

Abstract

HALL, HILARY BROOKE. *Two Step*. (Under the direction of Dr. Thomas Lisk)

“Two Step” is a collection of seven previously unpublished short stories that capture the mood and mystery of a single moment in time.

“Two Step” reveals the tension between love and contempt in the relationship of a newly married couple.

In “Something Borrowed” a conflict between a mother and daughter is introduced after the daughter accepts a proposal of marriage from a man who gives her an engagement cake instead of a diamond engagement ring.

“Late Afternoon” is the story of a brother and sister who find the dead body of a former enemy washed up on a wooded creek bed.

Through variations in point of view, style, and tense, the four “Nightswimming” stories, focus on the flux of emotion that accompanies the coming of age. More than revealing the characters themselves, the stories explore the emotions, relationships, and decisions that have brought the characters to a particular point in time.

TWO STEP

by
HILARY BROOKE HALL

A thesis submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
North Carolina State University
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

ENGLISH

Raleigh

2003

APPROVED BY:

Chair of Advisory Committee

Biography

Hilary Hall lives in Raleigh with her husband.

Table of Contents

	page
Two Step.....	1
Something Borrowed.....	15
Late Afternoon.....	37
Nightswimming	
Retrograde.....	51
Twenty.....	56
Rain Song.....	69
Fount of Every Blessing.....	77

Two Step

Two hours later he still didn't know.

He was thinking about it as he watched her from the kitchen window. She stood in the backyard, hanging a load of bed linens to dry on the clothesline wire furthest from the window. After pinning up the pillowcases, she stripped down to her underwear, and he noticed she was wearing the only matching set of undergarments she owned—a plain, black satin set that he'd bought for her last year for their first wedding anniversary.

She draped over the line her faded denim cut-off shorts and the paint-spattered button-down shirt she wears backwards as a smock when throwing pots or cleaning house, and stood on tiptoes beside the line, looking at the ducks on the water. After a moment she stretched, her calves tensed, arms above her head, and he admired the tautness of her skin, the long muscles in her arms, the lifted poise of her body. She began walking the length of the line, her fingers an open circle sliding across the bare wire, her figure moving like a shadow play in front of the white, waving linens.

He rinsed an apple under the faucet and selected a paring knife from the drawer. The screen door banged behind him as he made his way to where she was sunning herself on the grass, stretched out on her back, hand over her eyes, without a towel or a blanket under her.

He sat down Indian-style beside her and laid the knife on the ground at his knee. She propped herself on her elbows and shook her head at him as he tossed the apple in the air as though it were a tennis ball pitched up for service.

She rolled over on her side and let him kiss her.

“You’re the only man I know who walks around in the grass without first taking off his socks or putting on his shoes.”

“And you’re the only woman I know who sunbathes in her underwear,” he said, resuming the apple toss.

She tossed her head and lay back on the grass. “It’s really no different than lying out in a bathing suit.”

“Oh, don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t complaining about your attire.” He caught the apple in a slap against his palm and looked down at her, raising an eyebrow the way he does when he impersonates a British spy or tries to speak with a fake accent. “In fact, I wouldn’t mind seeing you take sunbathing to the next level.” Holding the apple by its stem, he spun the apple just above her stomach.

“Stop it, that tickles,” she said swatting his hand.

“I hear nude beaches are all the rage in Europe,” he said, still turning the fruit, but more slowly than before.

“Yes, well, I don’t know how our fellow Americans would feel about nude backyards.” She slid her hand under the apple and he let the fruit drop into her palm.

“Well, I can tell you how this fellow American feels about it.” He flattened his now free hand on her stomach, and he could feel the muscles in her stomach tighten as he slowly spread his fingers over her skin.

“So what are you saying?” she asked, placing her hand over his and curling her fingers between his knuckles.

“I’m saying that where you find one nude backyard, you might find many. Only someone has be bold enough to put the movement in motion.” Her hand still on his, he moved his thumb back and forth across the smooth bottom curve of her ribcage. “Or maybe two someones.”

“Oh, I see.” She raised an eyebrow. “And where would we find such willing someones?”

“I don’t know about you, but I’ve always heard that the things you’re looking for are usually right in front of you.” As he started to lean down to her, she thrust the apple in front of his face.

“I know what you’re looking for right now, mister, and you’re not going to find it here.” She wagged the apple at him. “You may find this hard to believe, but while me and my underwear might be doing it for you, you and your grass-covered socks are not doing anything for me. Hate to break it to you.”

“What a spoilsport,” he said, taking the apple from her hand. “We could have started the hottest trend to hit backyards since the gas grill. We would have been all over the news.”

She laughed. “Right, for that or for indecent exposure.”

“No one’s going to get us for indecent exposure out here, love. It’s not like we have any neighbors or anything.” He wrapped his fingers around the apple and held it behind his back like a surprise, leaning closer to her as he spoke. “It’s just me and you, baby.”

“And those ducks down there. Let’s not forget those ducks,” she said.

“Oh, those diabolical ducks,” he said, touching his hand to her cheek and lifting her face to his.

“I give up,” he said, rolling away from her.

“I told you you would,” she said, reaching around behind him and taking the apple from his hand.

He handed her the knife, and she peeled the entire apple in one curly slice. He caught the peel before it hit the grass, and, turning it in his palm, he shaped the peel into the red sphere it had been before, cupping it in both hands before unraveling it again.

“I think I could sit here all day just observing.” She held the apple out toward the pond, pointing to the ducks as they bobbed and splashed at quick moving flickers under the surface of the water. “I love the way their little feet just sort of kick out behind them when they go bottoms up like that. It’s so cute. Like something from a cartoon.”

He reclined in the grass, watching her bite into the apple, the skinned fruit blocking the lower half of her face. He wanted to lean over and lick the juice as it ran off the apple and between her fingers. But he knew that she didn’t like him to be amorous while she was eating, just like he knew she didn’t like to make love when her hands were dirty because things got all sticky and she didn’t like being the one who cleaned everything up. So he had learned to wait to catch her around the waist as she was washing up. She never seemed to mind him then.

She was concentrating on the apple, taking small, tidy bites and chewing slowly, deliberately. He considered counting the number of times her jaw moved between

swallows, curious if she fell into a rhythm when eating fruit as she did when bathing or dusting or applying make-up.

He brushed his finger back and forth across her thigh. In two weeks she would turn twenty-six. This morning over breakfast he had asked her what she wanted for her birthday. Instead of giving him the name of one particular item, she said that she wanted him to do the one thing she considered the most romantic. He'd felt his pulse quicken and his face flush. Then, after seeing the red excitement of his face, she laughed and assured him that the most romantic thing he could do for her was not sexual, that he could just go ahead and get that idea out of his head.

She told him that though she thought the answer to her single-question riddle was obvious, she would be generous and give ten guesses. If he guessed correctly, he was not obligated to carry out her one romantic wish and could just give her a birthday present at his own discretion. However, if he still had not guessed correctly after ten attempts, her wish was his command. She had given him until dinnertime to figure it out.

He had chosen not to guess anything at all and had ruled out any possibilities that bordered on sentimentality, like preparing her a drippy candlelit dinner of rich French gourmet or stealing her away to a five-star palm-tree resort in the Caribbean. He considered the romantic but meaningful possibility of his orchestrating a picnic on the Blue Ridge Parkway, as he'd done in college nearly every weekend when they first started dating, but with a second thought he determined that it would have been too easy for him to guess, and she was not one to make things easy. He moved on to more practical possibilities. Knowing her, she might just want him to clean something.

He rolled over on his side, facing her, propped up on one elbow. “So what is it then? What is the most romantic thing I can do for you?”

She shook her finger like she was scolding him. “Remember now, you promised.”

“I know what I promised.” He turned his hand under hers and began stroking her palm with his finger. “And now I want to know what I’m getting out of this deal.”

She batted her eyelashes. “The satisfaction of knowing you made me happy for my birthday.”

He rubbed his chin, pretending to consider her offer. “No good.”

“And why not?” Her eyes were wide and her mouth was open.

He crossed his arms. “It’s not special enough. I make you happy every day.”

“Says you!” she said, laughing and pushing against his chest with his hands. “You actually make me crazy. You know that, right?”

He laughed and ripped a few blades of grass from the ground, playfully tossing them in her direction. “You love it.”

“You think I do,” she said, brushing the broken blades from her lap and waving the apple between her thumb and third finger like she intended to conjure up a new plan out of the humid air between them. “Okay, fine. If you guess, then you can make the same deal with me for your birthday.”

“Well, we’ll just have to see about that,” he said, rubbing his hands together. “But right now why don’t you tell me just what is I can do for you?”

She touched the soft skin along his jaw line, the spot she'd told him was her favorite place to kiss him. "Are you sure you don't want to guess?"

"Just tell me." His voice was soft but stern.

She put the tip of first finger in the center of his chin. "Learn to dance."

"I was going to guess that," he said, folding his hands in his lap. "I really was."

She punched him in the arm, pretending to be upset. "You were not."

"I guess you'll never know." He shook his head and was silent for a moment, taking in her proposition. He pictured himself as her dance partner, his hand firm against the small of her back as he guided her across the dance floor, her hips swaying and skirts swishing. He could envision the curve of her body close fitted to his as they moved together in time.

He leaned back in the grass. "I thought you'd given up on dancing. Sworn it off forever." He knitted his eyebrows and felt the muscles in his face tensing. "At least that's what I thought you'd said."

He remembered their first date, when he had taken up to the parkway for picnic. They were lying at the edge of the tree line on the old red-and-white checked tablecloth he stole from the attic before going off to college. They had been pointing out shapes in the clouds, something he hadn't done since elementary school but a practice that she said comforted her every time she found herself down or lonely or far from home. Buildings and bodies drifted along her skyline where he could see nothing but ice cream cones and cartoon animals.

It was that afternoon that he learned that she had grown up a dancer—that she was in ballet performances by the time she was four, that she had gone to dance school for ten years in a city two states from her home, and that she had spent a year between high school and college touring the world as part of a premier ballet troupe. He remembered being impressed, intimidated, proud—then surprised and almost relieved to hear that four years at a state university was her escape from the rigors of competitive dance, that her career in photography was her opportunity for anonymity, for turning the spotlight from herself and onto others, for taking the time to catch for posterity a series of perfect moments that could be neither directed, performed, nor lost. Dance, she said, was a depressing profession for her—she felt she was showing people a kind of beauty found only on stages in opera houses. But photography, she said, is an avenue of hope she can use to reveal sweet snatches of the beauty found in the motion of everyday life. She'd told him that after she graduated she never planned to dance again.

She was rolling the apple core under her foot. “So what do you think?”

He wiggled the apple core out from the of her foot and slowly began twisting off the stem. “I think the stem on this apple doesn't want to come off.”

She tilted her head. “You know, for every turn of the stem you're supposed to say a letter of the alphabet, and then the letter you're on when the stem comes off is supposed to be the first letter of the names of your future spouse.”

“Oh really,” he said, ceasing to turn the stem. “And did it work for you?”

“Give me the apple and I'll let you know in a couple of years.” She took the apple from him and laughed as he folded his arms across his chest in mock dismay.

He sighed. “Well, now, this birthday proposition may be a little weightier than I thought.” He shook his head. “Who knew I could be bumped from marital status by an old wives’ tale.”

“Oh, it’s not as bad as that.” She surveyed the apple core balanced in the palm of her hand. “Your replacement would also have to be wealthy and robust, not to mention tall, dark, and handsome.”

“Thank you,” he nodded, “I feel so much better now.” He clicked his tongue and continued, “I guess now if I expect to keep you, I have no choice but to honor your birthday wish. I just had no idea that me jumping around in pink spandex and a tutu was your idea of high romance.”

She burst into laughter, falling away from him and wiggling around on the grass, and he studies the way the muscles in her stomach stiffened as she laughed.

“I’m glad one of us thinks this is funny.” He picked at the grass stuck to the toes of his socks, melodramatically lowering his head in reluctant resignation.

She placed the top of the apple, stem still in tact, under his chin. “Don’t hand me that,” she said laughing. “You know I’m not talking about ballet.”

