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—WINTER CHERRY—
A novel by Miriam Ellen Walden

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ONE

There was a fire in the church. It started underground in a forgotten crawlspace where wood had rotted for decades, wet and unventilated. Beneath statues of angels, beneath the sanctuary floorboards, a spark exploded in the night. Flames spread quickly, moving in the walls, following old wires through plaster and wood. Flames climbed window frames and burst through stained glass. The lacquer on the pews bubbled and lit up. The wooden seats turned black, then orange, then gray. Hymnals and prayer books, vestments and sacraments burned. Gilded wooden columns crashed onto the altar. Floor tiles cracked and shattered in the heat. The organ fell from the balcony in pieces, its pipes warped and glowing. Structural beams twisted as they reached the ground. The cedar cabinets in the sacristy, wax candles, triptychs, fire. Glass, gold, metal, silk, white winter carnations. The roof caved in. Clouds of dust filled the staircase, aisle and apse. Dark smoke rose high above traffic lights, lampposts, lights from midnight kitchens, spotlights, spiraling fire engine lights. It rose high above the Village like dense incense.

Around the burning church, falling embers and ash landed on the school's courtyard and in the garden on dormant flowerbeds. They fell on benches dedicated to a beloved's memory, across chainlink fences, into the backyards of the rectory. Smoke blew underneath doors and through a cracked windowpane,

stirring clergy in their sleep. A magnolia tree was scorched on one side, its veins tricked into the thought of blossoms for those hours. Paving stones were hot underfoot. Along Hudson Street, brownstone houses remained in their rows and watched from the corners of their eyes, wondering if they were next to ignite. Grass and neatly trimmed hedges shrank from the church's perimeter.

Paul stood in the street in his bathrobe, hiking boots and a wool blanket someone had placed around his shoulders, as men in fireproof suits and wide-brimmed helmets pushed past him with axes. The water hose made loud thuds as it fell in loops from the side of the truck, filled with water, and was pulled in through the church's front doors. Neighbors looked out of their windows from across the street or came down to the pavement. A barricade was set up to keep them at a distance. News cameras flashed. The church had been there before any of them had been born, before even their mothers had been born. Streams of water arced across the air.

In the morning the sky turned white. Cold river wind blew across cobblestone streets. A handful of congregants arrived with the Sunday paper folded under one arm, holding paper cups of coffee, staring at the smoking ruins. There were shocked sobs and silent sounds of witness. Amid pools of mud, steaming water and collapsed bricks that years ago had been laid and mortared after a sea journey from Holland, three walls and a bell tower stood still and high. Daylight flowed through charcoaled Byzantine arches. Someone passed around a box of coffee

cake and people in the small crowd ate it quietly. They had come to church and found it burned down. Their home for one day a week, maybe two. Maybe they had spent their whole lives there.

Paul was surrounded by questions. When would John be back from his retreat? He was on the road as they spoke, maybe an hour away. Two funerals were scheduled that week. Where would they be held? We'll find a way. Would there be Eucharist tomorrow? Yes, in the school gym. What about morning chapel for the students on Monday? Yes. All afternoon, Paul and the other assistant rector, Laura, sat at her kitchen table answering the phone, picking at sandwiches. Part of him wanted to get up from his chair, take the train from Penn Station to his sister's house in Massachusetts, and walk out into the woods in the snow and quiet. While he lit the burner under the teakettle for the third time that afternoon, Laura let the receiver fall back in its cradle and covered her face with her hands. Without turning from the stove, Paul reached back a hand and let it rest on her shoulder. The phone started to ring again and she stared at the table before wiping her cheeks with a paper towel and answering.

“This is Laura.”

That afternoon, John returned home. Quietly, he, Paul and Laura put on the hard hats that the fire department had left them. Together, they picked through the rubble of the sacristy and made their way to the sanctuary. John lifted a burnt

piece of wood and let it fall to the side. Paul and Laura swept away the mud that clung to the base of the altar. Peoples' ashes had been interred under the altar, and the three of them were there to take them out. One by one, Laura and Paul passed the urns to John's waiting hands. When they had them all collected, they exited through the sacristy to the garden. As the wind picked up and the sun set low on the Hudson, John read from the prayer book he had carried with him from his house. Paul and Laura spread the ashes over the garden, murmuring words no one would hear.

The next morning was the first Sunday of Lent. They held Eucharist in the school gym, with borrowed vestments, a chalice, sacraments, the gospel. It was raining, and people left their umbrellas and coats in a pile on the stage near the locker room door. The congregation sat in folding chairs carried up from the school basement. They sang without organ or piano. Alan Jones had already been scheduled to preach that Sunday, and it was a good thing, because Paul, Laura and John could hardly read the gospel, could hardly speak to lead the prayers, could sing only some hoarse notes in the Eucharist. After the service, they just sat down on the folding chairs with everyone else and blinked back their tears.

They knew they would rebuild. That morning, they each gave what they could, and everyone gave something. Fundraising began right away. This was a disaster

they could manage. This was a treatable problem. Soon a committee formed. They canvassed the neighborhood and ran inserts in *The Villager*. They were buzzed into apartment buildings and went door to door. The owner of Zito's bakery wrote a check. People made phone calls, met with consultants, architects, board members.

It was slow going. It was a challenge. It was 1981.

This was the way it continued for five years. Funerals were held in the school gym or in the church garden when seasons were warm. Bricklayers built out from where the apse had been, and a sacristy took shape. There were arguments about Chihuly glass and what kind of light fixtures to install. There were paint chips and budgetary analyses and large drawings of red thermometers tracking donations. Electricians discussed microphones and speaker placement. In the school gym there were baptisms and funerals, Christmas pageants and Easter passions. Some people left the congregation. Other people joined.

Time moves this way. It took one night for a church to burn, and one night for two people to conceive a child. As bulldozers removed twisted metal, ashen wood and plaster from the building's wreckage, Sara's cells divided in her mother's womb. Fingernails grew, her spine elongated and solidified, her brain expanded. There formed the curves of her feet, her thighs, her shoulders, her

cheeks. The twist of her mouth, the squint of her eyes. Tiny teeth hardened behind pink gums. A tongue reached up from her new throat. Her heart pumped blood through her muscles, stomach, intestines, liver, kidneys, arms and legs. She floated in amniotic fluid, attached to her mother, until she was born. Her parents wrapped her in white cloth and brought her home.

As the church downtown was cleared out and rebuilt, uptown Sara grew and began to walk. Her father interviewed for a job at the University and took a position in its history department. Her mother talked with patients in her office, cooked dinner for her husband, made birthday cakes and Valentines. She nursed Sara, bathed her, dressed her, changed her. Sara's father read to her, held her, sang to her, wrote letters to his family with recent photographs enclosed. And for more than a year, downtown, the church waited for new steel roofing beams to arrive.

One day, in the shower, Sara's mother was shaving her armpit when she felt the lump. They scheduled surgeries, chemotherapy, radiation. Her hair fell out. They moved to Boston for a few months to be treated by the best specialist they could find. She went into remission. Her hair grew back thick and short. She took Sara to the beach and watched her small hands dig in the sand. She smiled for her husband's camera. The cancer returned and spread. She had a stroke and lay in bed, unable to speak or move half of her body. Once she spoke in incoherent French to her husband, crying, telling him to please turn out one

lamp but not the other. After eighteen months of treatment, her body was cremated and Sara's father scattered the remains in a cathedral garden.

He held Sara and taught her how to tie her shoelaces, how to fold napkins, how to brush her teeth, how to say thank you and excuse me. He tried to trim her bangs, but she moved her head so much they ended up jagged. They had the flu together, crawling down the hallway with cramped stomachs, keeping the lights off, trying to hold down water and chicken soup. He pushed her on the swing at the park. Sara and her father sang songs at night when she was tucked into bed. He told her Bible stories and Aesop's fables and Grimm's fairytales. He made French toast on weekend mornings and sometimes for dinner. When he could not bring himself to cook, they went to the diner for club sandwiches and chocolate ice cream. The waiters knew them by name. Sara stirred her ice cream with a spoon and made it into chocolate soup.

Sara's father met Laura at a friend's fundraising dinner. They talked that night, then on the phone, then over drinks and dinner. Sara took the crosstown bus with her father to spend weekends with her grandparents so he and Laura could be alone. One afternoon, he brought home boxes and a roll of tape and began to pack up their apartment.

"She really made me wait," he laughed, half to Sara and half to himself. Laura had finally accepted his proposal.

He sat with Sara on her bedroom floor, trying to explain why they were moving, sorting through her toys and blocks. What would she keep, what would she leave behind for the family in the downstairs apartment who had just had a new baby. After she had gone to sleep, he went through the drawers of Sara's mother's clothes to give most of them away. He taped closed a wine box that held her diplomas, her journal from a trip to Europe, some old jewelry, a box of colored pencils, the plaque from outside of her office. They would be put into storage for when Sara was older.

Sara lined up her stuffed animals and packed them each a bundle made from a take-out chopstick and a handkerchief with provisions for the trip. The movers came and put everything in a box labeled "Girl's Room." When her father unpacked them three days later, there was peanut butter smeared on the inside of the box and stuck in the fur of several bears. Everything had to be put through the wash. Before Sara knew they were gone, the chopsticks ended up in the garbage with the uneaten sandwiches.

The church had given Laura three floors of a brownstone to start her new family. Paul still lived next door, in the basement apartment. He helped Sara's father unload the moving truck, carrying into Laura's house another marriage's dishes, glassware, furniture, paintings, books, tools, records, clothing, sheets, towels, pots and pans. Sara's father parked a bike with training wheels under the

staircase, wiped his brow with the back of his hand, then returned to the truck.

Paul touched the purple and white streamers hanging from the handlebars, and followed him out to the street.

All this time round skylights punctuated the church's new ceiling. Pews were built and painted white. Stained glass windows were hand blown and installed in new window frames. A pulpit stood to the right of the sanctuary.

Broad wooden columns were lowered into place. A replica of the organ was built in Canada and installed, piece by piece, in the new balcony. Fresh tiles were laid along the aisles. A marble altar was placed in the middle of the sanctuary, where the Eucharist would now be sung toward the congregation. The baptismal font was filled with water. There were chairs for the clergy and hymnals for the congregants. The church was nearly ready.

TWO

Laura had a key purse that closed up like a leather clam. Outside it was smooth and brown, worn, watermarked. When she unzipped its mouth, a cluster of keys emerged like jagged fingertips. They were keys to a house that Sara did not know. Sara carried Balducci's bags behind Laura, and waited under the brownstone's stairs as the keys rattled in their purse. In the cool darkness, she was swarmed by flies. They dove at the sweat at the base of her pageboy haircut. Sara pressed one ear into her shoulder. She set her teeth against the buzzing. Laura turned the key in the lock and pushed the door open, bending to pick up the rest of the groceries. They were home.

In the kitchen, parrot tulips stood in a vase on the table. Laura had grown them in her garden. Sara felt there was something gaudy about parrot tulips, though she was also drawn to their display, their flashy color and feathery edges. When no one was looking, she sometimes rubbed her finger against the pollen on a flower's stamen and painted it on her kneecap. The kitchen had a pass-through window to the living room, where Sara's mother's piano stood next to the fireplace. Laura had had to move her sectional sofa against the opposite wall to make room for the piano when Sara and her father had moved in three weeks earlier.

Sara helped Laura unpack the groceries. She was handed two boxes of frozen peas and a pint of ice cream to put away in the freezer. When she picked up the tomatoes and walked toward the refrigerator, Laura said, "No. Tomatoes

don't go in there." She sounded like she was spitting. "You can wash the lettuce for the salad tonight."

Sara sat at the kitchen counter and pressed down the plastic button on top of the salad spinner, then held on to the side of the bowl and felt the basket inside shudder as it spun to a halt. Droplets of water slapped against the inside of the bowl, then pooled together at the bottom. Sara loved this job. She pumped down on the button a few more times, getting it spinning fast again, then held it tight as it tapped along the surface of the counter. Laura looked around from the cutting board where she was chopping onions. She wiped the sweat from her temple with the back of her wrist and sniffed sharply.

"That's enough. Don't break it."

"When will Papa be home?" Sara asked.

"Not for another few hours. You should find something to do."

Sara climbed the two flights of stairs to her bedroom. The second floor was where her father and Laura slept. The television was in their room, and Sara thought about the next time she would be able to sneak and watch cartoons.

Laura was often home, but some afternoons she had meetings before she said the Eucharist at the evening service, and she frequently went to the hospital to visit people. When Sara's father was stuck in traffic on his way home from work, Laura left Sara alone in the house for the intermediate time. That is when Sara would stretch out on the upholstered bench at the foot of their bed and turn the

volume down very low so she could listen for the door downstairs being unlocked.

“By the power of Grayskull,” Sara whispered to herself.

On the same floor as her father’s bedroom was a small room, where Sara was not allowed. There was a closet there with Laura’s vestments and a file cabinet of sermons and liturgy. In the hallway near the stairs were a large wooden chest and a framed poster of The Birth of Venus leaning against the wall. Once Sara had tried to open the chest to see what was inside, but the lid had slapped closed on her hand, and The Birth of Venus had slid forward and hit her collarbone. She had managed to lay it flat on top of the chest and had gotten far away from it, quickly. Now every time she passed the naked woman with red hair snaking around her body, perfectly perched on the scallop shell, she worried it would fall into her.

On the third floor, Sara’s floor, was her bedroom, which was next to her father’s study. She knew he wasn’t home, but she imagined the sound of his electric typewriter tapping through the door. Sara’s room faced the street. She closed her door and went to the window, looking across at the diner, where people sat under ceiling fans, having late afternoon Reuben sandwiches or black and white malteds. She could see the children’s display in the bookstore window.

The deli full of potato chips and soda cans, travel sized toothpaste and plastic jump ropes. On the corner, two homeless men who lived on her street sorted

through the garbage. Sara looked along Barrow Street for signs of her cat.

When they had moved from their apartment, Sara and her father had not owned a cat carrier. Instead, they had packed the cat, Hamish the Second, into a duffel bag, which sat between them on the rental truck's seat. Hamish's claws scabbled against the inside of the bag and then hooked into the zipper. Sara watched the helpless claw peeking through the small gap where the zipper drew to a close, and imagined the darkness inside. Hamish thrashed from side to side, trying without luck to escape. "Don't let the cat out of the bag," Sara's father told her and smiled. Sara hadn't planned to.

For two nights after they moved in, Hamish the Second had mewled and cried until daybreak. Sara tried to coax him into her room, but he crouched in the stairwell, weaving his body in between the newels. She had fallen asleep in her room with her door open, listening to his complaints. When Sara woke up on the third morning, she found the cat's food and water dishes drying on the rack next to the kitchen sink. The house was quiet, except for her father, who turned the page of his morning prayers. She waited until he was finished reciting them, then asked, "Papa? Where's Hamish?"

"Hamish didn't like it here, so Laura brought him to an old woman where we used to live who needed company," he had told her.

If Sara did not like it at Laura's house, would she have to live somewhere else?

Sara wrote her cat a letter in cat language and printed his name on an envelope

so his new owner could read it. She kept it in the pages of The Fairy Book until the time they would visit him.

Still, she thought she might see Hamish lurking along Grove or Barrow Street, stealing into the parking lot one day in the middle of the afternoon. As she looked for him from the window of her new bedroom, Sara decided to ask for an allowance. The word tasted round in her mouth, the freedom to purchase something. She practiced how she would say the words when she asked her father that evening.

The phone rang and Sara pried open her bedroom door and listened as Laura answered it two flights down. Maybe it was her father calling. The phone was on the wall next to the stairwell, and sound traveled up the winding banister.

“Hello, Mother,” Laura said. The words that followed were unclear. There were hard-edged sounds of interrupted protest, something like, “I didn’t—” and “Don’t you—” and “You can’t—.” The bell inside the phone jangled when Laura slammed down the receiver. Then a strange sound reached Sara. A sound like a trapped dragon, a furious moan. Sara closed the door and sat cross-legged on her rug. She tried a casual but thoughtful voice.

“I’ve been thinking, Papa. I’m about to turn five and a half. May I please have an allowance?”

*

That night, Sara set the table with her father, who corrected her as she laid out the silverware.

“We don’t need salad forks on the outside, since we have our salad after the meal, like the Europeans,” said her father. He smiled at Laura’s back as she took the chicken out of the oven.

“I don’t eat salad,” said Sara.

“The wine glass goes right up here, see? Make a straight line from the tip of the knife, and that’s where it goes.”

Sara placed a glass there.

“Nope, that’s a white wine glass. You need a red wine glass. See the difference?” The white wine glass reached up like a tulip. The red wine glass was squat like a tea rose. “We’ll use the white wine glasses for water.”

The wine glasses were delicate, and Sara thought they might burst in her hands, the way a Christmas ornament once had burst when she held it too tightly.

“Here, Sara, take this to the table.” Laura finished filling a ceramic pitcher with ice water and handed it to Sara. “Two hands. It’s heavy.”

Sara did the best she could, but water sloshed out of the cold pitcher and onto the tablecloth.

“Put a towel under the tablecloth so it doesn’t mark the wood. Aunt Gail won’t be happy if she gets it back like that.”

Laura had borrowed a larger dinner table to fit everyone. There were special

ways to clean it and care for it. Sara's father wiped the bottom of the pitcher with a dishtowel, then spread the towel underneath the tablecloth where the water had spilled. He touched Sara on the shoulder, his large hand still damp.

"Napkins. In the drawer."

Sara fetched the cloth napkins and the silver napkin rings. Each was engraved with the first letter of their names. Sara's letter was a treble clef. Laura's was a snake. Her father's was the beginning of something. She rolled the cloth napkins and pushed them through the napkin rings, then set them to the left of the fork, as her father had showed her.

"*À table, on mange!*" he sang.

They poured the wine. Sara poured herself some milk without spilling it. They sat down and held hands around the table. Sara's father knit his brow, squeezed closed his eyes, and tilted his head down. Laura closed her eyes and her eyelids fluttered. Her hand was hot and held Sara's loosely, the way she would hold a pair of gloves.

"The eyes of all wait upon thee, O Lord. Thou givest them their meat in due season..."

As her father said grace, Sara studied the eyeliner on Laura's lids. The black lines made an unsteady course above her lashes. Sara listened to the even tone of her father's voice, then looked at the grains of sea salt on the tablecloth when she said, "Amen."

