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Reviewed and approved* by the following:

Charlotte Holmes
Director of Creative Writing / Professor of English & Women's, Gender and Sexuality Studies
Thesis Supervisor

Carla J. Mulford
Professor of English
Honors Adviser

* Electronic approvals are on file.

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Reflections, an Introduction

I suppose that I should begin by saying that this thesis did not begin as a creative thesis. At the end of my junior year, I approached Charlotte Holmes, asking if she would supervise a thesis on non-traditional endings in short stories. At that time, I thought that I wanted to write a critical essay about the ways in which stories can end without appearing to resolve their conflict. John Cheever's "The Country Husband" was the quintessential example of this type of story, at least in my mind, as it works through a series of different scenes without actually achieving resolution. This creates an effect where the reader feels as though they have been taken on a long journey, as though its protagonist has fundamentally changed, when, in fact, the story ends in a satisfying way without explicitly resolving its conflicts. But, as I read more and more short stories in the summer, I began to feel worse and worse about writing a purely academic thesis. There did not seem to be many stories like "The Country Husband" out there, even in the excellent books that Charlotte and I had chosen together. The ultimate result of this indecision was that I began to read the books for the sake of the books themselves, not for finding individual stories that fit a specific criterion, and when I returned to campus in the fall, I asked Charlotte if she would supervise a creative thesis instead. She graciously agreed.

Any positive aspects of the five linked stories that make up this thesis owe much to the work of Louise Erdrich, James Baldwin, and John Cheever, among many other writers. I would first be amiss if I did not mention that James Baldwin's *Going to Meet the Man*, an absolutely wonderful collection of short stories, provided me with new ways to structure my short stories and construct my characters. It was Erdrich's *Love Medicine*, though, that provided a jolt of real

excitement and discovery in my reading life, as I had not realized that you could write in such a messy, excessive, authentic manner about real people. The structure of that novel (or collection of linked short stories) also inspired the structure of this thesis, which works through various scenes of family life in the suburban Main Line. Most of these stories came to me organically. In the last month and a half of revision, I wrote two of these stories (“Where We’re Headed” and “The Ladder Propped Against the Garage”) and revised a third (“The Secret”) almost entirely by accident. I believed that I was revising one story when, in fact, I was writing new ones, and I would have almost certainly missed a few of these stories were it not for Charlotte’s oversight. The thesis is much stronger as a result of these additional stories, which, while they stand as stories on their own, give it more context, detail, and speak to meaningful empty spaces in the time between them. These stories also owe a great debt to Cheever’s short stories, which often deal with family dramas in the context of a 20th-century New York suburb. More than that, though, the development of these characters, their interactions with each other, and the descriptions of the environment surrounding them all are related to Cheever’s distinctive use of detail and careful pacing. If there is any writer who I was most indebted to in the writing of this thesis, it is Cheever.

When, at the beginning of the fall semester, I set out to write these stories, I had the vague idea that I wanted to write something angry and explicitly political. I was furious at the contemporary state of U.S. (and global) politics, and I wanted to write *something* meaningful about things like democracy, climate change, and rampant inequality, even if I knew that few people would read it, and even if I knew that I wasn’t an expert on these topics. In this respect, I think that my work here has failed. The characters and stories that I ended up creating are not as nakedly political as I would have liked them to be. Instead, I gravitated toward the old adage of fiction-writing workshops, “write what you know,” and wrote something else, something much truer to

my own feelings and experience. I hope that these stories offer flawed, sympathetic characters that readers can recognize in themselves in and their own lives, landscapes, houses, and a city that resemble the ones readers have seen and lived in, and, above all, that these stories will add something of value to others' lives. At their best, I hope that they help readers perceive the world through a new lens. That, I think, is one of the most powerful—and political—actions that literature can perform.