“I know.” He traced his thumb along the curve of her neck from her shoulder to her ear lobe, and she was still for a moment.

He sat up, lacing his fingers behind his head. “So when did you come up with this idea anyway? I know you had to be inspired by something.”

She smiled. “Actually, it was Tuesday. Tuesday I was shooting the interior of that huge house downtown—you know, the one we drove past the other day? The one I said reminded me of the governor’s mansion in Raleigh?”

He nodded, picking again at the grass on his socks.

“Anyway, I was shooting wide angles of the parlor—”

He looked at her sharply. “Wait, you mean a house in this town actually has a room commonly referred to as *the parlor*?”

“Well, yes, it’s a mansion.” She flicked a blade of grass from her stomach. “Personally, I think having a parlor sounds darling. I wish we had one. I would tell everyone who came to the house to please have a seat in the parlor while I go into the kitchen to fetch the tea. I also think it would be romantic to have a drawing room.” She turned to him. “Let’s start calling our study a drawing room. What do you think?”

“I think it sounds expensive. Next thing I know you’ll want conservatory and a solarium. I’ll think I’m coming home to the *Clue* house.” He leaned into her suddenly. “I’ve got it! It was Miss Scarlett in the parlor with the camera!”

She pushed him away. “Anyway, so I was shooting this room—”

“The parlor.”

“Yes. When I heard this faint sound, distant, like sleigh bells—or maybe wind chimes.” She tilted her head then continued. “After a minute I realized it was music playing somewhere in the house. I thought I was alone in the house, so naturally I was curious—”

“Naturally.”

She ignored him and continued. “Anyway, once the realtor had let me inside she went back to her car to look up some figures. So I decided to check it out.”

“One of these days your curiosity is going to get in you in trouble.” He gave her a playful slap on the thigh, leaving his hand on her leg and then running his finger the length of her body from her hip to her toe.

“You realize you are distracting me from telling my story.” She was very still as she spoke. He noticed that her eyes were closed and that she had let the apple core roll out of her hand onto the grass at her hip.

“That’s fine by me,” he said.

She kicked at him and he withdrew his hand.

“You don’t have to be so violent.” He rubbed his knee where she had kicked him.

“Well, you won’t listen to me otherwise.”

“Do you really expect me to give your story my undivided attention when you’re lying around out here with your clothes off? Be reasonable.”

“Well, I can fix that.” She stood up and reached the clothes on the line. He pulled at her ankle.

He rolled his head back. “You don’t have to go and do all that, now.”

She pulled her shirt over her head. “Yes, I do. I have a story to tell and I want you to listen. So I’ll help make it easier for you to concentrate.”

“Well, let me help you help me.” He pulled her shorts off the line and held them low to the ground. She put a hand on her shoulder and stepped into them. He moved them over her hips and took his time with the buttons.

Holding hands, they looked out toward the water. The ducks were swimming, single file, to the near side of the pond. She stepped away, watching one of the ducks step onto the bank and shake the water from its feathers, scattering droplets like beads onto the pond's surface.

“Don't you think it's funny how they do everything in follow-the-leader form?” she asked. “Swim, walk, eat. They even all just stop suddenly at the same time.”

“Monkey see, monkey do.” He tucked her hair behind her ear.

“No, it's different,” she said, “because they do everything in harmony. Like they're all hearing and moving to something that we can't hear.” She stepped back into him and rested her head on his shoulder. “Do you think they mate for life?”

He closed his hand around her waist. “Who?”

“Ducks.”

“Well, now, I don't know. I don't know much about ducks.”

She sighed loudly. “Well, I'm serious. I want to know what you think.”

“Okay, then,” he said, “I think that animals don't really consciously decide to mate for life or not. Seems to me they are mostly driven by instinct.” He patted her hip. “Like some people are.” He pulled her up tight next to him, leaning in to kiss her shoulder, her neck, her face.

She pinched his chin and wriggled free from his arms. She took a few quick steps towards the water. “Why do you always have to go and do that?”

Her shoulders moved heavily up and down and he knew she was upset. He frowned and let his arms drop, not knowing what to say.

“You always want everything to be so fun and easy. Sometimes things just aren’t that way.” Her back was to him as she spoke. “Can’t we ever just be serious for a minute? Just for a minute?”

“Sure, baby, sure, if that’s what you want.” He began walking towards her, wanting to close up the distance between them. “We can be serious awhile.”

He stood behind her, close enough to smell the honeysuckle scent of her hair, but did not touch her. Over her shoulder he could see ripples in the water, the wake of ducks swimming. He could not see the ducks.

“So many people give up, you know.” She turned to face him. “It happens all the time.”

She buried her face in his chest. “Sometimes I just want to curl up in a ball, like a snail, and fold myself into you and just be all safe and small, resting against the arc of your ribcage.”

He folded his arms around her and stroked her hair. “It’s okay, baby. We’re gonna be okay.”

He rested his chin above her head, looking past her into the sunset. The sky was beginning to purple, spreading slow and low over the treetops and power lines in the distance.

They were quiet a long time, holding each other.

She laced her fingers behind his neck and put her cheek on his shoulder. Her breathing had slowed and he knew she was watching the activity on the water. After a moment, she lifted her head and broke the silence.

“If animals don’t mate for life, I hope they dance. Wouldn’t it be romantic?”

He didn’t answer but looked down at her. She settled against his check and closed her eyes. He suddenly felt like he was holding a sleeping child, afraid to move or breathe too deeply for fear of breaking the sweetness of one soul resting with another, so at peace—the burden of one transferred to another, making the one life simpler and the other stronger. Holding her to him, he thought he felt her growing smaller and lighter, more vulnerable with every breath, and he swelling with the weight of love and duty.

She shivered and he felt her skin prickle as she pressed close against him. He held her waist, and slowly, gently, began moving his feet in the grass.

Her eyes remained closed, but he saw a smile settle softly in the corners of her mouth. He kept the movement of his body unhurried, steady, as he rolled the core of the forgotten apple under his foot.

The wind was picking up, and he noticed the sounds it made as it moved past him—a lush whisper in the trees, a tiny ringing among the wind chimes, a soft rustle from the linens now dry on the line.

Something Borrowed

Jackson didn't give me a ring when he asked me to marry him, and while that didn't bother me at all, Mama said it was keeping her up nights.

"Do you think he really intends to marry you without a diamond?" Mama was on her hands and knees in the foyer, twisting run-off water from an old cloth diaper into a bucket of pine-scented cleaning fluid. She was wiping down the baseboards and I was rubbing out scuffs in the floor.

Yesterday we started our spring cleaning, which meant that I, being the last of five daughters still living at home, had spent the morning helping Mama canvass the attic, pry open dusty box tops, and mercilessly determine which ancient household treasures would soon be found on the storefront display shelves of the local PTA thrift shop. Today we were cleaning the whole house, top to bottom, while Mama, never one to turn loose of a subject until she has sufficiently run it into the ground—or run everyone else off—vocalized her worries about my diamondless ring finger. Again.

"Mama, you've started in on me about this first thing every morning for the past week. I've told you a dozen times—and Jackson about two dozen times—I don't want a diamond. I just don't need one." I scooted the bucket towards her with my foot, pretending not to notice the water sloshing onto the hardwood.

I laced my fingers behind my head. Ever since Daddy's death ten years ago, Mama has had a growing concern for her five lovely daughters to become betrothed to robust young gentlemen with healthy bank accounts and traceable family lines. Though

Mama swore never to remarry herself, she was bound and determined that her daughters would find marital bliss—and find it as quickly as possible.

Once Granna, Mama's mother, passed away last year, Mama no longer had anyone left to take care of and could then devote herself to her daughters—which meant that I had it the worst of my four sisters because not only did I live at home, but I was the only one unmarried. Thus, my state of singleness became the first item on Mama's list of things to correct, and Project Marry Maggie Off, as I called her endeavors to find me a suitable husband, was underway.

Naturally, when Jackson proposed to me two weeks ago, I assumed that Mama would be pleased. Not only did Jackson actually want to marry me, thus relieving Mama of the fear that no man would find me desirable as more than a good friend, but he was also a far cry from the kind of man Mama had long feared that I would end up with—someone with multiple body piercings (signs of being in league with devil, according to Mama) who wore a dog collar as a necklace and eked out a living by hammering away on an electric guitar in a smoky bar.

It seems that for the past week, however, nothing about Jackson is good enough for Mama. When I reminded her that he is from a reputable Raleigh family with a history of philanthropy and a small city park and a stretch of highway named in its honor, Mama said that it would have been better if a college building or town hall was named for them, but that she supposed a park and a parkway will have to do.

Even Jackson's prospective career path no longer meets with Mama's approval: Jackson is just completing his second year in medical school at the University of North

Carolina at Chapel Hill but, since he is not studying at Duke University, the prestigious private school Mama always dreamed of us marrying from, Mama claims Jackson will just be a second-rate doctor, too busy treating the general public to give attention to people of position and promise.

Mama sat back on her heels and continued. “Of course you don’t *need* a ring, Maggie. Honestly. No one really *needs* a diamond so you can just drop that whole Mother-Theresa-charitable attitude thing. Men don’t give women diamonds because all women need a diamond. They give diamonds because they are symbolic.” Mama blew her bangs out of her eyes.

“I know, Mama. A diamond is supposed to be a symbol of love and solidarity and all. I’ve heard it before.” I flicked my fingers at a little pool of water on the floor. “I just think that these days that whole diamond engagement ring is just overdone and showy. A simple, modest band will do me nicely, thank you. I’ll not be caught up in the materialism of the times.”

“Don’t be a martyr, Maggie, please. It doesn’t become you.” She wiped her hand on the front of her shirt. “I just don’t believe for a second that you don’t want one. You can tell yourself all you want to that a diamond ring doesn’t mean a thing, but I know that deep down you feel differently.”

Mama dipped her rag in the bucket and noisily swished it back and forth under the surface of the water. “I just can’t stand to see this boy stringing you along this way, Maggie. It’s just bad form.” She splashed the water for emphasis.

“I don’t know why you—and Jackson—just can’t leave me alone.”

I sighed loudly and stretched my arms above my head. My wedding was tentatively scheduled for the fourteenth of August, a much-too-hot month in which to wed, or so says Mama, who is diametrically opposed to and displeased with everything about my engagement, my wedding, and my fiancé, Jackson Bennett.

Before Jackson proposed, Mama had been supportive, even thrilled, about my relationship with him. Now that I was engaged, she was anything but—always going around saying things like “diamonds are forever” and “diamonds are a girl’s best friend” and “a diamond doesn’t lie.” To retaliate I’d been quoting Audrey Hepburn from *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, saying that I personally thought it tacky to wear diamonds before I was forty. In response, Mama only sniffed and said that she was glad I felt that way because without a ring on my finger, I just might be forty before I realized Jackson wasn’t serious about marrying me. I told her she was being a stinker.

However, after listening to Mama pour her doubts in my ear for seven straight days, I must admit that I was starting to doubt Jackson’s intentions myself, forgetting that I was the one who convinced him I didn’t want a ring in the first place.

At first I was pleased with Jackson’s unconventional notion of a proposal—no ring, no candles, no flowers, no soft music. Just a med student with a cake, down on one knee in the middle of a grocery store. After all, I was the one who, ever since Jackson’s first hints of marriage, had been adamant in assuring him that a diamond ring was not important to me, that a successful marriage was not contingent on the clarity of a diamond. In fact, I told him that if he presented me with a ring I would not marry him, that he would be directly violating my belief that love triumphs over materialism—that

going against my request would be proof that he indeed did not love me in spite of all that a ring is supposed to mean.

He told me that I was just being stubborn, reacting against the tradition of an engagement ring simply because I wanted to be different from all my betrothed friends, classmates, and sisters.

I said that even if he was right, he still wouldn't be able to find a ring I liked as much as Granna's. "Besides," I'd explained, "we could put that money towards something else—like a car that starts even in rainy weather or a couch that doesn't roll you into the middle cushion when you sit down."