His hands traced a cross from his forehead over his chest. Then, in one motion, he slipped his cloth napkin out of the ring and spread it on his lap. Sara and Laura did the same.

“I think they’re starting to finally get it, these kids,” said Sara’s father, talking about the summer term course he was teaching at the University. “To cover fourteenth century Crimea, the Silk Road and the Black Plague in just six weeks—it’s not possible, really. But they’re trying. That’s for sure.”

Laura tied up her red curls in a loose bun before she ate. She cut into the chicken breast on her plate and pinched some salt from the small silver dish on the table. She sipped her wine and kept her eyes on her food as her fiance spoke.

“I mean, it’s July, for God’s sake. These kids want to go out to Long Island and get laid. They want to find a nice, air-conditioned movie theater where they can eat popcorn and sneak into movies all day. They’re not interested in Genoa and Jani Beg. They ought to be, but they’re not. Who can blame them?” He chuckled and placed another forkful of string beans in his mouth, chewing, smiling and shaking his head. He looked up at Laura, who was tracing her finger around the rim of her napkin ring. “How about you? What have you two been up to today?”

Laura cleared her throat but remained quiet for a moment. Then she said, “My mother called.”

As they talked, Sara dug her fingers into the loaf of French bread on the cutting

board in front of her. She dipped the pieces of bread into her milk and ate them.

On the plate in front of her were a chicken leg, some string beans and sliced tomatoes. Every time she took a bite, sea salt crunched between her teeth. Laura insisted on putting coarse sea salt on everything. There was a whale on the salt container, and it sounded like a maraca when Sara shook it. It made her mouth fill with saliva. She peeled the skin off her chicken.

“I don’t even know what she wants anymore,” Laura was saying. She picked up the bread knife and sliced the loaf as she spoke. “She doesn’t pick up for weeks, and then out of nowhere she calls and accuses me of being distant. I told her, it’s not as though I’m sitting here doing nothing. With everything happening here. The fundraising, the wedding. We had two funerals this week. She thinks we can just pick up and go see her anytime she likes—”

Laura dropped the bread knife on the cutting board and picked up a ring of crust. She held it between her fingers and looked at Sara’s father.

“It looks like we have a mouse in the house,” her father said.

“What is this?” Laura tossed the crusts onto Sara’s plate. Sara dipped one in her milk and kept eating. “I thought you liked chicken,” said Laura. “I made it for you.”

“I do like chicken.”

“All you’ve done is peeled off the skin.”

“I like the skin.”

“Well, that’s all there is for dinner, so eat up.”

“I’m not hungry,” said Sara.

“Three bites. You have to take three bites before you leave the table,” said her father.

This had been happening since they had moved in with Laura. Laura cooked, but Sara would not eat. Then they told her what number of bites to take. She picked up the drumstick with uncertain fingers and took a small bite.

“That’s one.”

But Laura had looked away, out into the garden. “I didn’t see it. Do it again. Three bites.”

Chicken was Sara’s favorite, but it stuck in her throat. They poured more wine, and Laura lit a cigarette as Sara’s father piled salad on her plate.

“I guess we could go out there next Thursday. You won’t have to teach.”

“Sure,” said Sara’s father. “The salad is delicious.”

“Two.” Sara chewed and swallowed, then shoveled a tomato slice into her mouth. “Three.” She stood to help her father clear the serving dishes.

“Don’t stack them as you leave the table,” Laura said.

Laura and Sara’s father ate salad and Sara drank more milk and ate the heel of the baguette. She watched as Laura’s tongue flitted out to gather the olive oil at the corners of her mouth. Sara felt the adrenaline coursing through her abdomen. The timing was perfect. She rolled bread crumbs between her thumb and

forefinger. Her father mopped up the rest of his salad dressing with the crust she had left next to his plate and nodded his head at Laura's words.

Sara did what she knew to get their attention. She tapped the edge of her milk glass with her unused knife. It took a moment, but they stopped talking.

"Yes?"

"Papa, I have a question." She stopped herself, then started again. "I've—I've been thinking. I'm about to turn five and a half—"

Sara's father looked at her and cocked his head to one side, smiled at Laura and looked back at her. "Yes?"

The word Sara had held like chocolate or possibility in her mouth that afternoon was gone. Instead, there was the residue of whole milk, and a dissolving grain of salt next to the molar that was pushing through her gums at the back of her mouth. She moved her tongue and tried again.

"I'm about—" Nothing. Then the word. Allowance. She said it quickly.

"May I please have an allowance?"

Her father smiled. Sara didn't know why. He looked as though something was funny. "An allowance? Well, that depends. How much were you thinking?"

Sara had not thought about this. She had not planned to bargain. Laura stood up from the table and cupped a hand around the candles, leaning in to blow them out. Smoke drifted above their heads. Sara tried to be reasonable. Laura ran the water in the sink.

“Well,” Sara said at last, “how about fifty cents? Fifty cents a week? I already help with the chores.”

“Fifty cents, huh?” asked her father. She saw his strong teeth, his skin stretching into a smile, his black hair falling happily around his face. “Don’t spend it all in one place.” He reached his hand into his front pocket and produced a fistful of change. Together they counted out two quarters.

But Sara was nervous again. She had heard what her father had said about not spending her entire allowance. She took the two coins in her hand and looked at them seriously.

“Papa?” Her throat began to tighten with the facts. She felt her face furrow.

“Yes, Pickle? What is it?” He was worried. He was hers. He reached his hand to her and brushed his thumb against her forehead. Then, quieter, “What is it?”

For a moment Sara couldn’t speak. She felt saliva in her mouth, tears behind her eyes. “The FrozFruit bar. Across the street.”

“The what?”

She swallowed and tried again. “The lime FrozFruit bar across the street in the deli freezer. It costs fifty cents.” Tears fell. “You said not to spend it all in one place.”

Her father opened his mouth and let out a laugh. Sara was startled but relieved.

Her father reached out for her with both hands now, hooked underneath her

armpits, and drew her into his chest.

“Oh, my big girl,” he said into her ear. “Tell you what. Let’s make it a dollar. You buy your popsicle, and I’ll even spot you the taxes.” Sara didn’t know what taxes meant, but she was glad.

Laura scraped candle wax from the tablecloth with the back of a knife and shook it out over the sink. She cleared her throat as Sara was held in her father’s embrace.

THREE

Summer continued, and Sara started to explore the garden. Laura's garden was part of a larger complex of annexed gardens that adjoined the church public garden, which opened to the street. The parsonage was part of a row of brownstones. Sara had learned by accident which door was John's and which was Laura's. One afternoon during the first week they lived with Laura, Sara had watched her feet as she walked home from the school gym and at the end of the flagstone path, she had opened the wrong back door and walked into John's kitchen to find his wife turning around from the stove asking who was there.

In the weeks that followed, Sara was nervous to leave Laura's garden, and might venture out one flagstone at a time, only to retreat at the sound of approaching footsteps. Soon, with empty, long days stretching out in front of her, she went further into the public garden. A crabapple tree dropped its fruit on the walkway and it smashed underneath Sara's bare feet. She peeked over the top of a rain barrel and stirred potions with a stick. When she thought no one else was there, she sang to herself, scratched at the brick pavement with sticks, and looked under rocks for potato bugs. In the middle of the garden, there was a large star magnolia tree and a box hedge planted all around it that Sara crawled through to

sit in the circle where no one could see her. She brought some of her toys with her and made picnics under the tree.

One warm evening, Sara's father poured charcoal into the barbeque and squirted it with lighter fluid. He dropped a match into the pile and stood back from it, picking up his glass. Sara gingerly passed next to the barbeque, and walked out of Laura's backyard into the public garden. Her father and Laura were having guests over for dinner. She had to set the table before they arrived, but first she wanted to collect wood sorrel and show it to her father. She had learned about the plant from the volunteer gardener. It was clover that had heart-shaped leaves and tasted like lemon. Sara knew it was a weed, but she picked it and ate it anyway.

In the public garden, there were two men on the bench drinking out of paper bags. They were the same men she saw on the street from her bedroom window.

"Hey, sweetheart. Come over here," the one on the right called.

The other one laughed and scratched his beard.

Sara walked over to them slowly.

"Hey, girlie. What can you do?"

"Can you do any tricks?" the bearded man asked.

Sara thought for a moment. Then she said, "I can do three cartwheels in a row. But I have to get a running start."

“Good! Good, that’s good,” said the first man.

“That’s a good trick,” said the second. “Let’s see it.”

Sara took several steps backwards and then ran across the stone path. As she launched onto her hands, her skirt fell over her face, but they cheered, “Hey!” and laughed so hard they started to cough. She finished the third rotation and stood with her arms straight up and her legs frozen in a lunge position, the way her gym teacher had taught her.

“That’s real good, sweetheart!” Both men clapped their hands against the bagged bottles and smiled broadly. Sara saw their teeth were black in places.

“How 'bout some more?”

“More cartwheelios!” said the man with the beard.

Sara did several more cartwheels until she heard Laura calling her name from the back steps.

“Sara! Come and set the table.”

“I have to go,” said Sara. Anyway, she felt dizzy.

Back at the house, Laura looked at Sara’s dirty hands and told her to wash them right away.

“How did you manage to get that dress dirty already?” she asked.

Sara wondered if she would have to change. She washed her hands and said nothing.

“Just leave it on,” said Laura. She was holding a tray of crudité, long, sliced carrots and celery, salted and on ice. “Set the table for seven, please. I took down the plates for you.”

“What’s for dinner?” asked Sara.

“Lamb. That means red wine glasses.” Laura walked past Sara out into the backyard with the tray.

When she had finished setting the table, and her father had checked her work, she returned to the backyard. She stalked around the perimeter, peering through the hedges, looking closely at all that Laura had planted. The parrot tulips were all fallen over now, and tiger lilies had pushed up their leafy bunches from the ground. A week ago they had opened, bright hot pink and speckled brown-black in the middle, edged with white. Sara had tried to stay out past sunset to watch them close when evening fell, but she never caught them.

Instead, early in the morning, she’d look out over her cereal bowl and through the window, and see them all closed up. Keeping warm, she’d think. But now it was light out, far from sundown. A muted brightness filled the sky. She stared down into the gaping tiger lilies, looking for bees. There were roses, too, that hadn’t bloomed yet. She pulled at the edges of a bud, trying to coax it open.

“Hey, stop that.” Laura was standing in the kitchen doorway. “My roses.”

“Sorry.”

Sara walked quickly away from Laura. All summer each day it had been the two of them together. Her father drove up to the University and taught summer classes. Sara stayed at home with Laura and tried to stay out of the way. Next year, Laura had told her father, Sara should really go to sleep-away camp.

Sara listened as the metal gate near the parking lot opened and closed and watched a set of feet clip along the path toward the yard next door. They stopped in front of Sara, who was crouched down very small and gripping a stick, pretending to examine a stump. Then she heard a voice through the hedges.

“Having a barbeque?”

Sara ignored the voice. She stuck her stick in the hollow of the stump. The feet moved a ways down the path to a clearing in the hedges and stopped again.

“Hello? Sara?” A pause. “Having a barbeque, huh?”

A man’s face peeked through the space, framed in green. She looked at him and remembered how to speak.

“Yes. My Papa’s cooking. We’re having company.”

“Smells good,” said the man. “I’m Paul. Do you remember me? I work with your—with Laura. I’ve met you after church before.”

“Oh. I don’t remember.”

“That’s okay. Well. See you soon.”

Sara leaned the stick into the ground and it snapped.

Paul walked back toward the house next door, across the yard, and into the first floor apartment.

Sara's gaze followed him, and she tried to look into the windows of his apartment. The windows were dark, though she thought she could see a small light turn on near a hall closet.

"Look at these vegetables. Don't they look just great?" Sara's father called to her as he flipped the skewers on the grill. "They're just great," he told himself.

The doorbell rang at the front of the house, and Laura called out to the backyard. "Sara? Do you want to answer the door?" Sara did. She loved having company.

Nadine always came early. She was about sixty and had frizzy gray hair, large gold-rimmed glasses that magnified her half-closed eyes, and wore lipstick over crooked yellow teeth that gripped skinny, long, dark brown cigarettes. For sixteen years, Nadine had been the stage manager for "The Fantastiks." Now she organized the church thrift store and proofread the bulletins and programs each week. She complained about money and her daughter, who had dropped out of Bard to become a Quaker. Nadine sat at the kitchen counter with her legs crossed and shucked corn for Laura, her brown cigarette sometimes perched between two fingers, sometimes sticking miraculously to her dry lips. She had a way of talking and exhaling smoke at the same time through her nose and mouth, which made what she said seem even more considered.

Sara waited in the hallway near the front door, sliding her bare foot along the molding that was flush with the floorboards. She could hear laughter and voices on the stoop before the doorbell rang, but she waited a moment before opening the door, so they wouldn't know how near she had been.

“Oh, Chiquita!”

Carlos and Emile stood on the other side of the door, posed like a photo booth picture. When they saw her, they lifted Sara off the ground and hugged her close. Emile was very tall and very dark, with broad cheeks, an open brow and wide eyes. His thick hair was cropped close to his head like a fighter pilot. His body was compact and muscular and his cheeks were so closely shaved, Sara wondered if his face was ever scratchy like her father's. He always tucked in his button down shirt, and wore a belt even with sandals. Carlos was Emile's lover. He was Venezuelan with an olive complexion, a short black beard, and black, glittering eyes. Emile and Carlos called each other and others they loved “muchachito” and “pacoline.” They called Sara “Chiquita.”

“Muchachita, I leave you for two seconds and you get so big, pacoline!” Carlos cooed and crouched down to wrap his arms around Sara.

Carlos and Emile swung Sara by the hands between them as Laura shepherded everyone through the ground floor of the brownstone, out to the garden, where Sara's father was grilling the lamb. Everyone hugged and kissed each other, and Sara's father asked what they were drinking. They sat in the butterfly chairs in

the garden and looked out at the evening together. Nadine and Laura joined them and brought out the corn and more ice for the drinks.

Sara sat cross-legged on the patio next to the table and chewed on a carrot stick like Bugs Bunny. She looked over at Paul's apartment. The light was off now. Maybe Paul liked carrots, too.

The doorbell rang again and Sara dashed up the back stairs and skidded across the kitchen and down the hallway to the front door to answer it.

"Hi, Sara. I said I'd see you soon." Paul was smiling, holding a baguette and a bag from the liquor store a block away. He had changed clothes and was wearing khaki shorts, slip-on Keds with no socks, and a tank top with a picture of a palm tree on it.

Sara stared at him.

"May I come in?"

"Yes," said Sara. Then she opened the door wide enough to let him in, closed and locked it afterwards as she had been taught. "They're in the backyard."

*

Half an hour later, at the dinner table, Laura and Sara's father directed everyone to their places at the dinner table, and they all stood behind their chairs, put down their drinks and took up each other's hands. Sara's father asked Emile to sing the blessing. Emile had learned perfect Latin in Catholic school. He

sometimes wouldn't return phone calls and could disappear for weeks at a time, but just when you thought he was not going to show, he would be standing in the sacristy, neatly tying a white rope around his narrow waist. Emile was the thurifier at the church, and he sang the Exsultet at Easter Vigil. At the early service, he stood behind Laura when she performed the Eucharist and administered the Cup. Sometimes Carlos looked at Emile as if he were afraid he was not really there. Recently, Emile had been fired from his job, though he would joke and say that when they told him, "You're fired," he'd said in his deep, cavernous voice, "You can't fire me, I quit."

When they were seated, Nadine filled everyone's wine glasses and Laura passed around the serving platter. Carlos took it in his hands and sang in falsetto with perfect, round syllables, "La-a-a-amb of Go-o-od...you ta-a-ke awa-a-ay the si-i-i-ns of the wo-o-orld," and Emile, Nadine and Sara's father joined in, "Have me-e-ercy o-o-on us!" Sara looked at Paul and he smiled.

By the salad course, Sara's father had moved the oscillating fan in from the living room, and opened all the windows facing the garden. Cigarette smoke hung in the air like taffeta and empty wine bottles clustered on the counter. Laura had bought special loaves of bread at the Union Square farmer's market that were filled with bits of *prosciutto*, onion and olives. Sara was on her sixth piece, and her third glass of milk. She loved having the table full of people, even though the smoke made her feel sick and lightheaded, and she often didn't know what they

were saying. The cadence of their voices comforted her like a wave. Her father's laughter and interjections, his long paragraphs of perfectly ordered words.

Laura's distraction from her. The attention from Carlos and all the guests, who sometimes remembered she was there. And tonight Sara watched Paul, especially. He happily drank the wine he had brought and even winked at her once. When Laura had asked her to clear the table, he got to his feet and helped her, following her directions about where to put the leftovers and how to stack the dishes in the sink. Sara noticed that Paul knew his way around Laura's kitchen.

As Laura opened the freezer door and reached for the pints of ice cream for dessert, Sara's father slipped behind her and cupped her breast underneath her blouse. The color rose at the back of Laura's neck as she turned her cheek into his kiss, looking sideways down at Sara who stood next to an open drawer while Paul counted spoons. Sara looked away and pulled the step stool over to the cabinet that stored the dessert bowls.

"At this time, we have the collective need for a certain degree of percolation," her father announced, as he strode across the kitchen to the coffee maker and filled the carafe with water. "I just have to get the scoop here. Who takes it black like God made it?"

Hands shot up.

"Muchachito, milk for me, pacoline," said Carlos.

"Sugar here," said Nadine.

At the table, Emile was in full swing, telling the story again, this time with a perfect imitation of his female boss. He wrinkled his brow and pursed his lip, feigning a schoolteacher's inquisition with crossed legs. "Then that tramp said, real serious and concerned, now, 'Emile. You're fired.'—You can't fire me, *tramp*, I *quit!*"

Emile laughed long and loud, letting his head fall back and his mouth open ever wider.

"I *quit*, tramp!"

His glee was contagious, and soon Carlos had tears in his eyes from laughing so hard and cried, "Muchachito! Stop, *pacoline*, I can't breathe!"

Nadine started to cough and dropped her cigarette. Laura shrieked, and Sara's father, grinning, looked around at everyone's faces, as if to be sure. The coffee was percolating. Emile stopped laughing, and lay his palm flat against the tablecloth, smoothing it out around the base of the wine glass. Sara saw Carlos rest his hand on Emile's knee, and Emile's hand left the table to cover Carlos's. Slowly, everyone went quiet.

