be in the same room with Will. Tom said, "Do me a favor."

I knew I didn't have a choice. "Okay."

"Don't talk to your mother about this right away. Let it settle in for a while."

"Did you tell her I read it?"

"No, I didn't have the nerve." We shared an ironic half-smile. Wasn't that exactly backwards? She should have been the one who got scared, not the one who did the scaring. It made no sense, but to us it did.

"Grampa, I don't want to get you all mad at me again, but if they had such a good marriage, why was he so unhappy when he wrote that?"

I could see him trying to think what he could and couldn't tell me. The next words would be "let me put it in this way."

"I've read it again and again," I said. "The damage is done. Just tell me. Please."

"Some parts of life can be very difficult," he said. "No matter what."

"I'm so not looking forward to this."

"This particular thing, what he's writing about, it might be something men have to get through more than women."

"So it's real. It's not just him."

"It's real for a while."

We sat there absorbed in our separate thoughts.

"Life is no pushover," I said. Tom looked up at me and his look made me feel about twelve years old.

\*

I spent all of Sunday afternoon getting up my courage to call Evan. Trying to think how I was going to tell him I was sorry for so many different things and how I was not going to try to justify myself and I was not going to fight with him and I was going to do everything in my power not to get defensive when he told me how I fucked up, I was going to take it and get past it, I had to or we would never be able to talk. *Some things can't be said without humiliating yourself, yet they need to be said.*

But when I punched in his number, and kept trying it in case I put it in wrong, nothing happened except I got some unintelligible message which I decided meant it was not in service anymore.

\*

February 11

Dear Evan,

Two words and I already got stuck. I could hear him saying What the fuck are you doing calling me Dear Evan, you dumped me, so much for Dear Evan. And Dear Evan meant I thought various crucial things were the same as they had been, that I was the same, that the word "dear" was the same, that he was who I had thought he was, none of which was necessarily true.

Hi Evan –

No way. Hi Evan was every e-mail I got at work telling me to fill out this spreadsheet and send it back in twenty-four hours.

Evan,

Who the hell was I to start in that abruptly, just Evan point-blank as if I were calling him on the carpet, when if anybody was in the wrong here it was me? It was going to have to be Dear Evan and if it made him think Fuck off so be it, maybe some part of him would like hearing it regardless.



Dear Evan,  
I really need to talk to you

But what did he need, or want, maybe nothing from me anymore. He could tell me to go to hell, then. That was part of the deal. Or never answer, which would be worse.

Dear Evan,  
I don't know if you have a new phone number or what, but I really need to talk to you, so if you have one, could you tell it to me? Please.  
Or if you're willing to call me could you call me?  
I can't stand to have things end like this between us

I couldn't even stand to see the word "end" in that sentence.

I can't stand to have things be like this between us.

You know you're going to have to say it. Just fucking write it.

I want to apologize. If you'll let me. And I have so much I need to talk to you about. But I can't do it this way.

love, Tam? Would I put that word before my name, as if the word "love" were still one I knew how to use?

As if I thought I could wish us into an alternate universe where that was what I had always written at the end of every message, the way he did? As if I could make everything okay by typing a word?

That was ridiculous.

If Sean could see this it would blow his mind. Girlfriend Tam grovels.

Screw Sean and Girlfriend Tam too.

This was not the place to say the struggle I was having with that word.

Tam.

I clicked "Send."

He would tell me his phone number and I would call him.

He would write back that he wasn't interested in talking to me ever again.

He would say, Whatever you have to say, just put it in an e-mail.

He would have a girlfriend.

He would have a wife.

He would have an official work permit, he would be planning to stay indefinitely, he would have decided to move on to India, Thailand, Vietnam, he would have become a Buddhist monk.

Valentine's Day came and went; Evan didn't answer. Girlfriend Tam didn't go out on Valentine's Day, but some of the prospective boyfriends hadn't forgotten they were interested in her. They kept calling from time to time. I put them off. I didn't tell them, but I had a feeling she was never going to be available anymore.

I put off talking to my mother, too. It was the route of least resistance. It was what Tom wanted me to do, I didn't know what to say to her, I was afraid of what I might say. She was busy. I found ways to be busy as well.

I had one of those fleeting glimpses of Evan on the street, the back of his head far down the block, like I hadn't had since right after he went away. I didn't need that to tell me he was on my mind. The notebook had pulled me back into the part of my life when we met, the part that began the day my dad died. I remembered telling Evan that what happened to my father never ended, and not being able to explain it to him. I didn't even know how true it was when I said it. I kept working on imagining the final moments of his life, as he stood there on the corner waiting for the walk light. I wanted him to have been thinking about me or Terry or his work, the things that made him happiest according to what he wrote, not about my mom and their trouble or whether the longing could ever be fulfilled. What would he have been thinking about me? Some mundane thing, something everyday. He didn't know, after all, that it was all about to end for him; it was a day like every other. More likely, because he was on his way to work, he was thinking about that, something I'd never really get because I would never have his kind of an education and understand it at his level, but something absorbing and worthy of his attention. I liked to tell it to myself that way best: he was lost in thought about his favorite problem and then like that, from one moment to the next, without warning, it was over. Then his soul floated up out of his body (which I did not want to imagine lying on the street) and he looked down at himself and realized he had died. How could that have felt? It had to be a hell of a shock when there was no expecting it. Or could it

be that a part of someone actually did know when death was on its way, even under the most unexpected circumstances? Then he floated up and up, so I pictured it, higher and higher like my little vision in the third grade, and from there he could see where everyone who mattered to him was at that moment – like Superman with x-ray eyes – me at the high school, Terry in his second grade classroom, my mom on her way to the studio where she taught dance. He could see Grampa Tom at his place way out in the country. He could see our house, and his lab, and every place he cared about, and then...my imagination reached a point where it had to stop. But I felt sure he hovered around and saw what it was like for us to get the news, and wished he could say something to us, I never knew what. But not what was in the notebook. And perhaps for a while longer. But that hovering could not go on forever. I remembered when I felt he was really gone from our house, when even his absence left. There had to come a time when his soul turned its back on us, and went on with something that we could never imagine. But there could never come a time when mine turned its back on him. Which was strange, really. I was still facing him, but he was never facing me. Actually it wasn't right, what I told Emma. I didn't have him, he had me. I was following him – a silhouette of him – into a blank, an emptiness either black or white but without features. I was incapable of letting him go. Perhaps if I could see, for once, where he was going, I could let him go there; perhaps I was even holding him back; or perhaps he had made his final escape long ago and I was following a part of myself to a place within myself.

No one knew these things about me, except I thought Evan did. At one time. Didn't I tell him exactly how it was? I was sure I must have, at some point I must have told him nearly everything. Or did I just think he knew me that well? Tom's words stayed with me: it's real for a while. Wasn't everything that? Real for one night like the time I told my life story, while being stoned, to a guy at a party, or for a weekend like the last time Evan and I were together, or a year, or a lifetime – but real forever, objectively and for all eternity? The last jump was the impossible one. It went beyond my imagination, so far outside my mind's reach that I didn't even care that I could never know it. That was what my dad wanted. Or he wanted to get closer and closer to that unknowable, to be in its presence, like being breathed on by God. Maybe his soul did know those things after it left the body, maybe he got his wish.

On the first Sunday in March, the phone rang at seven in the morning and I picked it up and it was my mom. "I'm sorry to wake you up," she said.

"You didn't," I said automatically, though she did. I couldn't let her get the upper hand. I especially didn't want to talk to her half-asleep. She was not stopping for me to say anything.

"But it's important. It's your grandfather." I knew she meant Tom, not Walt who is married to her mother, out in Milwaukee. "We had to get him to the hospital last night."

"Why?" I felt too groggy to hear this and I had a bad taste in my mouth. I reached out for the glass of water beside the bed.

"We were trying to call him all yesterday and we couldn't get him, so finally we got worried and drove out there. We found him lying on the floor in the sunporch. I think he'd been there all day. He wasn't really very clear about it. He pulled down all sorts of things onto the floor and knocked over the chairs trying to get up. It was so awful seeing him there, I hate to think about what it must have been like for him lying there and struggling. The last we heard, either his ankle is really badly sprained or it's broken. You know what that means," she said, as if I'd been through this before.

"What?" I felt guilty not knowing what she meant. But she had put in a lot of time in hospitals, and I had not.

"A long time in rehab."

"Oh."

"He's eighty-two, it's not going to be easy."

"I know."

"I tried to call you but you were out." Did she want me to feel guilty about that? "He's kind of...not himself, Tam."

"What do you mean?" But her voice already told me this was the bad part.

"It did something to him. Maybe he hit his head. Or maybe he had a stroke and that's why he fell. He's not really thinking straight. He couldn't even sit up with us helping him. And his ankle was all swollen up like a grapefruit, it was obvious he wasn't going to be able to walk. How was he going to go to the bathroom?"

"Oh," I said. I so much did not want to picture this.

"But he didn't seem to know any of that."

"Oh crap," I said.

"Crap is right," said my mom. "This is really it, you know."

"What do you mean?" Was there something even worse?

"He can't live there anymore."

"Wait, I thought you just said rehab..."

"Yes, but think about it," she said in a tired-out voice. I realized she probably got almost no sleep. "He can't go back out there by himself. What's going to happen the next time he falls? And you know how it looks. The place is slowly decaying. It's turning into the House of Usher."

"It's not *that* bad."

"It's bad enough," she said. "You didn't see what his bathroom looked like this time."