I scrubbed down hard on the floor, pushing the cloth with the bony part of my hand where the palm and wrist come together. "Honestly, Mama."

"Don't you 'honestly, Mama,' me. I thought I'd taught you better than to accept a marriage proposal without a ring to seal the deal." She sighed dramatically, "I have a hard time even considering you two engaged."

I sat up on my heels, blowing my bangs out of my eyes. "I don't see why. He got down on one knee and asked me to marry him. I even have witnesses."

Mama looked at me sharply, her hands on her hips. She was frowning.

"Maggie, he proposed to you at the neighborhood Harris Teeter—and at the bakery counter, no less! Getting down on one knee and offering you a monogrammed cake is a lot different than getting down on one knee and offering you a ring."

She cleared her throat and continued, “And I am all too aware of the fact that if I wanted witnesses all I have to do is stroll into the grocery store and consult the cake-decorating ladies, the produce guy, or the entire deli department.”

I crossed my arms. “You can think it’s low-class if you want to, Mama, but we met at that bakery counter. I think his proposal was sweet.”

“Most things at the bakery counter are, dear.” She wrung out her rag, the water rolling over her pointed knuckles and dripping back into the bucket. “A match made in heaven,” Mama added, moving toward me, “with angel food cake to boot.”

“Ha, ha.” I playfully threw my rag in her direction. It hit her on the shoulder, leaving a splotchy wet patch on the threadbare Wake Forest T-shirt that once belonged to Dad. Since his death, Mama has slowly assimilated some of Dad’s clothes into her wardrobe. She says that wearing his clothes helps her remember him more clearly—his favorite things, his habits, his warmth.

Without saying anything, Mama picked up the rag and dropped it into the bucket.

“Of course,” I said, rolling back the Oriental floor rug as I spoke, “if you need proof in addition to witnesses, there’s still that picture of me, Jackson, Laney, Deana, the bakery staff, *and* the store manager blown up and taped inside the storefront window. And don’t forget, too, that Laney even heard it mentioned on a local radio morning show driving to work the next day. So there you go,” I said, nodding my head slightly to punctuate my point.

“The Harris Teeter,” she said slowly. “Next I suppose you two are going to want to hold the ceremony at Wal-Mart, then move the whole wedding party to Dairy Queen for the reception.”

“At least Wal-Mart would be large enough to accommodate all those people *you* intend to invite to *my* wedding.”

She snorted. “Now, don’t get smart with me, young lady. You may be twenty-three years old, but I am still your mother. Just remember that.” Mama was standing up, running her cloth over the white chair railing, working particularly hard at scraping off the pellets of resin that had worked their way out of the wood grain.

“I still think it’s interesting that you find absolutely imperative to invite hundreds of people to witness the union of two people you don’t even considered to be engaged.”

“Well, if you think you are actually going to be married, I can’t have any child of mine going around planning an event that no one will see.” She tossed her head and continued, “Besides when Jackson doesn’t show and you are left there in the front of the church all by your lonesome maybe then you’ll see the value of a diamond.”

I didn’t say anything, hoping that if I didn’t let her bait me, maybe she would ease up. I should have known better.

“Just ask Moira.” Mama reached for the bucket. “Even that wandering nomad she calls a husband gave *her* a ring before they eloped to God-knows-where.”

“They went to Quebec, Mama. You know that.” I sat down on the steps, weaving my cloth in and out around the base of the banister rails.

I am a twin and therefore I am cursed with being perpetually compared to my non-identical counterpart. Moira beat me out of the womb by seven minutes and has been beating me out in everything else ever since. Sports, grades, jobs, and now husbands.

“So are you saying that you and Moira had this discussion a million times before she and Mitch got married?” I yanked the cloth free of the railing.

“Not exactly. She and Mitch only dated for a few months before they ran off together. So I didn’t really get the chance.” Mama tossed her rag into the bucket and turned to me with an accusing wag of her finger. “But she would have listened to me. She might be spontaneous, but Moira has always had a more realistic view of relationships than you have.”

I rolled my eyes and snatched up the water bucket. I fished out the dirty cloths and dropped them on the floor with noisy splash. “I’m going to dump this out.”

“Why don’t you water the flowers while you’re out there?” Mama called after me as I walked onto the front porch, letting the storm door bang behind me. I poured out the water in the grass then walked around to the back of the house. The backyard was thick with green, and the wisteria seemed to have bloomed overnight, draping purple over the trees like a scene from a Faulkner novel.

I set the bucket in the grass then sat down on the back porch steps, the wood soft and pulpy from the rain the night before. I leaned back, resting my head against the top step, and tried to convince myself that Mama’s diamond-ring comments were not getting to me, but I knew my efforts would be futile. Her verbal attacks were wearing down my

mental defenses. For the past few days her voice had been running around in the back of head, nagging and warning and looking out for my best interest, as Mama put it, to the point where I had even started dreaming about diamonds: Me hammered into the ground by giant, diamond-shaped hailstones. Me playing cards—spades, poker, hearts—with my hand always coming up diamonds—Mama the queen and Jackson the knave.

The dream I had last night was the worst one yet—me in a wedding dress, groomless and crying, stranded on a pitcher's mound in the middle of a baseball diamond, every seat in the stands occupied by my screaming mother—she and her thousand clones—throwing plastic cups like rice onto the field, jeering as I walked the path to home plate, and chanting a high-pitched sing-song chorus of “I told you so, I told you so, you're husband-to-be is a no-show.” This morning I woke up in a cold sweat and could not go back to sleep.

I traced my finger around a knothole in the wood of the step and sighed. I felt like crying. I was supposed to be happy to be newly engaged, elated to be marrying the man I love. Instead I was stressed out and tired. I hadn't been sleeping well and worst of all I was starting to doubt my fiancé's love for me simply because he had done what I had asked him to do. I wiped at my eyes, angry with myself because this whole predicament was my own doing. I spread the fingers on my left hand and looked hard at the faint sprinkling of freckles on my fourth finger—freckles that would completely covered by the thickness of a band or two. For the first time since Granna's death, I fiercely wished that I had my inheritance.

Last Thanksgiving, just before she took sick, Granna, Mama's mother, sat down with all of us Fielding girls (her only grandchildren) and told us what we were to inherit. Laura Beth was to have her diamond ring; Eileen, her mahogany dining room suite; India, her cherry bedroom suite; Moira, her baby grand piano; and I, her bone china, crystal, and silver.

Everyone was fine with this arrangement except Laura Beth, who was already married and not particularly fond of Granna's ring but who had always admired her dishes and flatware. She asked to switch with me, and none of the other girls objected: Eileen doesn't like round-cut diamonds and was also already married; India, though she didn't actually say it, didn't think the diamond was large enough for her; and Moira, back from her elopement, who had majored in jazz and is something just short of a concert pianist, was not about to part with the promise of baby grand piano. So the china went to Laura Beth and the diamond ring went to me, and everything was fine until Christmas Eve, two weeks after Granna had been admitted to the hospital with congestive heart failure. My mother, sisters, and I were all gathered around Granna's hospital bed when Moira noticed that Granna's ring was missing from her finger.

Moira had been sitting in an orange vinyl-covered chair between the window and the hospital bed, holding Granna's hand as she slept. Mama, Eileen, and Laura Beth stood in a tight circle near the hallway door, politely arguing about who would sit down in the two empty chairs and who would remain standing. Mama won, of course, and Moira addressed me as the other two girls were taking their seats.

"Maggie," she'd asked, "did Granna already give you her diamond?"

I was peeling an orange over the sink in the adjoining bathroom.

“No, why? Are you wanting to negotiate? Because if you are you’ll have to cut Laura Beth in on this deal too.” I stepped out of the restroom, putting an orange slice sideways in my mouth, clamping down with my front teeth and sucking the juice from the fruit’s skin.

“No, I don’t want to make a deal. The ring Mitch gave me is just fine.” She lifted Granna’s hand in hers. Granna sniffed in her sleep but did not wake up. “But I hope Granna told you where she put it because it’s not on her finger.”

All of us just looked at her. I pulled the orange slice from my mouth with a slurpy pop. Everyone looked at me.

“Sorry,” I said, throwing the sucked-out slice in the trashcan beside Granna’s bed and leaning in to inspect Granna’s finger.

Mama crossed the room quickly. “What do you mean it’s gone?”

Moira put her palm under Granna’s wrist, as if to show Mama more clearly. “Look for yourself. Her band is there but her engagement ring isn’t.”

Eileen peered over Mama’s shoulder. “Do you suppose she put it somewhere before she was admitted?”

India stepped around to the other side of the bed. “No, I know she had it on a couple of days ago because I cleaned it for her.”

This time everyone looked at India.

Laura Beth knitted her eyebrows. “You cleaned her ring the other day? Here?”

India tossed her hair. “Well, yes, I knew I was going to be here alone for a few hours so I brought something to do. Y’all bring books to read; I bring jewelry to clean. What’s the big deal? I was cleaning mine so I figured I’d clean hers too.”

She held her hand palm down in front her and wiggled her fingers, intending the light to catch and sparkle on her polished rings. “It’s too bad the ring’s missing because I really made it shine. I bet she hadn’t cleaned it in ages. You know, I read somewhere that you’re supposed to clean your rings like once a week to keep them in good shiny condition.”

India shrugged and continued. “Anyway, I put the ring back on her finger and she thanked me. Then I read out loud to her for a while—a couple of articles out of *People* magazine, if you’re interested. About Tom Cruise and Nicole Kidman. Granna was quite broken-hearted over their divorce.”

We were all just staring at India. Even though India grew up in the same house with the rest of us, sometimes we can’t help but wonder if she is truly from another planet.

India turned on her heel and sat down in the chair against the wall. “You can all just stare at me if you want, but I’ll tell you what, Granna really seemed genuinely concerned about what was going to happen to Tom and Nicole’s kids.”

She crossed her legs and started digging through her purse. The rest of us turned back to Moira.

“Don’t look at me,” she said, gently setting Granna’s hand on the bed. “I don’t have any answers. I just noticed it was missing.”

Mama walked over to me and put her hand on my shoulder. She squinted hard as she spoke. “Maggie, are you sure she didn’t give to you already?”

I pushed my bangs out of my face. “Yes, Mama, I think I’d remember if Granna handed off a family heirloom.”

Mama had immediately gone to report the missing item to the authorities, whoever they turned out to be, and we were sure that everyone she met on the way would hear of the injustice and travesty that had befallen our family. We were just glad that we weren’t the ones who had to placate her. We didn’t expect her to be back for quite some time.

When Granna woke up about a half hour later, Laura Beth asked her if she remembered putting her ring in any special place. Granna narrowed her eyes, the deep wrinkles on her face highlighting her high cheekbones and broad forehead. She looked at her hand, then at Laura Beth, then at me. Her dark eyes looked tired and clouded.

She held out her hand to me and spoke softly as I leaned in to hug her.

“I’m so sorry, Magnolia,” Granna said, her voice wavering as she addressed me by my given name, as she always did for all of us. “I just don’t know what could have happened to it.”

I straightened up and squeezed her hand. “It’s fine, Granna, really. I just feel bad for you.”

Granna settled her head back against the pillow and smiled thinly. She told us all again the story of her engagement, how Papa had surprised her while she was picking

peaches in the orchard one July morning, sending the ring up to her in the bottom of an empty fruit basket.

When she had finished, she patted my hand and looked up, offering a tired smile as she spoke. “And it’s such a shame, too, after Ingrid shined it up so pretty for me the other day.”

India snapped her purse shut and wagged a finger in the air. “Aha! See, I told you she liked it! And you all thought I was crazy.”

Granna died three weeks later, the mystery of the ring still unsolved. Mama had reported the missing piece of jewelry to the hospital administration, who told her that several similar incidents had recently been reported and that the situation was being investigated. A month passed and we learned nothing until February, when an article appeared in *The News & Observer*, detailing the exploits of a hospital volunteer who had been stealing jewelry from some of the hospital’s more heavily medicated patients—“Candy-Striper Turned Jewel-Stripper” the headline had read. The man was caught and convicted and some of the jewelry found and returned, but Granna’s ring was not among the recovered items.