Nadine walked to the counter and opened another bottle of wine, which she poured into everyone's glasses. Emile held his up.

"A toast," he said, wiping the laughter from his eyes.

"Speech! Speech!" called Nadine.

Emile continued to hold his glass aloft, but it was heavy in his hand. He brought it down to the table. Sara watched as he unbuttoned the collar of his shirt. His lapel fell limply open. Against his dark skin were two raised, tender, black marks beneath his collarbone. Carlos looked down at the table, then out at everyone.

“We saw them yesterday when Emile was going to take a shower.”

“There are more. My back. My.” Emile’s voice seemed small. He shook his head.

Everyone was quiet.

Then Laura said, “Shit.”

Carlos stared into the candlelight. Paul looked around the table and his gaze rested on Sara. She was looking out the window.

“What’s out there, Sara?” he whispered.

“Fireflies.”

*

“They’ll be my night light.” Sara was tucked into bed. She had books around her, and stuffed animals. On her bedside table was a tomato sauce jar with a layer of dirt and leaves at the bottom of it. Fireflies lit up underneath the perforated lid. “I can keep it all summer like this and then let them go.”

“They won’t last all summer,” said Sara’s father. “They won’t even last through the night.”

“But I put food in there. They’re flying around fine, do you see them?”

“We don’t know what they like to eat. And anyway, fireflies don’t live very long. Watch them tonight, and in the morning they’ll probably be gone.”

“They can’t get out, Papa, those holes are too small for them.”

“I think you’ll see they might be down on the dirt tomorrow. But for now, it’s time for you to go to sleep.” Sara’s father pulled the blankets up around her chin and kissed her forehead.

“Maybe fireflies sleep in the dirt during the day,” said Sara.

“Maybe so,” said her father.

FOUR

On Sunday morning, Paul arrived early to unlock the school gym, where they held services while the church was being rebuilt. Laura met him there, carrying a paper cup full of coffee, which she set down in the cafeteria as they rolled the altar into the gym. The walls of the gym were padded with blue mats for physical education classes. The windows above them stretched nearly to the ceiling and were covered in metal grates on the inside, to protect the glass when basketballs bounced into them. One of the basketball hoops was above the altar. Church in the gym seemed second nature after the first weeks following the fire. For Paul, Laura and John it meant setting up a little earlier, rolling the altar in on a dolly, setting the chairs in place, making sure the collection plates were in order. Some people in the congregation left because of it; other people who had never seen the old church joined the services in the gym. There were still funerals and baptisms and weddings. In the winter, incense covered the smells of floor varnish and rubber athletic equipment. In the summer, the south door to the parking lot and the north door that led to the school were left open, to make a path for the breeze that came up from the river. People used their bulletins as fans the way they always had.

The kitchen doubled as the sacristy and John had set up a metal garment rack for the vestments. On one side of the room, Clive filled the samovars for

coffee hour and sliced the cinnamon ring, laying it carefully on a donated plate and covering it in plastic wrap. On the other side, the priests washed their hands and vested as the acolytes readied the censor, gospel and cross, and lay readers checked their names off of the rota.

Paul caught sight of Robby and Jasper on their way into the gym and he quickly tidied a basket of crayons as Nadine handed them a bulletin. Robby and Jasper wore striped boat-neck shirts. Matching handkerchiefs peeked from their back pockets. As they passed him and took a seat, Paul looked more closely and saw that two buttons on the flies of their tight blue jeans were unbuttoned. He walked up the side aisle past their folding chairs and found Laura in the kitchen, kissing her stole. He retied his cincture and talked into his hands.

“Robby and Jasper are here.”

“He brought Jasper? Hm,” said Laura, wrapping the stole over her left shoulder and under her right arm.

“They couldn’t even button up their flies to come to church.”

“Did you say something?”

“I can’t look at them,” Paul sighed.

“At least he’s not wearing a leash.” Laura laughed, pulling the dalmatic over her head.

John glared at them as he crossed his stole over his chest, tucking the ends into the cincture, and then pulled on his chausuble. "I thought we might have church today. Care to join me?" he asked, and walked out to the hallway.

"I should say something. Shouldn't I?" whispered Paul.

"Up to you," Laura shrugged.

"I'll vest in a second. I'm going to light the candles with Emile."

"That's not even your job."

"I'll be right back."

Paul picked up the brass candle lighter and tightened his hands around the handle. He pushed through the door back into the gym and walked up the side aisle to the altar to Emile. They synchronized lighting the candles. Paul trained his eye on each candlewick and watched the flame quietly flare. This marked the beginning of ceremony. It was supposed to calm him, but he longed to knock the candle onto the altar, spilling wax and cracking the glass that cuffed the taper to stop it from dripping. Instead, Paul passed back down the aisle and stopped next to Robby and Jasper. He tried to look at Robby's hair instead of his face. It was dark and thick, speckled with gray, but Robby's head had the look of a schoolboy. He parted his hair on the side. It was still wet from his comb, which was probably sitting by his sink at home, next to the glass he used to rinse his mouth. Robby was always leaving things out.

"Hi, Paul," said Jasper.

“Good morning,” said Robby.

Paul did not look at Jasper. He hissed at Robby through clenched teeth,
“Button your fly.”

The men laughed. Jasper put his arm around Robby. Robby bit his ear and eyed Paul. “Darling, it’s tribal.”

Paul felt his thumb and middle finger turn the small knob on the candle lighter that lowered the flame until it extinguished. “I’m supposed to laugh at that, right?”

“If you can’t cry,” said Robby.

Church in the gym left little place to hide. There were only five feet between the clergy and the congregation. Throughout the service, Paul did all he could not to look at Robby and Jasper. During the Peace, when he and John and Laura walked out into the aisles and shook hands and kissed cheeks, Paul put himself on the other side of the room from Robby. Still, he felt he could hear their skin touch, could hear their key chains rattle against each other as they embraced. The room was too small.

He felt a hand on his sleeve and turned to find Sara and her father smiling at him. Sara held out her hand to Paul.

“Peace,” she said.

He shook it, feeling how slight it was in his palm. Her hand was warm and firm.

“Peace be with you, Paul,” said her father.

Paul thought about peace, the last time he had felt it. It had been a Wednesday afternoon early last fall and Paul was washing dishes when the phone rang.

Robby’s voice filled his ear like a lovely custard.

“Will monsieur be having his evening picnic tonight? I’ve got a basket full of pinot grigio, some cornichons, and ham and cheese sandwiches, and a little bird told me about your fabulous picnic blanket.”

It was true. Paul’s mother had given him a picnic blanket. It was a 12’x12’ blue and yellow flowered blanket, large enough to seat a small army of picnickers, or at least several courses of Balducci’s antipasti. All around the blanket’s borders were deer, rabbits and frogs in various states of frolic. When he had first arrived in New York, Paul was so mortified by it that he buried it on the top shelf of his linen closet, under placemats and hand towels he never used. But as it turned out, men in New York loved to picnic, and after meeting Robby, Paul had cause to use the blanket. It was the kind of thing that could be seen all the way across the beach or a crowded park lawn. It meant that when he and Robby were together, they were never alone. People always stopped by to eat a strawberry and drink some of the sangria that Robby made.

That Wednesday afternoon, Robby had called up from a pay phone down the block from Paul and told him to look out the window. There was Robby's car, a white convertible with the top down in late September.

"You may want to bring a scarf for your hair, and some big glasses," said Robby. "And a church key. I couldn't find mine."

Paul had pocketed the corkscrew, grabbed a sweater, a bar of dark chocolate and the picnic blanket, and was sitting pretty in the front seat of that car inside of a two minutes. Robby had to tell him to lock his front door. The afternoon air was warm, and once the car started moving, it was very comfortable. They drove up the West Side Highway, onto the Henry Hudson Parkway and into Ossining, until they reached Croton Point Park. They found a spot on the water, facing west. The light was long, and Paul spread the blanket over the grass, and noticed that even an hour north of the City, the leaves had already begun to turn. Robby uncorked the wine and poured it into two plastic jeweled goblets he had bought at a party supply store that summer. They leaned back on their elbows and ate sandwiches and watched the sun set. Orange and purple clouds flooded the sky and were reflected on the still river far below. Robby fed him champagne grapes he had found at the farmer's market that morning in Union Square, and Paul peeled back the gold foil from the dark chocolate he had brought and broke it into pieces. On the way home, the air was cool, but Robby refused to put up the convertible top. He wrapped Paul in the picnic blanket, covering his head like a

Russian doll, and bundled him into the passenger seat. He took off his own sunglasses and put them on Paul and buckled the seat belt around him. In the white car in the dark, with dark glasses on, Paul had never felt happier. The Hudson River glittered like a carnival and wind whipped over them all the way home.

As Paul remembered this, he thought perhaps it was for Robby, not the picnic blanket and all its food, that people showed up. That winter, Robby's job had sent him to Amsterdam for three months, where he had met Jasper. His letters became infrequent and then tapered off altogether. Paul had not even known Robby was back in New York until they nearly walked into each other at the bank one Friday. Jasper was with Robby then, and Paul had not seen them apart since.

*

After coffee hour, Paul and John folded the chairs in the gym. They could hear water running in the school kitchen as the samovars were emptied into the sink. Large standing fans oscillated in front of open doors and blew the late summer air from the parking lot and the school courtyard. The back of the new church building was still fenced off. Nearly all of the construction was internal now. Paul felt himself shake as he folded the chairs. He clenched his jaw against the tears. Finally, he held a folded chair in his hands and stood still. He unfolded it again, sat down, and put his head in his hands.

John was carrying two chairs under each arm. He placed them against the south wall and soon Paul felt John's hand on his shoulder as he sat next to him.

"Paul," said John.

Paul could not face John, but in the heat he could smell the detergent on his button-down plaid shirt. He folded his hands in his lap and looked at the crease running down the length of John's black trousers, a crease his wife had ironed for him the night before. He studied John's silver belt buckle, the hand that lay open in his lap. Gray hairs circled his wristwatch. His nails were trimmed and clean. John took off his glasses, folded them closed and hooked them into his breast pocket.

"Paul, what is it?"

Paul bent over and sobbed. "The pain. The pain is awful."

"What pain?"

"Robby. Seeing—"

John kept his hand on Paul's shoulder, and moved it back and forth. It rested on the nape of Paul's neck as he cried.

"I can't bear it. To see them together. I can't look at them during the Peace."

John put both of his hands on Paul's shoulders now and lowered his forehead to meet Paul's. Paul looked into John's face. His eyes were clear and blue. His pale skin was loose but soft. Paul could feel his breathing even out again, could feel himself matching John's posture as he inhaled and exhaled.

“Let’s pray for comfort,” said John. He moved his hands to Paul’s head, and covered his forehead with his palms.

They sat there together in the gym, knee to knee, bent in prayer.

* * *

Paul held the ticket tightly in his hand. The owner of the Sayville Ferry had offered another package deal for The Pines: lunch at The Blue Whale, two free drinks at The Tea Dance, a free roundtrip ticket for the shuttle from the train to the ferry. They had worked late on Thursday to take off early from the office on Friday. On the Long Island Railroad, they spotted each other and raised eyebrows behind sunglasses and beach hats. At the train station, they piled onto the bus, a mass of jean shorts, sleeveless athletic shirts, white loafers, wicker shoulder bags, flip flops and bandannas. They were young and beautiful. Even if they were old, they were beautiful. They were getting away for the day or the weekend, out to a friend’s timeshare, out to the ocean where they could leave their clothes on the sand and run into the water.

Paul leaned against the bus window and waited for everyone to find a seat.

Sweat dripped down his back and into the waistband of his shorts. His throat was dry. He wanted ice water and a martini with extra olives. Outside the window, Paul saw a group of teenage boys gather in the parking lot near the bus. Some of them straddled bicycles. Others perched on the hoods of cars they had spent the winter fixing. They glared at the bus, talking quietly to each other and kicking at

the gravel. A man in the seat behind Paul knelt and opened his window. He untied the yellow scarf from around his neck and waved it outside of the bus.

“Ta ta, boys,” called the man with the scarf.

Paul closed his eyes and his window cracked. He started back from the glass and saw the boy with the bicycle reach down for another rock. Boys around him did the same. The bus driver closed the door and shifted the bus into gear. The men inside hurried to close any open windows as several more rocks pelted the bus. As the bus pulled out of the parking lot, five boys on bicycles followed them. Paul heard through the closed window when the first boy’s friend called after them, “Bunch of faggots!”

Jeers and shrieks punctuated the bus’s initial silence. The man with the scarf leaned over the back of Paul’s seat and pressed his tongue against the cracked window and slammed his middle finger next to his cheek. When he pulled back, one of his false eyelashes was stuck to the glass.

“God damn it. Girl lost an eyelash!” he exclaimed. “Do you mind?” He was looking at Paul, who had moved to the aisle seat for the moment.

“Sure,” said Paul. He peeled the eyelash from the glass and returned it to the man’s open palm. The man wiped his saliva from the window with his scarf.

“Sorry for the commotion, dollface.”

“Don’t mention it.”

The line for the ferry was thick with men. Paul was at the front of the line and one of the first on the upper deck, where other passengers quickly staked their claims. Paul sat with the paper open on his lap and his sunglasses hiding his eyes. He scanned the people boarding the ferry for faces he knew. A voice called to him from the stairwell.

“Muchachito, you are here! Finally cast off those chains?”

It was Carlos, his black curls peeking out from under a baseball cap. Emile walked next to him in a jean jacket, his hand curved around Carlos’s forearm.

“They let me put down my cross for a few days,” said Paul. “Where were you earlier? I couldn’t wait to get off that bus.”

“Why, paoline? What happened?”

“Never mind. How did you get here?”

“Robby drove us,” said Emile. “You know how he loves to play chauffeur.”

Paul felt suddenly crowded. “So Jasper’s with him?”

“Of course, honey,” said Carlos. “The Bobsy Twins don’t do anything alone.”

“Great,” said Paul. “I guess I’ll sleep on the pull out couch. On second thought, just strap me to the roof. I already put on my tanning oil.”

“Missed a spot,” said Emile, tweaking Paul’s chest.

Emile was thinner, but his skin was still a soft, dark brown and smelled of cocoa butter. “How are you feeling, Emile?” asked Paul.

“Oh, me? Never better, baby. I’m going down to Mexico for a new treatment in two weeks. Something about a goat.”

“You’re kidding me. Who talked you into that?”

Emile looked at Carlos and then looked back at Paul.

“I’ll try anything.”

“Muchachito, you have a better idea?” Carlos asked. “We’re not going to no fucking hospital if we can help it. The looks you get in those places, makes my skin crawl. But today, Emile’s feeling good. We’ll all be together at the house. We’ll have a big salad and some cava and then go down to the Tea Dance. Don’t worry about the Bobsy Twins,” he said, and patted Paul’s shoulder, “You’ll hardly see them.”

“I just don’t want to hear them,” said Emile.

“Oh, God,” said Paul.

*

Jasper was accompanied by his newest annoyance, a caramel colored toy poodle named Dindi, after the Jobim song. Carlos and Jasper had sung it all the way home along the wooden walkways from the ferry and played the record as soon as they arrived at the house. Paul immediately took a shower, but they turned up the volume and he could not get the damned song out of his head. The

flute in the background of Astrud Gilberto's voice seemed to flutter around Jasper's every movement, as he peeled the foil from the cava bottle, as he emptied a Balducci's container of olives into a bowl. Dindi had already pissed on the rug and untied one of the purple bows that were fastened to her ears. Robby just grinned and squeezed Jasper's kneecap when he sat down cross-legged next to him on the wicker couch. Paul took his glass of cava out onto the back porch and did fifty pushups and sit-ups. When he was finished, it was teatime.

The Tea Dance at The Blue Whale was packed and spilled out to the deck. Emile, Carlos, Robby and Jasper found their way into the thick of it, and Paul was left surrounded by men, their sweat, their breath, their hair, their hands, the music bringing everyone close together. There were some women there as well, women from Long Island who had come to the beach with their boyfriends or husbands. Paul was wary of them. These sunburned men looked around them with their eyes wide. They clenched their beer bottles and leaned their shoulders forward into the crowd. The women were red-faced, laughing, drinking cocktails with fruit and umbrellas. They had died and gone to man heaven and they grabbed at the dancing men around them as Pat Benatar's "Hit Me With Your Best Shot" blasted from the speakers. Their boyfriends and husbands were not having it.

Paul danced further into the middle of the room with his planter's punch to be away from whatever was going to happen next. Behind him, a woman danced

her way between two men. She fell into the tie-dyed shirt of the man in front of her and then leaned back into the tan, shirtless man behind her. In one movement, she untied her ponytail and let her blond hair spread out over his chest.

Paul turned around when he heard glass break. The woman's boyfriend had pulled her away from the men by her arm and she had dropped her drink on the floor.

"Listen, Sally," the boyfriend shouted at the man in the tie-dyed shirt.

Emile's fist was under the boyfriend's chin before Paul even saw him move across the room. He held it there, his bicep strong and round, and they locked eyes. Carlos stood behind Emile and several other men gathered in a tight knot around the boyfriend.

"What's the problem?" growled Emile.

The boyfriend stared at the group of men that had formed. He let go of his girlfriend's arm and relaxed his shoulders. The next song started to play.

"Come on, Brenda. Let's get the fuck out of here." He pushed his way through to the deck and out to the beach.

The lights were coming on along the pier. Paul realized he had backed up against the wall. He found himself standing next to Robby. They watched as Carlos gathered Emile back onto the dance floor and got him to grind to "Jessie's Girl."

"Well, that was exciting," said Robby.

“The party never stops,” said Paul. “Where’s Dindi’s mommy?”

“Oh, he’s out there somewhere. I sent him for a drink and he’s been gone ever since. Must have found something he likes.”

“Have mine, it’s fresh,” said Paul, handing Robby his planter’s punch. “I don’t know if the free drink is worth all of this. I could have stayed in the bus parking lot if I wanted this kind of action.”

“I’m with you. There’s some talk about a boycott. Taking our business down the street.”

“It’s twice the price.”

“It’s Absolut. They won’t give us any guff over there. We’ll hit The Blue Whale where it hurts—the pocketbook.”

Robby was right. If they killed the Tea Dance, The Blue Whale would have to protect them.

“Fine. Tomorrow night we’ll go down the street.”