Late Encounter with an Enemy

John O'Hara sat on the grey terrace of *Le Pesce*, the Italian restaurant where he and his wife had met, sipping a glass of sparkling water and gazing at his date, Miranda. Under the black, folded shaft of an umbrella, their lavender tablecloth was topped with white plates, a green bottle of Pellegrino, wine glasses, and a metal ice-bucket cradling a bottle of white wine. Miranda had poured herself a glass of wine and ripped two pieces of bread from the loaf that sat between them, while he had only ordered the Pellegrino. John glanced out upon the parking lot and the rows of glass storefronts behind the parked cars. The sun was setting in the distance, spreading a deep, orange-red glow behind the stores on the right-hand side of the street, and a breeze rose, passing through the gaps in John's pink dress shirt. Seated there, the air tugging at his fresh-cut hair, John recalled the first time that he had seen Christine, when she was just a woman in a red dress making her way across the restaurant, the sun golden on her shoulders.

This was his first date since separating from Christine, arranged by a mutual friend. In recent years, he knew, he had developed more wrinkles in his cheeks and brow and, though he now dyed his hair brown, his eyebrows had begun to grey. When he sat down too quickly, he grimaced at a sudden, familiar pain at the base of his spine: a reminder of past 5Ks, half-marathons, full marathons, and mornings spent jogging on the side of Haverford roads. Sitting there, trying not to stare, his leg bounced beneath the table. Miranda was cute, with blue eyes, a button-like nose, and blonde hair hanging past her face. She looked to be in her late thirties, early forties, with wrinkles beginning to appear on her cheeks and neck, too. He wondered if she thought that he was cute, and brushed his hair back away from his face, taking another sip of Pellegrino.

“I work at the Philly Museum of Art,” she said. “I help curate their contemporary art collection. Lots of avant-garde stuff. We just bought a bunch of sculptures by Cy Twombly, but I also like paintings, especially ones by women.”

“You prefer women?” He said. “Isn’t that sexist?” He laughed at his joke, though she didn’t.

She shrugged. Her shoulders seemed thin beneath her cardigan. “It’s just my preference,” she said. She reached for another piece of bread. “I think that they make more interesting art. So what do you do, anyway? Mark told me that you were a doctor, but what kind, exactly?”

“I work as a cardiac surgeon at Jeff,” he said. “That’s just like Mark. I must have told him that twenty times. I think that it’s just his artist’s mind.”

She nodded. Her mouth was full of bread, and she politely raised a hand before her face.

There was a short pause. The chatter from the surrounding tables filled the space between them. “My wife was an artist,” he said. “Is, I mean. That’s how I know Mark.” He wondered whether Miranda, like Christine, was an artist herself. Glancing through the glass doors that bordered the terrace and led into the restaurant, he noticed that a painting on the far wall looked a lot like the first one he had seen of hers: a promenade stretching along the beach, dotted with small figures. Blue swirls suggesting waves. The sun floating among clouds in the sky. A couple on the promenade holding hands, kissing, the small ovals of their heads mashing into each other. “I love art,” he said. “I have a membership to the museum. Maybe we can go together,” he said, turning back to Miranda, watching his words float over the table.

“No thanks,” she said, putting down her phone. She laughed. “I’m only going back if I get paid money for it. I spend way too much time in that building as it is.”

“The Barnes, then.”

“Maybe.” But she paused, and he watched her pause. A car honked in the parking lot. “I’m sorry if it’s a sore subject,” she said, “but what is your wife’s name? Ex-wife, I mean.” She flashed a smile at him. “Sorry for asking,” she said. “I’m just curious.”

“It’s okay,” John said.

“It’s just that I didn’t even know that you were married up until now,” Miranda added. “Mark didn’t tell me. I guess I just want to know what the deal is here. You know?”

“Sure,” John said. He was reminded again of Christine, or Christine as he had once known her, in the way that Miranda leaned over the table, her elbows pressing on its latticed black metal. “Christine Bergeman. She kept her last name when she married, kind of a feminist, you know, and, you know, it just didn’t work out.” He ran a hand through his hair. “We’re not together anymore, obviously. We have one son, though—seven years old.” He smiled. “Love him.”