I was not, however, completely without inheritance. At the behest of my mother and sisters, who actually felt sorry for me, though I really had just felt sorry for Granna, I was allowed first pick of everything from her estate. I chose an old tabletop sewing machine and a tarnished phonograph, both more for looks than utility; two boxes of records from the attic; a telephone bench; and the collection of hardback *Southern Living* cookbooks that she kept on a shelf over the stove.

I covered my eyes with my palms, the cool of my hands soothing against the hot dampness under my eyes. I took a deep breath and coughed, the pine-lemon scent from my hands lingering in my nostrils.

“Where is everybody?”

I looked up to see India crossing the yard towards me. She was barefoot even though the grass was still damp, and I remembered that India never wore shoes when she drove and often didn't put them back after arriving at her destination. As a joke one Christmas, Moira and I gave India a shoe rack for her backseat. We thought we were being funny, but India actually used it for several months before replacing it with a collapsible canvas crate. She said throwing her shoes in a bag was much easier than arranging them on a rack, not to mention the fact that the shoes slid off the rack every time she hit the brakes or climbed a hill.

I straightened up and tried to look like I was not upset. “Well, Mama's inside and I'm out here.”

India sat down beside by the tone of her voice, I knew that my cover-up had not been successful. “I bet if those red eyes came from allergies you wouldn't be sitting out here basking in all this pollen.” She poked me in the side. “So why don't you tell me what's got you down, Magnolia Leaf?”

I tucked my feet underneath me and turned to her. “Oh, nothing unusual. Mama's just making me crazy.”

“Oh yeah? What's she doing?” India stretched her legs straight in front of her and flexed her feet.

“Oh, like you don’t know. Don’t tell me Mama hasn’t been on the phone telling you what a mistake I’m making in marrying Jackson.”

India alternately pointed her toes and flexed her feet, watching the line of her calf muscle move back and forth. She tossed her head. “What are you talking about? Mama loves Jackson.”

I snorted. “Sure, she loved him two weeks ago—*before* he asked me to marry him. But now she thinks he’s jerky med school student who’s just leading me down the primrose path.”

“What does that even mean? Leading you down the primrose path?” India rolled her eyes. “Mama’s always saying weird stuff like that.”

“I don’t know. I think it just means that she’s driving me out of my skull.”

“Don’t let her bother you, Maggie Leaf. If she weren’t nagging someone, I think the life force would be sucked from her body.”

“Yeah, I know. It’s just hard to live with. Especially when I feel like she should be happy for me.” I stood up and grabbed the bucket. “But enough of that. We all know how Mama is. Tell me about you. What are you doing here anyway? I thought you were involved in this big B-movie that was just consuming all of your time.”

India pulled her legs into her body and rested her chin on her knees. “Oh, the filming hasn’t started yet. Not for another week.” She stretched out her arms and suddenly squealed and leapt to her feet, grabbing me by the shoulders and almost knocking me down the stairs.

“Don’t you give me that Mama’s-got-me-down-so-what-are-you-doing-here routine? And everyone thinks that I’m the actress in the family!” She was shaking my shoulders and I could feel a bruise forming where the bucket kept thumping against my thigh. “Come on, Maggie Leaf! Let me see it!”

I broke loose from her grip. “Let you see what?”

She waved her hands back and forth, blinking rapidly. “Hello, this engagement ring that Moira’s been talking about for a month!”

I felt my eyebrows furrow. “What are you talking about? Jackson didn’t give me a ring—he gave me a cake. If you don’t believe me I have a piece in a Ziploc baggie in the freezer.” I shook the bucket over my head. “Haven’t you heard anything I just told you?”

“Oh, enough already! Drop the charade!” She pushed my shoulder with her palm then took my hand. “Seriously, Leaf, I hate I missed out on last night. I would have loved to have been there! The whole scene was *terribly* romantic, I’m sure, and I’m even considering getting my friend Phillippe to write a screenplay based on the story of y’all’s engagement.” India ran her fingers through her hair. “And I’ve never been to the Carolina Inn before and I would have really liked to have seen—”

She stopped and shook my hand, looking at me just as quizzically as I knew I was looking at her. She raised both eyebrows and asked, “What? What is that look?”

Just as I opened my mouth to ask her what in the world she was talking about, she squealed again and squeezed my hand so hard that I heard a few of my joints pop.

“Omigod, today is Saturday, isn’t it? And that means that today is not Sunday, doesn’t it? Omigod!”

I nodded, highly confused and slightly concerned about the circulation being cut off from my fingers. “You want to tell me what you are freaking out about?” I asked, trying to pull my hand from her vise grip.

She threw up her arms, thereby freeing my hand, and plopped heavily onto the steps, burying her face in her hands. “I cannot believe this!” Now she sounded like the one who was going to start crying.

I moved down the stairs, turned the bucket upside down on the sidewalk, and sat down, fisting and unfisting my hand to get the blood flowing again.

“You can’t believe what?” I asked, still totally confused but confident that I would be able to get full story out of India if I just waited long enough for the perfunctory dramatics to die down.

With her head was still buried in her hands, India muffled, “You have to promise-cross-your-heart that you will not tell Jackson, Moira, or anybody that I ruined the surprise.”

I felt a smile pulling at the corners of my mouth. “Sure, I promise. I haven’t talked to Moira in like a month anyway. Mama was the one who called and told her about my engagement before I could. Of course, Mama presented it as a supreme embarrassment to the family name as opposed to an exciting occasion for her daughter. But whatever.”

India could not keep a secret, and I knew that what I was about to find out was likely to put an end to my diamond dilemma. “Anyway,” I said, placing a hand on her knee, “I promise.”

India jerked her head up so fast that I felt myself jerk in return. She stretched out her arm and extended me her hand, little finger crooked.

“Pinky swear,” she demanded, her eyes red and almost scary with solemnity.

“Oh, India, please. We’re not in fourth grade,” I said, crossing my arms.

“Do it.” She thrust her arm toward me again.

“Fine, whatever.” I curled my pinkie around hers to seal the deal.

“Well,” India began, dabbing at the corners of her eyes with her fingertips, “Jackson has had this big surprise engagement party planned for you since, like, before you two even actually got engaged. I wasn’t supposed to be able to come originally until tomorrow morning because I thought I would be filming. But it turns out that filming doesn’t start until next week and then I was frantic because I had already bought the plane ticket and so I thought I couldn’t change it, but, of course, I forgot that my friend Bonnie works with American Airlines so I could just have her change the ticket over for me and then after I changed it over I guess I forgot I did it so all this week I’ve been thinking that I was going miss your—”

“Right,” I interrupted her. “I got you. So now tell me about this party.”

She took a deep breath. “Okay. Well, Jackson is going to take you to dinner at the Carolina Inn and then everyone is going to be there—me, Mama, Moira and Mitch, Eileen and Dave and their two little brats—did I tell you what they did to my carpet the

last time they stayed over with me?—and I think even Laura Beth and her family. Jackson’s family, I think, is going to be there, too, and also maybe some of y’all’s friends. So like the whole gang.” She waved her hand in front of her face. “So anyway as they bring out the cake, Jackson is going to give you a ring—you know, he thought the dessert course would be an appropriate time because of that whole cake thing before.”

I could feel a huge grin spread over my face, in spite of myself.

“He figured that even though you absolutely *swore* you’d reject him if he ever even *tried* to give you a diamond, he figured that you wouldn’t have the heart to turn him down in front of all those people. And that if you tried to turn him down, everybody else wouldn’t let you.”

India clasped her hands over her knees and leaned closer to me. “And then this is my favorite part.” She paused, and I could feel myself flushing with excitement.

“What, what?” I couldn’t help blurting out.

“The ring is an exact replica of Granna’s ring.” She grinned. “Well, maybe not as much an exact replica as a new, improved model *based* on Granna’s ring.”

I felt my eyes widen and my mouth drop open. “How?” I shook my head. “I mean, why?”

India rushed to me, veritably leaping down the steps and almost knocking me off of my overturned bucket seat as she shook me again. “Jackson wanted to give you a diamond, but you were too stubborn to take one unless it was Granna’s. So Jackson had Mama describe it to him or give him a picture or something.”

India started laughing. “And Jackson is the one you thank for Mama’s nagging. After he proposed to you, he called her and made her promise to be on your case so much and wear you down to the point where you would be overjoyed to get a ring just to get her off your back.”

Ordinarily I would have been furious with Jackson and would have torn into India for being in on the deal and helping everyone manipulate me. As it was, though, I was elated and overwhelmingly relieved and found myself laughing along with India.

After a minute or two, our laughing and jumping and squealing had calmed and I scooped the bucket up into my arms, stepping over the marigolds in the flowerbed to turn on the water spigot. The water ran loudly into the bucket, some drops splashing up onto my calves and shins.

India started to dash down the sidewalk, then stopped and put her hands on her hips, addressing me.

“Oh Leaf! Don’t let me forget! I’ll show you some dramatic exercises and poses you can do to fake your surprise. There are some pretty good ones we learned in this acting seminar I took a few years ago. I think they would come in handy for you tonight.”

“Thanks, India, but I think I’ll be fine.”

She tilted her head. “Well, a girl can’t be too careful. I’ll show you while you’re getting dressed for tonight.”

“Okay, India, fine.” I nodded at her, still grinning with excitement as I turned off the water.

“I’m going in to say hello to Mama.” She wagged her finger at me. “Now don’t forget. You promised. *And* you pinkie swore.”

She disappeared into the house, and I threw my head back and stared into the trees above me. The wind rocked in the branches overhead, and I watched petals and pollen drift and sway in the breeze, following them with my eyes and moving my head side to side in rhythm with their soft descent to grass and sidewalk and steps.

I bent down to pick up the water bucket and, rising, a glimmer of yellow sunlight shone through the soft twining of purple, pink, and white, catching in the ripple of the bucket water and in my arms I felt that I was holding a sweet bouquet of late-morning color, reflecting to the sky all things bright and beautiful.

Late Afternoon

No blood was in the water, only the orange of the sun in the quiet waves. Nick wiped the sweat from his neck and looked at his sister.

“This how you found him?” he asked.

Laurie nodded, her eyes fixed on the man’s body half-washed up on the creek bed, face pressed into the yellow earth and torso submerged under the roll of water running across his sodden body.

“Is he dead?” Nick asked, prodding the body with his greasy boot.

“I think so.” Laurie sighed. “I found him here about a half-hour ago—washed up to shore like this.” She put her hands to her head. “I didn’t know what to do. I didn’t want to move him or turn him over or anything, but I didn’t want to touch him, either.”

She swallowed hard. “I just stared at him. And then I went and got you.”

Laurie’s voice wavered, and Nick thought she might start crying again.

Nick watched the waves rippling the man’s dark clothing back and forth under the murky surface of the creek water. He figured it could not have been more than a couple of days since the body had first washed up there on the creek bed that divided his family’s farm from the Milsted property.

“I was down here Tuesday, and I didn’t see anything unusual around here. And *he* certainly wasn’t here, I can tell you that much,” Nick said, thinking out loud. He rubbed his chin. “And you just found him this afternoon? Have you been down here any other time this week?”

“No,” Laurie said.

Nick watched her biting at her fingernails, starting at the thumbnail, moving to her first fingernail, down the line from fingernail to fingernail, then moving back up towards her thumb.

“Laurie, quit it,” Nick said. “You’re going to make *me* nervous.”

Laurie bit one last fingernail before clasping her hands behind her back.

Nick shook his head. He felt the sweat on his back sticking to his shirt.

“Remember that big storm night before last? Maybe he fell in then, and it took until today for him to drift down this far.” He wiped his neck. “It was raining so hard you could hardly see, and trees coming down and all. And you know how bad those late season storms are around here.”

Nick absently picked at a scab on his forearm and sat down. He stared up at the orange October sun. No clouds, no birds, nothing on the horizon but thick orange haze. The red-gold leaves covering the creek bed were still damp from the rain days before.

