A STEADY LESSENING

BY

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A STEADY LESSENING

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Abstract

Presented here is a novella plus an academic introduction. The introduction attempts to explain how the use of literary theory, specifically theory of the novel, can be in a productive dialogue with the creative process and the novella serves as a case study for the points made in the introduction.
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Introduction

I submit for my dissertation, *A Steady Lessening*: a novella. As a writer, I have always been primarily interested in style. For the careful reader, style is where the most interesting tension is created or deflated. While a dynamic plot may carry a reader quickly through chapters, an author's style is what that carries a reader, slowly, from sentence to sentence. Style can present the most elaborate challenge for the writer, as it is typically easier to know what needs to be said throughout the course of the book, but much more difficult to choose how to say it. There are as many opinions on what makes a compelling style as there are authors. Flaubert famously aims us toward God-like prose that is both "invisible and all-powerful." Nabokov wrote, "Style and structure are the essence of a book; great ideas are hogwash."

For me, achieving a style that read as fresh, unique, and clear was extremely difficult. The novella I've submitted to you has been rewritten and revised many, many times and will, truthfully, undergo several more revisions in the future. At times, I felt carried away by unnecessary poetic impulses that served only to draw the reader's attention toward my authorial construction, toward "me as writer." The writing I admired most and wanted to model my intentions after never lost sight of the need for clarity, the need to both excite and welcome a reader. Yet, at the same time, the writing I loved the most didn't always make itself immediately accessible and some of my most pleasurable moments as a reader were the ones spent considering the possible interpretations of a sentence that was as elegant as it was complex.

My hope is that I write like a person of my temporal moment, a twenty-first-century reader who is aware (with varying degrees of knowledge) of the shifts from
eighteenth- and nineteenth-century authorial prose style that appealed to a sense of universal truth, what Roland Barthes calls "the reference code," to the popularity of free indirect style and its transition into stream-of-consciousness in twentieth-century Modernism to the meta or magically real elements that often characterize a Post-modern authorial style. I am probably most influenced by contemporary literature, beginning with the minimalists of the nineteen eighties (often referred to, somewhat derogatorily, as the Kmart realists) such as Raymond Carver, Ann Beattie, Joy Williams, and Tobias Wolff.

Another powerful force driving this novella is my desire to engage in the act of "noticing." Noticing is what Viktor Shklovsky—who, in his Theory of Prose, terms it "defamiliarization" or "enstrangement"—believes to be primary aim of art, the way we are awakened to the sensation of life, and the strongest defense against the habitualization that would "devour works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war." James Woods writes in How Fiction Works, that noticing in literature creates a dialectical relationship with the world. "Literature makes us better noticers of life; we get to practice on life itself; which in turn makes us better readers of detail in literature; which in turn makes us better readers of life." Great noticing occurs when an author surveys a scene that would ordinarily flood the senses with detail and elevates the exact right details to render the scene completely and selectively. For example, Flaubert's description of Frédéric's walk through Paris's Latin Quarter in A Sentimental Education,"...all sorts of peaceful sounds could be heard, the fluttering of wings in bird-cages, the whirring of a lathe, a cobbler's hammer; and the old-clothes men, in the middle of the street, looking hopefully but in vain at every window. At the back of the deserted café's, women behind the bars yawned between their untouched bottles ...." Or noticing causes us to slow down
and take in something that would ordinarily be skimmed over or neglected, such as Saul Bellow's description of a cigar being, "the white ghost of the leaf with all its veins and its fainter pungency." Or noticing can be the thing that so effectively brings a setting to life. In *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo evokes exactly the massiveness of a war protest in New York City by saying, "The crowd was large enough to make any part of it seem the middle." Or noticing can efficiently reveal the nature of a character in a simple line as Salinger reveals Seymour's wife, Muriel, as being, "a girl who for a ringing phone dropping exactly nothing." This high level of noticing is difficult to achieve, but is a beautifully important form of art because, as Flaubert said to Maupassant, “There is a part of everything which is unexplored, because we are accustomed to using our eyes only in association with the memory of what people before us have thought of the thing we are looking at. Even the smallest thing has something in it which is unknown.” In my novella, I have struggled to find unknown or often overlooked details and bring them simply and clearly to the reader's attention. Whether I've done this successfully is up to the reader, I suppose, but the intention is there and I've taken great pains to "notice" with care.

This is also an incredibly personal work, which is not to say that it is autobiographical. Memoirs and nonfiction boast their correlations to their writer’s lives. Some novels serve as treasure hunts for the well-informed reader: Woolf is *really* writing about her brother or a member of the Bloomsbury Group or her own thoughts of suicide or her jealousy/admiration of Joyce; Herzog is a stand in for Bellow himself; Zuckerman is Roth; Seymour is Salinger. Theory, philosophy, criticism shows a map of the author’s insights, as all constructed things—if we buy what John Berger has said—are a record of
how X has seen Y. Writing forms a spotlight on what the author sees as being important, relevant, worthy of his or her or our time, and it is in this way that all writing becomes autobiographical. *A Steady Lessening* is technically autobiographical in a few ways. My mother, like my protagonist Maggie’s mother, raises horses. I, like Maggie, am involved in education as a profession. The novella’s setting—primarily a country farmhouse in Kansas, surrounded by acres and acres of wheat fields and forests—is directly inspired by the environment I grew up in; however, the house and surrounding acreage of the novella is not written to depict my family’s home as it is now, but rather as I remember it from my childhood. The easily identifiable parallels end there. I have never been all that interested in writing about my actual life, the details of which feel like the details of any life: one day came after another after another. Instead, I am drawn more to ideas about the world, memories, selves. Not the information one tells, but what it is that makes one choose one set of details to tell over other sets. Not what is said, but how it is phrased. Not a novel’s plot, but its point. As a means of explaining this, I am often reminded of a bit from Lorrie Moore’s satirical short story, “How to Become a Writer,” in which the nameless narrator has her story returned to her by a poorly-completed professor who comments that her work has no discernable plot. She responds by writing faintly in the margins, “plots are for dead people, pore-face.” With that in mind, this dissertation proposal has been written with the intention of explaining—or at least exploring—not what my novella is, but what it does (or is trying to do).

The writing that I love and return to over and over possesses a complexity that goes well beyond plot, narration, exposition, and character development. I am an admirer of work that also makes careful use of rhythms, tonality, temporality, recursions,
symbolism, and structure in a harmonized and focused manner with the intention of all the elements operating together to support a point of view or philosophy that the author uses as the connective thread that unites the novel. Writing that achieves this is often quite difficult to read, as it tends to be complicated and unwilling to give up their meanings easily; however, the gifts they give the curious and persistent reader can be endless. *Ulysses* is probably the most exalted example of a novel that holds such complexity and challenge and reward. In *Ulysses*, one has a novel that baffles, entertains, and mystifies readers, causing them to return and return to its pages. Scholars, of course, write books far longer than *Ulysses* that try to decipher and explain the mysteries held in Joyce’s pages. Now, I am definitely NOT saying that I’m trying to write the next *Ulysses* (ah…if only), but I’ve looked to it (and *Mrs. Dalloway*, *The Recognitions*, *Sleepless Nights*, *Nausea*, *The Sound and Fury*—the list goes on and on) as an exemplar that speaks to just how much a novel CAN do. This sort of study lends me more insight and awareness as I write and edit my own novel.

The study of literary theory has also aided me greatly with the construction of my novel. Many of my peers have expressed that viewing their work from an academic perspective has seemed to weigh them down unproductively as they are trying to complete a creative project (On many occasions, Dr. Barnard has quoted me Nabokov who, in perhaps an attempt to scoff at theorists, said that he would rather be the “bird” than the “ornithologist”), but literary theory and history can provide lenses through which the novelist can better see their work (why not, if possible, be both bird and ornithologist?) and for me these lenses have led to the questions upon which my novella is built. Claude Levi-Strauss’s work, specifically his assertion in “The Structural Study of
Myth” that narratives present an imaginary solution to an unsolvable problem, has been greatly influential. Once I’d read this and Jameson’s continuations on this concept, I chose to rearrange the way I had previously been considering my novella. What unsolvable problem was my novella providing an imagined solution for? What questions did my novella seek to answer? These inquires replaced my interest in plot points following each other in a Freytag’s triangle progression with an interest in building conceptual foundations for the novel. This has helped me grapple with the question: why should my writing exist?

Franco Moretti, in the introduction to his two-volume anthology The Novel, synthesizes the varied scholarly approaches to the field by splitting them into two intersecting perspectives: the cultural and the formal. He writes, “First, the novel is for us a great anthropological force, which has turned reading into a pleasure and redefined the sense of reality, the meaning of individual existence, the perception of time and of language. The novel as culture, then, but certainly also as form, or rather forms, plural” (1). Other theorists could and do split these intersecting perspectives into far more categories (in The Political Unconscious, Jameson writes mostly of three concentric circles of interpretation being the political, the social, and the historical), but the emphasis of this field is not on how many perspectives apply, but rather how they intersect. The study of the novel is always one of multiple colliding viewpoints, a look from both inside and outside because, as Moretti states, “the novel is always commodity and artwork at once: a major economic investment and an ambitious aesthetic form” (1).

I have also been hugely influenced by Georgy Lukacs’s slim book, The Theory of the Novel, published in 1917, which explores the history of the novel as it evolves from
the epic form. In this text, Lukacs argues that the epic belongs to an ancient time in which the world was given in totality, rather than a time of fragmentation that marks modernity. Lukacs uses this long-past era of the epic as a means for building a model with which to contrast the role and function of the novel. He writes, “the novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, yet which still thinks in terms of totality” (56).

Meaning in life is a problem for the modern mind because, through the fragmentation of modernity, man is able to be self-reflexive, ironic, and possess a rich interiority. The epic cannot recognize the fragmented interiority of the mind because the epic, as a genre, is fixed, rigid, and complete. In the epic “a purely human understanding between the tragic characters’ souls will never break through, as it sometimes does in prose; the despair will never turn into elegy, nor the excitement into a longing for lost heights; the soul can never seek to plumb its own depths with psychologistic vanity, nor admire itself in the mirror of its own profundity” (Lukacs 56). Perhaps because the epic cannot address the profundities of the human mind, modernity is marked by a nostalgia for this long past time of given totality. A time of given totality is also a time of total meaning. One’s fate lay in the hands of the gods and genres were complete and closed thus making complete understanding and meaning achievable. This, of course, is not what it is to live. Life, Lukacs writes,

means the absence of present meaning, a hopeless entanglement in senseless casual connections, a withered sterile existence too close to the earth and too far from heaven, a plodding on, an inability to liberate oneself from the bonds of sheer materiality, everything that, for the finest immanent forces of life that
represents a challenge which must be constantly overcome—it is, in terms of formal value judgment, triviality (57-58).

The world of the epic provides an escape from the trials and trivialities of lived life. It is an already formed model that we can look to and find ready-made meaning. But it is not life, it is a dead form, and so the novel takes on a new form that allows for a “plumbing of psychological depths” in order to mirror modernity with all of its complexities, questions, subtleties, unknowns, fragments. Although Lukacs criticized formal experimentations and authors who employed them such as Joyce and Kafka, the connection between his theories and Modernist prose is evident. Novels like Ulysses, Mrs. Dalloway, and The Waves exemplify the novelistic approach to capturing the complexities and fragmentations of the modernity Lukacs describes.

In The Dialogic Imagination, M. M. Bakhtin both extends and breaks from elements of Lukacs’s arguments. Bakhtin uses the epic as a model of fixedness and rigidity in order to contrast the novel, a form that is alive, unfolding, and more attuned to “the tendencies of a new world still in the making; it is after all, the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it” (7). The flexibility of the novelistic form allows the novel to be more representational of life as it is, Bakhtin argues, as opposed to life as it was or life as it nostalgically is constructed within an imagined totality. The novel is able to incorporate layers of language that construct an organic, flowing form that is importantly historically present. Bakhtin writes that literary language within the novel becomes, “dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing—the novel inserts into these other
genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openness, a living contract with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the openended present)” (7).

While Lukacs’s perspective on the novel is rooted in a socio-historical method, Bakhtin’s seems to provide the inverse view in proposing aesthetics as the richest ground for critical discoveries; however, these perspectives should not be seen as oppositional, but rather as crucially interlocked. Language is both an artful and political mode of expression. Language, Bakhtin explains, is not abstracted away from reality, but is embedded in reality as the currency of our social transactions. Language is both semiotic code and social institution and the mediation of social structures through heteroglossic language is a political act as it asserts the individual in place of a static authoritative voice.

Stylistically, I've been influenced by Modernist prose and its break from the dominant realist style, which was once an inventive style meant to break with the romantic style of the previous era. Those old aesthetics simply did not fit the rapidly changing psychological and political landscape of the Modern era and were replaced by the seemingly chaotic, swirling, imagistic, and engaging prose style that is typically associated with high Modernist prose. In such prose, the reader is thrown directly into the world of the Modernist narrative without the grounding and stabilizing establishment of the setting, the characters, the plot in a logical, ordered way. We are given the mental landscape of the characters to interact with ourselves, to find our own way in and out of the text. We are not given the limits of the scope of the narrative, nor are we given definite meanings—thus allowing us our own entry and exit points—because no meaning is given, we are forced to make our own meaning. This can be read as social critique and
protest voiced through narrative. The realist novel opens with orientation, thus already giving you the proposed “correct” direction to be following. By “disorienting” you, the Modernist novel not just allows, but forces your subjectivity into motion, thus leading one away from hegemonic social structures and further into the singular self; the individual mind.

The expressed goal of many Modernist authors was to create prose that rejected dominant ideologies, using both content and style as means of opposition. They also claimed to attempt to show how ideologies are erected, who they serve, and how they become indoctrinated into a common social consciousness by interrogating the most immense and influential social constructions—things that, by the nature of their appearance seem outside of a system of question. The institution of marriage, the family structure, heteronormitivy, class system, an allegiance to nation—characters in modernist novels reject these institutions, while the style of the writing rejects the method with which we are indoctrinated into these institutions. Modernist prose shows preoccupations with solipsistic mental landscapes, unreliable narrators, uncertainty in a Godless universe, rejections of conventions and modes of normalecy—this curiosity and dissention is captured on the page through an obsession with the aural qualities of language, manifested in euphonic repetition, percussive musicality, portmanteaus, puns, homonyms, allusions, inferences, and onomatopoeias.

My hope is that my novella exists to explore the many ways in which one’s selfhood or “sense of self” is formed. In a loose sense, my novella is additionally influenced by bildungsromans, but instead of explaining a “coming of age” in a
succession of life events, my novel focuses on how fleeting images, parts of phrases, daily detritus, and seemingly minor memories accumulate into a “collage of consciousness” that drives the personalities of my characters.

At first the reader may get the sense that Maggie, as a character, is stilted or strange because it seems, at times, that she cannot access “genuine emotion,” but the novella is meant to question whether there is such a thing as “genuine emotion” or if all emotion is constructed, but if it is all constructed, how is it constructed? The novel’s answer is that emotion is constructed by many small encounters with things such as sitcoms, commercials, movies—of course I am using/aping Baudrillard here—but also with things we hear or read in a brief and distracted moment such as strange newspaper stories, comments overheard in a grocery store, anecdotes told to us by strangers at parties, etc. All these elements come in and out of Maggie’s consciousness as she attempts to forge an understanding of her present moments, and we see just how reliant her responses are on these deceptively small influences.

Throughout the novel there are several instances where I purposely inserted references to what I was seeing or reading or thinking about at the time. I did this to add another, perhaps meta, layer of “collage” in order to show that the novel itself must be—as I indicated at the opening of this introduction—an autobiographical collage of, if not the events of the author’s life, then of the author’s thoughts and sights and memories. I am helpless to be anything other than a construction of my experiences and when writing a novel, I cannot help but pull from what my understanding of writing is and so what I’ve read ends up in what I write. We are all derivative in that way, but I wanted to play up that borrowed nature in order to further the overall intention of the novel. An example of
these “references” comes in the opening line of the novel, which is, “Alone and in
darkness, they resolve to walk slowly.” This line is borrowed/stolen from Descartes’
*Discourse on Method*. His line is, “Nonetheless, like a man who walks alone in the
darkness, I resolved to go slowly…” This line stuck with me and I wrote it into the
opening of the novel to initiate the immediate sense of a borrowed consciousness. In
another scene, Maggie is following a student who is unaware of her presence. This is a
reference to Virginia Woolf’s character of Peter Walsh who follows a strange and
alluring woman through the streets of London sensing that her gestures are calling to him,
saying you, you, you. Maggie imagines that her student is also silently communicating
with her:

Lost in thought, wandering, both, together. Elsewhere others looked for buses, but
he walked without want, past shops and park benches. She, behind, with him,
watching. He tilted his head, were his lips moving? It is hard to tell from where
she stood, but she thinks that he was maybe seeing something—a word, an idea, a
moment before him as he walked instead of seeing people on the street or other
things that might be available to touch and confirm. You, he was saying to
Maggie with his slow gait and lost aim along sidewalks abraded by others. I am
just like you.

There are other references, but I won’t give them away. Part of the point is that
others discover them, thus making a treasure hunt for the avid reader, but also a reminder
of how we share the same information, always. We are readers, writers, intellectuals—
naturally diverse, and yet we’ve read or been told to read Joyce. And aren’t proud when
we can refer to Joyce or see Joyce in Bellow or in Pynchon or in *Mrs. Dalloway*? Aren’t we happy when we get to say, “I know that—it is something I recognize.”

All of these references are meant to underscore the idea that what I see ends forming what I think. What I hear finds itself in how I am able to speak. As I was writing, I kept coming back to these questions regarding my own wished for “specialness” and “uniqueness” and I kept coming up with the same answers: We fight to be individuals, but remain derivative. We fight to be singular, but will always lose that fight in the same way that we fight to stay alive, but will die, absolutely. I was alive and I fought to be what I was, but what did it matter, really? And was that “I” anything other than a possibly more interesting collage of what others have already been and done and said. And I entered into this sameness freely because I chose to speak the shared language. I chose to recognize the signs and ascribe meaning to them much like everyone else did. These are hard ideas to come to terms with, maybe. Perhaps this is why memoirs are so popular and films use “based on a true story” as a selling point. Maybe we are hoping that if *one* person’s story can be exceptional, then *my* story can be exceptional. When we find that a memoir has been exaggerated or fabricated—the Oprah/James Frey throwdown comes to mind—why the outrage? Where does that outrage stem from? Could it stem from the fact that something has been broken—a hope, the hope that one, specific life can mean something. One life can transcend the truth that we all know exists which is that we are not special. Why do we feel good when we watch mediocre people do meaningless things on television? Because we can point to them and say, “you are not special, and by identifying that we are special in contrast. My meaning isn’t special or singular. I look to corroborate. I look to see it twinned in meaning made by others.
I began writing this novel because I had formed a sense of a person who I was afraid I might lose. I had this voice, this character in my mind who, once she appeared, existed all around me. She became “Maggie” and I began to think of her as someone I knew. In conversations with friends or strangers, I would often think, “What would Maggie think of this situation? What would she say or not say? How would she interpret or be baffled by the actions and sentiments of others?” Maggie was such an interesting and complex person to me. She was continually unfolding and revealing other sides of herself. It’s hard to know how much of her is drawn from me and the way I see things; perhaps at first she was some sort of alter ego, but the more I wrote, the more she became a complete character—one who was not so recognizably drawn from me or from anyone I knew, although the ultimate point that my novel attempts to proclaim is that we are all helplessly drawn and collaged from others so I suppose Maggie is no different. She is unique only in her particular arrangement of influences, as we all are.