The skin on Miranda’s face had tautened. Her wrinkles had momentarily disappeared, and her lips were pressed tightly together. But then, in a moment, her face broke out again into a smile, and she reached for her glass of white wine. “I think I’ve met her once or twice,” she said. “I love her work.”

“Oh, it’s wonderful. She’s a very talented artist.”

“Mmhmm.” Miranda nodded. “Didn’t she have a show recently?”

“I don’t know,” John said. “Maybe.”

“No, I think she did,” Miranda said. “At the Paradigm Gallery.” She bent down below the table. “I think that I have the guide in my purse somewhere, if you want to take a look.”

“No, that’s okay,” he said. “I don’t need to see it.”

Miranda lifted herself up. Her upper half was parallel with the table, and her hair swung in the air. “Are you sure?”

“Yes,” he said. “Totally sure.” He daubed at his forehead with a napkin. Glancing toward the row of stores on the other side of the street, he noticed that the glow of sunset had faded, replaced by a bruise-purple dusk.

Miranda returned to her seat. She looked at him, and he looked away.

“Art is a nice thing,” he said. “But, you know, people have needs. The world calls.” He shrugged. “If I just holed myself up at home, making art, what would happen to the people who come into the emergency room?”

“I think it’s a worthy thing to do,” Miranda said. She was still watching him, and spoke with vigor. “It’s a great gift. Nothing compares to seeing some piece of art that you identify with. It stays with you for years and years after the fact—I would almost see it as a religious experience,” she said, smiling, “except for the fact that I’m not religious.”

“Do you make art?” he said.

“Yes,” she said. “All kinds.”

“Art is nice,” he said. “But you have to be willing to work for a living, and work hard.”

Her eyebrows went up. She leaned back in her seat and cupped her hand around her chin. “Don’t lecture me,” she said. “I work for a living.”

He made a dismissive motion with his right hand. “I know that,” he said. “But, trust me, Christine didn’t.” In the parking lot, the LED streetlights rooted in the concrete medians turned on. “Listen,” he said, leaning over the table, “I understand what I have to do. I work as a cardiac surgeon, I save lives, and, on top of all that, I make a lot of money.” He exhaled. “But Christine never cared about any of that stuff. All she cared about were those paintings that filled her studio.” On the other side of the table, Miranda sat still, watching him.

“It just frustrates me,” he said, speaking more slowly, “when Christine puts on an art show downtown, and all of these people who don’t know me, who don’t know us, judge me.” He shook his head. “I supported her for our entire marriage, and now I’m going to be supporting her for the rest of her life. When she needed help with our son, who hired the nanny?” He extended his arms on both sides of his body, his palms flat and dangling, as if they were pinned to a cross. “I have done nothing wrong,” he said, hearing his voice pitch. He watched his fists fall on either side of his plate. The table shook, and the glasses rattled. The umbrella thumped from side to side in its small circle, and the chatter on the terrace diminished until the sole sounds carried through the air were the rattle and tinkle of silverware, the faint rush of cars passing the restaurant.

On the other side of the table, Miranda had crossed her arms over her chest. “I don’t think that this is a good idea,” she said, speaking in a careful, even tone. “I’m looking for something a bit less serious.” Without taking her eyes off him, she reached down, picked her purse up off the ground, and withdrew a crumpled twenty-dollar bill, straightening and nestling it beneath her empty wine glass.

“Don’t worry about that,” he said. “Don’t be ridiculous. Just sit down. Let’s keep talking. We’ve barely started talking.” He knew that the other diners were watching them and that, if he stood up, there might be a confrontation. He felt like a dumb, fuzzy organism splayed over the bright light of a cover glass as the collective eyes of a crowd strained to peer through the microscope.