“Well, whoever he is—or was,” Nick said, still picking at his arm, “it’s hard to believe that he could have floated all the way down here without being seen—especially with people scouting the high water for whatever debris the storm turned loose.” He squinted at Laurie. “You haven’t heard about anybody expecting any visitors, have you?”

“I don’t think. I can’t think of anybody, anyway. Besides,” she added, pointing a finger at him, “you’d have heard about them yourself. News isn’t private in this town.”

Nick sighed. “Yeah, I know. It’s just that I don’t know what to do about this now.”

He beat his fist on the ground a couple of times then lay back on the bank and closed his eyes.

“You know,” he started slowly, “this guy might have drifted down here from the old Scott place.” He shook his head, listening the leaves scratching the ground when he moved his head. He heard a rustle from Laurie’s direction and figured she was repositioning herself on the bank beside him, perhaps leaning back on the cool mud and leaves herself.

“That doesn’t seem likely,” Laurie said. “No one’s been around there since Old Lady Scott died last spring. After they buried her, none of the relatives even stayed long enough to clean out the house. And for sure nobody’s been back since then, not even to visit the grave. You know that.”

Laurie was not lying beside Nick, but had moved away from him, dropping to her knees and kneeling close beside the body. Nick saw that her head was bowed and her hands were pushing in on her face again. She was leaning so close to the body Nick thought that the ends of her long blond hair must be brushing against the back of the man’s head.

Nick turned away from his sister and violently slapped the ground with his open hand. He dug his fingers in the earth, grotesquely satisfied with the sensation of mud oozing between his fingers and filling up his fist. He could not look back at his sister, crumpled there on the edge of the creek bed, and he clawed deeper and more intensely into the mud.

He heard splashing in the water and ran faster, faster. The rain was in his eyes and made his hair stick to his sweaty face. "I'm coming, I'm coming..." he said over and over. "I'm coming, Laurie, but don't you let him. Fight him, Laurie, fight." He was running with his hands fisted, and his feet hit the ground like the rain pounding through the trees, beating down around him. "Why did it have to be Laurie? Why her when you could have had anyone else, anyone at all? You talking fancy and smiling so slick, like you own the world. Well, you don't own us or me or Laurie and you can't have her. Did you think I would let you do it? Let you leave me behind while you lied to her—telling her that I was busy with the bales in the field, or that I'd been sent into town, or that I was asleep in the hayloft. Or maybe you told her I was right behind you, would meet you at the river, would be there in a minute to stop you.

Nick plunged his hand into the mud and gave the ground one last violent turn before abruptly standing up, shaking the mud from his fingers and hearing it fall on the damp leaves with a hard patter.

Laurie looked back at the body and said something very softly.

"What'd you say?" Nick said, kneeling beside her and grabbing her elbow more roughly than he had intended.

"I said, what if it's him."

"Don't say that, Laurie. I don't want to hear you say that, you hear me? I don't even want you to think it." He shook her hard. Laurie let out a cry, and Nick dropped his hand. He walked away from her, around the body, rubbing his face with his muddied hand and not minding the taste of dirt between his teeth.

Laurie rocked back and forth on her knees, squeezing her thighs with her hands. “But Nick, what if it is? What’ll we do? You know what people would say.” Her voice started to rise, and Nick went over and stood behind her, this time gently putting his hands on her back to calm her down.

“Laurie, what are the odds? It’s not him. It’s some guy who fell in during the storm. This is nobody to get upset over.” He patted her on the back and walked around in front of her. “You shouldn’t even be here at all. I can handle this myself. You just go back to the house and finish your chores. I’ll take care of it.”

“But, Nick, I—” Laurie started.

“Now, listen here, Laurie.” Nick stood behind Laurie, who was still kneeling close beside the body. He gripped her shoulders, streaking mud across the sleeve of her shirt. “You can’t ever tell anybody about this. Ever.”

Laurie was still rocking back and forth, but Nick thought her voice was steadier when she spoke.

“Nick, I know you are going to hate me.” She looked down at the red leaves on the ground under Nick’s boots. “But I know it’s him.”

“How? I thought you said you didn’t see his face.” Nick tried to keep his voice low and calm.

“I just know.” Laurie sighed. She was still staring at the red leaves.

Nick slammed his fist into his palm then rubbed his knuckles across the inside of his hand.

“And you swear you didn’t look at him? Didn’t turn him over?”

Laurie shook her head.

Nick crossed his arms. “So then how do you know?”

Laurie picked up a few leaves and started peeling the stems off. “I don’t know because I’ve seen it,” she said. “I know because I sense it.”

Nick squeezed his fingers around his arms, digging his fingernails into his flesh. “That’s impossible.”

“Why? Why is it impossible?” Laurie threw the leaf to the ground and looked up at him.

“Because he would not come back here, that’s why.” Nick dug his fingernails harder into his skin. He felt his blood quickening, rushing through his body, and creeping red into his face. Looking at Laurie, her eyes wide and her body drawing back from him, Nick knew his anger was starting to show.

“Nick, I’m sorry. You’re right. It can’t be Drake. It’s not him.” Laurie was slowly and carefully scooting back, inching away from Nick, moving further up the bank.

At the mention of Drake’s name, Nick threw his arms out and turned to the man’s body, still rising and falling with the push of the current. Nick stared at the back of the man’s head, locking his gaze on a leaf that had fallen near the man’s ear.

“I told him never to come back.” Nick was yelling now, leaning over the body. He snatched the leaf from the man’s head and tore it apart, watching the pieces falling on the man’s grimy hair. He walked around to the other side of the body. He looked the man up and down, noticing the rips in his clothes, the dirt under his fingers, the mud in his hair. Nick could feel his lip curl and his jaw clench as he studied the body.

Nick kicked the body. “What were you doing here?” he yelled, bending low over the body and kicking it again. “I thought I told you never to come back here!”

“Nick! Stop it!” Laurie screamed. She was crying now, digging her fingers into the grainy mud. “Stop it! We don’t even know if it’s really is him.”

Nick turned and stared at his sister. He was breathing heavily, and he knew that his red face and heaving shoulders scared his sister. Her face was white, and her lips were tight. She was quiet and still, sitting on the bank a little above the body.

Nick turned away from Laurie and squatted beside the dead man. He grabbed the man’s arms and dragged him out of the water and onto the bank.

“Go home, Laurie.” Nick didn’t look at her as he spoke. “Go home. You don’t need to be here.” His words were rough and low. “I don’t need you here for this.”

Laurie pulled at the fabric across her hips as she spoke. “No, I’m staying here. I have to.”

Nick looked her. Her shoulders were slumped, and her arms looked too heavy for her body. She swallowed fiercely and dropped to her knees.

“Laurie, go home.” Nick placed one hand on the man’s shoulder and the other on his torso. He rolled the sodden body on its side.

Drake was on the other side of the river, on his back, laughing. Laurie was beside him, her legs curled into her stomach, and she was coughing into the sand, rocking back and forth. The rain was making circles in the water around him as he splashed to the other side. He climbed the bank, and Drake was on his feet, waiting for him. Nick saw

Laurie, her dress stained with mud and sweat and water. Blood was on her skirt, across her thighs, smeared around her hips.

Nick's head was spinning, and his insides churned. The first blow, stinging and square, knocked his right jaw with a thick, wet smack. He took another punch, a hard right just under his left eye. He shook the rain and blood from his face and was fighting back—left, right, one after the other. He could hear Laurie crying, mumbling something to herself, over and over. Sometimes he thought he heard her saying his name.

Drake was running into the woods, yelling behind him, but he was going away, gone. Nick ran after him a little ways, stopping at the edge of the woods, throwing rocks and shouting threats. Nick turned back to the water, glaring at the spot where Laurie was crumpled on the bank. He closed his eyes, wiped at the blood under his nose, touched his eye. The skin around his eye was tender and throbbed under the pressure of his fingertips, and Nick could tell it was beginning to swell. He opened his eyes and studied his hands, cut and red from fighting, and looked forward to seeking out Drake for another bout when he would take pleasure in splitting his knuckles over Drake's skull, sinking his fists into the fleshy parts of Drake's face, and leaving him bruised and bleeding, lying doubled over in a wearied heap, crumpled, writhing—the way Drake had left Laurie, emptied and exposed, coughing into the sand.

“Nick, stop it!” Laurie was clawing at Nick's arm. He flailed at her then froze. He was kicking the body again, must have moved it a couple of feet at least from where he had rolled the body over. He looked over where Laurie was crouched on the bank on

her hands and knees. Nick turned his head and spat, and the saliva landed thick, froth-like, on the man's torso. He wiped his mouth with the back of his hand.

"He's like a demon—exorcised from the river itself." Laurie stared at the man's face. "His eyes—wide-awake eyes." Laurie stood up abruptly, sand falling from her clenched fist. She was crying. "Why was here, Nick? What was he doing?"

Nick didn't answer.

He knelt beside her, flicking the leaves from her matted hair. "He's never coming back. You're safe; you're fine." He turned from her and covered his face with his hands. He could feel the rain smearing the trickles of blood on his face. "Laurie, why did you let him bring you here?"

"No, no, Nick, no. It's not like that. It's not—I wasn't—" Tears were in her voice, in her eyes.

Nick couldn't look at her. "I'm going home."

"No, no. Please, Nick, don't go home." Laurie's body shook. "I can't go home. Not now. Don't you see? I can't go home." Her eyes searched his face. "Can't we stay here for a while? Nick, can't we stay here?" Nick knew she wanted him to say something, to comfort her, to make everything better. Nick didn't say anything, just sat beside her, staring at the mud on his boots. All he could think was how thin she looked lying there with her wet dress clinging her body.

"Nick, I didn't know—He said you were coming." She was crying again, harder now, and raked her fingers in the soil. "The whole time—I wasn't really there, wasn't there. It wasn't me at all—I wasn't here, I was above here, over, outside." Her voice was

choked but strangely calm. "It was like watching strangers from a window, and then I was gone, and I was looking for you. I found you in the hayloft, right where he said you were, and you were dreaming. You were dreaming and I had to wake you up—I woke you up and brought you here. And now you're going to wake me up, too, please. Wake me up, Nick. Wake me up and make the rain stop. Make it stop, Nick. It hurts, Nick—Nick..."

She was heaving on the ground, trying to catch her breath between fierce sobs.

He put his hands on her back, and she stiffened. With a sudden moan, stopped crying and tried to sit up.

"Nick, don't go home. Don't leave me here." He didn't move, didn't look at her. She reached for his arm, but he recoiled. She started crying again, quietly, and crawled to the edge of the creek and lay on her side, half her body in the water, half on the grainy bank. Nick watched the way the water lapped over her legs, over her waist—the way it sloshed her skirts, back and forth, slow and quiet. Lying there like that, in the dark, in the cold, in the rain, Nick wondered if the water would wash the stains from her clothes, from her skin. He stayed there with her until the rain stopped.

Laurie stood with her back to Nick, facing the body. Nick watched her shoulders rise and fall and knew she was trying to quit her tears.

"What should we do, Nick?" Laurie asked without turning around. "What do you think we should do with him?"

Nick wiped his neck and stared into the thick orange horizon. "I don't know."

Nick shook his head. "All I know is we can't tell anybody because all they'll remember is two years ago and his black eye and bruises and cracked ribs and how Drake

told everybody I almost killed him on his way home from town one night. You know that. The only people that ever knew what really happened were me and you and him.”

Nick slammed his fist into his palm. “They’d blame me for his death, especially now that he’s gone. Who’d believe our story anyway? How convenient, they’d say, to just now be telling everybody what really happened two years ago. Dragging poor Drake’s name through the mud and him no longer around to defend himself. No one would believe us now.” Nick sighed again and skipped a stone into the water.

“But it’s *true!*” Laurie said. “It’s what happened! Doesn’t that count for something?”

“It would have then, for sure. But you didn’t want to tell anyone—which was fine. But so since we didn’t tell anyone then, no one, I don’t think, would really believe us now, especially since Drake’s dead. They’d just think you were making up your story so I would look like a hero instead of a bully.” Nick skipped another stone.