“I’ll make a reservation for an outdoor table. The first round is on me.”

Robby drained Paul’s glass and handed it to him. “Thanks. You’re a prince among men.”

“You’re a jackass,” muttered Paul as Robby’s back disappeared into the dancing crowd. He lifted the empty glass to his mouth and covered the marks Robby’s lips had made along the rim.

FIVE

Laura had put out peanut butter, honey and bread on the counter for Sara to make herself a sandwich. When Sara tried to spread the peanut butter on the bread, her knife grabbed at the bread, and it tore at itself. She squeezed the honey onto the other piece of bread and pressed them together. She made an extra sandwich and cut it diagonally into four pieces for her bears. Laura was letting her have a picnic in her room today. She'd even made lemonade from a mix.

All day, Laura had asked Sara to please stay in her room. On the third floor, with her door closed and her Fisher-Price record player spinning Gilbert and Sullivan, Sara tried not to hear Laura on the phone. She thought she was on the phone, anyway. Sometimes it seemed that Laura was weeping, as if she'd broken her favorite plate. At first, Sara had hoped that she heard Hamish mewing again, but the crying wasn't a cat. Sometimes Laura was quiet for an hour straight, sitting at the kitchen counter and staring at the sink. Sara sat cross-legged on the towel she'd spread out as a picnic blanket over rug in her bedroom. She chewed her sandwich and drank her lemonade. She helped her bears eat their sandwiches, too. They were very hungry bears, all of them, and Sara tried to help them not make crumbs. She reset the needle on the song she was trying to memorize today and after making sure her mouth was no longer sticky, she cleared her throat and continued singing along.

“Sta-a-a-ay, Fred’ric, stay!”

“I-I-I must obey!”

Sara sang both parts, alternating between Mabel’s soprano and her version of Frederic’s tenor. She lay on her stomach on the towel, leaning close to the record player. She was listening hard to write down the lyrics on a pad of lined paper her father had given her from his study. Her pencil was sharp. She had taken a clipboard when he wasn’t looking and decorated it with cactus stickers and unicorn stickers. The pad of paper looked important fastened into the clipboard. It was difficult during the duet to hear who sang what. As she listened and wrote down the lyrics with her new letters, Sara felt around her mouth with her tongue. She had two loose teeth, one looser than the other. The loosest one was her right front tooth, and she used the consonants and *fal la la*’s in Fredric’s part to push with her tongue.

“He-e-e-e LOves THEe—He is goNE. Fal La La La. Fal La La La.”

After the better part of the morning, her front tooth was on its last hinges. She had heard from her aunt that sometimes children with loose teeth tied one end of a string around the tooth and the other end of the string to a doorknob. Then another person, not the person with the loose tooth, would slam the door.

Sometimes, Sara knew, Laura clenched her jaws together and made a seething sound. That’s when Sara turned up the volume more on her record player. *I Am A Pirate King* was especially good for that. She looked through her

closet for some string, but the best she could find was a spool of dental floss in an old Maxwell House coffee can where she collected things. The dental floss she tried to loop around her tooth, but it was waxed, and it kept slipping. Finally she secured the knot, and then walked gingerly to the door, the floss trailing from her mouth. It was hard not to drool with her mouth open, but she swallowed her saliva and set about tying the floss around the door handle. When the time came to slam the door, there was the problem of the missing person. She also had to manage to slam the door quietly because Laura was on the phone. Sara stood as far back as she could and tried to slam the door shut and jerk back her neck at the same time. This only made the dental floss slip out of her mouth. When she had retied the floss, now pink with blood, around her tooth, Sara tried facing sideways and kicking the door shut. She attempted this method a few times without success. Finally, the floss broke.

Sara turned the record over. *“Yes, it’s very evident these intentions are well meant. Evident. Are well meant. Evident.”* The third time Sara sang along with the “tarantaras” and marched around her room, careful not to make the record skip, she didn’t notice Laura in the doorway until it was too late.

“Sara! I’ve been calling you. Turn that down. Your father’s home. Why are you slamming your door?”

It was the middle of the afternoon on Tuesday. Sara’s father was never home at that time. He had to teach at the University.

Sara stopped mid-march and dropped the dust broom she had been using as a nightstick. She quickly lifted the needle from the record, though it continued spinning.

“Why is he home?”

“He just came home early, that’s all.” Laura scanned the room, not looking at Sara. “He’s not feeling well.”

Sara felt nervous. “What do you mean, he’s not feeling well? He’s sick?”

“Maybe. We’re going to the doctor.”

“I have to put my shoes on.”

“No, *we*’re going to the doctor. You’re not coming.”

Sara looked up from buckling her shoes. Just then her father appeared behind Laura and walked past her into Sara’s room. He hugged her and knelt down beside her to buckle her shoes.

“Are you sick, Papa?”

“No. We just have an appointment.” He looked up at Laura, who had turned her back and leaned against the doorjamb impatiently. He smoothed back Sara’s hair from her sweaty forehead.

“Oh,” said Sara. “Okay.” She looked up at him and opened her mouth slightly, pushing her tooth forward with her tongue and hoping he would notice.

“What am I going to do during the appointment?”

“You’re going next door to see Paul.”

Sara remembered Paul. She still watched for his light through his backdoor screen at night.

“So, let’s get some of your things together,” he said, standing. “I don’t think we’ll be more than a couple of hours, but just in case, you should bring some books that you think Paul might like. And if you want, you could bring a stuffed animal.”

“I think I’ll bring Mr. Turtle.” Mr. Turtle was a hand puppet, and Sara hid things inside of him.

Laura started to walk downstairs.

“Does Paul have a record player?” asked Sara

Her father smiled and looked sad at the same time. “I don’t know, Pickle. He probably does. But let’s leave the records here, okay? You don’t want them to get scratched on the way over there.” He walked to Sara’s record player and carefully lifted the record by its edges off of the turntable and slipped it into its sleeve. Then he switched off the record player, closed the cover, and took Sara’s hand in his. “Do you want to go to the bathroom before we leave?”

Sara thought about it. “Yes.”

They walked down the hallway into the bathroom. Sara pulled down her shorts and underwear and climbed up on the toilet. She looked at her father, who sat on the edge of the tub.

“Let ’er fly,” he said and smiled.

Sara exhaled quietly through her nose and heard the stream of urine tinkle in the water below her. She hoped it smelled like lemonade.

The three of them ducked through the hedges into the garden next door, and Laura led the way to Paul's basement apartment. Paul answered the door wearing loafers with no socks, cut-off blue jean shorts, a purple tee shirt and white wristbands. Paul smiled at Sara and crouched down to meet her at eye level.

"Hi, Sara. How are you?"

Sara looked up at her father. She felt his palm between her shoulder blades and she took a step forward and held out her hand.

"Hello."

They shook hands. Laura looked over Paul's shoulder at the clock on his wall.

"We've got to go," she said to Sara's father. "Paul, you're a lifesaver. Thank you so much."

"Thank you, Paul," said Sara's father. He kept his arm around Laura's waist. "We'll be back as soon as we can."

"Take your time," said Paul, standing up. "Sara and I will be fine. We can order pizza if it gets late." He gestured inside. "Come through to the street."

They walked through the length of Paul's apartment to the front door. The radio played in the kitchen, and a fan oscillated in the hallway, sending through warm air from the garden. They all stood in the doorway, and Sara said goodbye to Laura and hugged her father. Her arms around his neck, she pushed her tooth forward one more time with her tongue, but she kept her lips closed.

Paul closed the door after them and turned to Sara. His face was bright. Sara liked how smooth his skin was and the way his light brown hair settled softly around his ears. When he smiled he seemed to mean it.

Paul had gotten the call at eleven. He was just coming out of the shower after going for a run along the West Side Highway. He wrapped a damp towel around his waist and answered the phone.

"Paul. Laura. Hi. Listen. I have an appointment I can't miss. I thought I'd be able to use Michelle, but she's in class today so she can't watch Sara. If it's not too much trouble—"

Paul had said yes.

"We won't be more than a few hours."

"Don't worry. I never get to see my niece and nephew, but I have coloring stuff from the last time they were here."

Paul could tell there was something more. That Sunday, Laura had lost her place during her sermon and had turned the pages over and over, as if they

would tell her their order. When she'd sung the Eucharist, her voice had wavered even more than usual. She was tired. The congregation had looked at her and quietly, sideways, at each other. Paul knew what it was. He'd stood beside her at the altar and kept her place in the liturgy. He could see the sweat on the back of her neck, underneath the tangle of curls she wore up in a loose bun. She'd swallowed back her nausea as she held the host and consecrated it, and then the chalice, saying, "This is my Blood of the new Covenant." Laura swore almost silently under her breath as Paul and the congregation proclaimed the mystery of faith.

Now here was Sara, standing by the front door, waiting to be invited in. She carried a small backpack from which there peeked the knobby head of some kind of stuffed animal. She wore green Lycra shorts and an oversized tank top with a large, made-up, blond face on it. In graffiti script, the word "Girl" stretched across the bottom edge of the shirt. The face winked, and the winking eye's eyelashes were made of glossy black, fringed plastic that stuck out from Sara's narrow chest. She looked up at Paul, and Paul made a small bow to her and said, "Won't you come in?"

He watched her carefully look around, trying not to be seen as she took in the framed divinity school alumni photograph on the wall, the file cabinet full of sheet music, the overstuffed ottoman upholstered in 1930's golf caddies.

"My mother still thinks I play golf," Paul explained.

“Oh,” said Sara. She ran her fingers along the ottoman.

“Have a seat if you like. Do you like juice? Soda?”

“Sure, thanks.” Sara sat on the ottoman and felt it bounce slightly underneath her. Paul watched from the kitchen as she unzipped her backpack and took out the stuffed animal. He walked back with Sara’s soda.

“I didn’t know what you wanted, so here’s a ginger ale.”

“Thanks.”

“Who’s that?”

“Mr. Turtle.”

Paul wanted to ask more, but he knew Sara was often quiet. He had seen her at coffee hour, weaving between the congregants, her eyes fixed slightly downward. But alone, he knew she wasn’t always quiet. On warm nights with the windows open when he was having dinner he sometimes heard her three stories above him and next door, singing. Paul watched Sara sip her ginger ale. She held her nose close to the surface to feel the fizz.

“So. Does Mr. Turtle like ginger ale?” he tried.

“He’s a stuffed animal, Paul.”

“Right.” Paul sipped the ginger ale he had poured himself. Sara seemed sorry. He could see her tongue moving in her mouth.

“Ginger ale is not his favorite,” said Sara. “But it’s good.” She took another sip. “Do you know? My second cousin painted on a balloon with acrylic paint.

But when the balloon died, the paint kind of—” she motioned with her fingers, a balloon collapsing.

Paul saw Sara clutch at the turtle’s shell. It was soft and plush and it gave easily.

“What happened to the paint, Sara?”

“Well. I wanted to save it.” She was so determined.

“Uh huh?”

“I tried to take the balloon out, but the paint started to rip. The paint was like plastic. It peeled off.” She rolled back the plush shell behind the turtle’s tail.

This was where a person’s hand would fit. It was a puppet.

“What’s in there?”

Sara sucked her upper lip into her mouth. She stuck her hand into the turtle and pulled out a handful of dried acrylic paint, different colors. In the heat, the paint clung to her fingers.

“Is that the paint?”

“Yeah.”

“You kept the paint? That’s neat.”

Sara picked a piece off of her palm and gave it to Paul. “Here, look.”

Paul felt the smallness of Sara’s fingernails as they brushed against his open hand. He closed the fragment of dried paint between his palms and pressed them together. He thought of the host, his own body, of this little girl sitting on his

mother's ottoman. When he opened his hands, the rough side had stuck to his right palm, and the shiny side that had been against the balloon faced up at him.

A swirl of dark green with quavering lines of peacock blue. Perhaps it had been part of a letter, perhaps it had been part of a face. Paul stroked the smooth side then flipped it like a waffle into his left palm.

“See?” asked Sara.

It was difficult for Paul, who had no children, who would never have children of his own, to sit here with this child who elicited so many feelings in him. He wanted to brush Sara's hair. He wanted to dress her in clean clothes, make her drink chamomile tea like Peter Rabbit, give her scissors to cut his ottoman upholstery into pieces and store them in some secret place. He wanted to play *Colour By Number* for her and show her how much her tee shirt looked like Boy George. If he could, he would take her into the church early in the morning and let her dress up in vestments and swing the thurible.

There was something in her that was in him. Like the shreds of paint inside the turtle. Deflated remains.

In some East Side gynecologist's office waiting room, Laura sat paging through Home Beautiful magazines. Sara's father did the crossword puzzle in pen and rested his hand on Laura's thigh. She tightened next to him, then relaxed. She

pressed the tip of her thumb against the band of her engagement ring and looked at his left hand. A nurse called her name, and she stood up and followed her into the corridor. Sara's father folded the paper and crossed his legs, looking after her as the door swung shut.

Paul and Sara sat on the living room floor and drew with crayons on construction paper. Paul drew the houses on their block. He wanted to show Sara how he could hear her singing from the third floor while he was in his bedroom. Instead, he colored in the red-tan brick of the brownstones and framed out the windows with black. Sara drew a house with a winding front path. At the end of the path were three people, a woman, a man and a little girl. The man had black hair and a big smile, yellow pants, an orange shirt. He held hands with the girl. The woman stood slightly apart from them. She wore a blue dress with long sleeves. Red shoes. Long, curly, bright hair. The little girl wore green shorts and a tank top. Her head was larger than everyone else's. Her hair stuck out at all angles. A large open mouth showed a gap in her front teeth.

"Who's that?" asked Paul, pointing to the girl.

"That's me when I lose my tooth," she said. Sara pushed her front tooth forward with her tongue and drew a bowtie under the man's chin, glancing sideways at Paul.

"Wow! It's so loose. It's almost out."

Sara put her crayon down, sat up and wiggled her tooth with her finger.

“I tried to slam my door with some string.”

“Oh yeah?”

“It didn’t work.”

Paul felt compelled to reach his fingers into Sara’s mouth and grab the tooth tightly and pull it out himself. He wondered why he felt this way.

“Have you ever lost a tooth before?”

“Once,” Sara said. “It grew back.” She tapped the new tooth next to her incisor. “How many teeth have you lost?”

“A lot,” said Paul. “All of them. They all grew back.”

There are things that don’t grow back, thought Paul. Some things would always be lost. Still there was a strange urgency in him to help Sara lose her tooth.

“Maybe if you eat something crunchy, like a carrot, your tooth will fall out?”

Sara looked at him. He could tell she was a bit scared of this idea, and he understood why. There was too much uncertainty in that method, too much potential for pain.

“How about if you just wiggle it a lot for a long time?”

“Yeah, I guess,” said Sara. “I’ve been wiggling it.” She was coloring in the grass now. “I wanted the door thing to work.”

“With string?”

“Uh huh.”

They colored together for several minutes in silence.

Then Sara asked, “Do you have any string? You could slam the door for me.”

“String?” Paul’s mind searched his kitchen drawers. “String. Yes, I think so.”

Soon they were tying string around Sara’s tooth and tying the other end to the living room doorknob. Sara walked as far away from the door as she could and faced Paul. Paul looked at Sara and held the doorknob in his hand.

Sara’s father drank water from a conical paper cup next to the waiting room water cooler. He had been in too many waiting rooms. They were so often windowless. This one was not. He stood in front of the window, watching the cars stop at the red light, edge in front of each other, and accelerate with the green light. The blinds were angled half open and the air conditioner blew cold air through his button-down shirt. The afternoon light slanted across the sidewalk as nannies pushed strollers past piles of garbage being stacked along the curb by doormen. He pressed the cup quietly between his hands and threw it away.

“Let me never be confounded,” he had recited in his prayers that morning, sitting in his armchair next to the piano, a mug of black coffee resting beside him on the nesting table. The sun had still been below the horizon or trapped behind a building, and a squirrel stirred lightly in the branches outside. He had known about the appointment then, had known what they would have to do together.

With all the crossword letters in their boxes, all sections of the paper perused, refolded and tucked into the side pocket of his briefcase, there was only waiting left. It wouldn't be long before Laura was wheeled out from the office, drinking orange juice, drained and pale. She would know pain he never could. He had been born a man, born, it seemed, to look on.

But he had other pain to bear. His dead wife's face and his own in his daughter's gaze. The new memory of a child who would never live. Laura, trying to make a life for them, but so broken all the same.

Sara was thrilled and terrified, alone with a man who wore wristbands and liked to color. She felt the taut string leading from her mouth to the doorknob. She looked at Paul, his eyes glistening. They both smiled with excitement.

“Ready?”

“Ready.”

Paul slammed the door as fast and hard as he could. The string pulled at Sara's tooth, which, on its last hinge, was torn from her gums and hit Paul in the middle of his chest and then landed near the door. Paul's face broke into wide laughter. Sara was frozen for a moment, then tasted salt-familiar blood in her mouth. She grinned and pushed her tongue through the gap in her front teeth.

They ordered mushroom pizza for dinner.

After Sara's father put Laura to bed early, he came to Paul's door to pick up Sara. She answered the bell with her backpack on, and carried a drawing of a man in a purple tee shirt, holding a long lasso and wrangling with a giant, square tooth. She took her father's hand and led him through Paul's apartment to the back door out to the garden. She skipped next to him along the flagstone path back to Laura's door. Imperceptible, all around them, tiger lilies closed their petals.

SIX

When it was first built, St. Luke's Church stood on the banks of the Hudson River and was surrounded by fields and farmland. In paintings from that time, cows graze nearby and wisps of smoke can be seen from distant farmhouse chimneys. In the decades that followed, landfill extended the Village over the water, the West Side Highway was paved, and fields were replaced by brownstone tenements, cobblestone streets, boxy factories, garages, hospitals, stop lights and one way signs. Now the church was made new again and its doors were about to open.

Early on the morning of the reconsecration, Paul stood in the freshly painted church and looked around him. It was adorned with large vases of November sunflowers. Bright light filled the building through new windows made of clear blown glass. Book-sized, nearly colorless rectangular panes filled the center of the windows. Smaller panes that held different pale shades of brown, green and purple framed these clear panes and fanned out in arches at the top of the casements.