Miranda strode towards the edge of the terrace, where its grey tiles slipped into the black asphalt of the parking lot, and looked down at her phone. A nearby streetlight framed her narrow figure. And, as John watched her, a blue, dented vehicle appeared before her, and she slipped into its backseat. The vehicle grunted and groaned on its way out of the parking lot.

John slumped in his seat, palmed his cheek, and listened to his neighbors recommence their conversations, their voices gradually returning to comfortable levels as the black-uniformed waiters passed back and forth between the tables, carrying silver pitchers of water. John gazed at the parking lot filled with vehicles and blinked, his eyes tearing from the sharp shards of streetlight projected into his vision by their glinting hoods and windshields. Speeding vehicles rustled the leaves of the maple trees standing on the sidewalk. Up the street, the Apple Store, its walls constructed of glass, illuminated in yellow light, displayed indistinct figures bending down over tables, leaving the store swinging opaque white bags. Opposite the store, a new town square occupied the space of a former office building, adorned by a spurting fountain, wide swaths of turf, and multicolored lawn chairs strewn over the space.

Things had changed, he thought. A dozen years ago, the avenue had been occupied by office buildings that, with implacable, blinded windows and brown brick, had hosted realtors and lawyers and small-business entrepreneurs, therapists, psychiatrists that he knew from medical school. One of them, Jonathan Crowser, had even connected him with the realtor who helped him and Christine buy their house. Antique streetlights had lined the block, projecting halos about their heads, and the small booth of a local ice-cream shop had stood just behind *Le Pesce*. The first time that he had sat here, he had been sitting with Christine, beautiful Christine of the red dress and the bared shoulders, Christine of the quick witticisms and loud, engaging laugh. John breathed, and, for a moment, felt as if an immense weight was bearing down on his chest.

As the sun lowered further behind the horizon, as the sky shifted from a deep blue into black, John thought of his son: Connor, a boy who liked to play T-ball and run outside, who climbed trees and sang songs at night, who sat transfixed for hours in front of the television. Alex, who had not seen *Star Wars* yet, who did not know how to play cards, who had not even been to

a single baseball game. Who, if his mother was not careful, would become addicted to his computer, where he played *Lego Star Wars* for hours and hours on end. Art was fine, technology was fine, John thought, but all in moderation. And what about the old gangsters and westerns? What about the old proverbs that had shaped him as a boy, the time spent outside that had made him into the man he was today? *You're crusin' for a bruising*, he thought, looking past the parking lot, the row of stores, at something indiscernible in the darkened horizon.

They had lived in Haverford, on the other side of the Main Line, and, turning off Montgomery, he accelerated through the steep, narrow lanes that rose and fell with the natural shape of the landscape. Tall oaks and imposing rock faces lined both sides of the road. He flicked on his high beams, watching the light pierce the underbrush and appear at the opposite end of a straight stretch of road. When he had first lived in this neighborhood, arriving from the confined concrete of New York City, he had thought that houses here stood like thrones over their grass palaces, reaching toward the sky, rivaling the tallest trees that stood on their manicured properties. And if a house was a throne, he would be its king. He would sit in his backyard, watching a flock of birds soar against the blue morning sky, a dog lying by his feet, his wife sitting by his side. His son running through the grass and the dog rising to its feet, following him.

The vehicle hummed beneath his loafers. He thought about his new apartment in Philadelphia: a hardwood-floored, wide-windowed place with a view of City Hall, a place where he blasted classic rock and drank whiskey, where he entertained his friends from college and medical school and the local bars as they drank and talked late into the night. Sometimes John would stand on the balcony and look out at the tiny, blurred lights in the tall apartment buildings, the vehicles and people moving far below him, coated in orange streetlight. And on those nights,

woozy and lightheaded, he would think of the home in Haverford, where Christine drew a blue comforter over Connor, brushing back his brown hair. He would think of her returning to her studio on the second floor immediately afterward, the window lit, her figure bending forward in silhouette. He would think of her thinking of him, and his fists would tighten on the railing, just as his fists tightened on the steering wheel as he arrived, turning onto the bridge that spanned the brook burbling just in front of the house.