Maggie’s voice was often urgently asking questions regarding the social behaviors of those around her. She was confused as to how people made meaning out of simple gestures or slight changes in tone. The novel as a whole argues that all of these gestures and the emotions they create are socially constructed, and the way the novel explores that concept is through the eyes of someone who has not been able to become fully fluent in the language of these social constructions. Maggie is different from most of the people around her in the sense that others have internalized and naturalized the rules that come with these socially constructed calls and responses and are therefore able
to use them to communicate beneath their words to one another. Maggie is baffled, but intrigued by what seems like secret rituals performed by all around her.

Once you’ve read my completed novella, this introduction may serve to show only how I’ve failed to communicate any of the objectives listed here. I am currently going to through rounds of revision with my agent on what will be a much longer novel, of which this novella is only part, and I’m sure that those revisions will continue if an editor chooses to work with my novel for publication. Even after publication, I feel I will be refining these ideas for quite some time.
A Steady Lessening

Chloé Cooper Jones
PART ONE

Winter
Together in darkness, they resolve to walk slowly. Maggie and her mother are silent shapes, silhouettes in dim winter, walking. They reach the edge of the garden. Maggie waves a hand through an embrittled shrub, beheading. Berries—red once, gray now in lowlight—fall somewhere. The shrub is thorny and it cuts her hand, but she is too numbed to tell if she is bleeding. If she is, then the snow will be marked for them to see, soon, when the sun is up. Her mother is lost nearby; her features still seem visible, floating palimpsests, and Maggie is sure she sees the flash of her mother's teeth, but then hears her mother's voice from somewhere else, behind—a neat trick.

"Did you ever make a garden?" says her mother.

"No," says Maggie.

"Not even a little box?"

The sun crowns across a faraway field. Maggie steps ahead. Her mother is not keeping up. Frost cracks along the hard ground, opening seams for ryegrass to stitch through. The delayed grass gives a brief forgiving underfoot. Everything else had died mostly, undone by the cold in an incremental surrendering, inevitable in the always weak light of winter.

"I only ever lived in cities," says Maggie.

"You had ledges," says her mother. "You had windowsills."

Her mother's footsteps stall. There is a sound like shuffling feet, or she is kicking the ground, untangling herself from some sudden growth beneath her, but no, she is not kicking, she is trying not to fall down, but does, Maggie hears her mother fall. Perhaps
she has fallen on her hands, scratched her palms, is bleeding like maybe Maggie is bleeding. She does not turn around, does not speak, could never ask her mother if she is all right. Maggie knows that her mother is using the dark to hide the fall and Maggie does not turn around as a kindness; if Maggie turned around, her mother's fall would not be completely concealed, would be hinted at by the dawn.

"I tried to grow herbs in a window once," Maggie says.

She knows that her mother will see this as the polite lie, the gentling gesture. Maggie walks, but slowly now, slowly, knowing her mother will recognize this, too, as the deliberate masking of pity, ever sharper when obscured.

Maggie hears her mother struggle in the snow. These drifts give, swallowing limbs, presenting only false holds to press against—her mother, again and again, falling. Maggie keeps walking. She remembers herself as a child, seated on a bench in the barn as her mother readied a needle and thread. One of the horses had bitten the top of Maggie's head as she had picked its hoof. Its teeth had peeled back a small pass of scalp, made a flap of it. Her mother stitched it down. Maggie had wiped a thin line of blood from her face, away from her eyes. "Don't cry," her mother had said. "Don't you dare cry."

Maggie imagines her skin opening, her joints unwinging, the sponge of bone widening—imagines that she can push the winter air further into her body. She wants to see how cold she can be. Her suitcase is still in the driveway where she had dropped it earlier. Her car keys might be lost until the snow melts or maybe they are still in the ignition. She had only just left the car when, there: Maggie had almost not seen the figure in the field, no, at first only the boots, the break of color, the boots, just their dark red against a pall of white, then, her mother.
Maggie kneels. She crawls, hands skimming the ground, searching, until she finds a stone, then one more. Quietly, she slides them toward her mother. The stones are large, set there to break garden path from plot. The daughter edges them forward until they gently brush her mother, who will think she has moved, and in moving, has discovered the stones herself, can push against them. It takes work for her mother to sturdy herself and rise. Maggie speaks to cover the sounds of her mother's effort.

"The farm. You've kept it up by yourself? Does Emily come and help?"

"How long will you stay?" says her mother.

"Do you want me to stay?"

"It won't take too long."

"How long?"

"It is better to just ask how."

Her mother believes she is dying. She told Maggie this in an answering machine message. Her mother had said, "I will die soon. It seems rude not to tell you. So here I am, telling you." Then the sound of her mother hanging up, that sound, the correctness of the receiver back in its cradle. Outside, cars moved through gears. Sirens rang. Inside, the slush of the machine's tape moving, the mechanical note of the message ending, then nothing. Maggie imagined she was in an elevator, she saw the dinging circles brightly telling her where she was, whether she was moving up or down.

Should she be slumping to the floor? Shouting something? She is not much of a shouter, this daughter. To cry never occurs. She looked at her hands, in them, now, a cup of tea. She thought, What? Where did I get this tea? She tried to remember. Her actions went by unnoticed; her: so habitualized to herself, to living alone, to the sensation of no
one watching her. Why had she made tea? That was new and so it alarmed her to have
done it unconsciously. She drank coffee. She had only ever made tea for Sam. Sam
appeared to her. What? she said to the Sam in her mind. What am I supposed to do? Did
you leave this tea here? She should not call Sam to tell him about her mother. Where did
he live? He had moved away so long ago. Who had she heard that from? She could not
remember.

Look at this, Sam, she thought and she walked to a wall where she had taped up
many newspaper clippings. She tapped on an article about a woman who had been shot in
the head by her husband. The bullet had gone right through a part of the wife's skull that
wasn’t connected to anything too important and she had been fine. Her husband had then
shot himself in the head and died. The wife called the police and when they arrived she
was holding a towel to her bleeding head and was making tea. She offered tea to the
policemen and showed them her dead husband. The article did not say whether the
policemen drank tea with her or not. See, Maggie thought. Tea. People make tea.

A cup of cold tea. Maggie tried to remember how long she had been standing still.
When she had gone into the room, it must have been light outside, but now it was dark.
She had been standing at a wall until she realized that she could not see anything. Blind,
she touched the wall. Newspaper.

If Sam still lived with her, he would instruct her. He would hug her and look at
her and ask her, Was she okay? and would make her call her mother and make plans,
make them definite; he would speak of arrivals and departures, actual days, specifics; he
would dig out the suitcase—just one? both?—and suddenly she, Maggie, would feel like
a kicked and cornered dog. But Sam did not live with her. No one observed her and
advised her and this allowed hours to dissolve against themselves and disappear. And years: years left this way.

She would drive. There was a day between her and her mother.

Maggie had always believed that her mother would die from being kicked in the head by a horse. Had Maggie ever been allowed to ride her mother's horses, Maggie would have believed that she, too, would die from being kicked in the head by a horse. But her mother’s speech was clear on the answering machine, so—no major head injuries. The few cards from her mother or phone messages from Emily over the years had made no mention of illness or disease. When she called her mother, Maggie had not asked any questions, had just said she was on her way.

One hand held the wheel and the other was flattened sadly to the vents on the dash. She owned an old car and the heaters were weak, only thin breaths of warmth came to her palm. She switched hands. She tried to listen to the radio, but the voices of late-night announcers were too awful, too sharp. She tried to cover an ear by pushing it to her shoulder. She reached to rub her eye with the ends of her fingers, pinched the thinnest spaces of skin.

She wanted to have the energy to examine herself. She had not felt what might be considered the appropriate regret since the meeting with her Chair. She drove to campus. There was no one walking down the center boulevard, but as she passed the library she saw many heads framed in the brightly lit windows.

The campus was lovely in a massive way, in a way that justified itself, existed outside of explanation—the explanation, the worth, already implicit in the campus, itself, just being there; a child playing in his sandbox, the king of it. The buildings were all
angular and clean and someone in charge of such things flew trees in from other countries
and the flowers, too, and who had ever seen so many different types of trees and flowers,
and isn’t that the power of it? There: in the sheer number of things one can see on a walk.
The library was the most impressive building, the centerpiece. She should want to miss it.
Maggie’s office was on the top floor of the library, one in a row of windowless rooms
hidden behind the stacks that held the library’s collection of Japanese texts.

When she started teaching twenty years ago, she had crammed in books and
papers and letters half-written and notes on projects she planned to start or meant to have
started. She had loved to work in that office, in that library, both lending officialdom to
her work. Freshly sharpened pencils, all lined up. When Sam moved out, she began
working from home, preferring the complete solitude of her small apartment.

Her car coasted down the steep hill toward the rest of the town. She turned once
to look and could still see the library glowing itself apart from the hill.

The library sat at the town’s highest point, visible always.

It was as if the narrow road that led to her mother’s farm did not lie under any
county’s jurisdiction—it was unlit, ravaged with holes, forgotten. Maggie had driven so
far, girding herself against the miles, following the circles made by her headlights. She
listened to the sound of her tires slushing through drifts and melting ice. She drove
fearfully. The road seemed living, it was so untouched, and some stretches were flanked
by the safety of cornfields, but on other miles deep ravines or ponds or the large trunks of
trees awaited her swerving car.
She was getting closer. She focused on the feeling of moving forward, hurdling dimly toward dawn. She wished for someone to talk to. She placed a palm onto the passenger seat. She pretended to hold Sam’s hand.

"I know," she said aloud.

He might be smiling. Be careful, he said. The roads.

I am being careful. Diligent driving.

Tell me what you’ll do if you see a deer.

Honk, not slam on the brakes.

That’s right. Why?

Deer react to sound, not light.

But was that correct? She could not remember.

Sam, is that what you told me? Honk or flash my lights? Deer react to moving light or sound?

The Sam in her passenger seat was silent. She started a new conversation. She heard him asking, Was she okay? and she started to tell him, but stopped, remembered the meeting with her Chair, the message from her mother, the reason to be driving. Then the sheet of gray sky seen through her windshield was punctured by two globes, street lamps, announcing that she was there, in the small town where her mother still lived. A line of pink emerged, defining the horizon.

Hers was the only car in the intersection. She looked. She drove through the center of the town. Every business sat on this five-block crawl. First a gas station, then a post office, funeral home, flower shop, pharmacy, tanning salon. On the last block was Glen’s Opry. It stood like a ghost, a mausoleum. The block-long stucco building had
once been painted a bright orange, but now all was eroded to gray, a fading bruise. Glen had painted the mural on the side of the building himself. It had been of a sun setting over a beach. In front of the mural he had propped up six wooden palm trees. Maggie remembered the picture of Glen in the newspaper. It had been taken for a story announcing the opening of the Opry, which had been on some cold December day. Glen wore a parka and stood surrounded by snow that had been shoved up into mounds on the concrete around him. He was wearing sunglasses and leaned against one of the palm trees, sipped from a plastic cup shaped like a coconut. With his free hand, Glen waved to the camera. It is the same picture the paper used when they reported his death a year later.

The wooden palm trees had long lost their heads and were just brown poles, stiffly swayed to the right or left. The mural was chipped and washed out. Maggie could only see a faint gold outline of what had been the sun and only because she knew it had once been there.

Maggie tried to see Sam in her passenger seat again. That was Glen’s Opry. The Glen’s Opry, she thought. It was difficult to pretend she was not alone.

The story of going to see the ballet with her mother had been an anecdote once. Sam had asked her how she’d become a reader. They were both so young. She had not yet started teaching literature courses at the university, but would that autumn. She was at the beginning of her love for Sam. They were sitting at a picnic table in the narrow garden space behind their favorite bar. It was a busy night for the bar and they heard parts of people's conversations all around them. Maggie was drunk and looked to him as if he
were inescapable, about to pull her into the ground. The night air was warm. She smiled easily, being so aware of his watching her.

"The real plan was to be a ballerina," she had said.

"Of course, of course," he had said.

"I used to dance all day in my mother’s kitchen. I was good. I had nice, long arm movements, like this." Maggie stretched her arms above her head, moved them languidly around herself.

"Yes," Sam had said.

"But it was not meant to be."

"No?"

"My mother took me to the ballet. I was nine. It was a big deal in our town. This guy opened an Opry. Glen’s Opry. Mainly traveling gospel acts, but once a ballet came through. Romeo and Juliet. I was all dressed up. My mom, too. I remember wanting to cry. I left with absolute certainty that I had seen my future. Have you ever had that feeling of certainty?"

"I think so," Sam had said.

"It is never that way now, the way it was when you were a kid. I was so sure."

Sam had touched Maggie’s leg under the table.

"So, on the drive home," Maggie had said. She had been blushing then. "I said to my mother that I would definitely be a ballerina and could she enroll me in some dance classes? And she said that I didn’t have the neck for it."

"The neck?"

"She said that ballerinas must have long, graceful swan necks."
"I like your neck."

"I said to my mother, but I have a long, graceful swan neck, and she said, no, you’ve got a neck like a dog."

Sam had laughed. "I can’t believe that."

"It’s true. I was so embarrassed by my ugly dog neck that I started carrying books around with me everywhere. I would pretend to read just so that I had something covering my neck. Then, of course, one day I started to really read, then I started to like reading, and now I’m here. I could have been so much more."

"A dancer."

"A ballerina."

"I like your neck."

His hand on her leg. The promise of summer. Maggie had felt her whole body move toward the knowingness of she-with-Sam. Was everyone looking at them? How clearly could she be seen? Maggie had felt voices all around her. Sam, he had looked at her, he had been there, right there, he had been sitting across from her, all of him at once.

"Who could ever say anything mean about your neck?" he’d asked. "What kind of mother?"

Maggie pulled into the long, gravel driveway that led up to her mother’s farmhouse. Her mother’s house was intimately familiar. It was as if a long absent piece of Maggie was forcing itself back into her. She felt surrounded—suffocated, but still there is a certain warmth in this familiarity—as though she had suddenly been wrapped very, very tightly in a heavy blanket.
She looked out at the pastures covered in white. Her mother had given up raising horses the summer Maggie’s father had left. It seemed the fields and the barn had long gone unattended. Whatever overgrowth there might have been in a summer had been cut down, killed by frost and heavy snow.

There they were, the red barn boots. Maggie ran to her mother.

The snow was deeper with every step. Her mother was still so tall. The black was gone from her long hair, but in all other ways she seemed undiminished. Her skin was pale and her lips were blue with cold. In her red boots, Maggie’s mother, in the snowy fields—she wore a white nightgown, Maggie walked closer. Her mother held a frayed lead rope in one hand and made soft clicking sounds with her mouth. The sounds were directed at something Maggie could not see, but that her mother stared at.

"Hello," Maggie said gently, not wanting to startle her mother, but her mother had never been easily startled and is not now.

"Come on," she said to Maggie and waved her closer. "Watch this." Her mother made the clicking sound again. She said, "You can make any animal walk toward you if you know how to communicate with it."

Maggie’s mother changed the lead rope into the other hand. "But you can also make it walk away," she said. She raised a hand and put it, palm out, in front of her. "No, No," she said. She was still. She stared into the field with the steadiness that Maggie had seen so many times, but had never been able to mimic. Maggie’s mother looked into a space in front of her and was quiet and there were no movements in the field around them as all the grasses were dead or are weighted down with frost and the evening was windless. Her mother was still and could it be that she was sleepwalking? Then Maggie
wondered if she, herself, was asleep, if she had fallen asleep while looking out the
window and if, maybe, she had not made this long drive and, maybe, she would soon
wake up at the window or in her bed and the message would not be real either because it
had been such an odd message, dreamlike, and so it could not be real and, now that she
was thinking of it, many of Maggie’s actions had seemed odd and dreamlike and she got
so easily confused and so maybe this was all about to end with the sound of her alarm and
she would not be in the trouble she was in and she will not be standing in an empty horse
pasture with her mother. It was Maggie’s most hopeful wish.

Maggie was awake, cold, colder the longer she stood out in that snow. Maggie
watched her mother. They, together, stood still. Then, as if all along she was simply
waiting for a specific second and that second had come, Maggie’s mother wagged the
index finger of her outstretched hand. Back and forth.

"No, No," she said. Her face changed. She narrowed her eyes. She was in a
standoff with a horse that she, alone, could see. Then she smiled. "There he goes," she
"See?"
"How?" says Maggie.

"Just kill me, that’s how," says her mother.

"Let’s go inside," says Maggie. "Do you want me to run you a bath?"

Maggie turns away from the garden. A small circle of porch light shows Maggie a large ball of rolled snow. Her mother nods.

"I thought about making a snowman, but stopped because it was too boring."

The front door is heavy, has always been so heavy, and Maggie is surprised when her body remembers just how to lower and push against it. Her mother slides in her red rubber boots, the tracked-in wet making the kitchen floor an unstable plane. Maggie moves a chair from the table toward her mother and she grips it and sits.

There is a scent that belongs to the house, to her mother, to her mother’s things. There are two aquariums in the kitchen and each hold several goldfish. Stacks of newspapers are used as risers for the plants that line the floor of the kitchen. Maybe there are newspapers in the stacks from when she was a child, as Maggie’s mother has always used piles of newspapers to make small plants tall enough to sit above the ledges of windows. Maggie’s mother turns to one of the smaller plants and puts her mouth near its base.

"How were the roads?" Maggie’s mother says. Maggie watches her mother speaking into the plant. The smell of the house is everywhere without reprieve. Maggie is hot beneath her eyes. She had driven all night with an alertness that now leaves her. In her ears, a light sound, the squeal of air as if from a just unfastened balloon.
"I’m talking to you," Maggie’s mother says.

"What?"

"It looks like I’m talking to this plant, but I’m talking to you. This is good for the plant. The roads?"

"The roads were not great," says Maggie.

"Could you say it to the plant?"

Maggie kneels in the space her mother points to. She plucks off a few brown leaves. She exhales into the soil and imagines her carbon monoxide weeping down into the roots.

"More snow soon," Maggie says to the plant.

"Yes," says Maggie’s mother into her plant across the kitchen. "It’s about to get worse."

Maggie’s knees are already sore from kneeling on the hard floor and so she places her hands under them, palms cradle kneecaps.

"The semester is over?" asks her mother.

"Sort of," says Maggie.