Each retained the raw patterns of hand-blown, twirling sheets of molten glass. Some squares rippled outward like pond water around a thrown pebble. Some patterns spiraled like pinwheels, ghosts of the glassblower's spin. There were panes like wavy horizontal lines of text. In others, transparent creases

diagonally ascended. They were parable windows, showing the story of the seasons that surrounded the church. Through them, the branches of trees swayed and caught the light. Fall leaves glowed yellow and orange in the wind. On the southwestern side of the church, they threw shadows against the glass. On the opposite wall, the sunlit branches twisted and distorted. Sirens passed on the streets. Conversations echoed from the sidewalk.

The procession for the reconsecration began in the school gym. John, Laura and Paul lined up with the Bishop of New York, the full choir and all the acolytes. Bishop Moore led them out of the gym where they had held services for four years, along the flagstone paths and into the new church. The standing congregants filled the pews, singing in full voice with the new organ as incense filled the air. Bishop Moore traced a cross in a concrete tile and, with the clergy, acolytes and choir, processed over the threshold, along the aisles to the sanctuary. The new marble altar had been repositioned to face the congregation. Communion would now be fully visible. Across the front of the altar, inlaid in brown and gold marble, the congregants could read, “Do this in remembrance of Me,” and below that, in larger letters, “ADD SYMBOL the Ω.” Bishop Moore anointed the table with oil.

Light streamed through the windows, caught beams of incense smoke moving over the people. John did not preach from the pulpit that day. During his

sermon, he stood in the middle of the aisle in front of his congregation and asked them a question.

“St. Luke’s, where are your fields?”

And again. “St. Luke’s, where are your fields?”

*

At a celebratory lunch with the congregation, an old queen clutched Paul by the elbow and whispered on his neck, “We had to wait till the place burned down to finally redecorate. It’s magnificent.”

After lunch, John, Laura and Paul carried garment bags to St. Vincent’s Hospital. They walked east on Christopher Street, past The Lucille Lortel Theatre, Li-Lac Chocolates, McNulty’s Tea and Coffee, Village Cigars. Men in leather jackets and ripped jeans walked with their hands in each other’s back pockets. Punks with pink and green Mohawks slunk by with silver wallet chains jostling and small hoop earrings up the length of their ears. Storefronts were tattoo parlors, barbers, bakeries, piercings, bondage costumes, leather goods, butchers, cafés and bars.

“I’ve got Fred, Mark and Justin today,” said Laura. “What about you?”

“Ian,” said Paul. “And Scott.” He ran the back of his hand along the painted black iron posts of a front gate.

“Scott’s sick?” asked John.

“Damn,” said Laura.

“I’ll be with Gene,” said John. “And Laura, I’ll take Justin.”

“Are you sure?” she asked.

“Of course,” said John. “Listen. We have another meeting with Dr. Lerner on Wednesday at Sloan Kettering. They’re titrating this thing, trying to figure out where it’s coming from, how it works.”

“We know how it works,” Laura said. “It kills you.”

“I wish it had a name,” said Paul. “It doesn’t have a name.”

“It’s The Plague,” said Laura.

“People go so quickly,” said John.

Paul laughed. “I had lunch with Carlos last week. He said he reads the obits in the Sunday *Times* now like they’re job listings.”

Laura and John managed to smile.

“Blood tests the first week of December. Don’t forget,” said John. “Dr. Lerner said he’ll do them himself if your doctor won’t.”

“December, April and August, right?”

“Right.”

St. Vincent’s Hospital dominated the corner of Seventh Avenue and West Twelfth Street. Outside it was grayish white, like a fortress, but in the middle of the building was a chapel with stained glass windows. Inside the hospital, nurses and doctors served people from throughout the neighborhood. For decades, the

Sisters of Charity had opened their doors to cholera patients, passengers from the Titanic, children with polio, winos, Chinatown, drug addicts, cancer patients, elderly who had broken their hips or arms, the homeless, beaten wives, unexplained cases of the flu, and people giving birth. Some time ago, the nun's habits had been traded in for hospital gowns. The patients to whom John, Laura and Paul were ministering were often scattered throughout the hospital, but increasingly they could be found in Intensive Care.

In a changing room at the end of the Intensive Care Unit, the priests fastened their collars into black shirts and pulled plain white robes over their clothes. John, Laura and Paul divided the communion wafers and wine, and each took a small vial of oil.

“Got everything?” asked John. He ran his fingers back over his thin gray hair and straightened his glasses.

“See you on the other side,” said Laura, pressing her lips together. She replaced the cap on a tube of peppermint ChapStick and tucked it into a hidden pocket in her robe.

Paul squeezed her shoulder and they walked down the hall.

Outside of Ian's room, Paul talked to nurses as they helped him tie on a blue plastic surgical gown and handed him a face mask. A nurse named Tracy touched his elbow.

“Don’t go in there,” she whispered. Paul could see only her eyes over the face mask she wore. Her hair was covered by a surgical cap. Tracy brought her face close to his. He noticed the way her makeup sat in the creases of her skin. She was wearing latex gloves and held another pair in her hands for Paul.

“Why not?” he asked.

“I won’t go in those rooms anymore. Not when it’s like this.”

Paul took the gloves from her and put them in his pocket.

“Tracy. Excuse me.”

Tracy stood aside. Paul pushed open the door to the hospital room, carrying his small bag with a prayer book and the Sacraments.

Ian’s face was half-covered by an oxygen mask that was fogged by the heat of his skin. A skullcap his sister had knit him covered his head, bald from chemotherapy. His arms lay quietly by his sides, hooked up to intravenous tubes that led to bags hanging above his bed. Ian’s lover Michael sat in the corner, a book open on his lap. He was wearing a surgical gown, face mask and gloves.

“I’ve read this sentence nine times,” said Michael through his mask. “I couldn’t tell you what this book is about, and I’m halfway through.”

“That’s all right,” said Paul. He sat on the edge of Ian’s bed and placed his bag next to him on the chair. “How are we doing, Ian?”

Ian’s lungs were filled with pneumonia. He did not try to talk. Over the oxygen mask, his eyes opened, wide and red.

“He was vomiting blood today,” Michael whispered, standing up. “I was sitting right next to him on that chair where your bag is. I didn’t know what to do. I just jumped back, away from the bed. Blood got all over my gown. There’s still some on my shoe. He was choking on his own vomit. I should have done something, propped him up or something, but I ran out to the hall shouting for someone to come. It took forever to get a nurse in here. I froze. I just. I froze.”

“Michael, it’s all right,” said Paul. “You’re here. You’re still here.”

“I can’t bear it. How could I do nothing?”

“You don’t have to forgive yourself today. But come here. Let’s be with Ian now.” Paul motioned for Michael to join him. “Come on, now. We’ll do this together.”

Michael walked slowly to the bed and sat in a chair across from Paul, who continued speaking.

“The hat looks good, Ian. Karen made that, right? She was working on it last week when I was here. Beautiful colors.”

He unzipped his bag and opened his prayer book to the page marked by a yellow ribbon. He lay the book on Ian’s thigh.

Ian blinked and closed his eyes again. Paul could hear him struggling to breathe, the underwater sound in his chest.

“Hey, babe,” Michael said quietly. “Hey, sweet man. Everything’s taken care of now. There’s nothing left to worry about. We’re here with you.” He studied

Paul's hand as it reached down and rested on Ian's sweaty forehead. Michael took up Ian's hand between his gloved hands. He kissed Ian's closed fingers through his face mask. "We're not going anywhere, babe."

"Okay, Michael, Ian," said Paul. "Let's begin."

"Okay," said Michael.

"Almighty God, look on this your servant, lying in great weakness, and comfort him..."

From the next room, Paul heard a man scream in pain. The stench of diarrhea drifted up the corridor. As he heard the staccato of Laura's voice, he imagined her helping nurses roll the man, still screaming, onto a gurney while they stripped his bed of sheets and sponged clean his back and legs.

"No!" screamed the man. "Fuck me! Fuck!"

Laura's voice. "Can't we get him to the toilet?"

The nurse. "Sitting up is impossible for him now. The tumors in his chest and stomach. They're too painful. The bedpan is the best we can do. Watch your—"

Paul looked down at his prayer book and found he had reached the end of the prayer. Michael's eyes were fixed on Ian, whose chest rose and fell with shallow, rattling breaths.

Later, Paul was washing his hands in the hall bathroom when Laura knocked on the door and quickly opened it. She ran to the toilet bowl, fell to her knees and retched into it. Paul wiped his hands on a paper towel and held back her hair. There were streaks of diarrhea on her surgical gown. The gown was half untied in the back, but Laura hadn't been able to finish pulling the strings herself before reaching the bathroom. Paul helped her out of it, crumpled up the gown and threw it in the garbage as she continued to heave. Afterwards, Paul and Laura washed their hands with lots of soap, and Laura rinsed her mouth at the sink.

*

At home, Paul stripped down to nothing and washed his clothes in the bathroom sink with double detergent. He hung everything over the radiator and ran the shower as hot as he could stand. With a nailbrush and a bar of soap, he scrubbed his hands and arms up to his elbows. He washed his hair and brushed his teeth, gargled Listerine. He wiped the fog from the mirror and looked at his skin.

That evening, Paul slipped on his canvas boat shoes, slung a small tote bag over his shoulder, and set out across town again. It was dark and he walked east on Grove Street past Marie's Crisis. Strains of *Evita* floated up the stairs to the sidewalk. He crossed Seventh Avenue and cut east on Waverly Place, past Washington Square Park where glass vials and folded Robbys moved in

handshakes between pushers and users. He walked for a while, cutting over on Astor Place and past St. Mark's Church to East Tenth Street, between First Avenue and Avenue A. He climbed the stairs of the Russian and Turkish Bathhouse, entered through two sets of wooden doors and locked his valuables in a metal box at the front desk.

On his way to the locker room, Uri stopped him with a bottle of potato vodka.

"Reb Paul! Won't you join me?" Uri's eyes were red and wet, and his broad chest was covered in black hair that matched his thick moustache. He'd tied his dark blue robe around his waist and let the top fall over his knees. He and Paul embraced, and he produced two shot glasses, which he set on the counter and filled to the brim. Paul smiled and took one.

"*Na zdarovie!*" They slammed the glasses squarely on the counter and tipped them back.

Paul slapped Uri on the shoulder. "Health! Health!" he coughed. "What is this, acetone?"

"Mother's milk!" cried Uri. "Is good. Mother's milk from Motherland. Only best for my favorite rebbe. My cousin Yonatan brought here just for you, stuffed in his asshole." His laughter was rough and warm.

"Tell him it tastes like it."

Uri grabbed Paul by the ears and planted a kiss right on his mouth, his moustache pressing into his nostrils. “Mmmmmm—rebbe! I love you too much, man.”

Down in the basement, Paul shuffled from the showers in plastic slippers. He greeted Deniz and Kolya, who were as permanently installed as the tiled seating that lined the walls. They sat near the entrance, their feet in large pails of water and eucalyptus salts. They leaned over the buckets, scrubbing. Next to them, three men took turns spreading green-gray Dead Sea mud on each other’s backs and shoulders. The same people were always at the bathhouse, and there was always a newcomer somewhere, unsure of where to hang his robe, which room to enter first, with eyes that moved from place to place.

The Russian room was dark and cave-like and radiated heat. All night long, the oven was heated to blistering temperatures, and all day long, the remaining heat seeped from the room. The walls, floor and ceiling were covered in large stone tiles. Thin wooden boards rested on the tiered benches that lined the walls. Paul spread out his towel on a stone bench near the well, and filled a bucket with cold water. He doused the bench with water, then refilled the bucket and dumped it over his head. He draped another wet towel over his head and shoulders and sat in the half dark, waiting.

John’s words walked around in his head.

St. Luke’s, where are your fields?

Paul came to the baths to be one of many. The heat was intense and brought him both into his body and out of it. The cold buckets of water tightened his skin and made his circulation rush. The steam, the deep heat of the rocks, the room's small noises. They were a sanctuary. Paul sat still and quieted his mind.

St. Luke's, where are your fields?

Most of the men there only knew each other without clothes. They learned the curve of each other's spines. They watched the pitch of a bucket poured over a head and shoulders. They knew each other without speaking. So if later they appeared, dressed with their hair towel-dried, on their way down the front steps, or the next day on the street walking with friends, or smoking alone in some nearby café, there were downward glances and knowing looks.

Now Paul felt someone sit closely next to him on the bench. From underneath his towel he saw the man's dark thigh touch his own.

SEVEN

“Does Advent mean waiting?”

“Advent means arrival.”

“But we’re waiting. The Advent calendar makes us wait for Christmas.”

“We’re waiting for Jesus to arrive.”

“You mean when he comes again to judge the living and the dead?”

“No, we’re waiting for him to be born. On Christmas we celebrate the birth of Jesus.”

“I know. It’s like his birthday party. That’s why there’s all the gifts on Christmas.”

“Well, yes.”

“Was there Christmas when you were little, Papa?”

“Yes. There’s Christmas every year.”

“But isn’t Jesus dead?”

“What?”

“Jesus died. At Easter. He died and went to heaven.”

“Well, Jesus died on Good Friday. Easter is when we celebrate his resurrection. So, in that sense he died. He’s no longer human. But he’s always alive. He is seated at the right hand of the Father. And like you said, we await his coming in glory.”

“But how can he be dead and in heaven and also not born? Is he reincarnated at Christmas?”

“No. Jesus doesn’t get reincarnated.”

“Yes he does. He’s reincarnated in his mom.”

“That’s incarnate.”

“What?”

“He became incarnate from the Virgin Mary.”

“What?”

“It means that Jesus became human because he was born from his mother, Mary.”

“Of course. Everybody’s born human.”

“But remember, Mary was a virgin. Jesus became incarnate—he arrived here—by the power of the Holy Spirit. Not just because his mother was pregnant.”

“She was engaged already.”

“I know.”

“So they could have made a baby together already. Mary and Joseph.”

“They could have, but they didn’t.”

“They were looking for a place to stay. Everyone knew she would be a good mother. She was great with children.”

“She was great with child. That means she was very pregnant.”

“Oh.”

“Like this.” Sara’s father curved his arms out in front of him and leaned back in his chair. “See how big she was? Great.”

Sara didn’t see what was so great about it.

“We’re all God’s children,” she said. “That’s what John said in chapel. It doesn’t matter if you want to be or not. God is everyone’s father. We’re all here because God made sure we got alive. So, God made Mary be pregnant. Why does Jesus get chocolate in his calendar?”

Sara pointed to the cardboard Advent calendar hanging on the kitchen wall. It showed a colorful, Scandinavian-looking house, filled with running, rosy-faced blond children in striped scarves, hats and mittens. There were toys of every description, steamed holiday puddings, roasted birds and piles of smoked fish. A fire roared in the fireplace. Everyone smiled, the father in his armchair, smoking a pipe next to the laden Christmas tree, and the mother carrying a tray of tea and cookies. People ice-skated on a frozen pond in the distance, ringed by trees dusted with snow. Each day, Laura allowed Sara to open the window or door or toy chest marked by the calendar number. Behind each was a flat piece of chocolate wrapped in foil. Sometimes the foil was red, sometimes green, gold or silver. Sara would unwrap the chocolate and let it melt on her tongue. She smoothed out the foil between her palms and then folded it in half and in half until

it became a hard little knot. She rolled it tightly and pressed it like a jewel in the spaces between her fingers.

“We’re all God’s children,” said Sara’s father, “but Jesus is the Son of God.”

Over the calendar house was a large cloud with the number 24 on it. Sara wondered what was behind cloud number 24.

*

Advent lasted a long time. Every night before dinner, Laura lit the candles on the Advent wreath on top of Sara’s mother’s piano. There were four places for candles on the wreath, and one in the middle of the metal wreath-holder, but only one candle was lit for the first week. Each Sunday, they were able to add a candle, up until Christmas, when the wreath would be fully lit. Laura taught Sara how to light a match and hold it under the wick, and taught her in which order to light them. Sara’s father told her to light the candle farthest from her first, so she would not burn herself, and showed her how to cup her palm around a flame when she blew it out so the wax would not spatter on the piano. Each night, Sara watched the candles burn slowly and thought about Santa Lucia Day, when young girls wore white dresses and a crown of candles. She had learned about it in school. She had also learned about leaving her shoes out for Saint Nicholas and crossing her fingers against receiving coals. But the Advent wreath was beautiful and looked like a crown of holly. In the middle of one afternoon, she lifted it,

unlit, onto her head, but it would not balance. She set it back down and sat on her mother's piano bench, plunking away at the keys as if she knew how to play.

*

On December twenty-second, there was a tremendous heat wave up and down the coast. People on their ways to work peeled off layers of coats and sweaters and carried them across their arms. Laura took one step onto their front stoop and turned back to leave her coat at home. She returned with two pairs of gardening gloves and handed one to Sara's father. They were going to find a Christmas tree.

As Sara walked between Laura and her father, she tried to match her father's long stride and step twice in each concrete slab on the sidewalk. She stumbled to keep up with him. When they were across the street from the tree market, her father let go of her hand and she ran to the corner and stopped at the curb. She waited for the "Don't Walk" to become "Walk."

Behind her, Laura spoke with Sara's father.

"They promised me the invitations will be here on Tuesday," she said. "I know it's Christmas, but we should really have them out the door by the twenty-seventh. People have been calling to see if the wedding's still on."

"I don't know when we can address all the envelopes," said Sara's father.

"You'll be on the altar nearly every day for the next two weeks."

"I know. But the list is finalized. You could do it while I'm working."

"There are two hundred invitations. And most of them are yours. Why did you

invite everyone you've ever met to this thing? It's a wedding, for God's sake, not a fundraiser."

"Oh, I'm sorry, this just a wedding? It's my first," said Laura.

"I'm sorry," he said quietly.

Laura's voice softened. "I wish they *would* pay for their plates, it would take the load off of my father."

"Look, if the invitations need to go out, I'll take care of them on Boxing Day." He put his arm around her. "Has your mother called you back about the cake?"

"She's in Italy. She won't be back until after New Year's, and then it always takes her time to settle in. I'll be lucky if she shows up at all."

"Or lucky if she doesn't."

"Right."

They felt something at their hips. It was Sara, worming her way between them.

"Swing me!" she said, trying to take their hands.

"My back hurts, Pickle," said her father. "Come, walk over here." He led her around to the side with his outside hand. Laura took his arm as they crossed the street.