As he guided his car over the bridge, turning onto the driveway, the bright, intrusive eyes of the small spotlights dotted his vehicle with white circles. A black staff light shone by the paved path leading to the front door, coating it in an orange tint. The beige, stucco house, which stretched into the sky with its triangled roof, appeared almost entirely dark. As he followed the curving driveway, his high beams bored into the shadowed living room, revealing the piano, the paintings hung on the walls, and the antique furniture. Parking before one of their three garages, he looked up at the house for a moment. The kitchen, just beyond the vestibule, was lit, but nobody seemed to be there. Above the kitchen window, the master bedroom and Christine's studio were dark.

Striding up the long stone slabs that rose toward the back door, he peered through the glass at the kitchen beyond the vestibule. Azaleas and hydrangeas, bent by cool gusts of wind, brushed at his waist. He shivered. Cursing, he withdrew a key from his wallet and, pushing it at the doorknob, felt it jam, heard it ring as it fell to the ground. He left it there, glittering, and rang the doorbell. He rapped at the glass, and the sound faded behind him. The house was still. In the vestibule, sneakers sat on long horizontal racks, and small, puffy coats hung above them. The white rectangle of the spare refrigerator, the kitchen bulbs sending yellow light across the kitchen floor. Stepping back, sighing, John was suddenly struck by his faint reflection: an older man in a rumpled

shirt, faint lines around his cheeks and eyes. He shook himself, turning away from the door, and stepped through the bushes, making his way to the back patio.

Walking past the black chairs and tables of the patio, he peered into the sliding glass doors. The pots and pans, suspended above the stove, shimmered in the light. A faint outline of painting frames, a glint of marble floor in the dark hallways beyond the kitchen. Turning back from the glass, running a hand through his hair, he fell down into one of chairs, staring down at the grey stone. The familiar ache ran through his spine. Taking out his flip phone, he scrolled through his photos until he arrived at a picture of Connor: red-cheeked, smiling beneath a brown baseball cap, hefting an aluminum bat. The wind picked up, and John felt his shoulders shake, his vision blur. He sniffled, brushing snot away from his nose, and leaned back in the chair, taking deep and measured breaths.

The backyard dipped into a gulley before rising toward a boundary fence of tall pines, occasionally dotted with the wide-branched outline of an oak or maple. Above the trees and the angled roof of a neighbor's house, the moon hung, pasted like an illuminated wafer in the sky. Thin moonlight sparkled in the dew on the grass and, in the right-hand portion of the yard, soft shadows lay beneath a cluster of sweetgum trees. John lifted his hand. He closed it into a fist for a moment, then opened it, stretching his fingers wide. He let it soften. Above his hand, white stars were scattered across a black canvas. The leaves and needles rustled in the yard. He lowered his eyes, breathing, feeling his chest rise and fall in the fresh night air.

Then, in the distance, two figures appeared at the far end of the yard, tramping back towards the house. The smaller one grasped the taller figure's hand, and the taller figure bent to reach it, arm dangling, hair hanging over its shoulder. And as the figures came further into the light, John recognized them: Christine, pale and thin, holding Connor's hand as he swung her arm back and

forth. “My favorite constellation was Orion,” Connor shouted, his high-pitched voice carrying over the yard. “The hunter!” He released his mother’s hand and, sprinting into the gulley, mimed the motion of an archer, pulling an invisible bowstring and taking aim at the patio where John was sitting. He peered forward, then dropped his arms and turned back around. “Mom,” he called. “Who’s that?”