For quite a while, I had been in the habit of avoiding that experience by using the bathroom on the second floor that he never used anymore. I knew to carry a roll of toilet paper up there when I came. I didn't want to imagine his on the first floor, but I could. From the smell sometimes, you could tell he must have peed on the floor without meaning to. I knew he'd rather die than ask me to clean it up, and I couldn't bring myself to volunteer.

"This is so awful," I said lamely.

"They wanted to admit him out there, of course, after we took him to the ER, but I talked them into referring him to Beth Israel. It wouldn't make any sense to have him clear out there and drive back and forth all that way."

I knew the medical area because of my dad, and somehow knowing the hospital he was in made it real. I could picture the route from my apartment to there, all but the last bit, the corridors, his room, and Tom himself. I dreaded seeing him like this and I realized, belatedly, that I would be making that trip soon. "When can we visit him?" I said.

"Oh," she sighed tiredly, "they don't know, they have to run a bunch of tests and decide what they're going to do about his ankle and then maybe later, but he'll probably be all doped up on painkillers. He already is. I mean we can go see him, but he won't be very responsive."

I didn't know what to say.

"I'm sorry to start your day with such bad news," she said.

"It's not your fault, mom."

"When I hear anything, I'll call you."

"Or if you're going to go visit him," I said.

"Okay. Bye, hon."

"Bye." I lay back down and stared at the ceiling. "Oh shit," I said to no one. The first birds of the morning were chirping outside, insistently announcing their life. Tom in the hospital, Tom no longer Tom, it was too horrible to contemplate. Why hadn't I gone out to visit

him the day before, while he was still himself? I could have made the effort. Maybe he wouldn't have fallen if someone had been there. What was he trying to do when he fell? I knew how much he couldn't do for himself, but I always thought somehow he would make it. How could he not? He was my grandfather who always knew how things worked. As if that were a guarantee.

We don't do religion in my family, but like Evan not ruling out reincarnation, I don't rule out God. What I wanted to do was to say a prayer, but I didn't know anything about how to do it, only the old formulas everybody half-knows, Our father who art in heaven and so forth, and a few hazy memories of World Religions. To mumble words I didn't believe in would be worse than nothing. If God was paying attention then It would know I was being insincere; I had to mean it. I remembered a girl in that class saying to me, "I don't believe the universe takes requests." That felt right to me. I had never tried to pray for anything, but maybe I had never needed the help as much, either.

I had to do something. I sat up, and then stood up. Helplessly I turned my palms to the ceiling and bowed my head, as if hoping that something might fall from heaven that would help now because nothing else could. Listen, I thought. Please listen. I thought I should say it out loud. "I don't know how to do this. I really don't. Please just accept it, it's the best I can do. I'm not saying I deserve special treatment or anything like that. It's just we really need my grandfather, Tom, I really need him, please let him be okay."

I thought for a while. I remembered that in Native American religions it was often said you should pray for others, not for yourself. What I had said was all self-centered, as though the reason Tom should get well was for my sake, not for his. "Please help him. That's all. I'm sorry I stuck myself into it. Please help him. He's such a good person, he's done everything for us that he could."

I stood there for a while longer with my eyes still closed until I began to feel foolish. I meant it, though. My helplessness was 100% real. And if God noticed how humans feel, then maybe It would notice how much I loved Tom. The invisible harmony as I had perceived it was neutral towards life and death – they were equally a part of its work – but maybe one person's love for another was part of the order as well, a third term that weighed as much as the other two. That was my faintest of hopes.

I couldn't go back to sleep after my mother called. I hadn't gotten enough sleep and I lay there tired and grim for a while, imagining things I didn't want to – Tom on the floor trying to get up, grabbing onto the furniture legs and struggling but never succeeding. I could picture him trying to use the wicker chairs to right himself and how they were too light to give him any leverage and of course they fell over. Could picture him trying to plan out his next move after the first attempt failed. Or maybe, worse, he was no longer able to think out a practical problem the way I was used to seeing him do. If he lay there all day he must have peed in his pants. And then to be found that way, in utter humiliation. It was one thing for theorists to theorize about the abject, to read about it as an idea, something else to helplessly be it. A thought I did not like having, but couldn't help, was that at least my father never had to go through this.

To stop imagining these things I got up and started the day but the emptiness of Sunday morning was no better. The weather was pure March, gray and uninviting. There was some snow on the ground, the routine snow of late winter that is no longer of any interest once it has fallen. I went out and got a Sunday New York Times, thinking to distract myself with it, and read it and drank coffee until I couldn't stand any more of either one. The news, as always, was that the world was continuing to fall apart. Likewise the analysis of the news and the opinions about the news: we were screwed and getting moreso. Same as last week. Emma and Brian got up, I told them about Tom, they said they were sorry to hear it. No, I really didn't want any more coffee, no, I already ate, thank you. Emma put on a Nina Simone CD that I normally liked but her voice hit too close to home in my downhearted state.

My mother called again. She was back at the hospital, she wanted to keep track of what was happening to him. Tom's ankle was broken; they had it in a temporary cast. He was too sedated to talk. He had a bruise on his head and that might be a good thing – a knock on the head could be much less serious than a stroke – but it proved nothing and we wouldn't know anything until they did more tests and some of the drugs wore off. She was going to go home. I retreated to my room and stared at my books looking for something to lose myself in. *Guns, Germs, & Steel*. No. Deepak Chopra, Gail Sheehy, *Towards a New Psychology of Women*, *Women's Ways of Knowing*, *Writing a Woman's Life*. No. Willa Cather, Stephen King, Hawthorne, Emerson, Toni Morrison, Edith Wharton, *Invisible Man*. I tried reading *Death Comes for the Archbishop* for a while, but it didn't work even though it was one of

my favorite books ever. I would be completely out of luck if I lost Tom, no father, no grandfather, just my mother and Will whom I did not want to deal with and would have to, very soon, because going to see Tom would mean seeing them for certain. How was Terry taking it? I picked up my phone and called him.

"Hey," he said. He sounded as glum as I felt.

"Hey. How ya doin'?"

"Mom told you, right?"

"Yeah. How are things going over there?"

"This sucks big time."

"I know. You okay?"

"Yeah, just great," he said, and I realized it was hitting him as hard as it was me.

"Anybody talking about going to visit him?"

"No, they're just kind of moping around. Mom was pretty much up all night. Will, too. They look beat. They were at the ER forever, I don't know when they came in."

"She told me he hit his head, he's not really thinking straight."

"I know."

We were both silent for a bit.

"Shit," I said.

"I know."

"I don't know what to do with myself," I said.

"I gotta get out of here. I think I'm gonna go hang out at Jason's." Jason was Terry's best friend; they could play Sim City for hours.

"I guess we'll go visit him, like, tomorrow, right?" It wasn't really a question. Terry was never the planner of anything, he was the one who needed to be reminded, rounded up, prodded into motion.

"I guess," he said.

"See ya."

"Okay." He hung up.

I couldn't stand being in the apartment any longer, and I didn't have a game I could go play. I didn't want to see anyone. Except Tom. Just go, I thought. Even if he was too out of it to notice me, I realized he was the only person whose presence I wanted to be in. Maybe mine would do him some good, or maybe it wouldn't, but it wouldn't do harm.

It was a relief to walk out of the house and have somewhere to go. I drove my car because it was Sunday and I knew the T would be too slow. Beth Israel had its own parking garage, too expensive of



course but this was no time to worry about that, I took the ticket and drove in. It was close to full, but why wouldn't it be, it was Sunday afternoon and people didn't stop being sick on weekends and their families could come visit them. Either Tom would be somewhere that I could see him, sit with him, or he wouldn't, but trying to see him was the one thing that I could do and I needed to. I waited my turn to ask at the desk in the lobby, breathing hospital air that was somehow different from any other kind. This was my dad's world and I felt a kind of secondhand citizenship in it, but I couldn't visualize what might be happening to Tom at that moment. Announcements in words that meant little to me spoke themselves softly from the ceiling. There hadn't been any serious illness in our immediate family, nothing more major than stitches or a broken arm. When my grandmother was in the hospital, the last time before she died, I was twelve and I only visited once, maybe they thought it would be too hard for me to go back. Anyway they didn't take me with them again. The hospital was the place my dad went to and came home from, and after a while he didn't see patients that much himself. Maybe Tom would be fine, they would set his ankle, he'd be in for a couple of days, then rehab...I didn't know how to picture that. Vague image of him walking gingerly while holding onto metal rails, being coached by a physical therapist. It was finally my turn to speak to the person behind the desk, to wait some more for her to call someone and be on hold herself. She sent me to the seventh floor. Big elevators, very quiet, muffled dings, signs reminding everyone to respect patients' confidentiality, please do not discuss cases in a public space. The elevator doors opened on people sitting on a bench, waiting. I found another desk, a nurse. His name is Tom Aller, I am his granddaughter, he came in last night. Could I find out how he was doing? Apparently, no. If I were there when the doctor made his rounds...where? That was not clear. Did he have a room number? More waiting, more telephoning. He was not actually in a room yet, he was elsewhere, having a procedure, an x-ray, an EKG, an MRI was called for but did not seem to be scheduled yet...would he be on this floor when he got assigned to a room? Yes. Or else they would know where. Could I wait? Yes.

Maybe it was the waiting that gave the air its flavor, especially the waiting of the patients, to be admitted, to be discharged, to be seen for the next procedure, to receive the doctor's verdict, waiting for the pain to lessen, waiting to die...Maybe it was a mistake to come here and think these thoughts. But then it would be worse to be anywhere else and I felt myself in a kind of trance. There was a clock within sight,

and at the end of each minute the minute hand clicked forward one notch on the dial, dragging reluctant time ahead. I was accomplishing nothing but I was unable to leave. Or even to want to.