The Pick-A-Tree vendors had found an abandoned lot on Greenwich Street and piled the broken furniture and abandoned gas cans in a heap that they had covered

with a large canvas tarp. They were running a generator that would normally power a space heater and a hot plate for coffee, but now was only needed to run the saw to trim the base of each trunk. The lot was so packed with debris that most of the trees were on the sidewalk in a neat stack, already wrapped in plastic netting like tight bags of onions. A few of each kind were loose and stood in stands, their fresh scent brushing against Sara's hands. Because of the heat, there was not the usual clean December crispness in the air. Instead, the trees seemed to droop, and a passing garbage truck left a rancid smell in the branches. Sara moved between the trees. There were tall, straight Balsam firs, dark green and smooth at their trunk. Blue-green, bushy Scotch pines had dense needles that Sara felt were grabbing at her hands as she touched them. The white pines had soft, thin needles, like long fingers on a graceful dancer. Sara buried her face in the branches, feeling the clumps of foliage against her face. She wished she could sleep inside of the tree, burrow into a nest and stay the winter. When she came around the corner, she saw what she had hoped she would find—a blue spruce, only inches taller than she was, on a miniature tree stand, already covered in tiny white lights. She stood next to it and reached her hand up to place an imaginary star. This was Christmas. This would be wonderful.

“Where did Sara go?” she heard her father's voice ask.

“Let’s see this one,” said Laura to the younger of two men sitting on folding chairs next to the generator. He stood up and pulled the tree from the bunch that leaned against the chain link fence.

“Sara?” Her father’s voice sounded worried now, and Sara emerged from the trees, moving silently next to him until she could fit her hand into his. He looked down, startled. “Oh! There you are. Don’t go off like that.” She held his hand tighter, feeling the sweat on his palm, the heat that came off of his hairy arm.

“Could you cut open the bag so we can look at it?” asked Laura.

“That thing must be eight feet tall!” said the older man, still sitting and drinking a Dr. Pepper. “Open her up, Marty,” he told the man holding the tree. “Let’s have a good look. Name’s Tim, by the way. Merry Christmas to you.”

“Laura.”

“And Merry Christmas to you, Tim,” said Sara’s father, watching as Marty cut through the white plastic netting. The branches fell slightly as they were released, but stayed angled upward. “Trunk looks pretty straight,” he said, “but Laura, do we need all this tree? Do we even have enough lights to cover it?”

“Between the two of us, we’ve got lights for days,” said Laura, not taking her eyes off of the tree. She reached out and grabbed one of the branches, squeezing the needles and then smelling her fingers. “When was this cut down?”

“Just two days ago, ma’am. My brother Eddie cuts those trees himself. Those extra large ones are my favorite, too,” said Tim. “Fraser fir. Drove ’em here from Pennsylvania myself.”

Sara reached out a finger and poked at the needles. They poked her back.

“Is this the one, then?” asked Sara’s father, pulling out his wallet. Sara saw him turn his wrist slightly to glance at his watch.

Laura smiled at Tim. “Wrap it up! We’ll take it.”

“Want me to trim up the bottom for you?” asked Marty.

“That won’t be necessary,” said Laura. “It was just cut two days ago, right, Tim?”

“That’s right, ma’am,” said Tim, and winked at her. “Mighty nice tree you got there.”

Sara’s father counted out the money and looked in his empty wallet before putting it in his back pocket. Marty raised his eyebrows at him and shrugged as he pulled the tree through the plastic packaging machine.

At the front door, Sara’s father handed her the key and looked on from the sidewalk as he held on to the tree trunk. Sweat poured from his face and neck. The armpits and back of Laura’s shirt were soaked through. There were dark wet marks under her breasts. Sara thought they looked like eyes on a warrior shield.

She climbed the steps and reached up to fit the key into the lock.

“Pull the door toward you,” said her father.

“Hurry,” said Laura. “I’ve had to pee for blocks.”

Sara pulled at the door handle and twisted the key. She heard the lock shift and the bolt move. She turned the knob and pushed open the door. Laura dropped her end of the tree and rushed past her.

“I’ll be right back—can’t wait any longer!” she called on her way upstairs to the bathroom.

Sara watched her father bend over the tree and grab it toward the middle of the trunk. He straightened his back and his knees carefully and, saying nothing, brushed past Sara through the front door, pushing forward trunk-first. The tree was the length of the entrance hallway. It was wide enough to brush against both walls, knocking framed photographs askew and overturning a jar of pennies on the side table. The coins covered the floor under his feet and he cursed quietly.

“I can help,” said Sara, grabbing onto the top of the tree that trailed behind him. “I’ll help you carry it, Papa.” She could feel him tugging her forward and she held on tightly. She tripped over her feet as the toe of her sneaker caught against the floorboard. She fell onto one knee and quickly picked herself up again.

“Let go! You’re making it worse,” snapped her father. Sara let go of the tree and wiped her hand. There was a sticky bit of sap on her palm. She stopped for a moment and then followed him into the living room. He dropped the tree on the

floor and walked back out through the hall to the front door, which was standing open to the street. The sunlight outside was so bright, the doorway glowed white. He shut the door with a bang and Sara heard the locks bolt and the chain slide into place. In the kitchen, he drank two glasses of ice water and wiped his face and neck off with a dishtowel. He loudly blew his nose. Laura came downstairs leisurely, carrying the Christmas tree stand.

“I thought I was going to explode!” said Laura. Sara’s father did not look up from the sink. He filled his water glass again and added another ice cube.

“Can we put up the tree, Papa?” Sara asked.

“Just a minute,” said her father. “We’re going to have to move the couch.”

“I can help,” said Sara, opening a drawer to find a pair of scissors. She wrapped her hand around the blades and held them, point to the floor, like she did in school, as she skipped back into the living room.

“I’ll be right there,” she heard Laura say to her father.

Sara began at the top of the tree and started to snip through the plastic netting. With each cut, the branches pushed out against the netting, making Sara feel as though she were unzipping a tight coat that had been holding in a dark green monster. Snip, snip, snip. She continued to cut all the way down the length of the tree. Soon the branches had fully opened on the rug and needles scattered around her feet as they pushed against the furniture. She pressed her shoulder into the back of the couch and pushed until it began to slide across the floor, then came to

a stop against the bunched up rug on the other side.

“What are you doing?” Her father stood over her, angry. “What did you do? I said we needed to move the couch first. Laura! Where are you?”

“She went upstairs.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I’m moving the couch, Papa.”

“Not there. You’ll scrape the floor. And what are these scissors doing here?”

He bent over and picked up the scissors. “Did you—did you cut this netting open?”

Sara looked down at the tree on the ground and did not reply.

“God. This is going to be fifteen times more difficult now. Sara, when you put up a tree, you wait until the end to cut it free.”

“Oh,” whispered Sara. “I’m sorry.”

“All right, let’s see what we can do here. Where’s that stand?”

Sara spotted it inside of the doorway, where Laura had left it. “Here,” she said.

“Okay, now first of all, we’re going to move this couch against the wall.” She watched as he flipped a corner of the rug over, folding it onto itself, and maneuvered the couch into place. He relocated an armchair and two side tables. “Now, that’s not too bad. Hand me that stand.” When he had positioned the stand, he stood up and put his hands on his hips, looking from the tree to the ceiling and back. “Well, I’ll be damned,” he said.

“What is it, Papa?”

“Laura!” he called up the staircase. “Laura?”

Sara heard her footsteps coming down the stairs. Her father swore under his breath again. Laura entered the room carrying a box of lights and ornaments.

“I’m here. You already moved the couch—terrific. I just thought it would go over here,” she said, motioning toward the windows. “But we can fiddle with that later.”

“Laura,” said Sara’s father, “this tree is too tall.”

“No way,” said Laura.

Sara looked down at the tree and tried to measure it with her eyes. She turned the room on its side in her imagination to see if the tree would fit.

“I’ll show you,” he said, grasping the tree by its trunk and moving it toward upright. The top of the tree jammed against the ceiling. “We’re talking about a seventy-five degree angle, here, Laura.”

“Shit,” said Laura. “Do we have a saw?”

“Beats me. But Marty did.”

“Christ.” Laura walked into the kitchen and started opening drawers. She looked under the sink. Sara looked up at the ceiling where the tree had scraped it.

Laura came back with a bread knife.

“The bread knife?” asked Sara’s father. “We’ll ruin the blade. That thing can’t cut through the trunk of this tree.”

“Cut from the top,” said Laura, making her way toward the tip of the tree.

“But that’s where the star goes!” cried Sara.

“Oh, we’ll make a big star out of tin foil and stick it up there. No one will ever know,” said Laura.

Sara thought about the etched glass star she and her father had packed in newspaper in their old apartment. Maybe that box had been lost as well.

Sara’s father sat on the floor and looked up at the ceiling. “Grab me a tape measure. Let’s try to get this right the first time.”

Laura returned to the kitchen and came back with a tape measure, which she handed to Sara’s father. She took up the bread knife again.

“Just let me. I’ll cut it,” said Laura.

“Are you kidding me? That’s a good knife.”

“It’s serrated and it’ll do the job,” said Laura, taking the top of the tree in one hand and beginning to saw at it with the bread knife.

“Can’t you wait just a minute? I can find a decent saw and do this right.”

“Measure all you want. This should do it.” The top of the tree fell away in her hand. She held it up to look at it and then tossed it aside. Sara thought of saving it. She thought of the small tree she had seen that was just her size. On the floor, the large Christmas tree looked like a tangram shape that Sara made at school, slanting in on the sides, with a flat top and flat bottom.

“There,” said Laura. “Let’s get this thing up.”

Sara helped her father screw the tree stand into the trunk part way, and then stood out of the way as he and Laura lifted the tree upright.

“Is it straight?” asked her father, struggling to hold the tree up.

“I don’t know,” said Sara. The tree was leaning toward the piano, its top digging into the ceiling. “It’s still too tall.”

They brought it down again and sawed at it some more. They had to trim the top branches back to even things out. Finally it was cut back enough to stand upright. Sara’s father finished screwing in the base and Laura brought a pitcher of water in to fill the stand. Sara marveled at the pine needles that coated the rug. She thought of a forest floor, of Max’s room becoming a jungle in *Where the Wild Things Are*. Imaginary snakes wound around the legs of the piano. She started to gather up the pine needles to make a pillow.

“So many needles,” she heard her father say, “there’s no way this was cut down two days ago.”

“It’s just the heat,” said Laura. “Grab the broom. I’ll get dinner going.”

“Order pizza,” he said. “I don’t want that oven anywhere near on.”

Sara held the dustpan as her father swept up the needles. They spread a red felt skirt around the tree. Sara sat on the rug and leaned back on her hands, looking up at the tree. She fixed her eyes at the scrape in the ceiling paint. Her father sat

in the armchair and rubbed his shoulder.

“Ridiculous,” she heard him whisper when he thought she could not hear him.

Laura returned from the kitchen and handed Sara’s father a decanter of scotch and two glasses full of ice. She looked through the records in the bookcase and chose the soundtrack from *Diva*. Sara watched her slip the record out of its paper sleeve and place it onto the turntable.

“Could I light the Advent wreath?” asked Sara.

Her father was silent. He had poured the scotch and was looking at the rug.

“Sure,” said Laura.

Sara was glad. There were four candles to light now, and Laura let her use long matches that were for fireplaces. She climbed up on the piano bench, opened the long, rectangular box and pulled out a match. It had a green tip. If she had been alone, she would have pretended it was a cigarette and sucked in imaginary smoke, acting out her best Cruella de Vil. But she knew her father was there, and she struck the match away from her as he had taught her, and held it tightly as the flame flared up. She carefully lit the wicks, one by one. She thought of her father watching her, but when she had finished and turned away from the piano, she saw that his eyes had not left the rug.

They poured another glass of scotch and Sara realized she was thirsty.

She went to the kitchen for water, and when she came back into the living room,

Laura was sitting on her father's lap, trying to kiss him. He jerked his head away from her when he saw Sara. She kept at it, kissing his neck and ears. He leaned further away from her.

Strange sounds came from the record player. First there had been long squeaking tones, like metal tines vibrating against each other. Then out of nowhere, an Italian aria. Laura slid off of Sara's father's lap and took Sara's hands. Sara watched her warily. Laura hardly ever touched her, and now she led her around the rug, spun her around. Laura's red hair came loose from its bobby pins and fell around her shoulders. She knelt down and wrapped her arm around Sara's waist, swinging her close to the ground. Sara felt her toes brush against the rug. The soprano and the violins swelled and she let her arms trail behind her head. Laura twirled her around and around and then they landed on the couch together, laughing. Laura let her body go limp, sliding across the length of the couch and down to the ground.

Sara kept her eye on her father, who sat silently. He stared at them and sipped at his drink. He had unbuckled his watch, and it sat spread across the arm of the chair. Part of Sara wanted to stop dancing, but Laura grabbed her ankle and pulled her to the floor. The song had changed. This one began with a synthesizer and a hard drumbeat. An electric guitar played rough chords and then the introductory line, in a minor key. The synthesizer came back to double the chords, and a whining, metallic melody. This song became a slow melody, an

electronic harp with a lot of echo. Laura was wriggling across the rug on her belly, pulling at Sara's arms and legs. Together they jerked back and forth, tossing their hair and angling their shoulders and knees. It was as if they were stuck to the ground, able to pull themselves up for moments at a time, then snapping back down again.

"It sounds like fish," said Sara. "Like we're underwater."

"Are you a little fishy?" Laura asked, tickling her ribcage. "What kind of fishy are you?"

"I'm a rainbow fish," said Sara. She imagined silvery scales, dotted with purple, pink, yellow, green. "I can make all the colors." She twitched back and forth, flitting across the floor on her belly.

"What kind of fishy am I?" asked Laura, dragging her arms and fingers over the rug and digging them into the couch cushions.

"I don't know." Sara tumbled over in a breathless somersault.

"I'm...an...octopus!" shouted Laura laughing, and lunged at Sara with both arms and legs. She wrapped herself around Sara and her hair covered over Sara's ears, neck, mouth and nose. "I'm a big squid! I'm full of ink and I'm going to squirt you!"

Sara squealed and jumped away from Laura. Laura turned and used her suction-cup arms and legs to move across the floor to the armchair where Sara's father sat, his eyes rimmed in red, his lip trembling.

“Come on,” Laura called to Sara. Sara wriggled across the rug to her father’s chair. She followed as Laura slowly rubbed her body against her father’s leg, climbing up with her tentacles. Sara was a rainbow and slid her scales along his pants. She felt Laura’s hair on her face. Laura pushed ahead, wriggling higher and higher onto her father’s lap. Sara was left at his shin. She felt his bony kneecap against her cheek. She heard his voice, “Laura, stop this.” And again, “Stop it.” He pushed her away from him, trying to stand as she leaned herself into him, laughing. “Laura.”

The doorbell rang.

“What’s that?”

“Pizza.”

“Let me get your wallet for you,” laughed Laura, plunging her hand into his pocket.

“Stop. Stop it.” He held her wrist away from him. She looked up at him, hair sticking to the sweat on her temples. “I don’t have any more cash after the tree.”

“I’ll get it,” said Sara, and ran into the hallway, sliding on her sock feet. She unlocked the door and opened it wide.

“Sausage, onion and peppers,” said the pizza delivery boy. “Is that you?”

“I’m a rainbow fish!” said Sara.

They ate in the kitchen, with all the lights on. Laura tried to talk to Sara's father, but he only talked about the pizza and how quickly it had arrived.

Sara folded her slice of pizza lengthwise and tried to put the corner of it into her mouth. She felt the cheese burn the roof of her mouth and pulled it back out again quickly, dropping it onto her plate.

Laura opened a bottle of white wine and put an ice cube in her glass. They ate in silence until there were only two slices left in the open pizza box. The record ended and the needle skipped back and forth at the center of the vinyl disc. Sara looked around at them, hearing the small scratch over the speakers. No one moved from the table. Her father was silent. Laura poured the rest of the wine into her glass.

"I'll get it," said Sara and pushed her chair away from the table.

She saw the fire immediately. A candle had fallen over and the Advent wreath was burning on top of the piano. For a moment she froze. Then she turned and ran back to the kitchen.

"Fire!" she said. "The Advent wreath is on fire!"

Her father suddenly snapped awake and jumped up from the table. He picked Sara up in his arms and swept into the living room. When he saw the flames, he set her down brusquely in the doorway.

"Laura!" he shouted. "Water!"

Sara heard Laura shriek and curse. She pushed past Sara into the living room, clutching the bottle of wine. Laura ran toward the burning wreath and dumped the wine on top of the fire.

“Laura, it’ll burn!” shouted Sara’s father.

She emptied the bottle and doused half of the fire. They raced each other back to the kitchen for the water pitcher. Sara stood in the doorway and watched the wax pool on her mother’s piano, the wine travel across the lid and drip down onto the strings. The record skipped gently against the needle. The fire made soft little sounds as the holly popped. The wax and the wine fell silently onto the piano wires.

Sara looked up and imagine she could touch the scrape the tree had made on the ceiling.

EIGHT

Sara wanted Barbie Dolls, but knew she wasn't allowed. Her classmates had collections of them, with different outfits and accessories. Nurse, secretary, ambassador, stewardess. Barbie could do it all, and her house opened up like a suitcase. Sara played with them at other people's houses, holding them in her hands like contraband. The hard roundness of Barbie's breasts, the narrow, impossible waist, the heron's legs, arched feet, fixed smile. None of them were hers.

Sara's father walked her to school in the morning. It was just down the garden path and past the church. They didn't even have to walk out to the sidewalk on Hudson Street to get there. He told her when she felt comfortable she could walk on her own.

"You'll never have an excuse to be late to school!" he laughed. At the statue of the Virgin Mary, he let go of Sara's hand and headed back to the garden. Sara jumped up to give the Virgin's initiating hand a high five.

She was buzzed in at the school's front door and walked down the hall to her first grade classroom where students hung up their coats in their cubbies and sat at their desks as the teacher took attendance. Kate D. had gotten a short haircut over the weekend and everyone had noticed. The week before, Allison V. had also

gotten her hair cut short. Kate D. lived on Sullivan Street and she and Allison V. played basketball in Kate D.'s backyard. Sometimes they were nice to Sara, but not during gym or recess. They were girls who liked sports and had older brothers. They took showers in the morning instead of taking baths at night, and they came to school with wet hair whose comb marks stayed there when their hair dried. Their mothers knew how to use mousse. Sara sucked on the end of her ponytail and wondered about her headband.