Christine had already seen the figure on the patio. Running forward, she stepped before her son, pushing him behind her legs. “Who’s there?” she called. A familiar fright edged her voice. She pulled a handheld flashlight out of her pocket, aiming it at John, and, from her other pocket, pulled out her flip phone and pressed it against her ear. “If you try anything, I’ll call the fucking cops,” she screamed.

Blinded, John raised his forearm before his eyes. “It’s me,” he said softly.

The Secret

Last night, after the highway running to and from the city had released its arrangement of white headlights and was lying coiled under tall poles of orange light, his father had packed the family into his silver Infiniti and, with a sly smile on his face, driven to the Belmont Plateau overlooking Philadelphia. Standing by an old oak tree that leaned over a scratched and pockmarked picnic table, Mason watched his father look out at the blurred skyline like a voyager staring out at a vast expanse of wilderness. His father's hands were stuffed in his pockets, his shoulders were thrust forward, and his teeth strained at his lips. His cheekbones pressed against his cheeks, and he cut a thin figure in the moonlight. There was something important, Mason thought, that he was not saying, something that he was squinting to see in the city.

“What a view!” his father shouted. “Danielle, Linda,” he called. “Come and see!” Mason watched his father listen to his voice stretch over the empty baseball field and narrow stand of trees below. He watched him lean out over the sloped edge of the plateau, gazing at those bright lights shaped by rectangles of shadow, gripping his belt with both hands as if it were his lifeline back to the known world.

Without looking over at her, Mason knew that his mother was sitting at the picnic table beneath the leaves of the oak tree, that she was stroking her temple with fingertips and gazing at the broken shards of beer bottles laying on the ground. He knew that his sister was waiting by the car, tapping at the keyboard of her new phone. But as he took a few steps forward, leaning out over the edge, the breeze coursing through his hair, the long slope of moonlit grass and the empty expanse of the baseball outfield running toward the dark conifers and pines, the distant, intoxicating lights of the city glinting like diamonds, he felt that he shared some indiscernible

secret with his father.

“You have to go out,” his mother said. She was standing by the stove in the kitchen, cooking dinner. “I mean it. If you don’t do anything, there’s no way that you’re going to make any friends.”

“Mom,” he said, walking over to one of the cupboards, “It’s the first week of middle school. Cut me some slack.” He scanned its shelves for a bag of chips or a narrow box of crackers.

His mother walked over, closing the cupboard. “I’m cooking turkey burgers,” she said, frowning. “Just wait a little bit.”

He sighed, turning back toward the hallway. “Stop,” she said, and he stopped. “All you’ve done this week is go up there and play video-games,” she continued, flipping one of the burgers. Steam rose from the pan to the hood over the stove. “When I was your age, I was out every weekend, at the mall, the movie theater, the ice rink.” She pursed her lips, and they seemed to disappear within her face. “If you don’t join a club, a sport, or *something*, then you can’t play video-games, either.”

Mason exhaled. “Mom,” he said. “What is it with you?”

His mother turned back towards him. Her face was pinched, and she shook her head as she spoke. Lifting the burgers from the pan and on to a plate, she turned off the hood. “What is it with *you*?” she said. “Jesus Christ, I’m just trying to help, Mason.”

Mason, rankled, stalked down the hallway and ascended the stairs. “Whatever,” he called from the second-floor hallway, walking into his room and closing the door behind him.

That night, after dinner, Mason heard his sister walk through the hallway and, without knocking, push open the door to his room. Sitting at his desk, Mason closed his laptop and took

his headphones out of his ears, swiveling on his chair to face her. A cool yellow light from the lamp standing beside his bed spread through his room, whose carpet was strewn with dirty clothes and books splayed face-down. She was wearing blue shorts and a tie-dyed T-shirt colored blue and red and yellow that hung to her thighs. As he watched her walk up to him, standing next to and leaning on his desk, he took his chin in his right hand. He thought that it made him seem older.

“What is it?” he said.

“Nothing,” she said. Her hands tugged at her shirt, wrapping themselves in its hem.