I looked up and realized it was Tom being wheeled by me on a gurney. I stood up. "Grampa," I said, or maybe only thought I said, maybe my voice didn't work. His eyes were closed, he looked a hundred years old, his face sunken and white. His leg from the scrawny shin down protruded from the thin covering over the rest of him. It was being squeezed by an inflated blue plastic contraption. An I.V. bottle was hanging from a pole on the gurney. My mind wanted to refuse the sight of him that way and I did not move after him as they went by, I stood where I was and watched. The orderlies wheeling him stopped, read something. They went on down the corridor, stopped, turned, fitted the gurney into the doorway of a room. The door closed.

I sat down again and in my head was my mom's voice saying, "This is really it, you know." I knew she didn't mean it the way it sounded at first, but then maybe she really did, or maybe it was worse than anyone realized.

I continued to sit where I had been waiting, furtively watching the door down the hall. A nurse went in. After a while it opened and the orderlies came out with the gurney, empty. A minute or two later the nurse followed. I took a deep breath and went to the nurses' station.

"I noticed my grandfather got brought to his room. Tom Aller? Would it be okay if I go and sit with him?"

The one behind the desk consulted a file. I almost wanted her to say no, you need to come back tomorrow.

"He's in 717. You can go in if you like."

I did not like any of this, but I steered myself to 717, past various laundry carts (I remembered my father's dream) and red containers saying "Sharps" and wall-mounted telephones. The door was open and I entered as silently as I could. The first thing I saw was a partly drawn curtain around a bed. High up on the wall a TV was playing quietly. The man in the first bed was not Tom and he looked at me incuriously and then back to the TV. He seemed strangely ordinary, hardly sick-looking at all, just elderly. I passed the curtain that separated the two beds and there was Tom in the second one. He was asleep, or at any rate his eyes were closed. I didn't know what he was. I stood at the foot of the bed dreading what I would see. His face looked as if it was made of wax, his mouth slightly open, his lips pale and dry. He was breathing, but not in a comfortable way, more like a little gasp

in, then hold it for a while, then let it out. Watching him breathe made me feel I was suffocating. He was hooked up to what I decided was a heart monitor. His hands were on the coverlet and there was an I.V. line in the back of one of them, which I thought must have hurt, but probably his ankle hurt a lot worse. Or it didn't, because they were giving him painkillers and that was what knocked him out like this. Maybe when they wore off he'd get some of his color back and look more like himself. There was a chair near the foot of the bed and I sat down on it. It was too far away from him. Or was it? Maybe I shouldn't disturb him. What was the point of my being here if I didn't at least try to let him know I was? I cautiously pulled the chair over closer to the head of the bed, trying not to make any noise, and sat down where I could reach his hand that didn't have the I.V. in it. I slid my fingers under his, watching his face; he didn't respond. Lightly I grasped his hand – it felt cold – and in a low voice I said "Grampa, it's Tammy." His eyes were not entirely closed and I thought I saw a flicker of movement in them.

I sat there holding his hand and watching him breathe until my back got tired from leaning forward. There was no response in his fingers to mine, and when I let go he didn't react. I sat back, looked around. Everything in the room was smooth and clean and inorganic, except for the human beings. I should bring flowers. I remembered noticing a florist nearby. Of course – how could there be a better place for one than next to half the hospitals in Boston? I got up and looked out the window at an incomprehensible jumble of roofs and massive buildings wedged into one another as if there were no streets between them, cranes sticking up constructing more of them, more city beyond – Roxbury, Fort Hill, gray sky. With a muffled roaring, a helicopter landed on the roof of another hospital. Something serious if they went to that length to rush the person there. Personal catastrophes of one kind and another happening constantly, unnoticed. A small, persistent dinging came from somewhere, announcing something, making me look around at Tom. Not something about him, he hadn't changed.

I sat down on the window seat with my back to the sky and the confusion of city, and watched Tom breathe.

He seemed to have aged twenty years since the last time I saw him. For the first time, he was a decrepit old man. But I had never seen him asleep in bed and maybe he looked like this then? Wishful thinking. Something was all wrong. What would I do if he died? Cry a lot. Stop thinking about yourself. I couldn't. Who would I talk to the way I talked to him? No one, and no one would talk to me like that,

bluntly and with that much love. My heart was weighed down with the bleakness of this prospect and it was inevitable. He was eighty-two. If he got better from this, he would die at some time not all that far off. He would have to leave his house, which he loved, and his view which he loved more, God knows where he would end up but someplace nearer to us, what kind of place was the question, would he always be in a place like this the rest of his life? He would hate every minute of that, I knew exactly how much, and he wouldn't have a choice.

A nurse, or a nurse's aide, I couldn't tell which, came in and said, "I'm just going to take his vital signs." After that she paid no attention to me. She told him the same thing, addressing him by name, although he was obviously not aware of it. He groaned a little in protest when she moved his arm, but he didn't wake up. She had no visible reaction to whatever she learned about him, just wrote it down and left. I felt the uselessness of my sitting there. If I had made it through pre-med, I might have been in med school. Possibly good for more than just taking up space. At least I might know what questions to ask.

I stood up and approached him again, stood over him watching his face. He didn't look quite as clean-shaven as I was used to seeing him. His forehead was dry and cool to my touch. I took his limp hand, bent down and kissed him on the cheek – I could smell his familiar smell – "I'm going now, Grampa," I said. He didn't react.

Again, as I left his half of the room, that feeling of guilt for leaving him there. There was something hard-hearted about health that prevented the healthy from even imagining what it was like to be another way, and as I walked out I became one of the hard-hearted. I could turn my back on 717, I could pass down the hall ignoring the struggles going on in all the rooms, take the elevator down, walk through the lobby and the revolving doors and out onto the street. I could see the sky, not through a window. I could breathe outside air and drive away. I could do whatever I chose and my body would work so well that I wouldn't even have to think about it, and Tom would remain there unable to help himself.

I thought, not for the first time, that perhaps I should have become a nurse. But I would have had to pass organic chemistry to do that, too. And on a more fundamental level I doubted I had the courage for the job.

I went to work on edge, waiting for news. Around noon my mother called. "They've put on a permanent cast," she said. "And they're not finished doing tests."

"How is he? Did you see him today?"

"No, I finally got a doctor on the phone."

"He looks terrible," I said.

"You saw him already?"

"Yes. Yesterday. I went in in the afternoon."

"Why didn't you tell me you were going?"

I didn't owe her a bulletin on every move I made. "You already spent forever in there, why would you want to go back?"

There was a tiny pause which I interpreted as It's not worth fighting over. "He does look bad," she said.

"He looks about a hundred years old. His face seems kind of – caved in. You know what I mean?"

"I hate to say it, but I do," she said.

"What's really wrong with him? It's more than his ankle, right?"

She sighed. "I think it is, hon."

"I so don't want to believe that."

"We're going to have to get used to it. The reason they admitted him, besides his ankle, was because they suspected he had a stroke."

"Oh." I wasn't entirely sure what that meant, old people with one side of their face that didn't work, his didn't look that way.

"If it was just his ankle, they'd have him out of there and into rehab, like tomorrow. Today. As soon as they could. But it isn't."

"Oh." So this was only the beginning.

"We told them he wasn't the same. But I don't think they needed us to tell them."

She waited for me to say something. "So that's why all the tests?"

"Yes. Oh, and I brought his medications in? That's what they want you to do. He hasn't been taking them. Unless he's been putting new pills in old bottles. But I don't believe that."

"Oh great."

"You know how he hates to go to the doctor." I wanted to say, Is this as bad as I think it is? But I was afraid she'd say yes. "I'm going to go in later, maybe you could meet us there after work."

Meet us. Just what I did not want to do. "Okay."

"Try not to dwell on it too much. It doesn't do any good."

"I know," I said.

It took about twenty minutes to walk from work to Beth Israel and the whole way there I was dreading seeing my mother and Will. Terry would be there, nothing too horrible could happen. I wasn't going to bring it up in front of him.

I knew which way to go this time; I bypassed a couple of layers of waiting with a grim feeling of now belonging. I was Family of the Patient. Walking toward his room I felt part of me wanting to turn and go back, but there was no such option and I entered to find my mom and Will and Terry all standing there over Tom. I could see them before I could see him: first Will, then Terry who was not looking at Tom's face, then my mom bending over him. Will and Terry glanced at me and grunted "Hi." No one cared that I didn't reply. My mom was focusing on Tom, holding his hand. "Everybody's here now, Tam just came in." He had his eyes open and was looking around at us, surely he could see me for himself. His eyes lighted on me briefly but moved away. His face still looked drawn and gaunt. My mother said to me in a low voice, "Talk really plainly, okay? You don't have to yell at him, but don't mumble." Then she made room for me to bend over him the way she had been doing.

"Hi, Grampa," I said, feeling everything at once, sadness, dread, awkwardness at not knowing how to be any use. I took his hand and I thought he squeezed it a little. Again he looked at me for a moment and then away. He was hooked up to a new monitor, more complicated.

"Nothing," he said.

I looked at my mother. She made a little rolling hand gesture that meant Keep talking.

"I came yesterday to see you, but you didn't notice. You were asleep. I guess they gave you something for the pain? Are you feeling any better today?" Weakly he pushed at my hand, as if it was in the way and he wanted it off the bed. Was it hurting him? I took my hand away. "Was that bothering you? Sorry," I said.

"All a thing!" he said in a weakly angry voice. "All, nothing, all!"

I looked at my mom again. She sighed heavily and gestured with her head toward the corridor; I followed her there. "God almighty," I said, when we were in the hall. "What? What is it?"