The Chair had not seemed angry as he’d listened to Wendell. Not angry, the Chair—he had just regarded Maggie with repulsion. When Wendell had finished, the Chair opened and closed his mouth. His confusion made him look like a child. Maggie thought to hug him and say, I know. I know. It doesn’t make any sense. It made Maggie want to laugh. Who knows? We all do strange things sometimes, right? she wanted to say. Instead, Maggie had just looked back at her Chair. She’d kept still and waited.
The Chair asked Wendell to leave the room. Maggie watched the Chair’s face carefully, hoping to anticipate what was to come, hoping to prepare herself just a little. He was fat. The skin around his mouth and throat sagged to jowls. Broken capillaries on his nose made a red web that wound downward. Always a black sports coat. No tie. He had been published before becoming Chair of the English Department, Maggie knew, but now he only wrote reviews of other people’s work. He had the arching eyebrows and practiced maxims of a man who had planned to be more brilliant than he turned out to be. He answered questions in abstractions, disdainful glances, in a dismissive wave away.

Maggie tried to imagine the best possible outcome of this meeting. She imagined that they were the very best of friends. What have you gotten yourself into now? he would say with friendly exasperation. Or maybe he would say, Whatever will we do with you now, my dear? and he would be smiling at her. Maggie would throw up her hands. These students, she would say and sigh and they would both smile and leave campus and have a drink together in a dark bar and there, in the dark bar, she would get a little drunk and he would ask good questions and she would tell him all the things that were really bothering her.

"Sort of?" says Maggie’s mother. "But tell the plant."

Maggie watches her mother, she is kneeling, speaking softly, breathing into leaves. She notices that her mother has a perfectly round wound on the inside of her forearm.

"What is that?" Maggie says, twisting up her mother’s arm.

"Spider bite," she says.

"What kind of spider did that?"
"I don’t know," says her mother.

"Brown recluse?"

"You don’t see parts of my flesh falling off do you?"

Maggie moves closer. The affected skin inside the circular wound is red and raised. It looks like her mother’s flesh is falling off.

"Leave it alone," says Maggie’s mother. She stays kneeling, her face away, but does not take back her hand, allows herself to be inspected for many minutes.

She cannot see her daughter, but can feel her there. She keeps her other hand hidden, ah, she is thawing, she can feel her palm—the pain from her fall is made whole now, now she can feel the deepness of the cuts from the warmth of the house and the pressure of her daughter’s presence, pressing closer to her, holding her other arm, prodding other wounds open. She cannot see her daughter, but can hear her breath, her exhale, her way of not asking questions, her exasperation. She is busy, her daughter, wondering how long will this all take.

Within the warmth of the house, Margaret can feel everything. One palm bleeding. Her daughter releases the other arm and can be heard leaving, rustling through cabinets and drawers in other rooms. Her daughter does not know about the cuts on the palm, but will see this soon enough as neither can just go on talking to plants in the darkness. The sun will rise and the leaves will go from green to gleaming green.

Margaret needs to make an excuse, she looks for an object to break. She pats her fingers along the windowsill, finds glass, and ends its form on the floor, the floor shards it. She hears her daughter’s pause somewhere, elsewhere. Margaret pulls up the window.
She sweeps at the pile of glass and then realizes what she has broken. He was still hiding around the house. His things. Hidden to everyone but her. Even to her. Hidden. She knew what she had broken now. Did not need to look anymore. Something of Glen’s. It was a half of a salt and pepper shaker set from some other era. A salt, in the shape of a boy. A boy wearing wooden shoes, glass shoes really, painted brown to make the illusion of the material’s opposite. The pepper was a little girl in the same shoes, lost now, long gone.

Margaret lets out a little gasp. She moves the glass around with the bristles of the broom. She had made Glen nice suppers. It was something she could make with her hands that could be accepted simply, easily. She spent entire days planning out meals for them, shopping, specialty stores, outdoor markets. Fruits from roadside stands. Lavender. Let’s stop here, she would say to Glen.

This is what she had wanted: to be with him on a Sunday at a roadside stand choosing strawberries telling him that she would make him a pie. She would do it that night when they got home, when they were in their home that they shared, but the home had its traps, so she didn’t want to even be there yet, no, she wanted to just be with him at the side of the road, still choosing. Still, always, this sunny afternoon.

She has broken what little she has left of him. She had only just fallen in the snow. Why could she not admit it? Now another piece of him was gone. But how sad it is to be sentimental now about a salt or peppershaker, pathetic. One that they never used anyway as Glen had collected so many, too many, absurdly he had collected and collected and lined their ledges with things, with figures of glass or wood or plaster and so many of those things were easily broken or simply lost over time or thrown away. She, herself, had thrown many things away, then her husband had insisted on clearing out
what remained in the house, not wanting to look at what had preceded him. Sure, that was fair. They had rented a dumpster and tossed much as if into a cave, as if down a well, as if into a fountain, making wishes, establishing their life together in negative space, in what would not be there. Then a truck picked up the dumpster and took it away and there was a finality to that, absolutely, finality, a new absence that rang itself awake by its inescapability; but here was a little salt shaker left on the windowsill, also gone now. Gone. And she cannot help but feel a little cry rise in her, a want to clutch a treasure with her into death. But that is for the weak, such sweetheartedness. A touch at her elbow, her daughter, back with a bandage.

Maggie strains to see her mother’s wound. When searching through drawers, Maggie turned on a bathroom light, a bare bulb; the bulb was blue in front of her now, floating before her eyes, blinding her. She covers her mother’s bite, whatever it is, her pusing forearm. It is covered now and will maybe heal while neither is looking. She sees a broken figurine, blue ceramic, a relative’s gift maybe, Maggie thinks—Had there been an Aunt with a somehow lost husband, lost under a moving tractor, lost to trees that could not be split, gone, something like that? A half-remembered story. Maggie’s mother dropped it?—What is it?—a little Dutch boy, small. Maggie’s mother seems to have been waiting, staring into the floor, waiting until Maggie is in the doorway so that she can begin her exaggerated sweeping.

"Opened the window a little," says her mother. "The wind took this right over. Careful not to cut yourself. Look," she says and holds out her palm, scraped from her fall
outside, Maggie knows, sees three drops of blood on the carpet, already dried. "I cut myself cleaning this up," says her mother, pointing at glass. "Careful."

Maggie is in her classroom. There are her students. She can only see them in their parts, the nodding heads and bitten tongues, tongues out in concentration. She is saying something, but loses the meaning, a sentence, one word, then the next word, then another sentence, saying nothing, saying nothing, again, a mouth moving, she senses this, knows her students' displeasure and is undone. The faces, now on her, erase her. Undone, she is undone by grouped flesh; all facing her; her facing them; she is outmatched. They have a force, together; they are arms and cloth. Their full faces, their books, papers, pens, all aimed at her, in judgment, nakedly, without shame, waves coming together, gaining, colliding and turning over, beating the way to the shore, ever faster, no easing the force of it—but one always tries to hold a hand up, against, and then is subsumed, of course, as it could never be any other way. Something is sharpening in her vision as if with a lens changing, slowly, a movement together and a backing away, toward something new to be seen and the newness is darkness. She opens her eyes. More darkness. First, the softness of the pillow against her, then the heavy blankets, eyes open, what is she looking at? An empty water glass. It takes work to perceive. Her mother, this bed, where is Maggie’s suitcase? Still in the snow, still, she is still here. She has slept all day and it is dark again outside, night again.

Maggie listens for her mother. She cannot remember a time when she’s seen her mother asleep. Maggie walks to her mother’s bedroom door. As a child, Maggie would wake in the night and wander the house until she found her mother sitting quietly
somewhere, watching a wall, sometimes speaking softly. Now Maggie’s mother seems to be asleep, behind this door, but Maggie cannot be certain. It seems impossible—her mother in a bed, eyes closed, mouth open—impossible as she has only been seen in a state of utter awareness, her mother, once so edged, so whole, dying now, sleeping now, or is she sitting still in the darkness, unseeable, waiting at a window?

A big omelette, Maggie thinks. She prepares vegetables as she had been taught by her father, which is to say with great order, care, sure strokes, a sharp knife. She has a lamp on in the kitchen. It illumines only the square of her board, brightens her work unfolding: red crescents, the tomatoes; imperfect circles of dusty mushrooms. She chops all the vegetables she can find, chopping more, making the space in front of her first a tidy composition, but soon just a clutter; here, peppers and onion always cut last her father had said, the worst is saved for last, but garlic first, he had said, smash the garlic with the knife and do it well, never press it, use your knife as garlic will leave itself and then be traced through all you cut after. This particular advice, her father’s method of infusion, seemed somewhat romantic to Maggie, which was unlike him, he who had been meticulous, a man contained by unyielding reason.

Her apartment already feels very far away. Into her own sink she scraped food from old dishes and did little else. She jammed scraps through the holes of the drain, all clumps catching and left, forgotten. Had this bothered Sam? Sam. She cannot bring his face to her in her mother’s house. He had never been here and could not be here now. It was as if she had just left him in the car. She tried to see him. His face, once so present, was now moving backward into a cluttered landscape, becoming an object in a vague collection. Had he done their dishes? Had that been his role like it had been her father’s?
What were the pieces of others kept in her? Her father’s way of holding the onion, firm against the board, the tips of his fingers folded in, folded under his knuckles, his ways of safety. And in with these ways, the kitchen became his, his built world. I know where the bread is, he’d said once, moving Maggie around the kitchen by her elbow. I know where the cups go, the mugs go, each with its own shelf, different places, fruit is here, paper sacks under the sink, plastic ones to hang dry, I know where the cereal is and it is not where the crackers or cookies go, her father had said, opening the pantry and, with his hand on the back of her head, pushing her to see the differences. When you put this there, he said, lifting boxes, I do not know where they are, I don’t now know how to find them, they are lost, wasted, do you understand? he’d said. Do you understand? And Maggie had understood and spent little time in the kitchen and Maggie’s mother had the barn which seemed to hold its own design and in these ways her parents had been alike, makers of their own isolated spaces, and Maggie sees Sam, for an instant, in her memory, knocking softly on her closed office door, asking to be let in.

But Sam was gone and all her spaces were empty of anyone else; she cooked for herself and cleaned for herself and all was an ordering of her logic alone, just as her mother’s home, too, seemed devoid of any imprints from another. Just her mother’s things, her piles, her stacks, her plants, her fish tanks, where did all these fish come from? Two are dead. Maggie scoops them out with a coffee mug and flushes them away. Her own apartment—cramped in a city of many, a box in a building—housed no animals nor plants and she had never made herself a garden, not anywhere, not on her windowsills, but still she recognizes something here in the sprawled dark of her mother’s farmhouse. Maggie looks and sees herself twinned, imagines shining elevator doors closing, at first
showing two reflections of herself that move toward each other and make one image that will again be split when the doors reopen and it had been through elevator doors that she had first seen the student, Wendell, the one at the center of this vague and distant trouble she was in. The doors were closing. He looked up. They saw each other sliced, they smiled.

When her class was over, he took time gathering his things; this and his glance, the shared second seen before doors separated them, she took for signs for weren’t these recognizable and agreed upon signs? Wendell. She liked the way cloth hung from him, his clothing, his pants. They walked from the classroom, from the building, from the courtyards of campus, he kept walking and she was behind him. Someone passed him, passed her, too, she was so near, passed them and said, Hi, Wendell, but he did not notice. Lost in thought, wandering, both, together. Elsewhere others looked for buses, but he walked without want, past shops and park benches. She, behind, with him, watching. He tilted his head, were his lips moving? It is hard to tell from where she stood, but she thinks that he was maybe seeing something—a word, an idea, a moment before him as he walked instead of seeing people on the street or other things that might be available to touch and confirm. You, he was saying to Maggie with his slow gait and lost aim along sidewalks abraded by others. I am just like you. Then she had found herself in a parking lot and he was gone, disappeared at some point unknown to her, lost while she was looking and seeing something else.

On the kitchen walls only ever a scratch coat. Rough plaster, waiting. She is staring. There is the unpainted wall. She sees it and no longer the walk with Wendell. She looks down and in her arms is the largest bowl in the house, brimming with split eggs and
the vegetables. A dog is barking. A tapping, Maggie’s fork against the bowl, yes, but also something else, a different sound, her mother, suddenly there, sitting at the kitchen table, her fingernail ringing against windowpane, her nose pressed there, too, against glass, the mother, jerking her chair across the floor in dry screeches, moving closer, closer and from her a thin moan rising as she points again and again to what she sees is there, outside.
Chapter Three

The wind races around the farm making new geographies with snow, peaks and divots, shaking loose the branches, sending them slingshotting free. These piles of white—the wind builds them up in thuds, pushing weight off of the roof. Footsteps. Formless snowmen appear and then are quickly flattened as the wind changes its mind and builds barricades against the house instead. A knocking in the walls. In the dark, they hear the wind’s work, its whistle. It rattles the windows like joking ghosts. A branch cracking. A gunshot.

Two lights show the yard and Margaret sees something in the glow of the first. Then it is gone. Then in the second brightened circle, there, then gone, then back. It moves in and out of the light. A dog, something dead in its mouth, but is that what she sees? She’s been wrong lately, and so she knew it was time, time because of all the changing shapes showing as one thing and then emerging as another and is that a bleeding dog or a dog with blood falling from its mouth or no dog?

Her daughter works at a kitchen counter under two lamps, two lights inside making the glass of the window a black slate. That’s it, the mother thinks. There are no outside lights, no dog, only the reflection of the inside lights and my own dying mind. She smiles. I'm rotting, she thinks. She presses her hands to her mouth and bites her fingers to keep from laughing.

She’d seen her father die this way and, as a girl, she had imagined along with him. The eroding mind sees visions and his sight was magical. Her father gave her a world before he died. He would wake in the night and tell her, We are surrounded by oceans,
listen. You can hear the waves coming toward us. And in the dark it was easy to believe her father as anything sounded like anything, but in the morning, it was just wind through browning leaves and branches heaving and the blue raft he pointed to was a boy in a blue shirt throwing sticks at unmoving cows in a field that seemed so far away, far enough that if she unfocused her eyes, then the boy could be floating, swimming, not walking, and the birds could be seagulls, why not? What had she ever known about seagulls, living always landlocked here? What now did she know about seagulls? Were they not the ravens in the wheat fields as her father said they were? She had been so young and her father had been so easy to believe because it was true for him and he told her so convincingly and isn’t it so, isn’t it? That a daughter should believe her father?

She had seen all of this before and knew what was coming. And now the signs—the frequent confusions distorting the days. Most importantly, she knew how to protect her daughter, and she would. It did not matter that her daughter was an adult, capable of understanding the space between what she saw and what she knew. Still, a child wants to believe what the parent tells. Outside, is it a dog barking, branches breaking, gravel and snow grinding under tires? All sounds are muffled and distant and approaching. She stares into the yard, a form is moving toward the house, she can see it or, no, it is a figure mirrored in the glass, imposing, terrible. The unknown of it hangs for a moment, but then the reality is simple: it is her daughter behind her, walking to her with two plates.

"Omelette," says Maggie.

_Omelette_, thinks Maggie’s mother. On her plate, a rough yellow moon cut in half. It is the largest omelette she has ever seen. Undercooked bits of brown and green resist then break beneath her fork. She looks at the refrigerator, expecting it to look blackened,
raided. She imagines her daughter lifting the refrigerator above her head and dumping its contents into a frying pan. Had she taught her daughter nothing? But the kitchen had never been hers, always her husband’s. Hadn’t her husband, Maggie’s father, been a good teacher, an attentive man? He seemed from a time too far gone to remember. He had happened to someone else, been someone else’s husband, not hers. It couldn’t be that she and his wife were the same person. So many lifetimes and they were all collapsing now. This daughter had been a girl, her girl, but she could not remember what she had looked like then.

She closed her eyes and tried for a moment to see Maggie as a child, but saw only stock images, false familiarity, movie stills, blondes in pigtails and pink dresses or overalls or mud-stained…something…something from a commercial, maybe. A red-ribboned head of hair. Milk on the table. A kitten coming out of a pocket, a basket? Ridiculous children, parodies, none of them hers. Her Maggie, her Maggie…a quieter child.

To see Maggie now brings a shock, a sharp pain behind her eyes. She rubs them with the backs of her palms, over and over, and seeks out Maggie through the veil of red and black spots spinning, converging, then dissipating. Maggie is no longer a girl and it is grotesque to see just how far she is from youth.

Maggie is staring into her food blankly. She isn’t even pretending to eat it, but rather is looking as if trying to discern a species. Maggie’s palms are flattened on the table and her face hovers above, casting a round shadow that nearly perfectly shades the area of the plate. The omelette is so large, so terrible. She must never have cooked for anyone. Had she been alone all these years, this daughter, her Maggie? On some ugly
couch, eating out of boxes, her house a mess, no, she said she’d only lived in cities, in a
city? In an apartment, not a house. An apartment with unclean floors? Margaret imagines
her daughter’s unclean floors then looks at the kitchen now, at the piles here—the
messes, plants on stacks of newspapers, a permanent scent, and there is the aquarium
scent too, and are fish missing? The aquarium water is thick in the lessened light, so
maybe the fish are not gone, but hiding? Margaret sees some, but are there fewer than
yesterday? No, no, no, it is her mind tricking her again, of course.

It is hard to look at Maggie, who seems lost, elsewhere, not eating, just hovering
over her plate, side to side, moving her head to block the light behind her so that the plate
breaks into patterns of full shadow, then partial shadow, less, less, then fully in light, then
back, back, until darkened again.

Her mother is grey in this light, already a ghost. How sick was she? Maggie
wonders, yet somehow she feels unafraid, unconcerned. She doesn’t know this old
woman in front of her. She doesn’t know anyone anymore. Her father, her sister, Sam—
all of them gone. Strangers in other cities somewhere else. She had been alone for years,
more than a decade. She had that cat, the cat Sam had given her who cried at her feet and
then died a week ago on the street below her window, a window left open for a day.
She’d come home to find the cat flattened fourteen stories down. She had forgotten to
feed it often. It was old. It sometimes couldn’t find the litter box and peed on the
cushions of the green armchair in the living room. Maggie’s reading chair. At first she
had tried to clean the chair, but the stains remained, yellowed and faded and the cat just
peed there again so Maggie stopped trying to change anything that was happening around
her. Really, it helped her to stop trying. Sometimes she felt a guilt about her loneliness, felt that she could change it and should, should invite someone over, her colleagues, maybe, but then she smelled the piss in her apartment and thought of someone accidentally sitting in that chair and, well, what did she need with the distraction of others? She would always think to clean the chair the next day, the next day. Soon enough she would really take care of things, she was sure: organize, get a haircut, throw a party.

"What?" she says to her mother. "What's wrong?"

"What are you doing?"

"I don't know," says Maggie.

"Are you going to eat?"

Maggie and her mother sit silently together, watching their plates, each other.

"It isn't very good, is it?" says Maggie. Her mother smiles.

"I know what you were doing," says her mother. "I just remembered it."

"What?" says Maggie.

"Solar eclipse."

"We shouldn't eat this," says Maggie. "What should we eat?"

"When you were little. When you still lived here. You played with your food. You wouldn't talk to us at meals, you just stared at your food and played little games."

"I don't remember."