Mason waited for her to tell him why she was there.

“It’s just,” she said, continuing to pull at her shirt. “Do you hear them?”

Standing up, Mason walked to his doorway, listening. Their parents’ voices barely made it to the second floor, restrained as they were, but their mother was nearly hissing, their father growling. He looked back at Danielle. “So?”

“So,” she said. “That’s the third time in the last week.”

He shrugged, walking back and sitting down in his seat. He took his chin in his hand again. “It’ll be fine.”

Danielle looked at him. “What if it’s not?” she said. Her hands were on her face now, scratching absentmindedly at her cheeks. “What if they divorce?”

“They’ll be fine,” he repeated. “They’re not going to break up.” He knew, almost by reflex, that divorce was an impossibility. The sun would sooner vanish from the sky or the moon refuse to rise. “What’s bugging you?”

Danielle leaned down, closer to him. Her face was taut. “Listen,” she said, “Don’t tell Mom I told you this, but last night, before Dad came home, I went down to get a snack, and I heard her talking on the phone.”

Mason had dropped his hands into his lap. He looked up at his sister.

“She was saying stuff like ‘I’m not able to do this anymore’ and ‘He’s acting like nothing is wrong.’” Danielle was quiet for a moment. “She said she wasn’t sure that she wanted to stay with him.”

Mason leaned back in his chair. He felt his stomach tighten, and heard his own breath. “Why?” he said. “What’s wrong?”

“I don’t know,” Danielle said. “Maybe Dad’s not doing a great job at being a husband. He is sick, after all. He has that disease”

“He’s not,” Mason said, vehement. “Not really. He’s still the same. And she shouldn’t leave him.”

“She might,” Danielle said.

“No,” Mason said, “They love each other. And we love them.” He did not have to stand at the doorway to hear his parents’ voices anymore. They rose through the staircase and into the hallway, slipping into his room and filling the space around him and his sister.

On the following Monday, Mason put his name down on the sign-up sheet for the fall sixth-grade baseball team, and stayed late on the next Friday, throwing with a partner on the field that bordered their school during tryouts. His partner, Connor, was a tall boy his age with a thick mess of blond hair who smiled at him when Mason’s throw bounced before his feet. “Take it easy,” he said, motioning with his glove. “Your arm’s not doing the work. Your legs and chest are.”

“Okay,” Mason said, sweaty and self-anxious. He had not played in a few years, but when his toss smacked against the center of Connor’s glove, he could not help grinning, pumping his fist in a small motion at his waist.

“There you go,” Connor said. And they were partners the whole afternoon, throwing each other batting practice in the black net of the cage, playing second base and shortstop during infield drills. At the end of the tryout, the coach, an eighth-grade history teacher with a grey mustache and a manicured beard, gathered them around him in a semicircle at the edge of the field. “There’s only fourteen of you,” he said, sweeping his gaze over them. “So, good news: You all make the team. But,” he said, raising a finger, “I expect you to give it your all. You should want to compete, to win, and to leave it all out there on the field, whether it’s a practice or a game, every day.”

Mason could not help looking over at Connor. The other boy’s glove hung between his knees, and his face was set and determined. He nodded every few seconds during their coach’s speech, and Mason could not help imitating him, hanging his glove between his legs, looking up at their coach in an intense, focused way, furrowing his forehead as he bit self-consciously at his lower lip.

That afternoon, as he entered the house, Mason tossed his backpack to the floor just beyond the door. “I made the baseball team!” he announced, shouting through the house. His mother, who must have been sitting in the dining room, appeared at the hallway door. “You’re looking at the starting second baseman for the sixth-grade team of Bala Cynwyd middle school.”

Her face broke into a smile. “Oh, that’s wonderful, Mason,” she said, walking towards him. “I didn’t know that you were trying out.” Her voice was filled with a sudden warmth, and Mason grinned unconsciously, feeling a small happiness pool in his stomach. “That’s amazing,” she said, hugging him. She walked to the base of the stairs. “Danielle,” she said, calling up the stairs. “Come down! Your brother made the baseball team.”