"He's had a stroke."

"Was he like this when you found him?"

"He's gotten worse."

"Is he – does he know what's going on?"

"I don't know how much he understands. It could be he understands everything we're saying. But you see what happens when he tries to talk."

"He knows who we are?" We were talking in murmurs as if he might overhear.

"I think so. I hope so. I don't know. I think he does. I want him to. If he doesn't know who we are, we can't do much for him."

"Even if he does," I said.

"I know."

"God, this is awful. I can't believe that's him."

"But we have to. That's the thing. If he's still himself, inside, we have to keep treating him like who he is."

"I had no idea," I said.

"You know how much you mean to him. So maybe it will help a little that you're here. You don't really have to do anything except let him know you're there. And you could talk to him, the way you normally do. I know it's hard."

I thought of when I brought the notebook back and how absurd it would be even to mention my problems to him now. "What do I talk about?"

My mom looked worn out. "I wish I knew."

We went back into the room. Terry was sitting on the window seat leaning forward resting his chin on his hands, his usual taciturn self but now it seemed completely fitting. Will was in a chair against the wall, staring heavily ahead but not at Tom. Both of them waiting, for what? It didn't seem as though anything was coming. Tom wasn't looking at either of them. His eyes flickered over us when we came in but didn't stay with us. I pulled up another chair next to the bed, too aware of the rest of my family watching my every move. "It's me again," I said.

Tom's eyebrows went up and he made a face that looked like skepticism, or disdain. If he was still himself inside, then that face should still mean what it would have meant, and that was what? He was not putting up with this crap. Well, of course not. No one could.

"This really stinks, doesn't it?" I said.

"On, over onner station, standing through."

"What? I didn't understand."

"Wearing," he said in a voice that suggested that should clear it up.

"Oh." Maybe I should play along? Pretend I got it? Or would that only make things more confusing for him? Just say something. "I was worrying about you all day at work."

He made a face as if I had fed him something bitter, repulsive. Was that the wrong thing to say?

"Orange, stable, aphid re. Blue."

I felt as though what he was speaking was a language, just not one I knew. Divorce the sounds from meanings I expected, from English, what was left, the sound alone, the tone of his voice, muffled as it was by drugs or what was wrong with his brain. Sounded what? Angry, before, then insisting, trailing off. Trying to break through and failing? I would be angry if I were in his situation, if I were still me to know it.

"Yeah, it's awful. I hate it, too."

He looked me in the eye for a moment as if we had communicated, then made the face again of something tasting bad. Was his face like his words now, unable to say what he meant?

All I could do was sit there with him and hold his hand. I looked around at my mother, who subtly shrugged her shoulders to say she didn't know any better than I did. Then I just sat and watched his face, his eyes darting about the upper part of the room as if he were furiously thinking, then closing. Would he fall asleep? He opened his eyes, looked over at me and seemed to notice me in a perfectly lucid way. His hand pushed at mine, pushing it aside, the message clear: go away.

I took my hand off the bed and sat looking down at the complicated mechanized bed frame with mysterious writing on it. What was "Trendelenburg"? My feelings were hurt by his pushing me away and yet I thought I could understand, knowing Tom and how much he hated to ask for help, or even to be helped, this must be about as bad as that could get, to have his whole family sitting here feeling sorry for him. But it would be even worse if no one cared. I had seen him, what? Barely over a week ago. He had been himself and now that was the last time, ever, that I would see the Tom I knew. We had talked about – nothing really – ordinary things, stuff about the house and how his truck needed to get fixed, that would be our last conversation ever. "God damn," I said softly, without meaning to.

"Only," Tom said. He seemed to be agreeing. I looked up but he didn't meet my eye.

For quite a while, then, the four of us sat and Tom lay there, and no one said anything or made eye contact. We experienced time



passing, or not, the distinction was impossible to make. I realized that in his room there was no feeling of time, it must be this way in every room and that was why there was a clock on the wall wherever you went, because otherwise it would be impossible to keep track or even to believe time was moving at all, if it was dark out you would accept dark and if it was light you would accept light and you wouldn't even expect one to change to the other. It was dark now. "Mom?" Terry said, startling me a little. "I'm gonna go, okay."

"You don't want a ride with us? We're not going to stay that late."

"I'll take the T." His face said, I know I'm no use here, you know that, don't we all know that?

"There's leftovers in the fridge."

"I know. See ya, Tam."

"Yeah, see ya."

Terry's big, but he walks quietly and he has a way of seeming to vanish, as soon as he's out of sight you feel he's miles away, or maybe he wasn't ever there.

An aide came in with Tom's dinner. She sat him up straighter, put the dinner on a tray in front of him and talked to him about it. Of course she got no response. If he had been his normal self, he still might not have responded, or he might have snapped at her to take it away. I knew perfectly well how little he liked a stranger bringing him a stranger's food. My mom said, "I'll help him with it."

"I think the nurse might need to, I'll tell them at the desk."

The aide left. "Need to what?" my mom said irritably. She sat down in the chair by the bed and said, "Tom. They brought you some dinner and I think that means you need to eat it. Do you want some help?"

He said nothing. We all knew how stubborn he could be. "Really. I'm serious. You need to eat something."

My mom offered him a spoon. He looked at her, undoubtedly angry, but she didn't stop offering it to him. There was a standoff for a few moments and then he took the spoon from her and dropped it over the side of the bed, where it clattered on the floor. My mother sighed and looked at Will. "I don't know what else you can do," he said. "Maybe the nurse is a good idea."

My mother rang the call button and I thought that if I had to see a nurse come and feed Tom like an uncooperative baby, it would be more than I could bear. "Mom. I'm going out for a bit, okay?"

"Where are you going?"

"Downstairs. To the cafeteria, I guess. I just...need to."

"You're coming back, right?"

"Yes."

As I turned to go Will said, "Do you think you could get some coffee?"

The last thing I wanted to do was wait on him. My mom said, "Yeah, that would be great, Tam, if you could."

"What do you want?" I said, facing the door.

"Anything you can get that's coffee," Will said.

I didn't answer; I left the room as the nurse was coming in. I wandered for a while in search of the cafeteria, ran across a coffee stand, didn't want to go back up. Aimlessly I explored the maze of passages, stared indifferently at the gift shop, read notices on bulletin boards, anything to keep reminding myself that the door to the world had not closed on me the way it was closing on Tom. Or already had. Impossible to take in. From that to this in how long? A day, a minute? One moment he was himself – old, yes, but still making it, still entitled to the rights and privileges of being a person – and the next...

I did not have a choice; I got coffee and made my way back up. When I got to Tom's room Will and my mother were standing watching a nurse who had Tom sitting up in bed; she was listening at his back with a stethoscope and Tom was coughing, hard. "What's going on?" I said.

"Something didn't go down right," Will said. I didn't want to hear it from him.

"Apparently he's having a hard time swallowing," my mom said. "I think he aspirated something. Something went down his windpipe."

The nurse straightened up, tried to make Tom comfortable which was clearly impossible. "He needs to sit up," she said, wedging him in with a pillow. "If you could make sure he doesn't slip to one side, he's weaker on the left."

"How do his lungs sound?" my mom said.

"Adequate," the nurse said, but from the way she looked at him, adequate was a long way from good. "He needs to be very careful when he eats, he's going to have to learn how. We'll develop a care plan before he's discharged."

"When do you think I could talk to his doctor?"

"Rounds are first thing in the morning, that's your best bet."

The nurse left us standing there. Tom continued to cough weakly. I was still holding three coffees in a cardboard carrier; I put

them down on the rolling tray that had held his dinner. My mom tried to arrange the pillows a little better for Tom. Will sat down and rubbed the back of his neck. "This isn't good," he said.

"You're telling me," my mom said.

"What happens when they discharge him?" I said.

"He'll go to a rehab hospital. Like Faulkner, or maybe Youville. It's closer to us."

"But --" I was about to say, He'll never get out, will he, he'll end up in a nursing home, but my mother stopped me with a look. I realized what she meant: don't say any more, he understands. She sat down on the window seat; I was the only one standing. Uselessly hesitating. There was nothing any of us could do. "I think I'll go," I said.

"We could run you home," my mom said.

"It's okay." I didn't want to be in the car with them, in the back seat, the old configuration. "I'll take the T."

"That's silly," she said. "It takes twice as long, doesn't it? Especially now, the traffic's died down some. We'll take you."

I wanted to refuse, but I didn't have the strength. I knew it would be a sign of hostility in the making, or of Tam being a pill, or something, and I couldn't get into it. "Okay. Thanks."

I put on my coat and bent over Tom. I couldn't really hug him but I put my face next to his and patted his thin shoulders. In his ear I said, "Goodnight, I hope you have a better night and feel better in the morning." I could smell him, the personal smell that was his alone. I did not want to miss my chance at that. His hand came up and touched my arm, surprising me; I held it for a bit, trying not to get teary because that wouldn't help him, would it? "I'm sorry I have to go, Grampa." He turned his head away and shut his eyes. I let go of his hand, left the room with my head down. Out in the hall I wiped at my eyes and waited for them to come out. We were all upset. There was no need for anybody to say anything. Or at least it would be understandable if I didn't.

My mom and Will came out, carrying the coffee. "You forgot yours," my mom said.

"I don't want it."

We passed down the hall in silence except for my mother sighing once. Will put his arm around my shoulders and I said "Don't" and shrugged it off. "It's tough," he said. No one responded. I pushed the elevator button.

"Do we have enough of that shrimp stuff for Tam?" my mom said to Will.

"It's okay, I need to go home."

"It's easy to extend it," Will said. "You might as well eat with us."