"Your head was the moon and you'd move it back and forth to block the kitchen light above, which was the sun, and it would cast a shadow over your bowl and you would call it playing Solar Eclipse."
"I don’t remember that."

"You were just doing that. Just now. Over the omelette."

"Was I?"

"Did you do it at your Dad’s?"

"I don’t think so?"

"You had learned about solar eclipses. You were in second grade. Do you remember?"

"No."

"Do you know what a solar eclipse is? Do you know anything?"

"Should I make something else?"

"Did you never learn to cook? Anything?"

Her mother's face is mostly shaded by the night and Maggie is glad. Looking directly at her mother causes a sharp discomfort, the sensation of so many years passing in an instant. The part of Maggie that still considered her mother had stayed ten years old. She was now, still, the same child who had watched her mother with wonder, wishing always to sit closer to her at the dinner table. Through absence, her mother had not aged or become any less huge than she had been in Maggie's child mind. Despite the fact that her father had been the one to raise Maggie, to take her to school, to make her meals, it was her mother whom Maggie revered. She had taught her things, had taught her how to be alone.

Repeated attempts to remember her mother and their life together had eroded any real knowledge of the woman, acting like tide on broken glass, smoothing her into an
unrecognizable shape. Her mother had become a myth that Maggie could conjure, unsure of how much truth was left in any of the memories she held.

Maggie had once been bright with an energy for anger. She could exhaust Sam and sometimes when she spoke she was able to see his interest in her waning. He had a set of gestures that meant that he had stopped listening. She understood this to be a kindness. He was salvaging his end of their relationship by turning his mind to other things rather than engage with her. In these moments, Maggie would tell a story about her mother to try to win his sympathy.

She was so direct, Maggie would say. She never would have been playful or sweet. She saw that as coddling behavior and coddling was, of course, weakness.

When in a generous mood, he would ask Maggie to continue, to give an example from her childhood that would explain away her current rudeness. He wanted to be on her side, mostly.

Maggie told him that once she had tried to imitate a fairy-tale princess from a story she'd heard.

"The princess could make all the animals in the forest come to her by singing aloud to them. Her voice was so beautiful and her melodies so lovely that the animals came running. Birds would perch on her fingers and harmonize the melody, tweeting back to her. The squirrels would gather, along with other furry things. I was a child," said Maggie to Sam. "I wanted my own furry animal to crawl into my arms."

"Of course," said Sam.

"Who wouldn't want that?" said Maggie.

"Sure," said Sam. "Everybody wants that."
"And so I would go outside and sing and wish for all the animals to come to me in friendship."

"But they wouldn't, would they?" said Sam, no longer so angry at her.

"No," said Maggie. "No woodland creatures for me."

"All alone in the forest," said Sam. "Little Maggie."

"Yes. I was so sad."

"You wanted a little friend, sure."

"A raccoon. Or a—"

"A baby deer would have ideal."

"A baby deer. Yes," said Maggie. She took Sam's hand in hers. He allowed his hand to be taken and they were friends again. She said, "I went to my mother in tears. Why was it that no animals wanted to be my friend? And my mother looked at me for a long time and said, 'Why would animals want to come and be your friend?' and I said, 'Because the princess sang to them and they came to her,' and my mother said, 'How?' and I said, 'Because of her beautiful voice.' I told my mother that I had a beautiful voice and then I sang her my songs. She listened and I thought that she would be my friend even if the animals wouldn't come."

"So then she was your friend."

"No. She said"

"She said."

"My mother said, 'Your voice is flat.'"
Sam laughed. They both laughed, but Maggie remembered that she had actually cried in her bedroom for days, sure that her flat singing voice would keep her friendless forever.

Often after these stories, Sam smiled like a man whose mission had been set before him. He would look at Maggie and nod slowly. He would hold her and kiss the top of her head. There was something to save in Maggie and he would do the saving, of course, he would do the fixing, the healing, the teaching, and he had always been happy to do it, except when Maggie wasn't learning her lessons quickly enough.

"You are always picking targets," he'd said to her once. "You are always finding reasons to dislike people. It is truly unattractive behavior."

He'd said it just like that, with an intention to scold. *Truly unattractive behavior.* They had been talking about her family again, but this time her attempts at playing the damsel were failing and she was appearing, to him, the pathetic, bitter victim.

Sam had an uncomplicated relationship with his parents. From what Maggie could understand, Sam genuinely loved them and they loved him. This clouded his ability to see family in any other light than the most positive. Sam was this way about many things—static in his views, something always definitively equaled something else. Family equaled meaning, and it was a meaningfulness of a certain type and that type only. There was no room for the way Maggie felt about her sister, her father, her mother. Her reactions to them did not make sense to Sam, was not within his set of experiences, and so they could be deemed incorrect.

Once they had made the day-long trip from their city to this town, her hometown, the place that held what was left of what could be considered her family, to go to a swim
party for Steve, Maggie's brother-in-law. It might have been Steve's birthday. He and
Maggie’s sister, Emily, had just had a baby so the swim party might have been for
everyone to look at the baby, too. Maggie brought Sam. They were not new to each other
anymore, they had settled into their relationship, still he had agreed to go so easily, so
happily, and that should have told Maggie how soon the end of their relationship would
arrive.

Sam had actual photographs of himself with his parents in his apartment. They
had been taken professionally and he'd framed them and hung them on his wall. There
was one in the bedroom and one in the living room. He had actually gone somewhere,
sometime, with his parents, and they had paid someone to photograph them together.

"That is the difference," Maggie had said to Sam when she'd first seen the
photographs.

"What is?" said Sam.

"That you are able to find it unremarkable for your parents to want to go
somewhere to have your pictures taken together."

"I can't tell if you're trying to be funny or not," Sam had said.

"You all agreed to pay someone to take your picture and then you paid to have
prints made and then you paid for a frame and then you found nails and a hammer and
actually hung the photographs."

"Is this about money?"

"No, it's about the effort exerted. The choices."

"The choice to be in a photograph?"

"Yes."
"That's just something families do."

"Not all families."

But Sam couldn't understand that and maybe that was why she stayed with him. To find out which one of them was the abnormal one. She tried often to provoke him, to push at his rules for what was and wasn't normal, to see if there was room for her within his definitions. Why didn't he give her any space for difference? But maybe no one really did that. Not really.

On the drive to the swim party, Maggie had begun to feel nauseous.

"I don't feel well," Maggie had said.

"No, it's a beautiful day!" said Sam.

"Everyone will stare at me."

"Self-conscious about your swimsuit."

"I don't want to do this."

"You'll love seeing your family. Your family is your team."

"I don't want to see my mother."

"Don't worry, your mother will love me. All mothers love—Maggie, you missed the turn."

"No, this is right."

"The map says—this, here, Maggie, look."

"I've been to their house before, this is the way."

"But the map says something else."

When her parents divorced, Maggie went to live with her father and it was then as if her mother was an acquaintance. She made polite appearances at a few birthdays, but
not all, at school events, but not many. Now they lived in different towns, they didn't call or write and it was just the way it was.

Maggie rarely spoke to her sister either, but Emily, ever the decorous one, would send cards on holidays. She had learned this from their father, who never did anything incorrectly. Growing up, people had labeled her mother as cold and distant, but her father's exceptional social grace was, Maggie knew, his own model for the same distance. When he died, the pews were packed with people who had nothing particular to say about him.

Emily had left a message on Maggie's answering machine, inviting her to the swim party. "Of course it is so far to come," Emily had said, making the invitation as vague as possible. "But I'm sure Mom would be happy to see you."

It had been the way Emily had said it: Mom. So casually. What did it mean that Emily got to see their mother often enough to speak so casually of her? Maggie heard the sound of that word and the way Emily said it, *Mom, Mom, Mom*, falling like footsteps..

At the swim party Steve asked, "So. What? You're still in school?"

"Yes." Maggie said. She looked for her mother and saw her sitting on the edge of the pool, Steve and Emily’s pool, her feet touching the surface of the water. She looked into the water as if it might dissolve her body on contact.

"But what are you doing?" Steve asked. Steve was wearing only red swim trunks. He had the skin of an uncooked chicken. His stomach was white and hairless, Maggie saw. The cool air had raised bumps along his thighs.

"I’m studying literature," Maggie said.

"But what are you doing?" said Steve.
"She's writing, too," said Sam, but this did not impress Steve. "She just started a job as an assistant teacher," Sam added. "She’s great. She works so hard. Her students love her."

"Do they send you love letters?" Emily asked. She was wearing a pretty sundress, the edges of which swirled around her knees when she moved. Her nails were painted a deep shade of red. Maggie stared at Emily's nails when she spoke, searching for, but failing to find, the slightest imperfection in the paint. A chip, a missed spot, a sidewise streak.

"What?" said Maggie

"Do your students just love you?" said Emily.

"They love her," Sam said.

"Do you paint your own nails?" said Maggie.

"What?" said Emily.

"Your nails." They are perfect.

"I just bought this new color. Do you like it?" Emily smiled uncomfortably. As different as they were, as separate as their lives had been, neither Maggie nor Emily knew how to act when directly complimented. It was a family trait.

"No," said Maggie.

Emily laughed.

"They are too perfect," said Maggie. "Like just plastic melted on fingers."

"You'd prefer them smudged like a lunatic has done them?"

"Sure," said Maggie.
"You know, Maggie," said Steve. "Teaching is a lot more than giving out
information."

Steve didn't much hear what others said. He had missed the interruption about the
nails. Steve worked at a local newspaper. He owned a house with a pool and two nice
cars and had found the time to have a baby. Congratulations, Steve! said the cake in the
kitchen. Emily did some sort of work in an office building or something. Oh, who knew
what she did. Was is an office building or maybe it was it a bank? There had been mail
on their kitchen table from the Society of Actuaries. Maggie was vaguely aware of what
that meant. No family pictures in the kitchen. None in the living room, either. None of
Steve and Emily together, none of the new baby. Nowhere was there a picture of Maggie
or her and Emily's father or their mother. Bare walls, Maggie thought. They were sisters,
she and Emily, after all.

Steve was saying something about exercise now. It seemed that Steve was
regimented about his exercise. Maggie pictured his cake in the kitchen. Steve was saying
that he had a bad back. It seemed that everyone in the world had a bad back. Emily had a
bad back after birthing the new baby. Maybe Maggie's back would start to hurt now. She
reached to touch Sam. She wanted to touch him on the spine. Maybe Sam, too, had a bad
back and she could massage his spine. She would do this as if to say, Does that feel
better? Maggie dropped her hand. A man, a friend of Steve's who stood now, suddenly, in
their circle, announced that he had a bad knee. He was balancing on one leg and Maggie
asked why and he said, Bad knee. Maggie felt hungry, then noticed that she had a chip in
her hand. She ate it. Some guests went inside to watch television. Everyone at the swim
party seemed happy enough. Where was her mother? Alone, knee-deep in the pool now.
She seemed so far away. Maggie wanted to be in the pool with her mother, walking slowly underwater, not speaking to anyone as well. But here was Steve. Asking more questions.

"Are you writing anything ever, Maggie? Or just enjoying the safety of being in school still?"

"She's working on a novel," said Sam.

"Of course, a novel. Who isn't writing their novel?"

"Maggie's novel is about a writer who thinks a lot," Sam said. "I think. She doesn't let me read it." He smiled at Steve and Emily.

"Oh, really?" Steve said. "God, only writers want to write about writers."

"You’re a writer, right?" Sam asked.

"I’m a journalist," said Steve. "There’s a difference in priority. Listen, I had this intern once, great guy, and he came from a creative writing program—your people. Steve pointed at Maggie. I asked him why he left creative writing. He said, Turns out I don’t want to write a novel, I want to be able to get a real job. He was one of my best interns."

"Yeah, and fuck the serial comma, right?" said Maggie.

Steve touched his hairless belly. He was nearly naked. His swim trunks were red, like Emily's nails. His body had wetness, like sweat. No one said anything.

Maggie felt scared of everyone she saw. Who were these people? She barely knew them, but they hugged her and some looked like her. She needed Sam. She touched Sam’s wrist then she rubbed his earlobe. She tugged on it. This comforted her. Sam leaned down and whispered, smiling, I’m here meeting your family, aren’t I? Are you
going to act like you own me, too? He pushed her hand away from his ear. He kissed it, then dropped it. She felt flattened. She smiled, too. At him and her family.

"What’s that book you just read?" Emily said to Steve. "He’s always reading something. What was it about? The antelopes?"

"The Andes," Steve said. "You ever think about writing something that’s real?"

"Like the Andes," said Maggie.

"The Andes have already been written about," said Steve. "I just told you that."

"Well, what is a girl to do," said Maggie.

"You'll have to pick other mountains," said Steve.

"Your novel is about mountains?" Emily asked.

"It’s about a woman writer," said Sam.

"What else?" said Emily.

"Fascinating," said Steve.

"It’s good," said Sam.

"Sure-sure," said Steve.

"But what does the writer do?" asked Emily.

"Everyone in her department really loves her. They think she’s doing great. They love Maggie," said Sam.

"We love you, too, Maggie!" Steve said. He cheers’d her glass with his.

"To the Haraz of Yemen," Maggie said.

"Excusé?" said Steve.

"To the Titiwangsa," said Maggie. Maggie finished her drink and wanted more. In the car, Sam had said things about family and unconditional love and had said, This is
your team. Family forms a team. The team that cheers for you. And Maggie understood that Sam really meant that.

"What is she saying?" asked Emily. Maggie looked past her, over her shoulder. Their mother was fully submerged in the pool now. She was jogging in place. She was holding her drink above her head. She was humming. Inside people cheered. The hometown team was winning.

"She’s just being weird to be weird," said Sam.

Steve and Emily laughed.

"Sam, we like you, Sam," Emily said.

"He knows you," Steve pointed to Maggie and then Sam and then Maggie. Then, to the pool, "Who’s ready for a dip?" And Steve dived in.

They slept that night on a futon in Emily and Steve's basement.

In the dark, Maggie whispered, "I hate that baby."

"You know what I just realized," said Sam. "I didn't get to meet your mother. Did she just leave? She was there, in the pool, but she didn't stay for cake. Did she?"

"Babies are the only true solipsists."

"God, Maggie."

"What?"

"Where’d you read that?"

"What?"

"You always do this. You read about some idea you like and then you talk about it over and over until it sounds like the idea was yours all along. It’s so transparent. So where did this one come from? What book?"
"Not a goddamn book about the Andes."

"Congratulations for knowing the names of mountain ranges that Steve didn't know."

"Steve's an idiot."

"Congratulations for making Steve look like an idiot in front of people. Good job."

"Yeah."

"On his birthday."

"And he's doesn't believe in the serial comma. Journalists don't use the serial comma. I think they say it's a space issue. But that's absurd."

"Who cares?"

"I care. I like the serial comma. It's an important comma. I like the serial comma and I hate Steve."

"You are always picking targets. You are always finding reasons to dislike people. It is truly unattractive behavior."

"No, that's not—"

"Not what?"

"Not what I mean," said Maggie. She wanted Sam on her team.

"You are threatened and jealous and when you are threatened and jealous it brings out the worst in you."

"Jealous of what?"

"All of it. All of this, said Sam. He made a gesture, but the specifics of it were lost in the dark."
"No," she said.

"Sure," said Sam.

"I mean, nobody cares if the baby is thinking whatever the baby is thinking."

"What are you talking about? You're jealous of the baby?"

"No," said Maggie. "It's just that the baby gets to think whatever it wants. No one demands the baby to do or be anything. They just love the baby. You know? Do you understand?"

"Sure."

"You don’t understand anything," Maggie said.

"Is it possible that I can understand without caring?"

I guess what I’m saying is I am jealous, but not of the things you think I should be."

"Sure."

"It's lonely, being misinterpreted," Maggie said.

"Save it for your novel," Sam said.

Now the one kitchen light gives a ghoulish distortion to her mother's features. While Maggie had assumed her mother would be the same, it was clear that Maggie's mother had hoped that Maggie would be greatly changed. Perhaps she had hoped Maggie would have gained something with age—grace, beauty, strength. The disparity between what they'd imagined and what sat before them seem to horrify them both. In the twenty years since they’d seen each other, since that swim party, Maggie had only visualized her mother as she had been then, floating in that pool. But the woman in front of her now
looks nothing like that memory. In fact, Maggie does not recognize this woman sitting in front of her and this woman looks back at Maggie as if she, too, were a stranger. Maggie cannot see her mother. Where is her mother? This woman is so frail and confused, not terrible and strong. Had her illness done this to her? This illness that had been kept a secret from her. Did she not trust Maggie with this information? Even now? Her mother seems to be searching Maggie's face, looking for someone she knows, something she knows. Maggie feels sudden pain, like she's been shot. Being here, seeing her mother seeing her makes real Maggie's disappointment, Maggie's losses, her loneliness. What is she doing here?

"What am I doing here?" says Maggie. It tears the silence between them, her words; it is a violence, her voice. Her mother sits up a little straighter, watches. "What do you want from me? What do you want me to do? Where is Emily? Why isn't Emily here if you are dying?"

"Emily?" says her mother.

"Emily is ten minutes away."

"Emily doesn't know I'm sick."

"How can she not know? Why would you call me to come here and not Emily?"

"Do you not know?" says her mother. "The difference between you and Emily?"

"Tell me."

"They used to call me spindleshanks," says Maggie's mother.

"Who did?"

"I’m tall. I’ve always been tall and fast. Very fast."

"I know."
"Do you?"

"I remember watching you walking across the horse pasture. So quickly. Sometimes I would try to walk with you to the barn, but I could never keep up."

"I didn't want you to come with me to the barn."

"I know that now."

"There was no they. It was just me. In my mind, I called myself spindleshanks."

"No one else?"

"No. No one else. I'd be walking and I'd think, Come on, faster, faster, go spindleshanks, go. And then I could walk faster and faster. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I think so," said Maggie.

"Or sometimes I'd hold my breath and see if I could make it a certain distance before I had to breathe in again. Or I'd pretend that I had to get to from the house to the barn, had to touch the doors, in a twenty seconds, then fifteen, then twelve. Now you."

"Now me?"

"I remember the games you played as a kid. Even if you don't. But what about now?"

"Sometimes I have exactly sixty seconds to gather up all of my most valuable belongings and get them safely out of my apartment. Then my apartment will explode. I'll stay in bed for hours thinking through the worth of everything I own."

"What do you always save?"

"Usually just the cat."

"You have a cat?"
"Not anymore."

"What else?"

"What is the point?"

"The point is, Maggie, imagine having this conversation with your sister. What would Emily do if she were here right now."

"She'd be making you tea."

"Exactly," said Maggie's mother. And then she laughs. Maggie has no memories of her mother laughing and wonders if she's ever heard it before this moment. Now it was all she ever wants to hear.

"I think it is supposed to be calming. Tea."

"Yeah, yeah. Tea. We'll get your sister here. Not now," says her mother. "But this is why. This is my point."

"What is?"

"I wanted someone to talk to. I wanted you here."
Chapter Four

"For example," says Maggie's mother, "describe a villain."