Laurie was quiet for moment. Nick noticed her that her voice was steady and her shoulders were no longer rising and falling. “So what do we do?”

“We could leave it,” Nick said, kicking the ground with the toe of his boot, “or we could sink it.”

“Sink it?” Laurie turned around.

“Yeah.” Nick was thinking about the deep water just this side of Conover Ferry, where the river branched and the creek was sourced. He had a skiff tied up a few minutes further downstream, and it would easily hold him, Laurie, and the body.

“Nick, do you think that’s really a good idea?” Laurie voice was hesitant. She stared at Nick, then began biting her fingernails slowly, one by one.

“I don’t really know. It kind of seems like the only option we have if we want to keep this whole business to ourselves. If we don’t want to be called murderers. It’d be different if somebody else knew about, well, what happened to you. We should’ve told Mom and Dad—I told you then we should’ve told them.” He stopped. Laurie was looking at him with heavy eyes, like this was all her fault. He continued before she could start to apologize. “But that doesn’t matter now. I mean, it’s not your fault. I mean, it’s fine. I’ll just take care of it.”

“It’s just that if we sink it and the body should happen to, I don’t know, float up or get found or something, it would be obvious that that the body was sunk, right? Then it really would look like we killed him. And besides there’d be bruises from where you were kicking him and maybe our fingerprints or hair or something.” Laurie wrung her hands as she spoke.

Nick crossed his arms, flicking again at his scab. “Listen. First of all, if he did float up or someone found him, it would probably be a long time from now. And as far as fingerprints go, the water would probably wash away anything we would leave on him. And even if someone found him tomorrow, any autopsy would prove he died by drowning.”

“Death by water,” Laurie said slowly. She pushed her hair behind her ears. “Do you think anyone knew he was here? It has been like two days, or so we think. Don’t you think we’d have heard something about it? Like a missing person or something?”

Laurie's voice lowered, and Nick detected a quiver in her lips. "Nick, you don't think he was coming back for us, do you?"

Nick shook his head and wiped the back of his neck. "I don't know what he was doing here. And it doesn't matter much now anyhow. He's not going to be doing it anyway."

He put his hands on her shoulders. "Here's the plan. We're gonna go get the skiff and bring it up here. When it gets dark, we're gonna float upstream and drop the body off in the deep water just this side of Conover Ferry. Then we'll be done with it."

"So we're going to sink it? Don't we need to take stuff along for that?" She tilted her head.

Nick shook his head. "We're not going to sink it exactly. We're just going to drop the body off and set it to floating down a different course for somebody else to find. That way it's off our hands, and we're not really doing anything illegal. We're just passing the buck." He looked at her and raised his eyebrows questioningly. "Make sense?"

She nodded. "Yeah. I guess that really is the best thing."

"Okay. So you just go on back to the house. Get you some gloves—I still have my work gloves out on the tractor. Also, grab a blanket or something to help us move the body along." Nick squinted into the horizon; the clouds were thick and the sun was beginning to fade. "And grab a jacket for me and you. It's liable to start raining again tonight."

Laurie ran a few steps towards the path leading through the woods to the house. She turned back and looked at Nick. "What are you going to do now?"

Nick took a long look at the body before looking up at Laurie. “Right now I’m going to get the skiff and then I’m gonna move the tractor and get the fields all squared away. You go out on the back porch when you’ve got everything all ready. I’ll meet you there and then we’ll come back here and head upstream.” Nick smiled. “Okay? Sound good to you?”

Laurie nodded.

“Okay, fine. Now go home. I’m going to get that skiff.” Nick started to walk downstream, towards the brush where the skiff was tied, then turned around.

Nick folded his arms and watched his sister disappear behind the honeysuckle bushes.

He turned to the body and stared at the face, the square jaw and square chin, the open mouth, the dirty hair matted across his forehead. He kicked the body again then bent over it, leaning in so close the man’s ear he could almost taste the wetness of the body.

“I got rid of you once,” Nick said. “Now I’m going to get rid of you once and for all. Let’s finish this.”

He kicked the body one last time, rolling it over again, back onto its stomach. He went to the fetch the skiff, thinking about how to sink the body alone.

Retrograde

"Try and be quiet." Amy hushes me out of the house. The screen door bangs against its casing.

I make my best puppy-dog eyes. "Sorry."

"Well, so much for that." Amy shrugs and it's forgotten. She has on her almost-new leather sandals she likes so much, and I'm barefooted. The pavement is rough and spongy and soothingly warm. It's dark and I feel good, much better than I did at work. There's just something about that place, Amy and I agree.

Amy's beach towel is draped over her shoulders and she's twirling the end but looking at her feet scuffing the pavement. Her just-cut hair bobs somewhere between her ears and her shoulders, and I can't tell if I like it better long or not. She looks back at me and starts to ask why I brought my hairbrush along then remembers me explaining before that I like the feel of my hair slick and wet to my head, of the bristles making damp ridges in my hair, of the roll of water down my back.

Amy turns back around and I can see she is shaking her head. She doesn't understand but loves that I can be so simple sometimes. I'll miss her next year.

We arrive at the neighborhood pool, tiptoeing through the patches of yellow streetlight on the sidewalk. Amy opens the gate, but pauses long enough to laugh and say she hopes the people across the street don't get mad. She's seen the lighted window and knows we're not supposed to swim after ten o'clock. She says it doesn't bother her, but I know it does a little.

We peel off our outer garments and hesitate. The night air is thin and still, almost

cool. I catch the sweet faint smell of honeysuckle early to bloom and I find myself thinking about wearing blue jeans and eating hot dogs and sitting on the third-base line of a high-school stadium cheering the home team on to their next championship.

Amy tosses a noodle float into the water. I watch the ripples move slowly outward until they reach the side of the pool, meeting resistance in small quiet laps. I glance at the lighted window across the way and step to the edge of the pool, lowering myself into the water step by step.

After watching me for a minute or two, Amy dives right in. So typical of us. I the one anxious to rush into things; she the one watching until things get deep then she dives in and pulls ahead, testing the waters to see if they're safe for swimming. She calls me her little sister, and I think maybe that's how best friends should be.

I follow her lead and duck into the water, letting myself sink to the bottom. The pool floor is a smooth slant under my feet. I exhale slowly and feel the tickle of air bubbles as they push past my face, past my hair. Lungs emptied, I crouch and vault, propelling my body from below and pushing against the volume of water with my legs. I burst to the surface.

"Wow, am I awake now!" I gasp, wiping the water from my face with my palms.

"It's not really that cold, really," Amy says, but her shiver betrays her and we both laugh, feeling spontaneous, alive, acting our age. Amy holds onto the ladder, kicking her feet in circles underwater. I dive under again and swim with my ankles touching, wriggling my body like a mermaid.

I come up for air at the other side of the pool. Amy is already out of the pool,

wiping the bottoms of her feet with her towel. I use my arms to hoist myself out of the water, sitting on the side of the pool, feet still in the water. I tilt my head and wring the chlorine water from my thick, thick hair and listen to it drip into the rippling turquoise surface.

I walk around the pool, dripping wet and leaving a trail of water dots. I dry my hair with the towel I borrowed from Amy's house and pull on my ragged cut-offs and tank top. I wrap the towel around me and sit down, hugging my knees and feeling just right.

Amy sniffs. "That chlorine is really strong. They must have treated the pool this afternoon."

I rest my chin on my knees and say, "At least we don't smell like our restaurant anymore." We laugh.

We sit for awhile not saying anything. I lean back and look into the stars and feel dizzy. Amy notices my craned neck and dips her head back to see what I see.

I'm still staring straight up when I say, "I feel dizzy." I close my eyes and put my hands to my head. "Like the whole world is spinning around except for me."

"That's because it is, you silly." I hear her stand up and shake out her towel. "The world *is* spinning around and you're standing still on it."

"You know what I mean," I say, "I feel like the universe is moving forward and I'm moving back against it."

Amy doesn't say anything and I open my eyes. She is lying on her back. She looks more comfortable than I am so I stretch my towel out and lie on my back a few feet

away from her.

Amy points into the air. "I used to know where the Big Dipper is." She waves her fingers. "I think that's it right there. See? One, two, six stars, maybe."

I squint. "I don't know. I'm not usually able to make out constellations. I even have trouble spotting the comet sometimes."

I look at the lighted window in the house across the way and think about the comet. I close my eyes and try to feel it moving at hundreds of miles per hour, zooming through space at light speed, going unnoticed here save a graceful curve of light arcing slowly across the horizon. For a moment I feel connected to the comet, moving, changing, picking up speed—remaining all the time on a path fixed and dark, doubling back to go forward, dizzy with direction.

I am close to sleep when Amy breaks the silence. We talk about Joe and Erik and Matt and work and Aaron and college and graduation and how much the Big Dipper has moved since we last opened our eyes.

We are quiet for a minute before Amy speaks again.

"Do you know why I wanted you to come over tonight?"

I sit up and start brushing out my hair. It is heavy with damp and the chlorine makes it feel twice as thick as it normally feels. "Because I invited myself?"

She rolls over on her stomach. "No, because this is the last Friday night before we graduate."

"It is, isn't it?" I don't know what else to say. "Doesn't really feel like anything's about to change."

“Yeah.” Her sigh is heavy and uncharacteristic. I put my brush down and look at her as she continues.

“But everyone tells us it is. That it’s a whole different world out there. Do you really think it is?”

I brush my brush in circles on the cement, guiding it around with my finger.

“I don’t know. I think it depends on your perspective.” I flatten my hand on the ground and feel uncomfortable. I have no answers, but I continue anyway.

“Like how you can never really know where you’re going, only where you’ve been. And how sometimes we feel like we’re going around in circles and repeating history and it makes us frustrated but still we can’t break with what’s familiar to us.”

Amy sits up and folds her legs underneath her, Indian-style. “I have no idea what you just said.”

I laugh and hit her playfully on the knee with my hairbrush. She laughs too and stands up. I get up slowly and stretch, arcing my back until my hair touches the ground. Draping the towel over my shoulders like a cape, I look out over the pool and notice the light is out in the window across the way.

“Looks like the neighbors have finally closed up for the night,” I say.

“Maybe,” Amy says, unlatching the gate to leave. “But looks can be deceiving.”

I am careful not to let the gate slam behind me. Before following Amy up the sidewalk back to her house, I step back and look up into the stars. I think maybe I’ll try to make out the Big Dipper one last time before I walk away and leave it to circle surely on to morning.

Twenty

The wake from a passing motorboat slapped noisily against the dock, splashing the bottoms of Kate's feet and soaking the ragged hem of her blue jeans. She watched the yellow taillights fade into the darkness as the boat whirred toward the ocean.

Kate looked over at Sarah, who was lying on her back, eyes closed, with a sweatshirt stuffed under her neck. She was stretched out on the bridge between the land pier and the floating dock. It was low tide on the sound so Sarah's body lay tilted at a steep angle, her head to the shore and her feet to the sound. Kate could not tell if she was sleeping.

Kate turned back to the water and for the first time noticed a light on the other side of the sound. Squinting, she could make out the dark shapes of people moving and figured there must be a party happening across the way. She listened for music coming from the distance. After a moment, she thought she heard the low, amplified thump of a bass channeled through an oversized speaker; however, she was not sure if what she heard was anywhere but in her head.

The thought of people dancing, drinking, and generally having a good time was too much for Kate to bear alone. It was her birthday, and she was feeling sorry for herself for turning twenty on Valentine's Day with no sweetheart to celebrate. She wanted Sarah to get up and listen to her complain about being single, about growing up, about having a birthday and actually feeling older.

As soon as she woke up that morning, Kate felt older and it scared her. She felt like someone had suddenly just shoved a huge, heavy box into her arms and inside she

found nothing but another decision to make, another something to think about. She had felt so unprepared and overwhelmed that she pulled the covers over her head and had not gotten up until her mother called her downstairs for lunch.

Kate sighed and slapped her palms on her thighs. She looked at Sarah but detected no movement. Kate wanted to wake her up, but did not want Sarah to know she had gotten her up on purpose.