"No thanks." I didn't look at either of them. We rode down with a patient being pushed in a wheelchair by, it looked like, his son. He had one leg propped out in front of him and he appeared impatient to get home. I wished Tom could look like that.

On the way to the garage my mom and Will talked about logistics. She would have to leave early to make sure she got to the hospital in time for rounds, Will could drop Terry off at the high school on his way to work...Will drove, I got in the back seat and sat behind him so he couldn't see me in the mirror. My mother looked me over once. "You okay?" she said.

"Don't worry about it."

"I'm not worrying. I want to know."

"I'm okay."

She turned to face forward with her neck at a certain angle that meant, All right, be that way. The drive to my place was quiet; after a while Will turned on the radio and jazz came out. It helped a little. At my house I said "Thanks" and opened the door as soon as we came to a stop. My mother said, "I'll call you after I talk to the doctor."

"Okay. Thanks for the ride."

"Goodnight," Will said. I couldn't be quite so rude as not to answer.

\*

"It's not so good," my mother said. I was sitting at my desk going through my e-mails when she called. "His blood pressure is elevated, his heart rate is up, he's having episodes of atrial fibrillation."

"What's that?"

"His heart. It's weakened, it isn't pumping blood well. If he hadn't quit taking his blood pressure medication this might not have happened. But it might have anyway. No one knows."

"Well, can they do something about it now?"

"Not really. They can't cure it, if that's what you mean. Just try to control it."

"Every time I hear what's wrong with him, it gets worse."

"I know. It is worse, sweetie. That's just how it is."

I didn't know what to say.

"His lungs don't sound good, either," she said.

"God, stop."

"I want you to know. You need to know."

Was she telling me he was dying? "Should I come over to the hospital?"

"Not right now, there's really no point. Just come after work. We'll be there."

"Okay."

"And Tam?"

"What?"

"We've all got to get through this together."

Then began a period of time outside of time. I believe I continued to go to work, but if I did, I wasn't exactly conscious of what I did there. Those were the breaks, during which my mind turned off by doing what came automatically in that setting. Reality was inside the hospital, in room 717. Yet most of the time nothing happened there. There were interruptions in the nothing, frequently, but most of them were forgotten as soon as they were over. Nurses or aides would come and take vital signs, restart the I.V. pump when it began dingling to signal that it was blocked, hang a new bottle of whatever was slowly dripping into him, try to feed him. Three would come at once and shoo us out so they could change his bed. They had put a catheter in him which I did not like to think about that drained urine into a bag hanging at one side of the bed, and from time to time someone would unhook this bag and replace it with an empty one. They would check his cast. They would talk to him about whatever they were going to do and he would not reply, or not understandably.

What was not forgotten were the infrequent appearances of Dr. Park, who was Korean-American, young-looking and round-faced, and did not seem to remember that average civilians didn't necessarily understand medical terminology. She looked tired and sure of herself and in control. My mother and Will understood her better than I did, and knew more about what to ask. But there was no need to ask whether Tom was improving; he wasn't. Our job was to sit with him, but he seldom paid attention to us. Our job was mere presence in his room, where something was happening and we weren't sure what, except it wasn't good. There were visiting hours but no one seemed to care if we overstayed them. At night it was necessary to inform the

guard at the front desk before going up in the elevator. Tom's condition was not stabilized enough to discharge him to rehab. He had aspirated some particles into his lungs. His kidney function was...something. Not what it should be, apparently. I couldn't hear his breathing slowly become more labored as I sat with him, but when I went away and then came back again, I could tell the difference. Every time I came back I braced myself for seeing his face again. I could not get used to the shock of seeing him ancient and, say it, appearing to be on the verge of death. But he wasn't, they said. If they could get his lungs to clear a little he would be able to be moved to a different situation. The sooner the better. He needed to get out of bed, to start moving again, he was losing his muscle tone, what there was of it to lose.

\*

"Grampa, it's Tammy."

"Tammy," he echoed, without recognition, in a flat voice that seemed to come from within a cave or burrow, as if he had crawled deep inside himself. Did he know that word was my name, or did he just imitate it?

Please understand, I thought. "I'm Tammy," I repeated.

"Tammy, what say."

"Your granddaughter."

"Grand, grand, grand, grand."

"David's daughter."

"David, no."

I had no idea what he meant or if he meant anything. "No, Grampa, I'm not David."

"Pickle," he said.

I thought, grasping at anything. "Yes, we're really in a pickle."

"God damn."

"Exactly. God damn."

\*

There was nothing but waiting, without limit. There was all the time in the world to think, but I could not seem to think sequential thoughts. I felt as if I were ill myself and having one of those interminable days of illness when the mind circles over the same nonsense phrase for hours at a time. Mine went over the people in my

life: my dad (dead), Tom (possibly dying), my mom, Will, Terry, Evan, Emma, Tam. When I came to myself on the list I hardly felt that Tam was closer to me than the others.

\*

One late evening when I was the only one in the family in the room with Tom, Dr. Park came in. Hurrying past the room, toward somewhere else, and at the last moment she decided to duck in and glance at her patient. She didn't notice me in the corner. She came around the curtain and saw him and for an instant the resilience went out of her body, her jaw tightened and her lips compressed. It was as clear as if she had spoken: she knew he was going to die. It pissed her off as a doctor that her work hadn't worked. Then in the next moment she was already resigned to it, she conceded defeat. She looked away from Tom and realized I was there; her professional face returned, and she spoke to me but I don't know what she said. I answered somehow but all I was doing was waiting for her to leave so I could cry.

I had stopped crying by the time my mother and Will came in carrying cups of coffee. They didn't pay much attention to me. We each had an appointed spot in the room by now. They sat and talked about logistics, grocery shopping, the car that needed servicing, the dehumidifier in the basement...fury went to my head listening to that and knowing what I knew. I wanted to scream at her He's going to die, his death matters, don't you even give a damn –

Unconsciously, Will unhooked the metal band of his heavy-looking watch and dangled the watch from his fingertips, twirling it and catching it, fiddling the band around and around as I had seen him do a thousand times. His hands were large and plump, with some brown spots on the backs. His fingernails were cut as short as possible. He didn't wear any rings. He was not her husband, not my stepfather, not anything to me, why was this man sitting in this room with us when my grandfather, who was no relation of his, was about to die?

I couldn't sit there with them another second or I would say something terrible, something that couldn't be taken back; I felt their eyes on me as I left the room, felt them thinking Now what? What's wrong with her?

The hallway was dim and quiet except for subdued voices from the ceiling and the soft dinging of monitors and I.V. pumps. Rooms occupied, rooms empty, some patients would leave the hospital, Tom

would die. It was like I was on a cord attached to him and the farther away I got the more it stretched, pulling me back toward his room. I could only go so far. The more uncomfortable the pull of the cord became, the harder it was to breathe, but I could not breathe in the same room with them either. The sunroom at the end of the hall was empty. I sat down on a bench with my back to a window from which, in the daytime, I could see Cambridge in the distance. Elbows on my knees, hands holding up my head.

Feet came into my field of view. My mother's. She sat down on a chair at right angles to me and a few feet away. "Are you all right?"

"No."

"I know it's hard."

"He's going to die."

"We don't know yet," she said.

"I saw the doctor."

"She told you something? When?"

"No, I saw. Her. Her face. She looked at him and she knew. And then you came in and started talking about the fucking dehumidifier."

"Tam, really, I'm –"

"Why is Will here?"

"What do you mean, why? Where else would he be when this is happening?"

"Why?"

"What are you talking about?"

"Are you going to tell me the truth? Are you planning to, ever?"

My mother's face looked completely drained. "Christ," she said. "Now what?"

"I read the notebook," I said. "My dad's notebook. I know why Will is here."

She groaned. "God damn it, Tam. God fucking damn, that was not supposed to happen. How did you get ahold of that?"

"I found it in Grampa's desk, where he keeps the bills and everything. He asked me to look for something."

It was my mother's turn to stare, exhausted, at the floor. "Well, at least you're old enough," she said. "I hope."

"Why didn't you ever tell me?"

"Because I didn't think it would help you to know. And it appears I was right."

"Why'd you do it?"

"Which 'it' are we talking about right now?"



"When you had the affair with him, after you got married to Dad."

"I don't know if I can do this now."

Stop trying to weasel out of this. "Just say it, okay? I just want to know. I know it's the wrong time. There's never a good time."

"Do you understand that I don't owe you an explanation?"

"Did you think Dad wouldn't care?"

"Absolutely not."

"What was it, then? Marriage didn't mean anything to you? Why'd you get married if it didn't matter?"

"I got married to your father because I loved him, Tam, and you know it."

"I used to think I knew a lot of things but now I am not so fucking sure."

"Stop feeling sorry for yourself. This is not the end of the world."

"Well, it sure feels like the end of something."

I halfway scared myself when I said that, and in another way it was thrilling. I sat there not looking at her, tensed, waiting for her next move. Now she knew and I knew I was not going to back down, and we were not going back to the same, only forward and no one knew where.

"Tam," my mother said, "Will and I both understand that you're very upset."

"Don't give me 'Will and I,' I want to talk to *you*."

"No, you don't. You want to yell at me. Look. I know it's hard to lose your grandfather, it's hard for me, too. I'm sorry you're upset, I'm sorry you read that goddamn notebook of your father's, I'm sorry you found out the way you found out. But you know what, Tam? I am not sorry about the way I've lived my life or the way I've gone about being, pardon the expression, your mother. Much as my being that seems to irritate you."

"It's a simple question: how could you do this?"

"How do you suddenly know everything about right and wrong? Have you lived to the age of forty or fifty overnight?"