It had rained for days, then a freeze turned the trees into glass sculptures. And with the wind, the branches became chimes. It is all so pretty, Maggie thinks. A child's design. She stands at the kitchen window, watching, listening to her mother. She sees a black dog in the yard. The dog seems to be carrying something in its mouth, but Maggie can't see what it is.

"Mean," says Maggie.

"Of course, mean, but, no, more specific," says Maggie's mother. "A trait or physical description."

"Fangs," says Maggie.

"Good. Fangs."

"She's a spider with fangs who traps her victims in her web. Poisonous web."

"Arachnotrapper," says her mother. She watches carefully for Maggie's reaction. Maggie turns from the window and smiles.


"Arachnostabber. No, that's too close to what you said. Kid Web...ah...Stab. Kid Web Stab. That's awful."

"She Fang," says Maggie's mother. "The Villainous She Fang."

"That's the one," says Maggie. "I can see her in a black leather jacket with 'The Villainous She Fang' written on the back, don't you think?"
Margaret watches Maggie from the other side of the kitchen table. Her daughter is laughing, smiling. She did not seem to suspect that anything was wrong, which meant that they still had some time left together. Her mother thinks about reaching across the table to touch her daughter's hand. She remembers sleeping next to Maggie when she was a child. After her husband left them, she and Maggie began sleeping on their kitchen floor, neither wanting to be in their bedrooms on opposite ends of the house. She had feared for their safety then, alone in the house, alone in the woods. She would barely sleep at all. The slightest sound would wake her and she would wait for the feeling of certainty that she was not dead and that her daughter was not dead and that she could know that almost immediately because there they were, breathing so closely to one another.

She wanted to touch her daughter's hand now to be certain that she was there, to be certain that this wasn't a dream or a delusion of her dimming mind. She recognized this desire from her own father. He had touched her and said, Margaret? Are you still there? And she would say, Yes. It's me. Can't you see me? And her father would seem to be able to see her, but not to be able to know whether to trust what he saw. Those were still good days, before everything became a nightmarish confusion for him. She remembered waking to find him standing over her bed. Am I sleeping, too? he would say. Am I asleep? She would touch him and he'd cry out as if she had burned him. Human touch. It was simultaneous, forceful and absolute. It, and the knowledge it brought, happened for them at the same time. She thinks, Maybe it had forced her father to
confront what was real and what was imagined. Now she wants to reach forward and hold her daughter's hand—to be sure they both exist.

"My father loved comic books," she says to Maggie. "He was always trying to start his own series, but he couldn't draw. He had boxes and boxes of story boards with only stick figures. He would think of all these characteristics for a superhero or a villain and then we'd try to name them together."

"Like we are."

"Yes, like this."

"Why," says Maggie smiling. "Are you trying to write a comic series now, Mom?"

"When I was eleven, I started to notice that my father wasn't able to keep up with this game. He couldn't make sense of the characters and the names we'd given to them. The most familiar things confused him. He got worse very quickly and died on my thirteenth birthday."

"You never told me that," says Maggie.

"It had terrified me as a child, watching him die. I didn't understand it. I didn't understand what was happening to his mind. I didn't understand it then."

"Ok," says Maggie. "You understand it now."

"Yes."

"And that's why I'm here."

"Yes."

"How long do you have?"
"We'll decide that. But not now." She looks at her daughter, hoping that she will not ask anything else.

They begin their own circles around the kitchen. Maggie looks in the fridge for something to eat. Her mother stands to wash last night's dishes. Maggie closes the fridge and joins her mother at the sink. They do not speak. Soap stings both of their still scraped palms; three drops of blood on the carpet, her mother’s; three drops on the counter, Maggie's. A dog barking in the yard. Outside, ice lines the house, climbs it vine-like, kissing all the doors and windows. Outside they see the fields with dried and broken corn stalks standing up like thin daggers through the ice, and then past that is a wall of treeline, a solid blackness—impossible—all this white on the ground and yet the dark of woods is brighter. Out there, the breaking of branches, the sounds of coffins splitting; in here, her mother’s skin is thin and loose. It hangs from her face as she leans over the sink. It pulls away from her teeth. The grandfather clock sounds out the hour.

"Isn't it lovely," her mother says. "When the chimes ring marking the time? Isn’t it nice? That trick? Being lulled, so delightfully, into thinking that there is some beauty in moments passing?"

There is nothing they want to watch on TV, but they leave it on anyway. She and her daughter do not speak. They are knitting in the dark, but what are they making—crocheting?—it is hard to tell. She can feel roughness on her cheek. Whatever is being made is long and heavy and seems to cover her completely. She can feel the irritation of the wool all over her skin. Her daughter says something, but she can't understand her. Her
daughter is asking questions in a muted voice. What? Speak up, she tries to say, but her daughter can't hear her. Is she on the couch? She seems so far away now. Then Glen's face is on the TV. He's standing in front of the Opry. There is a sign behind him announcing the grand opening of the Opry. Glen is holding a drink and smiling. There are fake palm trees behind him. It is snowing and the snow crawls up the sides of the palm trees, then Glen, the snow, climbing him, pulling him under, drowning him. She blinks. The snow is covering the screen. Glen, she shouts. Glen. But he is lost in a blizzard of white, gone, the wind whipping the snow faster and faster around the screen, or it is static, she can see it now, static, she is waking, the TV seems too loud, so busy with the bits of black and white, flurries, the loudness of sound when all else is silent. Her dream is fading from her quickly. She is on the couch, still. A wool shawl is tucked around her. She can feel bits of it on her lips, her tongue. She sits up. It is not yet dawn. Everywhere is dark and quiet. Her daughter is sleeping elsewhere in the house.

In the kitchen, a humming, the furnace; further in, hummings, the fish tank, the fridge. She drinks a glass of water and watches out the window. There, in the small light shining from a left-on garage bulb, there, a lurking shape; she is seeing, imagining, the dog again, bloodied, something in its mouth. Her mind is failing her faster and faster. It is time to tell Maggie what would come next.

Maggie wakes to the sound of the coffee bean grinder ringing metallically from deep inside the house. She sits up and pulls her blanket off her bed and pulls it around her shoulders, shawl-like. For days, she had only worn her mother's old pajamas, found stuffed in a dresser in what had been Maggie's childhood bedroom. None of Maggie's
childhood objects remained. None of her clothes or pictures or books or toys. Her
mother's house was a reflection now of only her mother. Green grows everywhere. Plants
hang, climb, invade, raise, claiming all of the house's empty spaces. Maggie's bedroom
smells like soil, she walks down the hallway, the smell of paper, newspaper, file folders,
into the kitchen, coffee being made—there is her mother, feeding the last of the living
fish.

"The fish are dying," says her mother.

"I know," says Maggie. "I flushed two the other day."

"You did?" says her mother. She turns to face Maggie. "That's good news."

"Is it?"

"I love these fish. All I do is try to keep them alive. I thought I had made up in my
mind that there were fewer, but, no."

"Actually fewer fish."

"They just died."

"Yes," says Maggie.

"In real life!" Maggie's mother smiles. She brings Maggie a cup of coffee.

Together they sit at the table. Maggie pulls her blanket up, hooding it over her head.

"What should we do today?" says Maggie.

"When does your semester start again?"

"The semester."

"Come on." Maggie's mother rubs the table with her palms and then turns them up
toward Maggie, a question.

"I may have all time in the world."
"Not likely," says Maggie's mother. Her mother looks around the kitchen, distracted, what is she looking for? Breakfast, maybe thoughts of breakfast. Her mother looks from a cupboard, to the window, to the stacks of newspapers below the window sills.

"Is it hereditary?"

"What? This thing?" Maggie's mother points to her head.

"Is it? That we are going crazy? Am I?"

"Are you going crazy or going to go crazy?"

"How do you know what's happening?"

"How does anyone know?"

"I don't know," says Maggie. She feels like a child, mummied-up in her blanket, asking her mother questions, assuming that her mother would always, always have the answers.

"What happened? Have you been fired? Tell the truth," says her mother.

"I was dismissed," Maggie says. She drums her fingers on the wood table, tap, tap, tap, she does not want to have to say more. Where was the beginning of all of this? Wendell had been reading a book under his desk when he was supposed to be freewriting. Was that it? Was that when she had first noticed him? The students around him usually engaged in more modern methods of distraction, only slightly concealing their electronic devices. Some preferred to fall asleep or stare blankly at her as their form of protest. None spoke, unless forced. It was a particular type of torture, posing questions to a silent audience, and it had been hers, daily. Maybe that was the problem, she had simply chosen the wrong career, an easy mistake, everyone does it, it is understandable to many. And
Sam had left her so many years ago. A bad job, the wrong relationship, these are people problems. She had been alone for a long time. She watched Wendell reading. She noticed him. She saw him lean down in his chair, stretching his slender legs beneath the desk. He was handsome, she could see that clearly. She imagined them in the bathtub together, his slender legs stretching around her. Wendell looked up at her briefly, catching her watching him. "Write," she hissed. She snapped her fingers and pointed at him and then at his book. "This is freewrite time."

She had been assigned an introduction to fiction writing class. It seemed the administration didn't want her teaching literature anymore, so they'd thrown her back into teaching the less valued courses. She had never finished her novel, but had at least tried to write one once and that was enough for the Chair of English, and so she was sent back to teach Freshman things they didn't know whether or not they wanted to learn. She began each class with a freewrite. She gave a daily prompt and they wrote and she stared blankly back at them from her desk. It was a way, minute by minute, of erasing the hour. Calling out the role took away another minute. Collecting their freewrites, none of which she ever read, passed another minute. She gave them time to repack their things, to tear papers out of their notebooks or to put the papers in folders or to put their pencils and pens in small bags zippered up in their larger bags, and then she let them out early.

Sometimes she forgot to think of a daily prompt until she was already in the classroom and the students were looking, expectantly, at her and she was looking back at them, the strangers, and one would say, finally, Daily Prompt? She would think of something, the first thing that came to her.
"Ok," she would say. "Write about the first time you saw something dead in the road. An animal? What were you, ah, fascinated? Repulsed? Go back there. Let your writing spring from that place." Then she would hang up her coat and avoid looking directly at any faces and they would fall asleep or rub their eyelids with the erasers at the end of their pencils.

But Wendell was not like the other students. He read his first story aloud to the class. It was about werewolves taking over a small town. One man saved the town. One man killed all the werewolves with his fists and intellect. A man fighting the demons of the world. He has to do it alone because no one else understands him. No one can help him. Maggie liked the story.

When he finished, no one offered any comments. It was a particularly beautiful fall day. Everyone was elsewhere.

After a long silence, a student said, "I like the part where he rips off the jaw with the claw of the hammer. Very vivid."

"Umhm." Maggie nodded. Maggie tried to keep her face still. She tried not to look too much at Wendell. "But the themes," Maggie asked the class. "What is at work here? What is this man feeling?"

"Violent," said a student.

"Ok," said Maggie.

"I don’t think he’s feeling anything," said another student. "This story is just a bloodbath. It lacks any of the emotional resonance that Sarah’s story had."

"Sarah’s story was manipulation, not emotion," Maggie thought, but then saw the faces of the class looking back at her realized she has also said this out loud. "I mean,"
Maggie said, "Sarah’s story played with our emotions because we all knew it was something that actually happened to Sarah. How can we critique how Sarah, a person we know, feels about the dead people in her life?"

The class shifted in discomfort. Or maybe they had all shifted, in unison, against her.

Sarah was not Maggie’s favorite student. Sarah was terrible. Wendell had actually watched Sarah, listened to her when she had read her short story to the class. Wendell had watched Sarah’s mouth move. Sarah’s story had been about a college freshman named Sarah whose grandmother died, but before she does, tells Sarah to follow her dream of becoming a writer and so then dead grandmothers really won’t be dead, but will be captured on the page, and will live on into forever. Sarah had been absent for a week. She shuffled her pages around. She looked at Wendell shyly. He mouthed, *I missed you.*

Oh, if only all of Sarah’s relatives should die off, one right after another, so that Sarah would have to miss the rest of the semester.

And this other student was still defending her. Suddenly, now, a student had an opinion. The student said, "But Sarah was writing from a place that was true."

Maggie said, "Who cares what’s true for Sarah? Who is Sarah? Who cares? All that matters is what works as a story. How themes and emotions meet with craft and intention."

"That sounds so limiting," the student said.

"Who is this student?" Maggie looked at her roster. Ricky Crisp, his name is Ricky Crisp.

He said, "That just sounds like rules from a textbook."
It had, indeed, come a chapter of a textbook. The chapter was titled, "Craft and Intention."

Ricky Crisp continued, "What if Sarah was trying to use our knowledge to lend an additional weight to her story? Why is that a bad thing to try in fiction? What if the ‘trueness’ is a device in itself?"

Maggie had no response for this. She feigned a coughing fit.

"Listen," Maggie said, "This is Wendell’s time anyway."

"Yeah, let’s talk about werewolves," Ricky Crisp said. He lowered himself in his seat and looked past her, through the classroom door, out into the empty hallway.

Yes, please, Maggie thought. There was a sharp pain behind her eyes, like an incision. Knuckles aligned with her eyebrows, she rubbed her face with the back of her hands. Let’s please, please just talk about werewolves.

When class was over, Wendell and Sarah walked out together. Maggie followed them. The three of them seemed on their way somewhere. Maggie followed closely. She could have touched them, pushed them. She saw them speaking silently to each other, brushing arms and then edging back to their own sides of the sidewalk. Maggie could see that something was being acknowledged. Attraction, she thought. How had they learned the gestures? How did they know when to touch and retreat? How could so much be agreed upon, recognized, go unspoken? Sarah stopped at a vending machine to buy a soda. She searched through her pockets, but found not enough and Wendell handed her a quarter. Their fingers touch in the exchange. Maggie felt light; her face felt hot, pulsing. She sat down in the grass. She watched. Sarah was answering a question and drinking her soda without looking at Wendell at all. He was looking at her soda, her hands, his hands.
Sarah laughed at something. She laughed, mouth open, and bent, briefly at the waist, and when she was righted, strands of her hair were stuck in spit on the edge of her lip. Then Wendell lifted two fingers to Sarah’s face and brushed Sarah's hair from her face and tucked it behind her ear and she looked at him and everything made sense and added up to be the same thing and meant the same thing for them at the same time and how was that possible when Maggie was alone, sitting on the grass, unsure of all that could be seen with her eyes.

Wendell and Sarah began holding hands under their desks. Something had been expressed, received, and built so quickly. Watching them, Maggie felt the weight of something she had been shifting around, looking away from, hoping would dissipate. She was tired. She was lonely. She let her class out early, but stopped Wendell at the door.

"Sit," she said. "You owe me a freewrite."

At home, she made herself dinner, but burnt the fish, and it stuck to the pan and the only portion that could be retrieved flaked apart when she lifted it. She microwaved something else. She tapped at the glass, looking through the kitchen window. She saw little trophies everywhere. People carrying plastic bags from the bodega on the corner, pulling rolling suitcases behind them, checking pieces of paper, a watch, a phone. Families walked in formations, children behind them or children running ahead, children running ahead and then turning back at the sound of their name, children being carried or pushed or holding their mother's hand. Two men moved a couch down the block. Six girls ran by, maybe late for something, a bus, a train. A rummage sale was being set up at the community center across the street from Maggie's apartment. She saw them unpack cardboard boxes onto picnic tables. Out came gold and white and silver and red and
yellow things, all meant for someone's home. She watched people come to the tables and pick things up and put them down. She watched. It grew dark and the people selling the items packed them back up, promising lingering customers that they be back the next day.

She heard voices calling out from somewhere. There was the sound of something falling—wood on wood?—or perhaps a door closing or coming apart. A woman was shouting. Maggie heard the sound of something solid hitting something softer, then a man's moan, then his voice, sad and halting, said, "Please. Please. Kill me. Just kill me." And the woman yelled back, "Why? Why? Why did you? Why did you?" And he said, "Kill me. God, Kill me." Maggie looks for the man and the woman, but cannot see them. It was dark now. Too dark to see anything other than the reflection of her kitchen light, a bright sphere on the window's glass. How long had she been looking out onto the street? Were the sounds she heard on her block or further away? Two shapes emerged below her window. One, she could tell, was the woman walking quickly away from the second shape, the man. The man caught up to the woman and held her from behind. She struggled against him. He fell, he hugged her knees and moaned. "Oh, baby. Oh, baby," he said. The woman fought him, tried to get away. Maggie saw other lights turn on in windows across from hers. Others were watching, wondering if this woman was in danger, but no one came out into the street. Maggie watched. She must go down and help the woman, who seemed scared and slapped at the man's arms, his chest, screamed at him, swung at his head, shouted, "No, No."

Maggie would go out to the street and help this woman. She had a bat in her hallway closet, saved for this sort of purpose. She would get the bat and go out to the
street. The bat was in the closet. She would run down into the street. She would help the woman. The woman kept screaming. Maggie turned off the light in the kitchen and walked to her bedroom in dark, knowing the way so well, and fell asleep.

By morning, the rummage sale had found a hawker for its cause. Maggie closed her eyes against the sounds coming up from the street. A deep voice called out, "Cups, plates, trays, silver, butter bells, yours, yours, two dollars, one dollar, fifty cents, a quarter."

Maggie listened. She watched the light ease the shadows that crawled across her ceiling until they were gone all together. She rose, made coffee. Through her kitchen window, Maggie could see no evidence of the man and woman from the previous night. They had disappeared back into the city.

They were tied together by a string, a web, a breath. She followed Wendell. He led her through the streets, down into subway cars, across the city. He would leave the classroom with Sarah; he would walk with her, somewhere, to the library, to her train. Then she would disappear and he would belong to Maggie. They walked together, past the men playing music on the corner, past the park, the arguments of strangers, angling through alleys; the fall air, crisp and fragrant, carried them. Wendell would stop and touch something, a sudden roughness of a brick interested him and he would stop and touch. Or a clean window begged for his fingerprint and he'd leave it carefully. He was odd, Maggie saw. And she was discovering him, silently, walking not far behind him. She watched him. He leapt up to pull an orange leaf from a tree and twirled the stem of the leaf between his fingers. After two more blocks, he dropped the leaf, and Maggie
stopped to pick it up, pass it between her fingers. When she looked up, he was gone.
She'd lost him to a building or store or around an unknown corner.

At home she had ordinary thoughts. Dinner, dishes, clean up after her cat. She feared her front door. She expected to find evidence of the man and woman who had screamed at each other in the night. She had done nothing and they knew it and would find her eventually or she would see the woman's body slumped in her doorway or the man would follow her, begging her on his knees. Asking her to kill him.

Wendell showed her the city, her city, the home she had adopted so many years ago, but had somehow forgotten about. He moved through it so cleanly, with such knowledge. It was beautiful to watch from her careful distance the way he moved, the grace of his gestures. He never saw her, never turned around, but did he know she was there? Could he sense his company, his friend, her, always watching, always with him?

Once he saw her through a window between subway cars. He tilted his head in surprise and then looked away. He got off the train and she followed, tried to stay near to him, but he walked faster than he normally did and was lost to her in the crowd pushing up, together, onto the street.