Liz M. poked the back of Sara's neck with her pencil eraser and leaned forward to whisper into the collar of her shirt. "You pick your nose and eat it."

"Do not," said Sara, turning toward Liz. M.

"Sara!" It was the teacher.

Sara snapped around to face front.

"That's the second time I've called your name. You know it needs to be quiet during attendance. We need to know who's here and who's not."

Who's snot, thought Sara.

"Here," she said, nice and loud.

Sara could have told the teacher who wasn't there. Matthew G. was out with a very sore throat for the second time that month because he didn't like spelling tests and his mother believed him when he said he was sick and she stayed home from work and made him Jell-O, but really he had just screamed as hard as he could during kickball at recess so his voice would sound sick. Jessica P. would be

late again because her mother let her babysitter who was from Trinidad buy her Fruit Roll-Ups before school and she always came late to chapel sucking on one wrapped around her finger, which the teacher would find and make her get rid of very quickly so she didn't waste any more time. Everyone else was here. Why didn't they just go to chapel already?

After attendance, the teacher lined them up and led them outside, down the same flagstone path Sara had taken to school, and into the church through the back entrance. Sara wished she could skip attendance and meet them there, already sitting in the first grade pew, having marked the pages in her hymnal. She liked the way everything was when people were setting up. The acolytes lit the candles on the altar and the librarian made sure the correct readings were set on the lectern. But Sara filed in like everyone else, taking her seat and waiting for Laura to get up in front of the school and say what page to open to in the prayer book.

It was Lent, which meant no alleluias and all the boring hymns. Sara could recite all the parts of the service. She was glad it was Thursday because it was communion day when Paul and John joined Laura. She waited for Thursdays. The service was longer, there was more singing, and the organist played with them instead of the music teacher. When John held his hands open and sang the Eucharist over the bread and wine, Sara sang along under her breath. Her favorite part was "Li-i-ift up yo-our hea-arts." She loved to answer, "We li-i-ift them to-o

the Lo-ord.” It didn’t matter that other students even in other grades turned their heads when she sang louder than anyone else. But when the time came for communion, all the first graders got to eat wafers and drink wine except for Sara, who wasn’t baptized, and Ben S., who was Jewish and got to have chocolate money and eight days of presents on Chanukah.

Ben S. stayed in the pew and pretended to look at the radiator vents while he pulled a Micro Machine out of his pocket. Sara went up to communion with the rest of the students. They all stood along the edge of the stairs leading to the sanctuary and put their hands out like Oliver. John, Paul and Laura came around with the wafers and wine. When John arrived at Sara, he put his hand on her forehead and said a prayer over her about God protecting her.

She could feel Kate D. and Allison V.’s eyes slide over her as they slowly chewed their wafers and took tiny sips of wine. Sara thought about the way her thighs spread out on the pew when she sat down. The way in September when it was still warm enough to wear shorts, Kate D. and Allison V. had blond hairs on their thighs instead of Sara’s black hairs. The way Jessica P. called her Gorilla Arms because there was hair there, too. The way at lunch those girls traded chocolate pudding and Oreos even though they weren’t supposed to trade and all Sara had was a cream cheese and jelly sandwich with all the jelly bleeding through the bread and making it too soggy to eat. Sara thought about Architect Barbie who designed her own houses. She thought about Astronaut Barbie who

went to the moon. Executive Barbie told other people to make her mimeographs.

Surgeon Barbie cut people open to fix them.

Back in the pew, Liz M. had taken Sara's seat next to Ben S. They weren't supposed to talk, so Sara just squeezed in next to her.

"You pick your nose and eat it," whispered Liz M.

Sara opened her hymnal and waited for the organ to start playing again.

*

After dismissal that Friday, Sara left her book bag in the kitchen and walked back outside to Laura's garden to look for crocuses. She dragged a stick along the surface of the dead grass, inspecting the dirt, thinking about the word "wick" and *The Secret Garden*. It was cold enough that she could have worn gloves, but she liked how numb hands felt. They felt like they weren't hers.

She was lifting up a leaf with her stick when she heard Paul's voice next door call her into his kitchen for hot cocoa. She brought her stick with her but left it inside the door. Sara noticed there was steam on the windows as Paul brought milk to a simmer. She sat on a stool at the kitchen counter and watched his wrist as he measured cocoa powder with a tablespoon and then whisked it into the milk.

"How's first grade?"

"Good," said Sara.

“Yeah?”

“Well. Kind of boring. We just copy things from the board. I already know my letters and everything.”

“What’s your favorite part of the day?”

“Music. Mr. Hunter’s great. We get a lot done.”

“I like music, too. I know you like to sing. Anything else?”

“Reading groups.”

Paul turned off the burner. “Who’s in your reading group?”

“No one. I just read with the teacher.”

“Oh,” he said. “Why is that?”

“The other kids are still learning how to read.”

“Do you like the books you read with the teacher?”

“No. Nothing happens in them. They just repeat words that sound the same. House. Blouse. Mouse. Wow.”

“What kinds of books do you like, Sara?”

“The Fairy Books. I read them at night.”

“Hm,” said Paul. “I have one more important question.”

“Okay,” said Sara.

“Red mug or blue mug?”

Sara smiled, showing the gap in her front teeth. “Red.”

“Good choice.” He poured the hot cocoa into two mugs and placed one in front

of her. Sara blew on the surface of hers and tried to sip it without lifting the mug from the table. She wanted a chocolate moustache to see what Paul would say.

“It’s hot,” said Paul. “Careful.”

“Hot,” winced Sara, pulling away sharply. “Burned my tongue.”

Paul apologized and got up from the table. He came back with an ice cube. Sara watched it float and melt.

“Julian’s at my house,” said Sara. “He’s having lunch with Laura.”

“I know,” said Paul. “He’s talking to Laura about coming to church.”

“He already comes to church.”

“Yes, he does. He likes to come to church. He wants to be able to have communion, too.”

“Is he a Christian?”

“No, not yet. He wants to be a Christian.”

“But he can still go up at communion. They say a prayer on your forehead.” On Sundays when Sara went up to communion with her father, he would whisper to John when he got around to them. That’s when John said a prayer over her like he did on Thursdays. Her father had told her that baptism was a choice.

Paul stirred his cocoa and took a sip. “Julian wants to be baptized. That’s what they’re talking about.”

“I’m not baptized,” she said. “My mother was Jewish.”

“I know,” said Paul. “Your father told me that once.”

“We used to live in an apartment. Uptown. But we had to move.”

“What was it like? At the old apartment?”

Sara thought back. “I was with Papa all the time. We had French toast and ice cream. He let me dip my finger in the foam on his beer when we watched TV.”

“That sounds good. What else was there?”

“Hamish.”

“Hamish?”

“Hamish the cat. He didn’t like Laura’s house, so he went back to where we used to live. He lives with an old lady now.”

“I bet you miss him. What was Hamish like?”

“Funny. Orange.” Sara was quiet. “I wish I could visit him.”

“Who got Hamish for you? Was it your mother?”

Sara looked down and saw that the cuticles on her left hand were bleeding. She had torn at them. Her face felt hot. Suddenly she had to use the bathroom.

“I have to go home now,” said Sara.

“Sara?” Paul knew he had pushed too hard. It was too fast. “Sara, I’m sorry if I— if you didn’t want—”

“My stomach hurts,” said Sara. “I’m sorry, I have to go. Thanks for the—” she motioned at the table as she stood.

Sara moved quickly between the two gardens, between Paul's door and Laura's. She took the back steps quietly and turned the doorknob. When Sara walked into the kitchen, she saw Laura and Julian leaning over a prayer book together. Julian's blond hair was tied back in a ponytail. He wore a maroon sweatshirt with a black dog on it, stonewashed jeans with the cuffs turned up and a pair of white Keds. On the table was a plate of cookies that he had brought with him for Laura.

Up two flights of stairs in the bathroom, Sara took the water glass from the sink and held it underneath her as she sat on the toilet. She left the experiment on top of the water tank. Chocolate brown floating in lemonade yellow. She wondered what would happen to them when they sat there, mixed together.

Sara slid down the banister to the second floor and crept down the stairs to the first floor. In the kitchen, she eyed the cookies on the table and walked to the island, where she opened a drawer and then closed it again. Laura was reading aloud from the prayer book.

“‘Since we do not fully obey them, are they useful at all?’ So...what's the point here?’” asked Laura.

“‘Since we do not fully obey them, we see more clearly our sin and our need for redemption,’” Julian read, tracing an invisible line under the words. He looked as though he could build things. He looked like he chopped down trees.

“‘Sure, but what does that mean?’” asked Laura.

Sara opened the drawer again, then put her fingers over the lip of the drawer and pushed it shut quickly. She swallowed a cry and looked at her fingers. A white line ran across her knuckles, but it didn't last. She hadn't slammed the drawer hard enough. Julian looked around and met her eyes, wrinkling his forehead. Laura turned her head for a moment and faced back to the table. Sara ran her fingers under cold water. Laura touched Julian's sleeve and he continued reading.

*

That night in the living room, Laura and Sara's father were drinking scotch and reading the paper. Laura's legs stretched out across his lap, and he cupped her kneecap with his hand. Sara colored a picture of a house. There was a blue triangular roof, a yellow square of house below with two windows on the first floor and four on the second floor. A path wound its way toward the red front door, and purple crocuses lined the path.

She watched her father's hand move up Laura's leg. She looked back toward her picture.

"I want to be baptized," said Sara. She looked up at them from the floor, but they seemed not to have heard her. She wondered if she had spoken.

"Papa?"

"Yes?" He kept reading.

"Papa."

He folded his paper forward and looked down at her. “Yes?”

“I want to be baptized.”

Sara’s father looked at her, surprised. “Baptized?”

“You do?” asked Laura.

“I want to be baptized.”

“Well, let’s talk about this, now, Sara.” Her father moved out from under Laura’s legs and Sara came to sit next to them on the couch. “What makes you want to be baptized?”

“I want to be a Christian. I want to eat the communion. In chapel at school, and on Sundays with you, everyone gets to eat it.”

Her father was quiet. He took a deep breath and glanced at Laura. “You’re sure about this?”

“Yes,” said Sara.

Laura started to stack the paper and took another sip from her glass. Sara felt the pit of her stomach falling through her legs. The room was quiet.

“There are things you’ll have to learn. Will you learn the catechism?”

“The what?”

“Well, I’ll make a little class for you,” said her father, “or maybe someone else will.” He looked over at Laura who looked at the dark fireplace. “The catechism is... it’s a list of questions, really. Questions you should be able to answer by the time you’re baptized.”

“Like a test?”

“Not really a test. But you would have to talk about these ideas. Consider them. The person teaching you would be your catechist, and you’d be the catechumen, the student.”

Sara didn’t want to be a catechumen. These words— catechumen, catechist, catechism— cut the insides of her mouth when she said it to herself. Catechumen. Its edges were sharp and brittle. At once, she regretted what she had told them.

She had not expected there to be questions.

That night at bedtime, her father brought her into the bathroom to brush her teeth and Sara saw him stop when he saw the experiment. He lifted the glass between his thumb and forefinger and held it in front of him. Sara wondered if it was still warm. “Sara?”

He looked down at her and waited for her to spit her toothpaste into the sink. Sara looked up.

“Sara, what is this?”

Sara thought about it. The contents of the glass had muddled into each other but were still discernible. She could smell them in the air, underneath the peppermint toothpaste. She looked back to the sink and then at her father’s hand.

“Why did you do this, Sara?”

“I wanted to see what would happen.”

Her father looked at her for a moment longer and then opened the lid of the toilet. "I'm going to flush this down the toilet. That's where this should go. Okay?"

Sara said nothing.

"Now, we'll have to make sure to wash this glass very, very carefully. No one would want to drink out of this glass if it weren't clean. Right, Pickle?"

"Yes," said Sara.

"Why don't you flush the toilet."

"Okay. Sorry, Papa."

Sara pulled the handle down and watched the water fill the bowl and be sucked down into the drain. She felt her father pass behind her and carry the glass downstairs to the kitchen where there was detergent and bleach and plastic gloves under the sink. He would be several minutes in the kitchen. Wouldn't come back for some time if he started talking to Laura again.

She thought about why she had done the experiment and could not think of an answer. That night she went into the garden and broke off thin branches of forsythia. She made them into a bundle and put them in a glass with some water and set the glass outside of her father's bedroom door.

*

Sara knew Easter was chocolate bunnies, Cadbury eggs in baskets with plastic

grass, bright spring flowers. The morning before Easter Vigil, Sara tried on the same dress she would wear as a flower girl at Laura's wedding to her father. She stood in front of the mirror on Laura's vanity table, and studied the pearl beading in the bodice of the dress, the slight puff of the sleeves, the bow that tied behind her back. There was lace around the collar and on the skirt. Laura had told her she could choose some flowers from the garden for her hair.

"I hope it's a sunny day for my baptism," Sara told her father.

"The weather won't matter during Easter Vigil," he said.

"Why?"

"Easter Vigil is at eight o'clock at night!"

There were so many things her father knew and she did not.

As she looked at her reflection in the mirror, she thought of the service that night. Bishop Moore would be there, presiding over the Eucharist. Sara had thought the bishop would be the one to baptize her, or maybe the other Paul, her Paul, would. But Laura was going to baptize her, and Carlos would be her godfather. She wouldn't have a godmother. She didn't know why.

For weeks, throughout her catechism classes with her father, Sara had had fantasies of refusing to be baptized. Just as Laura leaned over the font and cupped the water in her hand, Sara would race up the aisle, away from her. What made the water holy, anyway? Sara's patent leather Mary Janes would clack against the black and white church tiles. The sound of her refusal would reverberate against

the organ in the balcony, would ring past the choir awaiting their cue, would fly past the brass chandeliers and hit the cream painted ceiling and the stained glass windows. Sara would run, her sash trailing behind her, lapping against her heels, the flowers stuck into her hair that morning falling around her. She knew the side entrance through the sacristy and out into the garden. That's how she would leave the church. She would run to the circle of hedges under the crab apple tree and stay there until someone came to find her.

While her father had asked her questions, Sara sat silently on the couch.

“What do you think it means that we are all created in the image of God?”

Sara thought, *It means that God has a million heads and ten million toes.*

That God steals and fights and cheats and makes messes. God is ugly and pretty and has no friends. God makes wars and crushes buildings and makes people die. God is mean. God let his own son bleed to death in front of Him.

“Sara?” Her father watched her with that look that made her stomach hurt.

“Sara? Look at the book. Let's read it together.” He ran his finger underneath the words in the book on her lap. “‘It means that all people are worthy of respect and honor, because all are created in the image of God and all can respond to the love of God.’ Do you see?”

I can't respond, thought Sara. I can't respond. And if all people are like God and all people die, then God can die. God from God light from light die from die.

*

On the evening of Easter Vigil, Sara ate her dinner quietly and did not swing her legs while her father licked his thumb and rubbed the dirt from her buckled shoes. Carlos arrived early before the service and made a joke about shoe polish. He gave Sara a present and she opened it hopefully. It was a white porcelain bunny with blue flowers painted on it.

“Is it a piggy bank?” asked Sara.

“No, Chiquita. It’s just for decoration,” Carlos answered.

Sara said thank you and her father placed the bunny on the table.

“Fabulous,” said Carlos.

“Absolutely,” said Sara’s father and grinned.

That night in the church full of people home from college or in from out of town, everyone sat in darkness as the Paschal Candle was lit. Paul carried it to the chancel, and as he passed by Sara she smiled at him, but he looked straight ahead. Her father passed her a candle with a white cardboard cuff, which she held still with both hands as he lit it for her. She looked around at the faces that glowed dark yellow in the candlelight. Emile sat between Carlos and Nadine, who kept their arms around him. He had walked in with a cane, and his hand trembled as he held onto his candle. Several rows behind them, Julian sat with his wife, their son asleep across their laps. Julian wore a starched white shirt under his new

blazer. His wife looked into her candle and Sara thought she looked pale and beautiful.

They listened to the story of how God created the world from darkness, wind and water, and after each story there was a psalm to sing. All the plants and animals and people multiplied, but just as soon as they were created, they were destroyed, flooded. God told Noah to build an ark and he did and they were saved and multiplied. Moses saved the Israelites and God killed all the Egyptian horses. Sara felt tired, but she held onto the candle and heard, “my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are my ways your ways, says the Lord.” And God plunked her down in a valley of bones that came back to life and He said He would open up all of the graves. And this was when the baptism was finally going to happen.

The baptism was very quiet. Sara found herself standing at the back of the church at the font, next to Carlos and Julian. She knew that later she had to say, “I renounce them” three times, and “I do” three times. She wished she could have said more. Or said nothing. It was dark in the church. The repeated oath, “I will, with God’s help” bothered Sara and comforted her. “I will” was a lie. “With God’s help” seemed to get her out of it. If God didn’t help her to do what she said she would do, then He could take the blame. Sara wanted communion.

Laura gave her an odd smile, and when she said her name, “Sara,” she said it like a discovery or a question. The water dripped into the corner of Sara’s eye, and she wiped it away as she followed Julian to the front of the church. With the

congregation watching them, Bishop Moore made a cross in oil on Sara's forehead. She decided to promise God she would never swear again, or at least would try not to. When, as a Christian, she sat down in the pew again after communion, she snapped the wax off of the cardboard cuff and broke it into little pieces, which she sprinkled on top of the small prayer book shelf in the back of the pew in front of her. She had just settled into her seat when the lights came up and all the bells rang. She looked around her and everyone was swinging bells. Small bells like little charms. Large cow bells. Bells with handles that schoolteachers would ring. One woman had a tambourine. Across the aisle she saw two men in leather pants and leather jackets jangling long metal key chains full of keys, nearly hitting the people around them.

It was time for communion, and this time Sara was allowed to eat the bread and drink the wine. She held her father's hand as they walked up to the wooden pillars that surrounded the altar. The Bishop pressed the wafer lightly into her palm. She ate it off her palm and felt how dry it was on her tongue. Paul bent down to her with the chalice and when he said, "The cup of salvation," it seemed it was just for her. The wine was sweet and felt hot. The wafer dissolved in her throat.

After the service, the church emptied out into the city night and Sara and her father stayed behind in their pew as he made her clean up the pieces of dried wax. They could hear John and Laura in the sacristy, changing out of their vestments.