"Did you really love Dad?"

"Yes."

"And you slept with Will, on the side."

"And I ended it, and I never looked at anyone else."

"That was good of you."

"Tam, you've basically been angry at me ever since your father died, and frankly I'm sick and tired of taking it. You're an adult. If you don't like me by now, I'm sorry, but maybe it's too late."

"I want you to tell me one thing."

"No, I want you to stop talking to me in that tone. Climb down off your high horse, for God's sake. If you could see yourself, you'd know better than to act like this. It isn't even you. I don't know who you're trying to be, but just let go of it. You can't make life come out the way you want, do you understand me? You can't, I can't, nobody can, and you can stop taking it out on me. If that's what I get for being your mother, I quit. You're raised and you can take care of yourself."

I felt I might explode with rage, kill her, jump out the window, anything, I could do nothing because if I did anything, if I said one word or moved a muscle, I felt I wouldn't be able to stop.

"Do you think everything is supposed to work the way you prefer?" Shut the fuck up *now*, I thought. "Let me tell you something, if it works at all, that's an accomplishment. What would you have had me do after your dad died? If you'd been the one who had to hold it together for two kids you could go ahead and yell at me all you want, but you weren't, I was, and it was for your benefit."

"Stop," I said. I was holding my head as if bricks were falling on it.

"You stop."

I sat staring at the floor between my feet. Could I, without meaning to, push myself out of my family? It had not occurred to me that I had the power to do anything that drastic. Apparently, two things: what I said mattered, and I would pay the price.

"I don't know much about what goes on in your life," she said, more quietly. "And I guess that's the way you like it. But you haven't seemed very happy ever since you got back from Washington. I don't know if this is what you think, but I want you to understand. I haven't messed up your life. What happened between me and Will hasn't messed up your life. Even the fact that your dad died hasn't done that to you. You can't go on forever thinking people did things *to you*. It's your life. Everybody gets something to deal with, growing up. It is what it is. There comes a point where it's totally up to you what you're going to make out of it. Really, totally, up to you. And nobody else."

I hated her. Did she think I didn't know that? Who else's life would it be? Definitely not hers, she appeared to be washing her hands of me for good. The strangest thought came into my mind: Girlfriend Tam had the right end of the stick. At least she knew that she was the

one driving the car. Of course, she acted as though she wasn't even in a family, and maybe she didn't want to be, but then maybe neither would I once Tom was gone, no that wasn't true..."I hate this so much," I said, not to her, not even intentionally, the words just came out of their own accord.

"I know what you mean," my mother said exhaustedly. I was staring at the pattern in the floor tiles and didn't look at her. She stood up and for a moment I thought she was going to put her hand on my back as she walked by, but she didn't. "But we've got to get through it," she said, and I heard her footsteps go back down the hall.

\*

Dr. Park applied the word "pneumonia" to the condition of his lungs, and we knew that was her way of saying it was over.

"Do you want me to tell Terry?" I said.

"No. But thank you. We'll tell him. I think he knows anyway." I was all but certain he did, which was why telling him would not be as hard as it might have been. Terry always knew the important things, though it was a mystery how he found them out.

\*

A nurse said, "I've seen patients linger like this for a week, even ten days." They had taken out the I.V. He was no longer aware of us, so far as anyone could tell; he was receiving nothing but palliative care. They had told us that hearing was the last sense to go, and if we wanted to talk to him, we should, or that simply hearing familiar voices in the room might be a comfort to him.

\*

"What will happen at the end?"

"He'll spike a little fever, and then in a few hours, he'll pass."

\*

Each time I left I thought, Is this the last time? I would bend down so that my nose was next to his neck, and smell him, and in his ear I would say "Grampa, it's all right, if you want to let go, you can let go. I love you."

\*

My phone rang in the middle of the night and I knew. I reached for it, next to the bed, fumbled it open. "Hello."

"Tam," my mother said. She didn't go on. I thought she was trying not to cry.

"Is it over?"

"Yes."

"God." I felt as though I had had no time to prepare for his death; it was as if it came upon me as suddenly as my father's and caught me defenseless. Now it was over, all gone, my father, his father, Terry and I were all that was left of them. To pick up the pieces if we could.

"I'm going down to – see him. To say goodbye. Do you want to come?"

I couldn't not go. "Yes."

"I'll pick you up in ten or fifteen minutes."

"Is Terry coming?"

"He doesn't want to."

"He should."

"It's up to him, Tam."

"Is Will?"

"No. Try to be downstairs when I come."

We hardly spoke on the way to the hospital. It was three in the morning. There were no unknowns now. The parking garage was not as empty as I expected. The lights in the lobby were lowered and no one but us was in the space except the guard behind the desk. We approached and my mother said, "We're here to visit Mr. Aller, in 717. Who has just died."

The guard said, "I'm very sorry." He picked up his phone and spoke into it. "You can go on up," he said.

Even at this hour, a few announcements came from the ceiling.

In the elevator I felt almost outside my body, light-headed with exhaustion. We went down the dim hallway, past rooms whose lights were off or only faintly on, hearing a few dings. The door of 717 was closed, and on it was a sign: DO NOT ENTER this room without checking at the nurses' station. We both knew why, but we went to the desk. Yes, we could go in. We could stay as long as we wanted and no one would disturb us.

My mother pushed the door open and I followed her in. First there was an empty bed, perfectly made up; the other occupant of the room had been moved two days before. The curtain around Tom's bed had been pulled all the way back, as it never had been in all the time he had been in the hospital, and one dim light was on at the head of the bed. He was arranged neatly in death, his hands on his chest one on top of the other, his eyes closed. He was lying flat, not tilted up the way he had always been. No machines, no monitors, just Tom and death as if on stage. I thought he looked hardly any different. My mother rested her hand on his forehead and said, "He's still warm," and started to cry. I touched him too, his hands and then his head. I stroked his thin, fine hair, like a baby's, and I bent down to put my nose against his neck and smell him one last time. His whiskers that had been growing ever since he was in the hospital prickled me sharply and it was as if he was telling me, You have to leave me now, you have to let go. I straightened up. I was crying too, and my mother held onto me as she hardly ever had for what seemed like a long time, I couldn't tell if she was trying to comfort me or if I was trying to comfort her.

I found the tissues and offered them to her. We blew our noses and wiped our eyes, then we stood side by side contemplating Tom. The father of my father and of her husband. He could not be replaced, nothing in life could, all loss was forever. I thought of Tom's soul hovering up around the ceiling looking down on us, seeing us say goodbye, and I hoped it was really true.

His glasses were lying on the nightstand, glasses no one would ever use again. My mother put them in her pocketbook. If she had not, I would have taken them. We could not leave a part of him to be thrown out in the trash.

We looked at each other and at Tom. "Are you ready?" she said.

How do you leave for the last time ever, when you know that's what it is?

"Do you want some time alone with him?" my mother said.

"Yes, thank you."

She looked down at Tom for a long moment and then quietly left the room.

I was alone with him and his death in the dimly and, for once, warmly lit silence. The hospital room seemed no longer like a hospital but a temporarily sacred space. I wanted to say a prayer but again I didn't know how. I would just have to improvise, the way I was going to have to improvise everything from here on out.

"Thank you for helping Tom Aller to pass over and leave the world, and please help him to know how much everybody loved him, and how much I loved him, and may his soul have peace, because he didn't have enough of it during his life. That's all I know how to say." I wondered if Tom saw me do this and if it surprised him.

I touched his hand. "Goodbye," I said, and then I too left, closing the door behind me. My mother was waiting in the hall.

\*

On the way home, I kept thinking about the prayer I had said in Tom's room, for the peace of his soul, and if I meant it, wasn't it my job to bring about what peace I could? This was the time. Not that it was easy at any time. "Mom," I said. I had to make up my mind again before I could say it. "I'm sorry I started that fight. In the hospital." We had not said one word about that conversation since.

She just nodded and drove for a while in silence. We were going north on Mass. Ave. "We've all been under a lot of stress," she said. She stopped at a red light. We were the only car in motion on the street. "I so much wish you hadn't found that thing, it must have been awful for you to read that."

"I wish I hadn't too, but once I found it..."

"I know. How could you not."

"I was so angry at you --" Why did I say that?

"I noticed."

"I still need to understand."

"Tam, I can't be yelled at tonight. I can't do it. I won't."

"No, I promise, I just want to ask you something and no more high horse or any of that. Really."

Her foot came off the gas and she pulled over in front of Elegant Tailor, across from the West Side Lounge. She turned the car off, leaned her head back against the headrest, and closed her eyes. "Ask," she said.

I had thought a lot about what the real question was. It wasn't did she love my father, because I knew she did (she was right about that), it wasn't even did she love Will because I knew she would say she did, it wasn't what was the difference because I didn't want to know. It had to be what my father had wanted to ask and never got the answer to. So far as I knew. "What made you want to in the first place?"

"Have the affair with Will?"

"Yes."

My mother was silent for a while. She covered her closed eyes with her fingertips like she was trying to think, and then took them away. "God, Tam, it's so hard to say. I mean it's so hard to get it right. It was a long time ago and I'm a long way from being that young, especially after the last couple of weeks, and I don't know if I really remember how it felt or if I just think I do."

"Try," I said.

"I am," she said, with a bit of an edge in her voice.

"This really matters to me."

"It's hard, Tam. I'm trying to do this for you. You promised not to yell at me."

"I won't." I remembered so clearly Tom saying to me, I'm only asking one thing. Be kind.

"I think when I was that age –"

"How old were you?"