As the semester moved on, Wendell went on fewer walks, went to fewer stores, didn't read on benches or at tables outside of restaurants. Instead, he stayed with Sarah longer. He waited for her outside of her classrooms. Here it was harder for Maggie to follow Wendell; she was too easily spotted in an empty hallway on campus. Once she followed them to his apartment. They had been looking at each other sweetly, hesitantly, and then disappeared into the dark of the hall and closed the door behind them.
Night found Maggie always alone in her bed, staring into the dark, listening. Outside her window there were always cars, car horns, sirens, someone shouting. All sounds seemed to be floating nearer. Never was she lonelier than at night in the city, the proof of so many people around her, none of them hers. Once the sounds had been Sam's. Sam slamming doors, Sam's hand on a doorknob, his steps in the hall, all on his way home to her, to be hers. She closed her eyes and imagined Sam, heard his routines again, him turning off a light in the living room, rising from the green chair, returning a book to the shelf. She heard him brush, the running faucet hushing itself, then the shower. Sam would come to bed and settle beside her, slippery and cold and wet, waiting for her to touch him. She remembered the night Sam had moved in, when the familiarity of their sounds still awaited them. He had taken off his clothes in the bright light of their bedroom. She had watched him, feeling no hesitation or resentment in her love for him. She’d looked at him with a lust that made her feel heavy, rooted to where she sat on the bed, waiting for him. Then, he had been so new to her. This love was the love, she had been unshakably sure. He had been sure. Soon he would walk toward her and kiss her and curl her to him and her idea of home would change to include him, and her days would include him inescapably, and they would learn to share themselves and everything. And he had stood there, looking at her, in the light of the bedroom, he’d stared at her, he’d said, "I love you completely," and she hadn't distrusted those words, but had, instead, felt that then was the only time anyone had ever said those words and meant them, but now, alone in the darkness of her bedroom, Maggie couldn't think of anything more trite than those words and her once sure faith in their meaning.
Maggie felt a sickness, an unabating dizziness, a nausea. It was as if she'd had too much to drink and cannot make the drunkenness go away. She closed her eyes and saw white circles spinning. If only she could make this feeling stop, but it would not and nothing could be done or achieved or changed. The thought of getting out of bed made the nausea worse. She was helpless. She could not save anyone from death or speak reasonably or read or even make it to the bathroom. She had lost control of every part of herself and all she can think is that she had created this, had done this to herself, had known that there was a threshold ever approaching. And who could she tell this to? Who could she talk to who would understand this without finding her disgusting, or worse, trying to help her?

Maggie got out of her bed and moved blindly down the hallway to the kitchen. The lamp over her stove shone just enough to show a bowl on the counter and Maggie remembered that the bowl held grapes. She suddenly wanted to eat grapes very badly. She wanted the sweetness of a grape, the sensation of biting and breaking the skin. She ate one and found that they were not grapes, but small tomatoes and she was so disappointed that the desire for a grape consumed her. The taste of tomato was not unsweet, but was not a grape and the not grape taste in her mouth made it so that all she wanted was a grape and she couldn't have one. She didn't have any, she had tomatoes, she had misremembered what she'd put in a bowl not two hours earlier. How could that be? Was something wrong with her? With her mind? She felt as though she would cry from sudden hatred of tomatoes. She drank a glass of water to expel the taste from her mouth, or she drank the glass of water hoping that if she just doesn’t taste tomato than maybe the desire for a grape would also leave her. She moved water around her mouth and spit it
out. She sat on the floor of the kitchen and cried. She is glad that Sam is gone, has been
gone, had left her so long ago, because how could she ever explain to him why she was
crying about grapes? He would laugh at her, or worse, he would try to understand and
comfort her and she would hate him for that. He would nod like he knew her and could
fix her and she would hate him for that. She would hold her and she would feel that
feeling again, the feeling she had felt throughout their relationship, that sadness of
wanting something that didn't exist.

Tomatoes existed in her kitchen. She looked out her window. She remembered a
child on a bus talking to his mother. Maggie had been sitting behind them on her way to
school. This had been many years ago. The child had said, "The sky is pretty," and the
mother had said, "Yes it is." The child had said, "I want it." The mother had said, "You
can’t have it. It can’t belong to anyone. Do you understand?" And the child had said,
"Yes. But I want it." And then the child had cried until the bus reached their stop and
mother and child left.

Maybe the mother laughs now and the child laughs about it and they both can
because the child, who is much older by now, has lost his desire to own the sky, but
Maggie had seen how despairing he had been in that moment. How consuming that
despair had been for the child, but now it’s gone and just a funny story, and how can that
be? How can anyone trust anything they feel in a moment when in the next that feeling
can be an anecdote? And who was the child then and why isn’t he that person now? And
who was she when she said, on that first night, when her apartment became theirs, on
their first night of living together, that she, too, loved Sam completely. And he had turned
out the light and had followed the walls with his hands in the darkness, barely making it
back to where she sat, waiting for him. They had stayed awake in the dark, trying to see
shapes emerge, and they couldn’t see anything, just as she, now staring out onto the
street, can’t see anything, but then, when they had looked together, they had been certain
that shapes would emerge. Certain that if they looked long enough together, they’d see
anything they wanted to see. It would take time. And she had lain in the crooks of him.
She had put her ear in the place that made his elbow.

"Dismissed?" her mother says.

"Yes," says Maggie. She holds her cup of coffee, feeling the heat of the mug burn
her hands a little. She does not mind it. Her mother made her this cup of coffee. Her
mother who sits across the table from her now, speaking to her, reminding her that she is
not sitting at home, alone.

"Were you fired?"

"There's going to be a hearing with the Chair and the department in the Spring
semester."

"What have you done?" her mother says.

Maggie cannot decide if she wants to tell her the truth or how much of that truth
she could tell or how much was left or how much she understood. She had waited outside
of Wendell's window, watching him. How had she gotten here? She remembered leaving
her apartment and then she was here, he had led her here. He had been sitting on his
couch, reading. He was so still. It was late and Maggie was hidden from him in the night.
She stood on a garbage can and leaned against his building for balance. He was visible to
her, inside, under one tall lamp, the rest of his apartment in shadows. He sat like a man on
stage, illuminated in a spotlight, and she was his audience. He stretched one leg in front of him and then crossed it over the other and Maggie saw that this graceful act, this simple physical gesture was what she liked about him. This was all. He was a reader, too.

She was so fragile, so in need. She'd heard her name being called out behind her. She turned carefully so as not to fall off of the garbage can. There was Sarah. She has halfway up his stoop; her feet rested on different steps. Sarah was hugging something to her chest, something in a white bag. When Maggie turned to face her, Sarah let the bag fall and it hit the cement. A cylinder of ice cream rolled down the sidewalk.

"What are you doing here?" Sarah said.

"I did something wrong," says Maggie. "I don't know how to tell you about it."

Her mother watches her with a tenderness, ready to forgive her before anything is explained. With the love Maggie feels now for her mother—her mother who is looks so able to listen to Maggie, to understand her—comes also a shame and a confusion. Maggie feels ashamed that, despite being so far into adulthood, she still needs her mother to comfort her, to calm her, to approve of her. But she is also confused because this is not the mother she has always known. The mother who, at all times, kept an unbreachable distance between them. But here is her mother, looking so softly, so lovingly at Maggie.

"I need you to tell me what's happening to you," says Maggie.

"I thought you were telling me what's happening to you," says her mother.

"Why am I here?"

"Ok," says her mother. She leaves the room and when she comes back she is holding a stack of books. This is when Maggie remembers that her mother, too, is a
reader. "I didn't know what my father died of," says her mother. "He died very quickly. He started seeing things that I couldn't see. They call them visual disturbances. Then things got worse very quickly. Then he died."

"What are these?" Maggie says. She picks up the first book and opens it a page at random and reads the words, invariably fatal. The words are so heavy-handed, so to the point, that she laughs as she doesn't know what else to do.

"I just read the words, 'invariably fatal," Maggie says.

"No beach read," says her mother.

"No," says Maggie.

"This is the only discussion that I want to have, now, then we're done," says her mother. She looks angry for a moment, then just reserved. "My father lost every faculty, everything that made him a man, a human, until he died. I know we haven't seen each other much or spoken to each other. I know you probably feel very little for me as your mother, maybe that's why I called you, because I thought it might be easier for you to help me."

"To take care of you?" says Maggie.

"No, to make sure that I die before I lose everything." Her mother stops speaking. She stands and walks to the kitchen sink and begin wiping down countertops with one hand, cupping the other to catch what debris is loosened, uprooted, removed. She seems without emotion. She might have been talking about anything else—their day, their lunch, their dinner, a chore.

"Oh," says Maggie.
"Those books, you know, you can read about it if you want. The disease, coping."

Her mother says coping with such disdain and boredom. Maggie laughs again. Coping.

She stands and joins her mother. Together, they look out the window, look out onto the farm, the brittle trees, the woods that circle them, all lined in ice.

"When did you get a dog?" says Maggie.

"What?" says her mother.

"That dog, is that your dog?" Maggie points out to the yard.

"You can see that dog?" says Maggie's mother.

"That dog right there?" says Maggie.

"Oh," says her mother.

"What?"

"Nothing. I thought it was something else."

"What does that mean?"

"It means time. It means a little more time."
PART TWO

Other Seasons
A Spring

Under attack, animals sound alike.

"What is it?" she would ask him. What she had meant was, what kind? What kind of thing was dying in the dusk when the packs of dogs were at their loudest, going after livestock or each other.

Dawn brought the beginning of machinery, farmers at work, their trucks moving, calls across fields, the clang of metal, the engines, gunshots ending what had fought the dogs and lived—it all seemed so close, a trick of flat land. Sound found them in bed and she woke early to watch Glen emerge from sleep in cringing recognitions; in morning mute-light, she watched his uncovered face.

Now, his picture in the newspaper. She sees his face and sees that there are words printed around his photograph telling her that he is dead and she sees another morning, long past, when she and Glen stayed in bed for many hours talking about pie. But—winter—and neither wanted to get out of bed. They looked at each other. They took turns saying, "Please go get the pie and bring it back to me." They said, "You do it. I'll keep the bed warm for you." Glen held her head with his hands. She spoke softly and shifted to kiss the parts of him closest to her mouth. His shoulder, a collarbone. She kissed him under his chin and whined, "Glen? Pie!" His breath on her. Their room grew brighter and their fear of the surrounding woods dissolved in unveiling light. They both wanted pie and eventually would get it together or not go at all.

Margie sees this and sees the picture of Glen. Margie’s husband makes breakfast. Margie’s daughters sit on either side of her at the table.
"Poor Glen," says Margie’s husband seeing Margie see Glen.

"Who is Glen?" asks Emily.

"Are you wearing lipstick?" Margie’s husband says and holds Emily’s chin in his thumb and middle finger.

"What?" Emily swats her father’s hands from her face.

"Get real," says her father.

Maggie is eating cereal. She stares straight ahead without blinking. She lifts the cereal spoon to her mouth and then releases it, letting it drop heavily to her bowl. She says, "Splash."

"Your clothes!" says Maggie’s father.

"If you get milk on your shirt it will dry up and smell like rot and you’ll smell like rot all day at school," says Emily.

"Wash your face," says Emily’s father to Emily.

"I’m a guest here," says Emily. "Now I’m just a guest here."

Maggie’s eyes close over her bowl. Her mouth moves, making silent words.

"What are you doing?" Margie asks her daughter.

"Quiz questions," says Maggie. Quiz day. She turns her head slowly and opens her eyes slowly until they are on Margie. "Twenty-one people drowned," says Maggie.

"What?" says Margie.

"Suffocated in molasses," says Maggie.

"What?" says Margie. She backs away from the table. Glen’s face, splayed across the folds of the morning paper, falls to the floor.

Maggie looks at her mother and says, "Did you know him?"
Margie feels she is falling quickly downward. Glen, she thinks.

"Change your shirt," she says to Maggie.

Glen lost a hundred and thirty pounds in college. Margie watched him shrink, digging her hands first into the fat of his belly and later into the folds of skin that draped from his frame. His body bore long lanes of stretch marks and Margie would, with her fingers, connect the marks to make on him drawings of their imagined life.

"This is where we will live together," she had said, tracing the shape of a house along his ribs with the tip of her nail. "Out in the woods and I will have fifty horses," she said. She scratched him, making lines of grass around their house.

"Here," he said, and handed her a pen.

On his skin, Margie drew a garden. She covered his back with tall weeds and trees and the careful outline of their home, which would have many windows. On the sills, she put his odd objects, his records, his little things made of glass.

"What are you drawing now?" His voice was low and muffled. He, facedown, speaking into his pillow.

"Your salt and pepper shakers. Can you feel that? That’s the pair that are fish, she said. Here is the little Dutch boy and girl."

"Where are they going?" he said.

"Where should they go?"

She drew herself on a porch, brushing clean her riding boots. Lines of his skin raised where she drew, rashlike, red. They were together on his left shoulder blade, pulling up garlic bulbs. They looked happy. She moved a fold of skin that hung below his
waist and on one side drew a pinto mare and on the other side a black gelding. She needed more space. She turned him over and began again on the heavy, round sack of his stomach. He watched her.

"Draw our bed. No, bigger," he said. "It has to be big."

She drew a bed as wide as his chest and put them in it, asleep together.

It needs more. Put more in the bed. His voice was sharp. He gripped Margie’s shoulder. She quickly drew more blankets. She entombed them. Bring in our things, he said, his voice a breaking whine. She drew books and magazines and their clothes. Bring in everything we need, he said. She drew his plates, his green glass, empty bottles at their baseboards. She drew bridles and saddles. On pillows, she drew the garlic from the garden.

"Open your eyes," Margie says to Maggie who is asleep in the backseat of the car. "We’re here. Get out a pen. Ready?"

Maggie puts her forehead on the cold car window. Strands of hair stick with sweat across her face. She cannot seem to wake herself completely. Maggie and Margie watch parents ushering their kids up the steps of the elementary school.

"Do you see any friends?" asks Margie.

"Do you see any friends?" asks Maggie. Her eyes are red and her skin looks blotched and beaten. She looks around her, but seems to see nothing she recognizes.

Each day, Margie gives Maggie vocabulary words to memorize. Today's word is tocsin. Maggie asks how the word is spelled and writes it carefully on her opened palm
and gets out of the car. The word appears and then is shaken to a blur as Maggie waves goodbye from the curb.

Margie liked watching her husband clean their kitchen. He was hard and precise and efficient. Her husband. She admired him. He saw problems as nothing more than a series of simple tasks that could be completed in a logical manner. He had planned their wedding saying, "This is easy. Just avoid procrastination, adhere to a schedule, must have good phone skills." The timing of Margie’s second pregnancy had been his idea, nine years after her first, allowing her time between Emily and Maggie to focus on herself. When it was all over, Margie was wheeled by a nurse to a waiting room where both her husband and Emily were reading magazines. Margie’s husband rested his chin in his palm.

He said, "I’m thinking if she’s named for you, it might encourage you to take more of an interest."

Margie had a hard time understanding what he’d said until she realized that it was just the truth spoken in words chosen for their simplicity. What a relief it was to be free of subtext, she thought, and kissed her husband. She loved him. He never asked her to talk to him. She could come in from the barn at night and watch him make her dinner. He chopped vegetables into chunks of equal size and placed them in separate bowls. He fed her and her children and washed the dishes and left Margie feeling like a light object. He kept leftovers in sealed ceramic jars, each with a label written in his neat, block lettering. These are real investments, he’d told her once, tapping a jar’s lid with the tip of his
fingernail. It is just true that butter will absorb the scents of other things in the refrigerator.

To walk directly at the horse is to scare it off far into the pasture. Margie advances in soft angles. She extends her arm to look as if it is coming out of her head. She is making her face look like a horse’s face. Fully offered outward, she makes limp her wrist, her hand curves down like a rounded nose. She is asking the horse to accept her. It had come from a shelter. She did not need to ask about the horse’s past. All is always worn openly in the missing patches of hair ripped from any place its mouth can reach and its ears pinned and the milk-irised eyes.

The horse brings his nose to her hand and his ears move toward her which means Margie can step closer and she does and she pinches his withers to simulate a horse mouth’s nip and scratch and now they have made sense of each other and can begin their work.

The phone in the barn rings. It can only be her husband.

"Can you come up to the house, please?" he says.

"I’m working," she says quietly into the phone.

"Can you come up to the house, please?"

"What is it?" she says, but he has already hung up.

She sits on the cement steps in front of her house and kicks the mud off of her boots. She sees her husband through the kitchen window. He is preparing their dinner. Emily’s spring vacation is nearly over and she will go back to college in the morning. Margie sees her husband lay a large piece of brown meat lovingly into liquid. Why does
he insist she be here? Her hand is on the doorknob to her front door and she thinks, Glen. He knows more about Glen. She wants back in the barn. She and Glen had bought it together, thinking they could turn it into their home. Glen tried to turn what had once been a tack room into their kitchen. He bought books about plumbing and brought them into their bed and read instructions aloud to her then fell asleep and never touched the books again. They filled their sink with the garden hose and drained it into a bucket. They peed in the yard. This was a summer. They weren’t worried. They had all this time. She had come home late one night. She had been in Des Moines to see a horse. It had not been the right horse and she was coming home with only the desire to be back in their bed, which was made in the hayloft. She wanted to be with Glen, looking down on all the open space they were slowly filling.

She pushed apart their heavy barn doors and saw him. He was standing still, staring at her. There were no lights on, but the moon shone enough for her to see that he was naked. Glen’s skin looked white, too white, and his eyes flashed out flatly and it was as if the night could allow nothing to look alive. She knelt in front of him. He was waiting for her! She put a fold of his loose skin in her mouth and bit. She kissed across the creases on his stomach and up his hard sternum and stood to face him. She saw his eyes change. He was waking. He had not been waiting, but was sleepwalking. He made a sound. She heard him cry out.

"What are you doing?" he said, his voice husked. He struck at her arm. He pushed away her hands that were fluttering to soothe him, to touch his hair, to bring him back to her. He lost his balance and fell to the ground. He pulled one knee to his chest and kept
the other leg out, perhaps so that he could kick her. "What are you doing to me?" is what he had said.

Margie’s husband does not look up, but says, "You’ll have to go pick up your daughter from school now."

"Can’t you do it?" says Margie. Her husband is punching flour into dough. He shows her his hands. "What about Emily?" she says. "Can’t Emily go?" He gestures around at their empty house. She looks at her watch, confused.

"She took a nap at recess and some boys kicked her," her husband says. "The nurse says nothing seems broken. She’ll bruise."

Glen, Margie thinks. She sees the day’s newspaper folded on the counter. What about Glen? She wants someone to tell her gently. She wants her husband to hold her and speak of it in his own words. She cannot bear to hear of Glen’s death through the loudness of a stranger’s printed words. Margie leaves her house and walks back to the barn. She looks up to the hayloft. She brushes the horse. She turns and sees her husband is standing in between the barn doors. He looks at her and Margie realizes that he has just decided to leave her. She can see it written on every part of him. It is as if he has—just now—finished a very long book and is calmly placing it back on a shelf.