By now Kate was certain the music was outside of her head; she was able to pick up a melody as it drifted her way. It sounded familiar and she began to hum, not caring if she had the right song or not. The music grew louder, and Kate assumed that more people had arrived at the party and that the accommodating host was kind enough to turn up the volume so that everyone on the whole beach could hear how much fun the party-goers were having.

Kate cleared her throat and coughed but was still unable to produce any signs of life from her slumbering friend. Finally, she dipped her hands in the water and flicked the water from her fingers in the direction of Sarah's face.

Sarah rolled to the side and covered her face with the sweatshirt. Her voice was muffled when she spoke.

"What was that for?"

"Just making sure you weren't falling asleep on me." Kate poked her in the stomach. "I mean, really, you can't go to sleep yet—it's my birthday."

Swatting at Kate's hands, Sarah opened her eyes. "That's right. It's your birthday and I can sleep if I want to. Besides, I was just listening to the fish jump." She yawned. "It would be a kind of peaceful noise if it wasn't keeping me awake."

Stretching her arms in front of her, Sarah rolled to a sitting position.

"Why don't you go ahead and tell me what's on your mind so I can rest in peace?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," Kate said, turning to the water.

Sarah was alert now, hugging her knees and twisting the sleeve of her sweatshirt.

"Please, you've been sighing and kicking water and doing all kinds of things to accidentally wake me up." Sarah let go of the sweatshirt, and it dropped to her side. "So tell me what's going on."

Kate drew her legs up out of the water. "Nothing."

Rubbing her temples, Sarah said, "C'mon now. You didn't go to all that trouble to get me up just to have me play twenty questions."

Kate shrugged, feeling sheepish and silly for wanting Sarah awake and now being too embarrassed to talk about it.

Sarah crawled over to where Kate was sitting on the edge of the dock. She crossed her legs Indian-style and covered her knees with the sweatshirt.

"We haven't been out here in awhile it seems. Which is crazy when you think about us being out here all the time while the boys were around." Sarah leaned back on the dock, staring up at starless sky. "It seems like different people, doesn't it? Thinking back I can see myself as clearly as I can see any of you. Like it was a movie and not real

life at all. I wonder if we'll always remember last summer. I wonder if it will always stay the same in my memory, you know, if I'll remember it like I do now.”

“It sure did feel important at the time, didn't it? That whole summer it was like something big was on the horizon, like any day we would wake up and our lives would be suddenly changed forever.”

She looked at Kate and added, “And I guess maybe they were.”

Kate ran her fingers through her hair; it felt thick and grimy from the salt in the air. “Yeah, well, summer is long gone, and things will never be same.” Kate knew she sounded more emotional than she liked.

Sarah sat up. “Well, you don't have to get bitter on *me*. I'm just making conversation. You're the one who woke me up not to talk about it. What do you want me to say? Do you miss him? Did you love him? Do you feel a fresh wave of pain every time you think about it?” She balled the sweatshirt in her hands. “Because I already know the answers to those questions, but I can ask them if you'd like to finally admit the answers to yourself.”

Sarah took a deep breath and Kate knew she was trying not to keep her voice level. Sarah continued. “Kate, I know I don't see you all time now that we're back in school and living on opposite ends of the state, but I still know you well enough to know what's on your mind.”

Kate's eyes were burning and she knew if she spoke she would cry. She stared hard at the party across the sound and imagined that the moving silhouettes were people

she knew, and she arbitrarily put names to the dark shapes as they laughed and sang and drank.

Sarah put her hand on Kate's shoulder. "It's hard for me, too, Kate, to be out here and not expect to hear guitars playing and us singing and the boys laughing at us. I miss it too, but it was like six months ago. What good does it do to think about him now? To wonder all the time what might have been, what never was? It doesn't change anything. He left but you're still here, still young. There will be others. How many times have you told me yourself that you need to just move on?"

Sarah gently shook Kate, emphasizing her point with body language. "You've got to put Ben behind you. You two were like ships passing in the night—and you told me that yourself that night before he disappeared."

"I know that's what I said," Kate said, "but that was before you and Dex went in to watch the Sox play. I can't help but think that if Ben and I had gone in, too, or if that night I had just done or something different, then everything would be different. Maybe he wouldn't have gone and maybe I'd be fine now, not driving myself crazy with questions I can't answer, each day just wondering why—why he left and why I can't just get him out of my system."

Kate sighed and tucked her hair behind her ears. She continued, "But we were left alone and Ben asked me to come for a swim—to take a drive and come for a swim at this place he knew. 'C'mon,' he said, grinning like a movie star, 'c'mon and show me how far you can go.' And don't you know I would have gone halfway to anywhere just to see that boy grin at me like that."

Closing her eyes as she recounted her last night with Ben, Kate could see his face before her as clearly as if he were right there with her, holding his head to one side as she told her story.

“We drove out to Packard Rock—that old swimming hole about a half-hour from school. My parents used to talk about it. We were sitting on a rock with our feet in the water. He said that he had something he wanted to tell me. I thought I felt my heart inside my chest, and I knew I didn’t want to hear it yet. I put my finger on his lip and told him there was something I wanted to show him first. I told him to sit right there and not to move and I would make him remember me forever.

“I climbed up to the top of Packard Rock and looked down at him watching me. He was mine for that moment in time, and I knew it. I stepped to the edge of the rock and closed my eyes. I can still remember exactly how I felt before that dive. The moss was cool and squished under my feet, and my dress was flapping against my thighs. I could feel the wind in my wet hair, and I knew I was beautiful. If only for that moment, I knew he was thinking that I was beautiful.

“Then I dove, slow and arched, imagining that I was a crescent moon, suspended and majestic. I felt strong and free and beautiful. It was the feeling I wanted to hold on to.

“Then I was in the water. It was cold and welcoming, and I almost thought of reconciling myself with the water forever. But my chest was burning and this time he was waiting for me. And when I surfaced, he was right in front of me, in the water, waiting for me, standing there thinking I was beautiful, and I laughed. He pushed the hair away from my eyes and told me he thought I was beautiful and I told him I already knew.

“And then he kissed me, once, sweet and quiet. His hands tightened around my hips, and I wanted to say something. Then he kissed me once more, just as short, just as sweet. And then when he kissed me a third time, I kissed him back and it was like something between us was set free. And then we kissed for a long time.

“Afterwards we just stood there, huddled together, not knowing what to say, not knowing what had just passed between us. The whole time I just wanted to shake him and make him hold me like he wasn’t leaving in the morning. More than anything I wanted him to tell me he would come back, one day—that he was leaving but not leaving me. He didn’t, though. He didn’t say anything and I didn’t say anything. He was stroking my hair and I wasn’t crying and we just stood there, not saying anything. When it started to rain, and we walked to the car and drove home.

“When he walked me to the door that night, I was shivering—cold from the dive, cold from the rain. He asked me if I was okay, and I didn’t lie. I told him I was happy for him. I said that I was so happy for him. That was all. He smiled and kissed my forehead. ‘So long, beautiful,’ he said and touched my face and then he was just gone.”

The two girls sat in silence for awhile. The sky was heavy with the dark, swollen clouds, and Kate felt like she had let the heaviness seep into their conversation. A fish jumped in the lake, and she watched as the water rings drifted towards her feet. She was glad to finally tell someone of her last night with Ben, to have someone understand the intense emotion of that night, to know a little more what memories she was carrying around inside.

Sarah stared blankly across the sound, her knees tucked under her chin.

“I can’t believe you’ve never told me that story before.”

“I know,” Kate said. “I couldn’t. It’s like I was too close to it, too involved in the memory to separate with it before now.” Kate smiled and poked Sarah in the stomach. “Maybe the fact that I finally told you is a good sign. Maybe it’s a start on me moving on, on kicking my depression and finally being able to put Ben behind me.”

Hugging the sweatshirt to her chest, Sarah crossed her legs and sat Indian-style. After a few minutes, she said quietly, “I have one last birthday present for you too, actually. I wasn’t sure if I should give it to you or not, but after that story you just told, I guess I ought to.”

Kate raised her eyebrows, confused at Sarah’s anxiety. “It’s okay. I’m sure whatever it is, I’ll love it. You have great taste.”

“It’s not that kind of gift. I mean, I didn’t pick it out.” Sarah hit her fist in her palm. “I received a letter from Dex today.”

“That’s great, Sarah, but what does that have to do with my birthday present? Did Dex send me a birthday card?”

“Not exactly—though he did say for me to tell you he says hello and that he hopes to see us when he’s home next weekend.” Sarah cleared her throat and scratched nervously at her neck. “Actually, the thing is, Dex sent me this letter for you.” She pulled a folded piece of paper from her back pocket. “It’s from Ben.”

Kate felt her breath catch and she was not sure how to feel—relieved, elated, angry, or frightened. At the moment she couldn’t feel anything and just stared at the folded paper in Sarah’s hand.

Sarah rubbed the letter between her thumb and forefinger, waiting to hand it off to Kate.

“I feel like I should warn you,” Sarah said, “but I haven’t read it so I wouldn’t know what to prepare you for one way or the other.”

Breathing deeply to try to slow the racing in her chest, Kate looked at Sarah and nodded. “You go ahead. Read it to me.”

“Are you sure?” Sarah said, again offering the note to Kate.

Kate bit her lip and tilted her head back, watching the grayish-purple clouds crowd out the moon. “Please. Whatever it is, I’d rather hear it than see it. Just go ahead.”

As Sarah unfolded the letter, Kate was sure that the party-goers across the water could hear the loud crinkle of the pages. Sarah held the pages at arm’s length and moved them up and down to catch the best lighting.

She scanned the lines of writing, then folded the letter in half and held it to Kate.

“I’m sorry,” Sarah said, “but I can’t. It’s like reading someone’s diary. It’s not meant for me.”

Taking the letter from Sarah’s hand, Kate noticed that her own hand was shaking. To steady the shaking paper, she held it in both hands, gripping it like a steering wheel.

“I’ll read it later,” she said, not sure she was ready for whatever the letter held.

“You’ll read it now,” Sarah replied. “At least this way you’ll know.”

Kate nodded, bobbing her head more to psych herself up than to affirm what Sarah was telling her.

“And I’m going to head in. It’s getting late and I’m sleepy.” Sarah pulled the sweatshirt over her head and flipped her hair out of the collar with the back of her hand. “Besides you probably want some time alone now.” She wagged her finger at Kate and added, “But I’m coming over tomorrow morning first thing and I expect full details.”

She stood up and patted Kate on the crown of her head.

“Goodnight, birthday girl, you old twenty-something.”

“Goodnight,” Kate said. She watched Sarah shuffle her way down the dock and into the house.

After Sarah had disappeared into the house, Kate turned back to the water, took a deep breath, and read:

I’m writing you, Kate, even though I realize by this time you may have forgotten all about me, moved on, moved away. I don’t know. I don’t even know what it is I want to say to you except that lately I’ve been thinking about last summer. Maybe it’s the weather or the time of year or my mindless roaming but whatever it is lately I just can’t shake last summer from my mind. It’s like there’s a reel spinning in my head projecting my thoughts, and I can see that summer spreading out in front of me like a home movie, grainy, silent, flickering, all movement and no sound. And the images are so strong I half expect them to walk up to me on the sidewalk, sit down beside me at a café, sing me to sleep at night.

What I’m saying is that I miss it—that season when the days were just being there with you and Dex and Sarah, just sitting there on the dock talking and laughing. I had that old twelve-string your dad used to play and Dex had the new acoustic he’d found at the pawn shop downtown. We were playing some old rock

songs and blues and hymns, and we were all singing. When we sang *Amazing Grace*, our voices seemed to stretch straight up to Heaven, and I remember thinking how long it would be before we could do that again.

It felt like Indian summer then, Kate, and I miss that feeling. After six months you'd think I wouldn't miss the States so much, but sometimes I miss it more the longer I'm away. It's hard to say what I miss exactly—the people, of course, and the culture. And maybe just the familiarity. Mostly it's little things like football and hot dogs and rock-and-roll. Like sitting on my back porch eating barbecue and homemade peach cobbler and watching the boats on the sound. Sometimes it's hard to find even a scrap of home over here.