"Twenty-eight. It was terribly important, to me, to be...that desirable. To be loved that much. I know to you it probably seems like more than a person should ask. But it didn't to me. And the times were different, everything was different, it felt like we could make our own rules."

"Did Dad feel the same way you did?" Because I didn't doubt that she felt she could make her own rules, but did he? That didn't sound like the father I knew.

"I don't know, sweetheart. After reading that...I wish it had never happened, in a way, but – I mean, this is my life, you can't wish away your life."

"I don't want to be around Will," I said.

"I know," she said. "I can tell. He can tell. I just didn't know why."

"I kept sitting there in the hospital thinking, He's not even part of this family, why is he here?"

"That is so unfair, Tam, don't you ever say anything like that to him, he loves you, don't you know that? That would hurt him so much ...God, you have to listen to me about this, please."

"It's how I feel."

My mother leaned forward, rested her arms on the steering wheel and her head on her arms. "Maybe we should talk about this tomorrow." But she didn't move, didn't start the car. We sat and I looked down Mass. Ave., where the traffic lights were changing with no cars to start or stop, and no one was on the sidewalks.

"I didn't mean to be so hard on you," she said. "In the hospital, I mean. I was just too exhausted to be anything else."

"I'm tough, it didn't kill me." She reached out and for a moment her fingers touched my cheek. I wanted that touch to continue after she took her hand away.

"Do I get to ask you a question now?"

"Okay." I knew I had to say yes, but it scared me a little.

"What do you really, really want? More than anything?"

I sat and thought about that. It felt to me like she hadn't asked me a question about my life in a very long time. But this was the night, if there ever would be one. Trust her to start with the question that was extra hard. I thought of Evan the instant she asked that, and then I thought I couldn't say his name to her. She'd think of us in high school and get it all wrong.

"I'm in love with somebody. And I fucked everything up with him, it was all my fault, and I want time to go back so I can do it over and get it right."

"Oh sweetie..." my mom said. She looked at me for an instant and then leaned her head back and closed her eyes. In the dim streetlight I saw a tear run down her cheek. I reached over and grasped her hand; we held on tight for a moment, then she let go and swiped at her eyes. "You're your father's daughter," she said with a little attempt at a smile. Then she started the car.

\*

My grandfather's wish was to be cremated. My mother said one of life's truly strange experiences was signing for the package that contained his ashes. They were in a cardboard box, inside which was a heavy black plastic container, and inside that was a bag with a twist-tie around the top. They were surprisingly heavy. I know all this because we took them and scattered them on his land and down by the creek, on the first weekend in April. Terry and I clambered down the bank to the edge of the creek and put some of his ashes in the water, where the heavier bits did not float away. We got all muddy climbing back up but we didn't care. Afterwards we lit a fire in the wood stove and sat around it and drank cocoa and talked about him, which was, I guess, his memorial service. Will was there and I was doing my best not to mind that; it helped that he didn't say much. Except at one point there was a pause and we were waiting to see who'd talk next, and Will said,



"I'm always grateful to him for accepting me into the family." My mom took his hand. I didn't look at him, nor he at me, and no one said anything else about accepting or not accepting.

T O M

I'm "walking" down a "road."

I am not walking. There is no road.

I'm not in my body anymore, but since when you imagine something here, you create it, I'm walking down a road.

That body is done for. It was an excellent body.

This place is deeply familiar. When I left the body, I realized some part of me had known that I would be coming here. This is the anteroom, so to speak. What comes after it is blank to me now, but I've been there before, too.

The road isn't straight, it's gently and continuously curving. I can't see very far ahead or behind. On one side, the land slopes down, bowl-shaped, a vast bowl that I can't see the other side of. It's a dryish, Californian-looking land, with trees growing in clumps here and there on it, testimony that there's water here, and where there is water there's life. On the other side of the road the hill rises up more steeply. There are trees on the hillside and some kind of brush. The road is dirt. Eventually I will come to the end of it. That's the only time there is here: I will be here for a time that will end, and then I'll leave and go on to whatever is next.

There isn't any other time. Language doesn't work well for this. It wouldn't be true to say that I imagined this road and then it came into being. No, imagining the road exists; the road exists; imagining other scenes exists; they too occur; whatever was/is/will be here exists at once and what happens, that I must speak of as if it were in time, is only a shifting of my attention.

David and I stand in the shade of a tree together and are healed by each other's presence. We can talk now as long as we like. We are brothers. He is the elder; he died before I did.

I'm with Maggie again. Also, I am her.

I am aware of Tammy when she's thinking about me. The most intensely focused moments, like her prayer over my body, are the clearest to me. I love her the same way, that is no different here. If anything, clearer. "My" soul as it were, the soul that was Tom, and the soul that is Tammy chose to be together, before Tom's lifetime began. It was a long wait on earth for her to show up. Tammy and David were the two souls I had the most powerful agreements with, that we would do our learning together. I would prepare them for theirs and they would be the cause of much of mine.

I've barely begun to consolidate the learning of the lifetime just past. There is much debris to clear away first. The lifetime was difficult; the soul tends to get ambitious, to bite off more than a person can chew. Some of the suffering didn't create learning but instead got in the way, took up energy that could have been used otherwise. Letting go begins, but it isn't finished. I have not let go of David or Tam or Maggie yet. I don't want to. Tom doesn't. As long as I am here, there is still Tom-ness, that is still the channel through which the soul still agrees to flow. I have let go of Sadie; I think it happened before I left the body. Maybe it had to happen before I could leave. The thought of her is neutral. I've nearly let go of Susannah, I can feel the neutrality close by, on another of the sliding panels that can slide into view. I have not let go of Terry; he has not let go of me. I feel him intensely here, more than in life. Terry's heart holds more love than anyone knows except, I think, Will. I cannot be sure. Will I can barely pick up, like a distant radio station lost in static.

I have not let go of Tom. Tom must be loved, by the soul-as-Tom, and then let go. That is what happens here, however it needs to. There is no time, it takes forever and it happens instantaneously, and when it happens, when the soul lovingly lets go of Tom and all the people Tom loved, when the lifetime is neutral, when there is no more attachment to its happiness or its suffering, then without effort it is complete. Then the unknown begins.

## T A M

In the weeks after Tom died, I felt the way I imagine a house feels when people take all the furniture out of it and vacuum in all the places they couldn't reach as long as they lived there. I led a pretty uneventful life and I liked it that way. Sometimes I tagged along with Emma and Brian's circle of friends, but mostly I stayed home and read. I was still taking American lit; we had to read *Moby-Dick* and I was actually glad it was so long and difficult and metaphysical. I figured out what I wanted the next course I signed up for to be: theology. It was a weird thing to realize about myself, but it was true nevertheless. I wasn't interested in religion, but I was in theology. I wanted to know how people thought the gods worked, and the spirit world. It didn't seem like it could possibly lead anywhere, but I didn't care. That was what I needed to think about.

I began frequenting coffee shops so that I could read with other people around, but not have to talk to them. I tried new ones every weekend. One Saturday in April I happened to walk into Panini, across the street from the Wine Cask on the line between Cambridge and Somerville, and the person behind the counter was Evan.

I saw him first and stopped so abruptly that someone coming in behind me bumped into me. Recognizing him, all unprepared, was like being stuck with something sharp. I took him in all at once, the same but older, his hair longer, he had a little more of a mustache than he had when I saw him last. My heart was racing; I was afraid to come closer, and I couldn't leave. I had no idea this could happen, but why didn't I? By walking in there I had ambushed myself. He felt me staring at him and looked up, in the middle of asking a customer what she wanted. When he saw me he went to cover his mouth with his hand. His eyes looked frightened. Don't look like that, I thought, please

don't. He deliberately turned his head away and then looked at me out of the corner of his eye, only for an instant, and shook his head. He had to ask the customer to repeat herself. "Okay," he kept saying. "Okay. Right." She must have wondered what was the matter with him all of a sudden. Evan busied himself with the espresso machine, pulled a pastry out of the case in front of him, rang up her order, took her money and made change all without looking my way again. There was a man in line after her, then me. I saw him sneak a look to see if I was still standing there, only the briefest glance, not high enough to risk meeting my eye. The guy in front of me hemmed and hawed over which sandwich to get because they were out of his favorite kind. I thought Evan's face looked a little thinner than it had. I knew there was someone behind me and I could hear other people coming in; it was lunchtime. I had tried a thousand times to rehearse what I would say to Evan if I ever got the chance, and now I wouldn't be able to speak a word to him without half a dozen people hearing, impatiently waiting their turn, oh do stop having your emotional crisis, I need to get coffee and get going. Evan rang up the guy's order and now I was at the counter, looking up at him, my hand sliding across it toward him, stopping halfway and retreating. "Tam," he said faintly. He looked like he wanted to run away.

"When did you come back?" I said.

"January."

January? All this time... "I tried to get in touch with you in Turkey," I said. "No wonder it didn't work."

"Tam, it's busy," he said.

"Can I talk to you? Please? I need to talk to you." He looked into my eyes as if he wanted to find out in advance if he could stand to do that. "I promise I won't –" do anything else to hurt you, I was about to say, but I couldn't blurt that out in the middle of the store and the waiting customers – "Evan, I'm so sorry."

He looked down at the counter, then at the line behind me and over his shoulder at the clock. "I have a break in an hour," he said.

"Okay." I turned away and as I left I heard him say, "May I help you?"