"Get out," Margie says to him. This is hers, this barn. Hers and Glen’s. "Get the fuck out," she says and she can feel her whole body expanding, rising, with the desire to be left alone.

Her husband steps back and puts his hands on the two barn door handles.

"Your daughter is waiting for you," he says and pulls the handles together, eases the doors shut.
The barn was farther from town then they’d expected. On their drive they joked about what they would say if made to eulogize the other.

"I’m going to tell everyone about your fear of synchronized swimming," Glen said.

"It’s really scary. It really scares me," said Margie.

"I’m going to tell everyone how you brush your teeth like you are trying to kill your teeth."

"I do not," said Margie.

"It’s like you hate your teeth," said Glen.

Margie turned away and laughed out her window. She could smell the sharp green of the woods. She wished she could jump from the car and run out to the trees. She would put her hands deeply into soil and swim through it like water, allowing the dirt to bury her body.

The barn had been listed as storage space. They stood in front of it. It was a battered wooden shell with two doors that pulled together, hands closing to prayer.

"We can build on to it," Glen said. "And all this land. We can have some gardens."

"Vegetables," Margie said.

"Pumpkins or something."

"I can just pick things from the garden and make our dinner."

"I’ll build us a kitchen and a bathroom."

"Do you know how to do that?"
"I'll learn."

"I’ll learn, too."

She was wearing a thin dress and a warm breeze moved through her skirt, rippling it up around her knees. She looked at Glen.

"I can’t tell you how good this feels," she said and pointed to her dress and then pointed to the sun. It had been an unusually long winter. She said, "I’m sad for you that you don’t know how good this feels." She could see a tangible shift, as if something in his body had made itself smaller to include her, to take her in. "What?" she said.

"Nothing. You in a dress."

She banged her face into his chest, feeling a tenderness for him that hurt her lungs and throat and made her cough a little with surprise and she thought, this is probably what people feel like when they are choking to death.

"I want to live with you," she said.

"Here?" he said.

"Yes," she said. "In this empty barn. In this skeleton of what will be our home."

Glen collected. Often he brought her objects like lamps in the shape of fruit or women and said, Do you know how much this is worth? He sought out records and chairs and dishes made of valuable plastics. He moved them into the barn by the truckload. He would sort for hours, saying that he was trying to find the right place for everything, but it seemed that he meant only to hold his belongings. To lift them up, aloft, and look, to turn them in his hands. She could see him from above as she assembled their bed. He brought up a deck with a different constellation of stars on each card. He looked at it for a
long time, touching every picture before replacing the cards in their sleeve and setting the
deck carefully on his bedside table.

When circling their home in morning inspections, Margie and Glen often found
teeth and claw marks on wood. There were animals larger than dogs living in the woods
and it seemed that something was always attacking something in the changing hours
between night and day. They heard this from their bed, in waking.

Some mornings, with tasks in mind, Glen made coffee and disappeared into the
tack room with wrenches and hammers. She would hear the sound of metal hitting metal
and water squealing through resistant passageways. When the sounds ceased, she looked
in on him and often found him sitting on the floor, staring at the broken sink or an empty
space meant for something they didn’t own yet. Outside, she threw seeds at the ground
and pulled at what she believed were weeds. She wanted to lose herself in the sensation
of something being built. She felt she should learn to sew. She thought maybe she should
fix something with needle and thread. She tried to make them a pillow to share, but it
turned out ugly and too thin and they already had a lot of pillows.

One morning Glen opened the heavy wooden lid of one of his many record
players and found a dead rat inside. He spent the rest of the day in bed. What is that? he
said to Margie when, later, she brought him his dinner.

"Soup," she said. He looked into it as if down a deep well. He refused it.

"The rat?" he said.

"Our doors are open all day. Things are bound to get in."

"You put it there," he said.

"Glen, why would I do that?"
Margie reached for him, but the bed was now so full of his things that she had no way in.

"Look," he said, then smoothed out a crumpled suit so that it lay flat like a body waiting. "Gabardine. First patented in 1888."

"Do you want to take a bath with me?" she said, but he wouldn’t answer her. He closed his eyes. He folded his hands on his chest and was still.

They bathed outdoors in a limestone water trough. Eventually their bathroom would be built and the trough could be used as it was intended, for the horses Margie would someday own. She circled ads for horses in the livestock section of the newspaper. Sometimes she and Glen would visit for sale horses and sometimes she would ride them. There was, of course, no place to keep horses yet, but there would be eventually, she was sure.

Margie filled the trough and got undressed. The water was warm, up from a rusted spigot. She wished Glen were with her. She didn’t know what was upsetting him. Glen felt things differently. The day they met they had waited together for a bus and he had looked at her and spoken to her with such intensity. He turned to her and said, Close your eyes. Margie hadn’t wanted to. She’d kept her eyes open and watched as he left the bus. He looked for her, and found her, again later, and then again. Glen said strange and terrifying sentences in his sleep. When first waking, he squinted at her as if trying to see across a very far distance. Before him, she had thought skin to be the most significant boundary between two bodies, but she didn’t think that anymore.
Margie’s husband packs his bags at night. Emily’s voice is on the answering machine saying that she’d been hired by a paper company in New York and will stay there this summer instead of coming home. "So, see you around," she says lightly. It was nice while it lasted. Her voice laughs into the space between Margie’s eyes and her husband’s suitcase.

Margie watches her husband and follows him out their front door. The wheels of his suitcase make terrible sounds against their gravel drive. He throws the suitcase into the backseat of their car and turns to face her. He has something to say, he struggles, holds words in his mouth, objects pressing. She can see it. She waits. The waiting is wild upon her.

"Did you want to marry me?" asks her husband.

He becomes so soft, so hard to look at, when he says the last word. Me?

She did not expect him to give this opening, to extend his palm weakly, a wound for her to cover with her hand. He is so generous, her husband, made prostrate, so generous, allowing her to ask him not to leave. Me? Not a word, but a parting of the lips. And she knows how to go up with her hands and say, I’m so sorry. It isn’t that she doesn’t understand this. She does. Of course she does. She knows she should tell him about Glen. Say she is sad that he is dead. That she is having a bad day. She knows how to make her husband feel in a way that would benefit her. Me? A turning up of the eyes. But she loves him and wants to tell him the truth.

"I feel so much less when I am with you," she says.
"What?" he says. Margie sees that he is angry, but she can’t change what she’s saying. She wants him to understand her.

"It’s hard to explain to you how little I think of you," says Margie. "It is as if you aren’t a real person. It gives me such relief."


"But that’s why I could marry you," she says. She wants to say, I’ve lost so much. You made me feel like there were fewer things to lose. This has saved her. Can he understand that? But he is already in the car. She opens her mouth to speak, but her breath stays in her stomach. Wait, she manages to say. He has already turned the car on. He looks at her through the open window.

"I hear what you are saying," he says.

"But you don’t know what I mean," she says.

"I will find an apartment quickly." When he says this, Margie knows that he has ended their conversation. He is making lists in his head, he is thinking in terms of efficiency. "I’ll need some time to find the right place, to enter into a contract with a landlord, to get the needed furniture, etcetera. Once that is completed, I’ll retrieve Maggie. I’m sure you’ll want that done as soon as possible so that you can continue feeling nothing."

"No." It is all she can say.

"It’s OK. I understand. I feel nothing, too. I used to feel a lot, but it has all been eroding slowly over the last twenty years. I didn’t even notice at the time. But now here we both are. Feeling nothing."
"It’s not the same nothing," she says, but too quietly, and he is rolling up the window and driving away. Gravel rocks cut her knees and palms when she can no longer stand. His car stops and brake lights cut sharply into the otherwise complete darkness. For a second she is blinded, but still she imagines his face watching her in the rear view mirror. Then the car continues forward, down the long driveway, away from her. She blinks many times, but even after the car is gone, the red eyes of the lights remain burned into the air in front of her.

She senses a constant threat looming. For Margie, a day is spent trying to keep quiet her fearful mind. It is nice to lie on a floor and stretch her spine and breathe deeply. The asking and answering of simple questions can cause her great physical pain. So happy was she to stay in the broken barn, hidden among Glen’s piles of things.

She bathed in the trough, hoping to hear the sounds of Glen coming to her. She could see only pinpricks of stars above. It seemed as if she could also see two stars directly in front of her. They were alight and buzzing. She watched these twin bright dots. They seemed to be growing and she thought she heard grass moving, but told herself that she was wrong. She was always getting these things wrong. She was always sensing danger where it didn’t exist. She pushed her head under the water. She could hear nothing now but water bubbling around her slow exhalation. When she could stay under no longer, she rose and sat upright. She sat still, breathing and listening. She listened to the dripping of water moving from her face back into the trough until she understood she was hearing a second sound. A slower one. It was liquid hitting liquid, she was sure, but it came from the end of the trough. This was a sound not made by her. Again she saw the
twin dots, but now she knew that they were not stars, but eyes, red and advancing. She heard Glen’s footsteps coming for her before she understood that she was screaming. He threw open the barn doors and a hallway of light extended out into the yard.

She saw its teeth first. One of the dog’s eyes was missing and it was the blood from the empty socket sliding into the trough water that had made the slow drip.

Glen said her name. She leapt from the tub and ran naked to him, but he would not embrace her. He was shaking. They looked out into the yard. The dog moved slowly toward them. It had been attacked, perhaps by several other animals. It came closer. Not one, but both eyes were missing. What had she seen floating to her in the tub? She thought she knew, but was wrong. Not stars, not eyes, but the glint of blood pooling in twin graves dug into what had been a face and was now a reminder of one.

"Oh, God," cried Margie. "It’s dying. It’s dying."

"The dog made no sounds."

"I can’t," Glen said softly. "I can’t do anything about it."

"You have to," said Margie. The dog slumped to the ground in front of them. It lay in the gravel, panting a bit. They could see that its stomach had been punctured and a section of its intestines pulled through—thick thread stuck in the eye of a needle.

"Please don’t make me do anything," Glen said.

"You have to," said Margie.

"I don’t want to do anything."

"You are supposed to protect me," said Margie.

"Do I have to do this alone?" he said.
What can be said? If there are two, then one doesn’t have to go alone. And here were two. Margie and Glen. And one asks the other for help.

Glen turned to her and said, "What should I do?"

"Pretend you are a man," she said. "Do something a man would do." She understood what she was breaking as she spoke, but she could only think of being, herself, spared. She could say the words to leave him alone with this dying thing in the front yard and he would, years later, leave her alone with his death on the front page. Glen looked at her for what felt like a long time.

"Go inside," he said.

"Ok," she said.

"Close your eyes."

"I will," she said. And she did. But she could still hear the sound of him breathe in as he lifted the dog off the ground and the sound of him putting it in the still full water trough and the sound of it thrash against Glen until it drowned.

Margie sits in Maggie’s room watching Maggie pretend to be asleep. The sun is rising and the room grows brighter. Soon Maggie will stop pretending to be asleep and Margie will have to think of words to say out loud. Maggie hasn’t been sleeping well. This was the explanation she had given when Margie had picked her up from the nurse’s office a week ago. It was Boston Molasses Disaster keeping her awake. Maggie had read about it in history class and now she couldn’t close her eyes without feeling her mouth and nose fill up with sticky fluid. She had anxious dreams. I’m suffocating to death, she cried in the night. I’m suffocating. Margie and her husband had taken turns comforting
Maggie, helping her return to sleep. This wore on Margie. She woke one night to see Maggie standing above her. Maggie said, I’m dying. Margie thought that Maggie might still be asleep. Margie slapped her awake. Her husband reached for her arm, but Margie was already up and out of bed. You are weak, you are so weak, she said, shaking Maggie.

Over and over, her husband had said. "That’s enough."

The sun arrives in the window and Margie looks out to the edges of where their yard meets the woods and finds the place where, so many years ago, Glen had buried the dead dog. He hadn’t been able to look at her. Her cowardice. He left her. She should have known then that there was only safety in loneliness.

Margie turns to her daughter, this body sharing her name, and sees that Maggie is looking back at her, no longer pretending.

"Tell me what you know about the Boston Molasses Disaster," says Margie.

"January 15th, 1919. Twenty-one people died."

"Don’t give me facts. Talk to me about it."

"I don’t want to."

"Speak," Margie says.

"Please don’t make me."

"You have to sleep. We have to do something."

Maggie looked very small, lying still in her bed, looking at Margie. Neither spoke for a long time.

"People drowned in molasses."

Maggie—her daughter, her little voice, it was sharp with the struggle of rising tears. Margie could hear it. She thought about the phone in the kitchen. Soon it would
ring and on the line would be her husband, him clearing his throat, the sound of his voice, then the sounds of his car on the gravel drive, him knocking on the door, and he would take Maggie and then they’d both be gone and Margie would be here, alone, at last, at peace; she had looked, she had tried, but knew now that never was peace to be found in love or in another’s ordered life, but only ever in solitude.

"That is scary," says Margie.

"The dead people had so much molasses on them," says Maggie, that no one knew who they were. Could not recognize them. You did not tell me that this could happen to people.

"It can."

"Oh," says Maggie. "Then what else?"
A Summer

Maggie’s mother fainted behind the wheel of their Ford pick-up and crashed it, so now they are out shopping for a new one. They kick tires.

"Nobody listens to what you say," Maggie’s mother says. "Only actions count. Look like you belong here."

Maggie leans down and squeezes a tire with her hands. She sniffs at it. She doesn’t know how to look like someone who knows about trucks. Her mother has only taught her how to choose the ripest fruit. Her mother nudges her up with her foot.

"You’re embarrassing us," she says.

Maggie’s mother injured her wrist when their truck hit the light pole. A bystander saw and insisted on calling an ambulance. Maggie’s mother doesn’t eat much. They had been coming back from the grocery store when the accident happened. They had collected a cart of food, but then Maggie’s mother got into an argument with the checkout lady who was also the mother of a school friend of Maggie’s, and then they left without the food. Maggie thinks her mother should eat more and then she wouldn’t faint and they wouldn’t hit light poles with their truck.

Maggie had hit her head on the passenger dash and felt a little dizzy so she sat down on the curb and watched her mother speak with the bystander. Her mother said "fuck off" to the bystander and it was the first time Maggie heard the word "fuck" said by an adult. No ambulance came. Now her mother’s wrist was wrapped in white gauze. Under the gauze, Maggie knew the wrist was purple and twice it’s normal size and was too soft to hold or squeeze. If it were fruit, Maggie would know not to choose it.
A salesman approaches and Maggie’s mother says, "When we’re ready, we’ll come to you."

He puts up his hands and walks backward, smiling.

"Tough customer," he says and shakes a finger at Maggie’s mother. "I’m ready for you." He steps forward again. He leans down to be Maggie’s height.

"Where’s your Daddy?" he asks. He reaches to touch Maggie’s head, but her mother catches the man’s hand and holds it back, holds his eyes. He stands so that he is now taller. Taller than both Maggie and her mother.

"Great-looking little gal you got," he says. His voice has changed. Each word now sounds the same. Before there had been a rising and falling. Listening to him, Maggie had thought of being at the carnival. She wanted cotton candy. She is hungry. Now he sounds like one note being played over and over.

"She’d look great in this truck riding around with her great-looking mom. This is a fine truck for two fine ladies. Good choice you’ve made here."

"This is not a choice we’ve made yet," Maggie’s mother says. The salesman’s hands go back up, palms facing them. He walks away. He smiles. Maggie still wants cotton candy.

Her mother turns back to the truck and says, "I do the choosing. I make the choices. That’s how we don’t get screwed."

Maggie wants a yellow truck. Yellow is her favorite color. A few weeks ago, Maggie asked for yellow shoes and her mother sent her to her room. Later, Maggie’s mother called her to the kitchen table. They sat across from each other. Maggie’s mother’s hands were folded together.
"First," she said. "Don’t ask anyone for anything." She rubbed her eyes with her knuckles and sighed. This was before the truck crashed and her wrists were still the same size. "There is no second point, actually," she said and sent Maggie back to her room.

Later, Maggie’s mother stood outside Maggie’s closed door and said, "I will know if you need shoes and then I will buy you shoes and those shoes will be black and will show fewer stains than yellow shoes." Her mother sounded tired. Her mother sounded as if her mouth were pressed directly into the wood that separated them. "That is called practicality," she whispered.

This morning Maggie had found a pair of black sneakers in a white box on her bed. They were a size too big and soon blisters formed and hurt her. She couldn’t find bandages. They were out of them. She would not ask for more. She taped bits of a paper towel between and around her toes and that worked pretty well.

Maggie’s mother is reciting a list; she is whispering the list to herself in the parking lot of the new and used car and truck store. Maggie listens. She thinks she understands what each word means by itself, but does not know what they mean when they are put side by side.

"The truck must track when hands come off the wheel, her mother says, hushed and mumbling. The truck must brake in a line that is straight. The truck, when at full lock right and then left, must not make any weird sounds." Maggie’s mother stares at the ground and nods her head in a slow, steady rhythm. "The transmission must move smoothly through all gears." She says the list again and then once more and then looks coolly at Maggie. She says, "We’re ready."
"That truck was no good," Maggie’s mother says on the bus ride home and Maggie is glad because the truck was an ugly green and the salesman had told Maggie that it was the same as the color of her eyes and now Maggie hates her eyes. Maggie wants pancakes for dinner.

The bus ride is long and it is abnormally hot, even for July, and all the seats are taken, so they stand. Twice, people bump into Maggie’s mother’s wrist and Maggie looks for an expression that signals pain, but her mother smiles once and does nothing with her face the other time. Their bus arrives at the downtown station. Forty minutes later, the rural line comes and takes them out of the city, down dirt roads, and drops them half a mile from their farm. They are wet and red-faced when they arrive home. The gauze on Maggie’s mother’s wrist has loosened and bunched and so she rips it off completely and puts it in her pocket. The bend of the break makes her arm and hand look like a swan’s head and neck. Maggie thinks it is beautiful. Maggie’s toes hurt.

"My feet are bleeding," she says to her mother.

"Convince yourself that they are not."

"I’m tired."

"Tell yourself you aren’t."

Near the front door are eleven boxes that hold items that belong to Maggie’s father. Maggie’s mother had packed them on the same day that Maggie’s father had left. They were neatly taped and labeled and stacked. With her index finger, Maggie traces the words, RECREATIONAL CLOTHING, marked in tall letters on the side of a box.
"Can we look at dad’s things?" Maggie asks.

"Why would one do that?"

"Can we have pancakes for dinner?"

"Think in simpler terms."

"Cereal."

"Ok." Maggie’s mother gets down a bowl from the cupboard.

"I’m sleepy." Maggie yawns. She wants to remove her shoes. A show she likes is on television tonight.

"Can I have my cereal in the other bowl?" Maggie asks.

"Your father did a terrible job of raising you."

"Dad let me eat out of the bowl. Even when we ate sandwiches."

"Heartbreak accompanies those who attach themselves to things as insignificant as bowls," she says, but then replaces the one she has already taken down and finds the yellow bowl in the sink. She washes it carefully and dries it. The cereal she fills it with is yellow. She places it in front of Maggie and hands her the milk jug, too.