Last night I fell asleep thinking about that last night at home. I remember we said it was the night of our harvest moon, like the Neil Young album, like something out of a folk tale. Because the moon was almost full and so bright reflected in the lake. And when we all jumped in the water, swimming towards the moon under the waves, you said it reminded you of a story about Brer Rabbit or something, about trying to raise the moon out of the water, about pulling more from the water than could be carried to shore, about casting nets so deep and coming away empty-handed.

And of course there was the image of you, burned into my brain, high above me, statuesque and perfect, untouchable. When you dove, for that first second, it was like time the earth ceased its spinning and you were caught in time, suspended, my own sweet constellation in the sky. Then you were falling, so fast, and watching you I realized that's what I was to you—a force that could only pull you down—and I knew then that no matter how much I wanted to stay, I had

to leave, to go away for awhile and put some space between us. I can't explain it and I don't expect you to understand.

I'm not writing this to tell you I'm sorry or to tell you to wait for me. I just wanted to tell you that you were right—that night when you said you'd make me remember you. You were right and I just thought I'd let you know.

I'm sending this through Dex because his is the only address I have, but if I've timed this right, I imagine you'll get this letter sometime around your birthday. How could I forget my Valentine baby?

So long, beautiful, and sweet dreams of summer.

Kate smoothed the letter out on the dock before carefully folding it and putting it in her pocket. She pulled her feet out of the water and leaned back on her elbows. The water from her feet and spread in a dark puddle across the wood. She made a dam with the side of hand and watched the water go around her pinkie finger. She remembered how Ben liked to go fishing on nights like this. He always tried to get her to go with him and now she couldn't remember why she had never gone. "Fish are hungriest just before it rains," he would say, but Kate couldn't remember him ever having caught anything at those times.

She wiped her hand on her jeans, and gazed out over the surface of the water, and her eye caught the light still shining from the other side of the sound. She remembered the party going on across the water. She sat for a moment, listening. All was silent, and she could no longer catch a tune on the air. Figures were still moving, though, more slowly now, more distinctly, Kate could not help but wonder if there was some dark

figure across the water, reclining in reverie, feeling like she was, renewed and ready for summer.

Rain Song

The night hung low and felt like rain. Brett heard the car pull away then lit a cigarette. He did not turn around until he was sure the car would be gone.

“Do you want to leave?” he asked without looking at her.

Lane stood a few feet away, her arms crossed. “Not really.”

She walked over to him. Her arms brushed her hips as she moved, and her stride was smooth and confident in the bobbing light of the Chinese lanterns strung the length of the dock. Brett thought of Lane on runways, of flashbulbs lighting her path, illuminating her from below, and he tried to remember if he had ever told her she was beautiful.

Brett threw his cigarette into the water, watching it drift idly from one wave to the next then under the dock and out of sight.

“I’ve had enough of people for one night.” Lane took a deep breath and let it out in a long, loud sigh. Brett couldn’t tell if she was upset or not.

He started to ask her if she was all right, if she was sure she wanted to stay, when he felt her bending over him from behind. She placed her hands on his shoulders and let her dark hair fall around his face like a veil. In that moment he wanted to fold her into his chest, to dissolve her right into his skin, to hold her close like he used to.

Instead he felt the muscles in his back stiffen. Lane felt it, too, and withdrew, closing her eyes for a moment and moving away again, putting one hand briefly over her mouth, then hugging her arms close to her chest.

“You’d think it would get old after awhile, wouldn’t you?” Brett thought her voice sounded small and distant. “Talking about it, I mean.”

“Stop thinking about it. Just let it go.” He knew she was upset, but he was tired of talking about it, tired of thinking about it. He was almost sorry that he had even asked Lane to come at all except that it had been good for her to see Jack and Charlie again. She had even seemed excited about the party—right up until the end. Afterwards they’d driven out here, Charlie and Jack, with Bridgette and Lindsay following behind. One of the girls mentioned that last summer home and their modeling jobs and Lane’s long vacation that kept her from the overseas debut. Then Lane started thinking about it too much, and Brett could tell by the way she kept her arms close to her body that it was getting to her again.

He was sorry about that summer. They had all been waiting for something to happen without ever thinking anything would really come to pass. And then when it did, none of them was ready—Lane was not ready and he certainly was not ready. They had been doing fine, having a good time, then finding themselves in a place that scared them, drove them apart. He couldn’t remember all the decisions and details and that was fine. Later on they tried to smooth things over, talk about it, move on, but something between them was lost and they both knew it could never be the same.

Brett shook his head. He didn’t want to think about it. Things were good now. Lane had agreed to be here with him, and he was enjoying the time together.

He heard Lane move behind him, and he turned to look at her. She had taken off her sandals and was sitting the way she did only when she was wearing a dress, with her

legs underneath her, her skirt a smooth, satin curve over her knees. Brett studied the beaded flowers on the bodice of Lane's dress, smiling as he remembered how excited she had been when she told him about it. She had described it to him in a rush over the phone. "Midnight blue—with specks of flowers," she'd told him. "Little Chinese flowers. Silver specks of the Orient. Doesn't that sound poetic, Brett?" That's how she'd described her dress.

Midnight blue. It was her favorite color. Midnight blue is summer, she'd said—soft and mysterious, elegant, sleek—like a June moonrise or the soft pull of the tide just before dawn. Blue is something to think about, an image to take away—something that settles over you while you're sleeping or thinking or dreaming. "It haunts you like midnight," she'd continued, "a little unsettling in its solitude, but somehow calming, like a song or a poem or an old photograph. It's a piece of you somehow, and you can't understand or explain it—you can just know it. Somehow."

He hadn't said anything in response, and she was silent over the wire before finishing quietly, "Anyway, Brett, it's midnight blue. With little Chinese flowers. Maybe you'll like it."

Brett stretched out on the dock, propping his head in one hand and loosening his tie with the other. He reached out and touched Lane's hand. She started at his touch then laughed, shaking her head and not looking at his face.

He laughed too and drew back his hand. "Did I tell you you looked nice tonight?"

Lane still did not look at him. "Must be the wine talking."

"Can't be," Brett said. "I didn't drink a drop."

“Well, I never told you not to,” Lane began.

“That’s not what I said. Sometimes I just don’t want to. Sometimes being with you makes me not want to.” Brett hooked her finger with his, and this time Lane didn’t jump at his touch.

“It’s good to see you, Lane,” he said quietly as he spread his fingers out and laced them over hers. “How long has it been?”

Lane did not speak for a long time. She stared into the water, and Brett wished that he had made her leave with the others, that she had already been delivered safely home and was not here pretending to be fine, trying to forgive him all over again.

She sounded tired when she spoke. “I don’t know, Brett. Two years ago, maybe, at the Mitchell’s New Year’s party. I was with Drew, and you were probably with some girl you can’t remember.” She shook her head and added, “You are always with some girl.”

She looked at him finally, smiling though he could not tell how sincerely as she asked, “How does it feel to be a heartbreaker?”

“You ought to know,” he said, taking his hand from hers and reaching into his coat pocket for another cigarette.

“I wish you wouldn’t,” she said.

He pulled a book of matches from his pants pocket, striking one match after another, watching them burn down to his fingertips then throwing them still burning into the water. Finally he threw the entire matchbook into the water, almost half of the matches still unused.

Kneeling down beside her, he put his hand on the back of her neck, cradling her head with his fingers like he was holding a baby. “Are you going to marry him, Lane?”

She trembled and her voice caught as she answered him. “I don’t love him, if that’s what you mean.”

“Lane, he’s the kind that wants the perfect little wife and kids, the two-car garage, the house on the lake, the table at the club—the whole nine yards. You think you’re the one to give all that to him?”

“You don’t even know him.”

Brett cupped her face in his hands. “I know you. You won’t be happy if you stay here, you know that.”

Lane pushed his hands away. “He says he loves me, and I know he’d work hard to make sure I’m happy. Besides, his family’s wealthy and he’s going to be a doctor. I could do much worse, you know.”

“But you could do much better too.”

“Listen, Brett, you’re the one who said we would never be again. I was willing to give it a try once upon a time,” she said, rubbing her temples with her knuckles. “You always do this in your weak moments. It’s not fair.”

She looked up at him, and Brett was surprised that her eyes were dry. “Brett, right here, right now you want to talk about things that should never be. You know I’d follow you to the ends of the earth if you really wanted me to, but we’d never make it.”

She put her hand to his face and stroked his cheek with her thumb. She looked sad and suddenly older, tired. “I love you, Brett, but it’s just not that way anymore. Maybe

once, a long time ago, before the something, but not now. You may think you love me too, now, but it's just too late. It's not our time anymore.”

They sat in silence for awhile, not touching. Rain started to fall, lightly at first, then harder, colder. Brett liked just sitting there beside her, being with her. It felt good, just sitting there. He didn't want that feeling to go away, and he sat there with her, watching the rain shine like glass beads in her hair and prolonging the moment, waiting, hoping Lane would break the silence and he wouldn't have to tell her. But Lane was silent in a way that he knew. She was waiting for him too.

She was making him say it. Lane always had to hear him say the things she already knew and he hated saying. He knew they each needed him to say it out loud—like hearing it made it real. He already felt empty and hollowed-out inside. He reached for another cigarette, then remembered the matches burning out in the water, the matchbook floating away on the choppy waves.

He ran his hand through his hair then wiped his palm on his pant leg. “Come away with me, Lane.”

She bit her lip and nodded slightly. “You always do this.” She hesitated and was still. “Where to?”

“California.”

He saw her close her eyes and hold in her breath. She set her jaw and tilted her head to the sky.

“You always did want to go.” Her eyes were still closed, and her voice sounded far away. “I'm so happy for you.”

Looking at the rain shining softly on her face, he thought of all the tears she had exhausted on him, on their past, on the things that never were. It was no wonder she had no tears for him now.

Lane stood up, holding her hand to her mouth, swaying almost imperceptibly, and Brett wondered if she was still here with him at all. He wanted to bring her back, to keep her as long as he could.

“Sing something, Lane. You used to always sing.” He was remembering that summer, those long nights with songs under the moon, kisses below the water’s surface, bodies in the grass, sunrises over the surf. He could not go back there with her, and he knew now that she would not let him take her anywhere else.

“What would you like to hear?” Lane turned and smiled.

Brett only stood up and looked at her, staring blankly, blinking in the rain. She felt suddenly like a stranger to him.

“What would you like?” she asked again.

“Sing with the rain, Lane. Like you used to.”

She stood away from him, dangling both her sandals from one finger. She threw her head back and the rain came down straight, running over her face, her neck, her shoulders. She opened her mouth and stood for a time, drinking in the rain. Finally she bowed her head. “I’m sorry, Brett. I can’t.” She turned to him. “I can’t find the words.”

Lane walked to him and touched his face.

“Think of me sometimes, Brett. Please. At least sometimes.” She kissed him softly on the cheek, and he could feel rain sliding down his spine.

She turned to leave, walking slowly back into the quavering light of the lanterns that were spinning slowly in the rain. He closed his eyes and wondered if it was raining in California.

Fount of Every Blessing

Streams of mercy, never ceasing, call for

songs

on the air and I cannot help but hum the tune. Service

across the water and people go down, one by one, tread

to the water. Rows of white, moving slow to a chorus

of loudest praise.

Teach me some melodious sonnet, sung by flaming tongues

above

the colors of the sun wave like fire in the water and I

watch figures go down, one by one, steeping themselves

in orange and purple, heirs

to grace

how great a debtor daily I'm constrained

to be

the stranger across the water, I stare as they go down,

one by one, to their knees, yielded—not like me,

standing in shadows, rootless and wild, bound to

my wandering

heart to Thee. Prone to wander, Lord, I feel it, Prone

to leave

without looking back, they take up a cross and go down

to the road, one by one, faces to the sun as it sets. Their

song on my lips, I wait by the water for my redemption

here

is my heart, O take and seal it, seal it for Thy courts above.