Sara cupped the wax in her open palm and carried it to the garbage in the hallway. She thought about eating a piece of it to see if church candles tasted holy.

When she came back out to the pew, Paul was sitting next to her father. He held a box wrapped in silver paper and a red bow.

“Come here, Sara,” said her father. “Paul has a present for you.”

“For you,” said Paul. “Happy Easter. You know what you get to say now?”

“Alleluia,” said Sara.

“Indeed,” said Paul. “Open it up.”

The present was not a book. Sara could tell from the shape. She carefully slid her finger under the paper flap and Scotch tape and set the paper aside. She had once watched her aunt iron wrapping paper after Christmas morning and put it back in the closet for the following year. She wanted to start her own collection.

Hot Stuff Skipper wore an aerobics outfit with a blue headband, and she came with yellow leg warmers. Skipper was secured to the cardboard backing with plastic twists around her waist and neck, and Sara couldn't undo them. She held the doll in the box and said thank you, really meaning it. It was wonderful to have Skipper, immobile as she momentarily was, but Sara was also afraid of what her father would say. Sara thought about what she would tell him. Skipper was

not Barbie, Skipper was Barbie's kid sister. She liked to babysit and go swimming. Maybe that would help. Sara looked at Paul, who was watching her, and she looked at her father, who was watching Hot Stuff Skipper.

“Should we get her out of that box?” her father asked.

Paul smiled.

“Sure,” said Sara. “Thanks.”

Together the six hands worked to free Hot Stuff Skipper from the plastic ties.

“Little buggers,” said her father.

“They really make you work for it,” said Paul.

*

Paul, Laura and Sara's father walked in front of her out the side exit of the church. Hot Stuff Skipper's little plastic hand felt like hard wax in Sara's fist.

The rest of the doll's body dangled and knocked against her thigh as she walked home along the flagstone path from the church through the garden to Laura's house.

Sara looked up into the dark sky and said aloud, very quietly, “Fuck. God damn fuck.”

NINE

In June, Paul waited on the pier and watched as passengers walked off of the Cherry Grove ferry. The day before, the phone had rung just as Paul was coming in from the beach through the sliding screen door of his timeshare. It was Robby, calling to ask if he could come and stay for the weekend. His summer plans with Jasper in Holland had fallen through. Paul stretched the phone cord over to the high stool next to the kitchen counter and sat down as he listened to Robby.

Robby and Jasper had flown to Amsterdam and rented a car to drive to Jasper's uncle's empty farmhouse. Jasper had wanted to spend the summer playing with their dog, Dindi, throwing pots and eating Edam cheese, but on the highway out to the farmhouse, Jasper had lost control of his bowels and shat himself. Robby had taken the next exit and driven until they stopped along the banks of a stream where Jasper rinsed his pants and sat in the water among the stones, cursing in Dutch and refusing Robby's help. Robby stood next to him in the cold stream until Jasper stood up and came back to the car where Dindi had been watching them, her wet, black nose and small front paws pressed against the backseat window. They arrived at the farmhouse past midnight and had to turn on the electricity and run the water the rust cleared. Jasper took off all his clothes, drank a bottle of port and smoked two packs of cigarettes. After he vomited in

the kitchen sink and passed out in an armchair in the sitting room, Robby covered him with a wool blanket and set about cleaning up after him. He watched the sunrise as he hung Jasper's clean laundry to dry on a line between the house and the pottery shed.

They tried for a week to keep it up. Jasper swept out the pottery shed and together they moved the pottery wheel out from under a pile of boxes and got it working. Robby and Dindi took long walks through the orchards that surrounded the farmhouse. He came home with an apron full of sour cherries and made a clafouti, cutting out the cherry pits with a small paring knife and sweeping them into a small pile on the wooden cutting board. Jasper threw a few pots and set them to leather dry on the shelf, but pumping at the wheel's pedal opened up the sarcoma on the ball of his foot. He pulled another sock over it and kept working. Robby discovered the oozing wound two nights later when he brought Jasper a fresh towel while he soaked in the bathtub. There were orange pill bottles on the stool next to him. Jasper sat up angrily in the water and shouted for Robby to shut the door.

That night at dinner, Jasper told him to pack his bags and leave. The next morning, Robby phoned Jasper's brother and sister and between their broken English and his broken Dutch, he told them where to find Jasper. When Robby was ready to leave in the rental car, Jasper was splitting wood and loading it into the kiln. He did not look up when Robby came to say goodbye. He stood stiffly

and kept his hold on the axe as Robby embraced him. Dindi ran circles around their ankles and barked sharply.

There was nothing Robby could do. He put his suit in his pinstriped garment bag. He folded his clothes back into his valise and took the dog food and feeding dish from the kitchen. Jasper would not go to a hospital. He had brought a suitcase full of pills and marijuana with him to the farm and stocked the liquor cabinet. If they failed him, he had a length of rope. Robby realized Jasper had never wanted him to stay. He had wanted Robby to drive him to the farmhouse and leave him there.

Robby took a large handful of clay with him when he left and wrapped it in plastic. He brought it home with him on the plane and sat in his apartment for two days, dribbling water over it and rolling it between his palms into a long snake shape. He hadn't used clay since elementary school, but the coiled pot method came back to him now. He lay the rope shape in a round, flat base, then began to coil it upward, building the walls of a rudimentary bowl. He filled in the crevices with slip, smoothing the edges where the walls met the base, and set the cup to dry on his windowsill. After wiping down the table and washing his hands, Robby had called Paul.

Paul had told Robby not to bother with his car, but he insisted, piling it high full of vegetables, fruits, cheese and honey from the Union Square market. He bought a case of wine—"For your hospitality, Paul—and so I don't drink it all

alone”—and a cooler full of Long Island lobsters—“If a man can’t make a lobster roll, what good is he?”

When he saw Robby pulling two wagons full of food off the ferry and Dindi trailing behind him on a powder blue leash, Paul kicked himself for not meeting Robby on the Sayville side. He imagined Robby struggling to unload the car alone in the gravel parking lot, cursing the Radio Flyers, standing in line in the hot sun waiting to board the ferry, forcing ice cubes into Dindi’s mouth. But Robby was unflappable, and he walked the length of the pier as if it were a runway, flashing Paul a bright grin. He was wearing big, dark sunglasses and a baseball cap. He was thinner, but still so handsome it made Paul want to kiss him.

“I never thought I’d be the old queen with the toy poodle, but worse things have happened,” Robby sighed, laughing. “I’m sorry for bringing her, I know how much you love dogs. I just haven’t figured out what to do about her yet.”

“She is cute,” said Paul. “When she’s not stealing the Camembert off of the coffee table.”

Paul took one of the wagon handles and they made their way through the shops and bars along the dappled walkways that led to their house. Robby smelled the air and Paul listened to the noise that the wagon wheels made against the wooden slats. This always sounded to him like beginnings and endings, arrivals and departures. They turned down another street and brushed against a stand of bamboo. Halfway to the house, Robby took Paul’s arm. Paul felt Robby tug at

him slightly as they walked, needing his support, but Robby would not give over the handle of the second wagon when Paul asked.

“I’m glad you’re here,” said Paul.

“Me too,” said Robby.

They arrived at the house and Robby unhooked Dindi’s leash and let her run around the deck. Paul unloaded the wagons and Robby went out to the back porch, where he fell asleep in the hammock for the next two hours. When he woke up, he set a stock pot on the stove on his way to the shower. Paul put on a record and made margaritas. Carlos and Emile were taking the late ferry in and would meet them at the Tea Dance. It felt for a moment like the past, the lobsters crawling slowly over one another, the water beginning to steam. Paul hummed along to the record and pressed the rims of the cocktail glasses into a pile of salt. He rolled a handful of ice in a clean dishtowel and crushed it with a saucepan. When he poured the margaritas into the glasses, they could have been in a magazine. But when he opened the refrigerator to find a lime to garnish the glasses, he saw what else Robby had brought with him. A shelf in the door of the refrigerator was filled with bottles of medication.

“Boil, pot, boil.” It was Robby’s voice. He came up behind Paul and reached an arm around him to take his margarita. He took a swig and put the glass down on the counter. “I’m about ready to end a lot of lobster lives this evening.”

“Poor dears,” said Paul.

“We must be relentless,” said Robby, tying an apron around his waist and grabbing a lobster out of the cooler with a pair of tongs. “The quicker the better. It’s for the good of the whole.”

*

After the margaritas, they walked together from Cherry Grove through the Meat Rack to the tea dance in The Pines. The sunlight was long across the sand and worked like a kaliedescope through the curved trees. A group of deer looked up from a clearing and took a few steps toward them. Robby tugged on Paul’s arm and they stopped for a moment. One of the deer was a male stag, with velvet on his small antlers. He walked closer as Robby spoke to him, and Robby reached out his hand for the stag to smell him. The stag licked his hand and gently rubbed his antler against Robby’s open palm. Robby pet the front of his face, smiling broadly, unbelieving. Paul watched them there in the sunlight and took a picture in his mind.

On their way out of the forest, they passed a couple of men caressing each other behind a tree. A thought struck Paul and before he could stop himself he said it.

“You’d better wash your hands. Maybe that deer had Lyme’s disease.”

“Oh Christ, I give up,” said Robby. “If it’s stag tongue that does me in, no one can say it wasn’t classy, honey. I was fucking Saint Francis just now.”

*

The next day on the beach, Emile sat in a collapsible chair under an umbrella, swathed in a brightly patterned sarong and a hooded sweatshirt from his alma mater. He wore large movie star sunglasses and a wide brimmed sunbonnet. Even his calves were covered in legwarmers, and he dug his bare feet underneath the sand. Carlos stretched out naked on his stomach across Paul's picnic blanket in the sun next to Emile's chair. He pulled Dindi close to him and tucked her under his elbow.

Robby was not ashamed. He did not cover himself. Paul watched as he stripped off his polo shirt and shorts and left them in a pile on the sand. He dug around in his tote bag and handed Paul the sunscreen, then turned around and looked out over the water.

“Will you do my back?”

Paul held the sunscreen bottle in his hands and looked at Robby's back for the first time in a year. Three sarcomas clustered on his left shoulder blade, and another was over his spine on the small of his back. Robby was busy rubbing sunscreen on his chest and legs. Paul squeezed some of the lotion onto his hands. It was thick and white and smelled of coconut. He rubbed it between his palms, warming it, then spread it across Robby's shoulders, moving his hands back and forth until the whiteness was absorbed into Robby's skin. As he touched Robby, he felt the sarcomas for the first time. They were tough and thick, almost leathery

under Paul's fingertips. He smoothed the lotion over the back of Robby's ribcage and over the curve of his lower back. He wished he could cover all of Robby's skin with the lotion, that it would make the sarcomas sink back into his body, that these wounds would disappear. He wished he could do more. He wished the sun would burn the disease from Robby's blood and tissue, would work its way through muscle, bone and fat, casting out the sickness like prayers or a song's melody carrying through a large room. He wanted to embrace Robby, to hold him close against his chest. Instead, he wiped the last of the lotion on the nape of Robby's neck and said, "Don't forget your ears and the backs of your knees."

Robby turned to him and smiled. "Thanks, mom." He tossed the sunscreen bottle on top of his small pile of clothes and jogged into the surf.

Paul took off his clothes and folded them next to Robby's. He looked at their two piles next to each other and wanted to sob. Instead, he looked out at the water and walked toward Robby's hand, waving to him from the surface for Paul to join him. His wet head bobbed and his chest rose and fell with the tide. His hair plastered against his forehead. Paul made it to the edge of the surf, where the breakers fell softly against the fine sand. He felt the sand sucked away from him under his feet and followed the water out towards Robby, diving underneath the next wave as it broke over his shoulders.

* * *

Late in July, Paul sat on his front stoop and waited for Robby's car to drive up Hudson Street. It was Thursday morning and he had three days to leave town before coming back late on Saturday in time for Sunday's services. A yellow school bus pulled up to the curb and to his right, the door opened next door. He heard Laura's voice call after Sara as she made her way down the stairs to the camp bus.

"Don't forget to bring your thermos home today!"

Sara was carrying a small purple backpack with a rolled-up towel sticking out of the top zipper. Her green jellies flapped against the stone stairs as her blistered heels rubbed against them. Paul could see her bathing suit straps under her one-piece jumper. It was different than the one she must have worn the day before, because he could see other tan lines that made an "X" on her back.

"Hi Sara," Paul said and waved.

She turned around, startled, and then smiled at him. "Oh, hi Paul. Guess what? I lost a tooth at camp yesterday!" She drew her lips away from her gums and pushed her tongue through the gap where her incisor had been. "The sharp one," she explained. "I was in the pool when it came out and I had to dive down to the bottom of the deep end to get it."

"Time for a bendy straw!" said Paul. "Do they have those at camp?"

The bus driver had opened the door and sat there watching them impatiently. She reached up to turn down the radio and called out of the bus.

“Let’s go, Sara! I don’t want to hit traffic at the tunnel.”

Paul waved at Sara and said, “I guess you’d better go. Tell me more about it next time I see you.”

“Okay,” said Sara. “Bye, Paul.”

“Have fun at camp,” said Paul. He heard Laura turning the locks behind Sara and watched as the driver swung the door closed and pulled away from the curb.

As the bus rounded the corner onto Christopher Street, Robby’s white convertible pulled up in front of Paul’s stoop. The top and the windows were rolled down.

“Apologies, monsieur,” said Robby. “Lady troubles. Get in.” He reached across the passenger seat and unlocked the door. “Chop chop.”

Paul peered into the car as he opened his door. He put his bag next to Robby’s on the backseat where Dindi sat near a dozen ears of corn in a paper bag. When he sat down, he noticed that Robby had stuffed pillows behind his back and underneath his legs. It was painful for him to sit.

“Do you want to me to drive?” Paul asked, eyeing the street warily as Robby accelerated through a yellow light. He stopped short at the end of the next block, nearly crashing into the Jeep in front of them. Paul heard him curse at his legs as he pressed down on the clutch and downshifted.

“Not necessary,” said Robby, pushing the stick into gear. “I’m still good on the straight-aways.”

“Imagine that,” said Paul.

“Just buckle up. Someone put sawdust in my tank this morning.”

Robby was right about the straight-aways. Once they made it through the Midtown Tunnel and got onto the Long Island Expressway, he signaled his way over to the left lane and they were home free all the way to Sayville. But road crews were paving Main Street in Sayville and Robby and Paul had to sit in a line of cars waiting to be waved through with an orange flag. At the third roadblock, the car stalled out and Robby hit the steering wheel with his fist.

“I didn’t come to Fire Island to sit in traffic!” he shouted. “This is bullshit! We’re going to miss the damned ferry!” He leaned over the dashboard as he turned the ignition again and pumped his foot on the gas pedal.

“We’ll make it, Robby,” said Paul. “I can drive.”

The road crew signaled them to move ahead and the car shot forward and turned sharply right at the sign for the ferries. He sped through the residential streets and fishtailed as they entered the parking lot.

“We’ve got fifteen minutes, Robby. We’ll make it. Why don’t you let me park?” asked Paul.

“I’m—parking—this—car,” he said through gritted teeth. His hand gripped the gearshift and pulled it back into reverse. “There’s a spot—right—here.” He swung the car into the parking spot and Dindi flopped into the driver’s side door. Robby rolled up his window, pressed the button that closed the convertible top,

and turned off the car. Beads of sweat stood out on his forehead.

“We did it,” said Paul. “Nice job.”

“Oh, spare me the pep talk, Paul,” he said. “I need you to get my chair out of the trunk.”

“Your chair?”

“Yeah.” Robby took the keys out of the ignition and handed them to Paul.

There was a Hawaiian girl in a hula skirt attached to the key chain.

Paul walked around to the back of the car and opened the trunk. He was expecting a beach chair, but folded into the truck at an odd angle was a gray wheelchair from St. Vincent’s Hospital. He felt the heat rise in his throat but told himself not to be angry. Instead, he lifted the chair out of the trunk and opened it up, clicking the latches securely. He wheeled it around to the front of the car and opened Robby’s door for him.

“Your chariot awaits, monsieur,” Paul said, holding out his hands to Robby.

Robby looked up at him from the car, still glowering, but Paul could see the edges of relief creep in around his eyes and mouth. He hesitated and then lifted his legs one by one out of the car and onto the gravel. Paul reached behind him for the pillows and placed them on the wheelchair seat. He came around to Robby’s side and put his arm around Robby’s waist, helping to lift him out of the car and into the wheelchair. Paul reached into the backseat and pulled out their two bags, the corn and Dindi, who was already on her leash. He slung his bag

over his shoulder, hung Robby's bag over the handles of the wheelchair, and put Dindi and the corn on Robby's lap. He locked the car and pushed Robby across the parking lot to the ferry.

"You're an asshole. You do know that, right?" said Paul.

"Who went to Union Square at rush hour yesterday to buy you corn?" asked Robby, smiling.

"Asshole," said Paul. "How'd you even get your wheelchair in the trunk?"

"I called Nadine and she met me at the garage. Now that's a friend."

"She's an asshole, too. I'm driving home."

Paul bought Robby a bloody Mary at Mallory Square and he sat in his wheelchair drinking it through a straw and petting Dindi. When it came time to board the ferry, Paul was allowed to push him to the front of the line and onto the boat. Robby would not sit downstairs. Instead of arguing, Paul stowed their bags by the door, scooped up the dog and the pillows, helped Robby out of the chair and put his arm around him as they walked to the stairs. Robby leaned heavily on the railing and on Paul and took the steps one by one. He ignored the men who streamed past them up to the top deck. They found a seat on the port side and Paul arranged the pillows again for Robby.

Robby was out of breath. He patted Paul's knee and Paul took his hand as the ferry pulled out onto the water.

"Thank you, Paul."

“Any time.”

* * *

In August, Paul sat on the pier and watched the ferry arrive. He dangled his feet over the water and watched the seagulls. It was sunset on Friday. The Wall Street crowd was arriving, many still in suits and ties. They walked off the ferry and went straight to their timeshares, some of them arm in arm, some alone. They would shower and head to the Tea Dance. Paul took his ticket out of his shorts pocket. Two hours ago the phone had rung. It was Nadine, telling him that Robby had been asking for him. “He wants you to plan his funeral.” Paul would go directly to St. Vincent’s that night. He waited for the last of the passengers to disembark, then joined the departure line.