The answering machine has three messages. The first is from Maggie’s sister Emily who didn’t come home from college this summer, but instead stayed in New York. The message tells them that Emily has an internship at a printing house that produces textbooks and consumer manuals.

"So much paper," Emily’s bright voice says. "You wouldn’t believe how much paper there is in the world!"

Maggie’s mother stops the message before it is over. "She’s out of our hands now. Nothing we can do for her anymore."
Maggie nods. Maggie thinks Emily is the prettiest girl in the world and wants to be just like her.

The second message is from the salesman at the truck store.

"We couldn’t convince you to buy a truck today? Will you give me another chance? Come back. Satisfaction. Hello to the little one. Frank Brick, here. From today. Please call about that truck. It was talking about you after you left. It said, I really wish that woman would come back and buy me. I love the way it felt to be driven by her. Ok. You think about it. Frank Brick, here."

The third message is also from Frank Brick.

"Hello, there! Seems like the little gal left her coat behind. Better come back for the coat. Or I will drop it by. Got your info on some forms here. I could come by in that truck you drove today. It misses you. It would love to see you. Ok, give us a call."

Maggie’s mother’s face looks tighter. Her mouth turns down. Her fingers stay on the answering machine. "I’m going to the barn," she says. Her fingers move to her wrist and stay, lightly, there.

"Can I come with you?" Maggie asks.

"Not tonight."

"Please?"

"Flashcards."

Maggie spoons in as much cereal as she can, knowing her mother won’t wait for her to finish eating. The flashcards are spread on the table. Each hold a word on one side and the meaning on the other. All are written in her mother’s small, neat cursive.
She gathers the cards and hands them over and her mother is out the door. Maggie chews faster. She leaves the bowl on the table. It will be there in the morning and through the next day until the milk smells so badly that one of them dumps it down the sink. The sink is full now. The mailbox outside their house is full. They’ve stopped bringing in the bills. The washing machine is full of clothes they intend to wash, but haven’t. They keep forgetting to buy laundry soap.

Maggie’s mother is already half way to the barn so Maggie runs to catch up with her.

"Trenchant!" her mother yells.

"Sharply perceptive! Keen! Penetrating!" Maggie yells back, out of breath.

The space between them shortens.

"Specious," her mother calls.

"Seeming true, but actually fallacious," Maggie replies.

The space around them is vast. Two hundred and forty acres of wheat and woods. Maggie’s mother raises and trains horses. She used to travel around the country giving lectures about proper handling techniques. She had to cancel her travels and speaking engagements because Maggie’s father moved out months ago and gave no notice and Emily was staying at college instead of coming home for the summer and now who would raise Maggie but her? There is no other choice, Maggie’s mother had said on the phone to someone who arranged her affairs. "Cancel Dubuque. Cancel Albuquerque. Cancel everything for…?" She looked at Maggie. "The next nine years, I guess."

Her mother is raising an Arabian now. They are getting to know each other. The horse doesn’t like anyone and often stomps the ground and makes noises that scare
Maggie. Maggie doesn’t like horses. Maggie likes her mother. Maggie likes to sit on stacked hay bales and watch her mother work. Before her father left, no one was allowed in the barn. It is different now. Maggie is allowed watch.

Her mother brushes the horse and feeds it by hand. She cleans the horse’s feet with a pick and rubs oil into the hard hoof. The horse is sick and Maggie’s mother carefully gives injections. This is his favorite spot, Maggie’s mother says and scratches him near the base of the neck. The horse’s head lowers.

"Okay, Okay," she says. "Shhh, you’re okay," she whispers as the needles go in.

Maggie has long brown hair and horse has short gray hair. Her mother has set down an oval, rough-bristled brush and Maggie picks it up and strokes her own hair with it. It hurts her. The bristles, too sharp, pierce her scalp. It is meant for horses, not for her. She puts it down.

"How do you know that’s his favorite spot?" Maggie asks.

"More flashcards," her mother says.

"I’m tired. My head is bleeding. I’m sick."

"Study. This will be helpful come fall. I am trying to arm you against a world that dismisses nearly everything and everyone."

"Oh," Maggie says. She thinks the world her mother refers to is more than fourth grade, next year. It’s something more.

In the house, the answering machine blinks. They play two messages but both are only the sound of a phone hanging up. Maggie’s mother looks at the clock on their kitchen wall. It’s late.
"It’s late," she says. "Bedtime."

"Who called us?" Maggie asks.

"Bedtime," her mother says.

Maggie cleans her teeth carefully. Gargles with purpose. She changes her clothing. Their house is shaped like a long, shallow rectangle with Maggie’s bedroom on one end, her mother’s on the other, and their large kitchen in the center. Maggie hates bedtime because she has to walk away from the brightness of the kitchen, its lights always on in the night, to her dark end of the house. Alone in it, her bed feels enormous and the country can be so quiet, black, and big. She tucks her blankets tightly on either side of her, closes her eyes, and tries to sleep. She wonders how many people would be able to find her, find their farmhouse, so far out of town, so many acres to search through. She runs her fingers along her scalp, through her hair, she scratches her neck, her own shoulder. She finds some horse hair the brush has left on her. She holds a few strands, rougher and much thicker than hers. She rolls them through her fingers.

"Okay, okay," she says quietly. "You’re okay."

Maggie’s mother has a box of frozen waffles and syrup set out on the breakfast table. She hasn’t changed her clothes from the day before. She is sitting in the same chair she was sitting in when Maggie went to bed. Maggie would like to eat her breakfast next to her mother. She’d like to share the chair her mother is sitting in.

"Eat," her mother says. She digs the fist from her good hand into her left eye. She drops the fist to the table. She looks punched. She watches the phone.
Maggie stands as closely as she can to her mother. She wants to sit on her lap, but doesn’t ask for what she wants. Her mother lets Maggie stand near her for a few seconds and then says, "I’m going to the barn."

Maggie’s mother is in the barn the rest of the day. Maggie draws and looks at her flashcards and watches television. The phone rings, but she does not answer it and no one leaves a message. She eats twelve frozen waffles and nothing else and tucks herself into bed at nine, which is her bedtime.

Hours later—or it could have been minutes later because it is hard to tell time in darkness and sleep—a bright light moves slowly through Maggie’s room and the sound of tires crunching gravel can be heard. In the moments before waking, Maggie dreams that her father is home, then she dreams it is her mother coming home from a horse show, then she remembers that her dad is gone and her mother is no longer traveling and that they don’t have a truck anymore that would make that sound, that crushing sound made only by something heavy moving up the drive, toward the house. So it must be someone else.

Maggie opens her eyes. The headlights fill the room with so much light that there is nothing else that can be seen. The lights keep moving and when they pass, her room comes into focus a bit. From the corner of Maggie’s room, a form emerges—a body, a person, her mother, her mother’s face. She is sitting upright in a hard-backed chair. Her mother isn’t moving, just looking straight ahead. The headlights are moving. They reposition. Whoever is here is leaving. The headlights cross Maggie’s room again.

"Are we scared?" Maggie asks quietly.
Her mother doesn’t answer. Maggie wonders if her mother has heard her. Then Maggie wonders if she has actually said the words out loud.

"Should we cry?"

"Accomplishing what, exactly?" Her mother says.

"Jody’s mother cried. Remember? We saw her crying in the grocery store?"

"Who is Jody’s mother?"

"Jody’s in my class. Her mom works at the grocery store. She asked you about Dad? She said, ‘Sometimes people cry’ and then she cried? Remember?"

"The world will forget Jody’s mother."

"Will the world forget us?"

"Yes."

"Will you sleep in here tonight?" Maggie asks.

"No," her mother says and stands and leaves, but doesn’t shut the door all the way, allowing a tiny glow of light from the kitchen to stay present in Maggie’s room.

In the morning, Maggie’s mother is lying on the floor of the kitchen. She has a blanket wrapped around her, but no pillow. She is awake, staring at the ceiling.

"I didn’t prepare any breakfast," she says.

"It’s ok." Maggie opens the fridge. She unwraps a chunk of cheese and takes two bites from it. She rewraps and replaces it in the fridge. She drinks a glass of tap water. The kitchen table, the countertops, corners of the floor are covered with evidence of their life together. Books about horses, doodles, notes, flashcards, plates with crumbs and crusts, cups with water in them, her mother on the floor.
"Did you sleep here last night?" Maggie asks.

"Sleep is hard."

"What do you mean?"

"Closing your eyes is hard."

"What does that mean?" Maggie whines. "I don’t understand."

Maggie’s mother sits up and faces Maggie and Maggie feels a little nervous. Her mother’s hair is matted flat and she has not changed from the clothes she put on three days ago. She says nothing. She walks to the door and Maggie follows. She follows her mother to the barn. She watches her mother care for the sick horse.

"How do you know which spot is his favorite spot?" Maggie asks, watching her mother scratch the long neck. Again, needles go unnoticed.

Maggie’s mother doesn’t answer. Maggie suddenly wonders if she doesn’t understand the act of speaking, of making sound. She thinks she is producing words, but they find no reaction, so how does she know she has spoken out loud? Maybe the problem is hers, her brain’s connection to her vocal chords. Maggie touches her throat. She presses down. She tries to feel a vibration, a physical feeling that something inside is moving tangibly out of her and toward her mother. Her mother says nothing.

Maggie says, "Hello, Mom," in what she thinks is in just her mind. She tries not to make a real sound. Her mother does nothing. Then she screams, "Hello, Mom," in what she thinks out loud means. She screams, "Hello, hello, hello." Her mother tenses a bit. Is that a sign of recognition? Maggie doesn’t know. She can’t tell. She tries to go back and forth between speaking within herself and speaking to be heard. She tries to feel a
physical change in her body. Both times, in both cases, Maggie hears herself, but sees nothing.

A few hours later, Maggie’s mother walks back into the house. Maggie follows. They spend the rest of the day in the kitchen, sitting in what Maggie thinks is silence.

In sleep that night, Maggie dreams of bells that ring and never stop. She sees them, heavy brass, swinging. She tries to hold them still, but can’t. As she begins to wake, she realizes the bell she hears is the phone ringing. She gets out of bed and moves, blindly, down the dark hallway to the kitchen where her mother sits, wrapped in a blanket. Her mother can’t see her because Maggie is standing outside the kitchen door in the darkness. Maggie can see her mother and watches her. She watches the phone. When it rings again, Maggie’s mother crawls slowly, on all fours, to it.

She picks up the receiver and asks in a very quiet voice, "Please stop calling."

Maggie walks into the light of the kitchen, walks to her mother. Her mother lets out a little cry. Maggie sits on the floor with her and does not try to touch her, but sits very close. Her mother shares the blanket. This seems to steady her and when the headlights appear in the drive and when the knock sounds on the door, she seems to have been expecting it all along. She seems ready. They stand up in unison, still wrapped in the same blanket. They are one lumpy body and two heads and they open the door together and see Frank Brick standing there. They see him at the same time. He is smiling. He is holding keys and a cardboard box.

"Oh, good. You’re home."

"It’s so late," says Maggie’s mother.
"Came by to return the little gal’s coat." He is not holding a coat.

"It’s so hot," says Maggie’s mother. Maggie hadn’t worn a coat in months.

"Came by to tell you about our new promotion deal," Frank Brick says. "We’ll just loan you the truck for a few weeks. Then you call in and tell us how the truck is doing. If it’s treating you right. If it’s saying nice things when you tell it to get up and go. What do you think? Want to take care our guy for a while? Maybe this is his home."

"What’s in the box?" Maggie asks.

"This is for you." Frank Brick hands Maggie the box. She opens it. Inside is a sleeping kitten. The kitten moves. Her mother screams.

"Thought the girl should have a kitten," Frank Brick says without blinking.

Maggie’s mother raises a hand from the blanket to shut the door. The hand she raises is her injured one. The bruises are fading into green and gray. Frank Brick leans into the doorframe and catches her hand at the wrist. He holds it gently, encircles it completely with his thumb and middle finger.

"You should really have someone look at that," he says.

"We don’t want the truck," Maggie’s mother says.

"Oh, well, it’s too late for that. He moves to the side of the doorframe, no longer blocking it entirely, and from around his body they can see there is a second set of headlights in the driveway." The truck stays, he says.

"Okay," her mother says.

"You call to tell us how it’s doing," he says.

"Okay."
He places the keys in the hand he still holds. Her mother cringes. Pain. Maggie sees it clearly.

"What’s all this?" he says, and taps the eleven boxes stacked next to the door with the hand that is free.

"My husband’s things," Maggie’s mother says. She is shaking. Maggie wonders what her mother has eaten today.

"Gone is he? Flew the coup? Left you ladies lonely?"

Maggie’s mother’s eyes look dulled. Slackened. Even though they are open, they look like they can’t see what is in front of them.

"You know what you should do? You should take these boxes to the driveway. You should take that bright, shiny truck I brought for you and you should run this shit over. You should smash his shit with my truck."

"Ok," Maggie’s mother says.

He releases her wrist. The three of them look at each other for what seems like too long. Finally, he smiles then turns to leave.

"Goodnight," he calls over his shoulder. He walks toward the headlights until they engulf his figure and they can no longer see him at all.

Maggie brings her pillows from her bed and she and her mother lie on the floor of the kitchen. They wrap themselves in separate blankets and do not touch or speak. The kitten sleeps on Maggie’s chest. She pets it. She kisses its sleeping head. It doesn’t mind. She names it Banana.

"Are we scared?" Maggie asks. "Can we cry?"
The kitchen begins to brighten with light from outside.

"Do you want to cry?" her mother says.

"I think so." Maggie is hungry. Her body hurts from lying on the floor. Every sound she hears that isn’t her mother makes her uneasy. She is so tired. She wants to cry. She wants her mother to cry. She wants to watch her mother smash things with the truck.

"Cry like a baby. Go ahead." Her mother sits up. "Stop looking at me," she says.

Maggie squeezes Banana closer. She wants to make breakfast for Banana and her mother and herself. She wants her mother to feel better.

"Could we drive over stuff with the truck?" Maggie asks. "Would that be a good thing to do?"

Her mother thinks for a while then nods. She stands. She takes something from the sink and begins to walk out the door.

"Come on," she says. "Bring that kitten. I want the kitten to see this."

Her mother takes long strides to the truck. So quickly, she covers the space between where Maggie stands and where the truck is. Maggie thinks her mother is graceful, fast. Her mother is thin and tall and has long, black hair that she never ties up. Her mother has pale skin and Maggie remembers a morning when her father reached across the kitchen table to touch her mother’s face. He had said to Maggie, "You’re so lucky. Look at your mother’s face. This is what you’ll look like someday. You have so much to look forward to."

Maggie sees her mother bend and place something on the ground near the truck’s front tire. It is Maggie’s yellow bowl. Her mother gets into the truck, starts it, and runs
over the bowl twice. Forward first, then backs up. She turns the truck off and walks away, toward the barn, leaving Maggie alone to watch.

Every night, Maggie and her mother sleep on the kitchen floor. Items from their rooms and other corners of the house accumulate, here, in the center of their house. Maggie’s pajamas are folded in a drawer with the silverware. They eat very little. They talk less. They move from the kitchen to the barn and then back; the rest of the house forgotten. Maggie’s mother gives one-word answers into the phone when it rings. It rings many times a day. It is the only sound her mother seems to recognize and respond to in a way that is clear to Maggie.

When slow-moving headlights move up their long drive again one night, Maggie feels afraid, but also feels joy. She wonders if her mother will share her blanket again. She wonders if they will move together, at the same time, to see what is coming toward them, who will knock. Her mother had been in pain, Maggie had seen it, and Maggie had been there and her mother had let her be there. Had let her sit next to her on the floor for the rest of the night, awake and scared. Maggie wants this again, but when the headlights stop their seeking and sound of car doors open and close, Maggie’s mother says, Stay here. Don’t move, and Maggie is left in the kitchen while her mother talks to the man at the door. Maggie kisses the top of Banana’s ears and scratches the kitten’s neck. She would feel worse, more alone, if she didn’t know that a greater fear, much greater than Frank Brick, would arrive soon for her mother and when it arrived, this fear, her mother would be cut wide open. The horse was dying, Maggie knew. But she would still be there. At the house. With her mother. Maggie would be the only one left.
The horse dies at night while Maggie is asleep and dreaming about singing. Her mother is singing in her dream, but the singing keeps changing and Maggie starts to wake and realize that her mother is moaning. Her mother is not moaning in the kitchen or in the house, but far away somewhere, so Maggie’s mother is probably not moaning, but is more like screaming and it is the distance between them that softens the sound.

Maggie follows the sound to the barn. She hears her mother. She sees her. Her mother is trying to keep the horse on its feet, but the horse is heaviest in death and wants to fall to the ground. Her mother’s hands, arms, shoulders, all push against the leaning horse.

"I need help." Her mother is screaming. Her body struggles, it shakes under the weight of the dead horse. "I need help. Where is everybody?"

Maggie runs to her mother and together they strain to keep the horse, the hugeness of this animal, from falling down.

"He has to stand! Keep him standing!" Maggie’s mother says. She is weeping. It was more than Maggie had hoped for.

They lasted only a few more seconds because the animal is a thousand pounds and they are not, together, even two hundred and so the horse gets its way and falls into the dirt. Maggie’s mother falls with the horse and holds its belly and cries. The crying is grotesque, horrifying. In the way it wrecks her mother’s pale face, makes it unfamiliar, unstable, covers it in wetness, snot. Maggie sees that she gets to cry, too, and does. It is ugly and great. Her mother reaches for her. Her mother reaches for her! Death has
allowed this, Maggie thinks, and is glad. Now she knows when it is appropriate to feel badly.

Maggie does not want this to end, their embrace of each other, but it does end and in the days that follow, Maggie’s mother doesn’t speak at all, won’t look at her, leaves the kitchen to sleep in her own room at a far end of the rectangular house. But Maggie now knows how to fix this. Her mother has given her the tools, just as she has taught Maggie to kick tires, to deal with strangers who show up late in the night, to choose the right fruit.

Maggie kisses her sleeping kitten on the head. She cradles it in her arms.


Maggie waits until it is dark and then takes the kitten out to the driveway and places it next to the front tire of the truck. The kitten curls into itself in sleep. It yawns. The keys are still on the driver’s seat. Maggie’s mother has left them there. Maggie turns the truck on with some difficulty. She can’t push the pedals and see over the dash at the same time, so when the truck jumps forward, she just hopes the tires are aimed true. She pushes the gas pedal softly and hears a flattening. She puts the truck in reverse, she has seen her mother do this many times, move the lever at the base of the wheel to get the truck to change it’s direction. She backs to flatten a second time. Now it is Maggie’s turn to moan and she does loudly until her mother appears in the drive next to her.

"Help!" Maggie screams. "I need help! Where are you?"

Her mother sees and vomits. This, too, looks grotesque, horrifying, and so Maggie sees it as the signal and begins to cry. She reaches for her mother. Her mother lets her
reach. Her mother picks her up and carries her back into the house. Maggie’s mother holds her tightly. Maggie holds her mother tightly. Maggie feels so much love.