I went down the steps of the coffee shop and turned to look back in at him serving someone. I tried to read his face, to read what was in his heart, but I couldn't. As he was ringing up their order he looked up and saw me there. He gestured with his head: don't do that. Go away. I moved aside so that I was out of sight and kept going, up the street, without destination. What could I do now? I walked quickly

and aimlessly on the almost treeless Somerville streets, past apartment buildings right up against the sidewalk and iron pipe grape arbors and low chain-link fence painted silver. I remembered someone saying – where? somewhere in school – “There always comes a time when you’ve got to pay.” Mine was coming, was here, and waiting for it knowingly was making me less ready every second. Evan would have time to think of the exact words he would use to tell me he had no use for me, no desire to see me, ever, that I was over and done with as far as he was concerned. That I had no concept of loyalty and had utterly failed to live up to the promises I made him. And what could I say to that? I could only slink away, guilty as charged. I kept walking and looking at my watch and walking. The day was windy and not downright cold, but raw; the wind was blowing from the east and smelled of ocean. From the top of the hill on Beacon St. I could see downtown Boston surprisingly well. Tatters of gray cloud were flying along fast in the lower reaches of the sky, below higher gray clouds that seemed to be standing still. If he would let me touch him, hold his hand, maybe he would feel it, he would know it was still there between us. Maybe he didn’t want to know. Maybe he had someone else by now. Maybe it wasn’t there, simple as that, and this was all just a story I told myself to make my life seem interesting when really, it was as ordinary as they come. I was a white, middle-class twenty-four-year-old apartment dweller, college educated, white collar job, owner of a ten-year-old Toyota, single and without a clear direction in life, slightly on the tall side of average, neither scrawny nor fat, not gorgeous, not homely. My grandfather had recently died, surely a standard event for people my age. But Evan had somehow seen in me – what, I could not name, but something other than all that, something not on view to the rest of the world, not even known to me, and if that was never to happen again, if that was what I was about to find out...then what? Then maybe that something never existed. As my father’s notebook seemed, at its worst, to say. A little humility never killed anybody.

The hour had passed and I was one block away from Panini. I made myself take the long way around the block so that, I hoped, Evan would have a moment to take off his apron and turn back into a regular person instead of a server of coffee and baked goods. As I walked up to the entrance I saw him standing on the steps, not looking my way, and then turning, he saw me. He stayed up on the steps as I approached, two above me, not coming down. Studying me, his face unreadable except it was anything but happy. I could not keep holding

his gaze; I put my head down and marched up to where he was, then looked up at him. Sadly he said, "Hey, Tam."

"Hey, Evan." I reached my hand up; he took it, for a moment, tentatively, then let go. "Are you going to come down?" I said.

He stepped down to the sidewalk and stood there somberly, with his hands in his pockets, waiting for me to speak. Was he not even going to talk to me?

"Could we walk a little?" I said.

He set off the way I had come and I fell in beside him. He said nothing, and I saw I would have to speak first. "What are you doing now?" I said.

"Going to grad school."

"Really, in what?"

"Master's in teaching ESL."

"That makes sense." Were we really having this conversation, like acquaintances who run into each other at a party?

"And you?"

"Just working. The same. You came back in January?"

"Yeah."

"Did you feel it was, like, dangerous?"

"Not really, Tam, and what the fuck are we doing here?" Evan kept walking, his eyes straight in front of him.

"I don't know, I'm scared to death."

"Of what?"

"You."

"Me? You're the one to be scared of," he said, staring determinedly ahead.

I caught hold of his arm. "Evan, please stop and look at me. Won't you? Come on, please? Do you just hate me now?"

That made him stop and turn to me. "Yes, Tam, I hate you," he said, in a weird mocking voice that I couldn't understand. "How do you work anyway? How do you even think? What do you mean, do I hate you? Jesus Christ! Tam, you must be out of your *fucking* mind."

"I'm sorry," I said. "I'm so sorry, I screwed everything up, I know I did, I don't blame you for hating me."

"God damn it, Tam, I don't fucking hate you, don't be an idiot, why do I have to say that to you, don't you *know*? Shit. You do. If you don't – that's the whole problem, isn't it? If you could possibly have understood that I meant what I was telling you, none of this would ever have happened."

"I'm sorry I screwed up," I said again. "I just needed you here, right here, I can't apologize for that, it's who I am, if anybody understands that, you do, don't you?"

"I don't know what the hell I understand about you. Maybe nothing."

"If you don't, then maybe nobody does. My grandfather did, but he died."

"Everything isn't about you," Evan said.

That hurt a lot. "Believe it or not, I'm starting to figure that out."

We were standing by the pale blue stucco wall of an apartment building built right next to the sidewalk, and Evan turned away from me and leaned against the wall, looking down the street. He lowered his gaze to the sidewalk for a moment, then he turned to look at me again. "Tam. I have a girlfriend. I live with her."

"Oh Evan goddamn it, no." I put my arms around his neck and myself against him on tiptoe as if I could make it not be so. Up till that moment I had not actually believed it could happen. And it was my doing, my colossal mistake.

"Don't do this," he said. I would not let go of him. He stood there passively letting himself be embraced. "Tam, it's impossible." His arms came up and held me, ever so lightly, as if against his will. "Don't make me do this."

My face was against his cheek and I turned so I could kiss him there. "Christ," he said. "Tam" — then he was kissing me on the mouth. We stood there kissing on Washington St. in Somerville, in plain view of passing cars. One of them honked.

When we were able to stop I still would not let him go. He held me like he really meant to and said, "You don't have any idea how hard this is."

"Who is she?"

"She's an American I met over there. She came back here with me."

Within his embrace I shook my head. I didn't know what to say. There was nothing I could say. She came back to be with him. And then I popped up one day and I had no right to him, not a leg to stand on...

"Do you love her?"

"Oh God, don't ask me that." He let go of me and I of him, but I reached for his hand. He wouldn't let me take it.

"I made an even bigger mess of things than I thought."



We started walking again in the same direction, much slower now. I tucked my hand under his arm; it seemed like he could stand that. "What are we going to do about this?" I said.

"We aren't going to do anything."

"You mean we'll never –?"

"Don't."

We walked half a block in silence while I asked myself the same question until I couldn't hold it in any longer. "Do you want us to be together again?"

"Don't," he said.

"It's too late for me to change this, Evan, you're like my partner, I can't seem to fix that."

"Then how did you do it before?"

"I don't know. It was nothing. It was all fake. I never thought I loved anybody else, I just – did things. But I'll never do it again, I promise. If you let it happen."

"Christ, Tam, this is so fucking ruthless of you. You break my heart and now you want me to pass it on. To her. She doesn't deserve this. Does being in love with somebody just excuse anything you want to do?"

Maybe, in some part of him, he really did hate me. I remembered my dad's notebook, saying People will do what they feel they have to do. And yes, I would. I was doing it, right then and there. "It's not an excuse," I said. "I'd rather be inexcusable if it means being with you, I know it isn't very pretty but it's what I am."

"Those are the choices?"

"Oh, how the hell would I know. Life is just fucked up. Do you want to know what I found out? I found this notebook, this journal, that belonged to my dad and guess what I discovered. You know my mom's boyfriend, Will? It turns out they had an affair. She was cheating on my dad with Will before I was born. And then my father dies and Guess Who turns up and now he's practically my stepfather, how's that for ruthless?"

We got to the end of a block and turned the corner while Evan thought. "Maybe it's karma," he said. "It's so neat it's almost hard to believe. But karmic stuff is like that."

"I wonder what ours is, then."

He smiled, for the first time, and nodded, giving me a look of shared understanding, and I thought It's going to happen. Sooner or later it has to happen. "That's the big one, all right. Exactly how much shit do we have to put each other through."

"Isn't it enough already?"

"It isn't up to us, I guess."

"I think you really believe this."

"It's getting to that point."

"I cannot give you up," I said, because I knew it. Simple as that, and as complicated.

Evan shook his head, and gave me a sideways look that seemed equally compounded of resignation and affection. "Tam, you are so fucking *you*."

"Thank you."

"You're gonna have to give me up now, because my break is over and I need my job." We started to head back toward the coffee shop. I took his arm again. "And plus..."

"I know. You have a girlfriend." For now, I almost added.

"Be something else."

"What?"

"I don't know. Invent it. Think of a word for it. Think of what we can be." I couldn't tell if I was now the one whose heart was being broken, or if I was incredibly fortunate, I could only tell that this was absolutely my life. "I work here every weekend. When you think of it, come tell me. I make great cappuccino. I told you that a long time ago."

"When I tell you, will you agree to be it?"

"Yes."

"And we'll never back out on this?"

"Never."

"What if I don't come up with a word?"

We were at the steps of Panini. "Come anyway," Evan said. "If you don't tell anyone, I'll give you the coffee for free."

"Can I kiss you?"

He shook his head No.

"Never?"

"Not here," he said, and went inside.

I turned away and began walking up Beacon St. toward my car. *Not here* echoed in my mind, and it kept turning into *Not now* and *Not yet*. But it was not never, it was the opposite of never, meaning at some time, some place, in this world, he and I...I could feel this thought within me as the seed of hope taking root. I thought, I am Evan's something – that there isn't a word for – and he's mine. No matter what else happens or who he's with. I couldn't stop myself from racing ahead to the next time I would see him, when I would walk in on a Saturday (Wouldn't it be next Saturday? How would I be able to wait

any longer?) and he would look up and before I got up to the counter he'd have started doing his thing with the espresso machine, and he would give me the coffee without my having ordered and we would talk a little and he'd have to remember everything between us, all of it, including the parts that could never happen with anyone else, it would be impossible for him not to know that and eventually – but I had to not go there, the whole fucking universe was not about me and if I remembered that and didn't try to push it out of shape, what was secretly unfolding would come of its own accord. Just live, I told myself as I came to my car, keep breathing, it is in motion and that's all I need to know today.