When Mason’s father arrived as the twilight of evening had begun to fade into night, he insisted on taking the family out to dinner at the local pub. “Why didn’t anyone text me?” he said.

“We have to celebrate.” At the bottom of the stairs, he yelled up at Danielle, who had not responded to his earlier calls. “Get your ass down here. Let’s go.” And, after a back-and-forth accompanied by her stomping feet, they all piled into his silver Infiniti, pulling out of the driveway underneath the black poles of streetlights and the wavering shapes of trees. From his seat, Mason watched the houses pass. At the end of their street, one of the porches was occupied by a man and a woman and a young child, sitting on their rocking chairs and staring out at the road. Sinking down from the window, Mason almost felt as if they were looking at him, as if they recognized the car and were staring at it as it turned around a hedge and accelerated down the street.

Autographed jerseys from Philadelphia sports players hung in display cases on the pub walls and, above the jerseys, an array of televisions was aimed toward every conceivable perspective that a patron might take from their seat. The family settled into a booth, Mason and Danielle facing their parents, and their waitress set a bread basket in the center of the laminated menus that lay on their table. Danielle slumped next to Mason, her arms crossed over her chest, her face hidden behind the thick mass of her hair.

The waitress, returning to their table, filled their glasses with water. Apart from a few older men at the bar and a family sitting a few booths behind them, they were the only ones at the pub. The restaurant lights, screwed into small circles on the ceiling, emitted an inoffensive illumination, and the low voices of the television announcers generated a steady undertone of sound through the restaurant. “Well,” said Mason’s father, setting his menu down, “What do you guys think you’re going to have to eat?”

“Just a pot pie,” Mason said quickly.

Danielle raised her menu to hide her hair and her face. Behind it, Mason saw, she was tapping something out on her cell phone.

“Danielle,” said his mother.

Stuffing her phone into her pocket, Danielle dropped her menu on the table, sighing. “This should be my celebration. Or our celebration, not just Mason’s.”

Mason’s father raised his eyebrows.

His mother, lowering her menu, leaned over the table. “Danielle,” she said. “What’s wrong?”

“Listen,” Danielle said, “When I got on the travel soccer team last week, no one said anything. Dad didn’t take us all out to dinner. But now that Mason’s on the sixth-grade baseball team, we have a dinner for him?” She snorted. “Is it just because I’m in fourth grade? Because I’m younger than him?”

Mason’s mother began massaging her temples. She cast a glance toward her husband, who was now concentrating on his phone. “Okay,” she said. “Danielle, this celebration is for you, too. Congratulations.”

The waitress, wielding her pen and pad, returned to the table. “Ready to order, guys?”

“Yes,” Mason’s father said. “I’ll have a double cheeseburger.” He nodded toward Mason. “And, later, can we get some cupcakes, or a piece of cake, or something? My son just got onto the baseball team.”

“And our daughter made the travel soccer team,” Mason’s mother said, smiling up the waitress. “So something for her, too.”

Mason’s father gave her a look, then looked back down at his phone.

“Of course,” the waitress said. “Congratulations.” She smiled, which made Mason feel queasy and anxious.

“I’ll just have a pot pie,” Mason said. “The small one. Nothing big. Thanks.”

“And I’ll get a Caesar salad,” his mother said. “With a glass of Pinot Grigio.” She glanced at her daughter. “What do you want, honey?”

Danielle addressed the waitress directly, lifting her index finger in the air. “I’ll have the biggest steak that you have,” she said, “and a glass of beer, too. And I’ll also get—”

“She’ll just have the chicken fingers,” Mason’s mother said, smiling tightly. “Thanks.” As soon as the waitress left, she turned to her daughter. “You are behaving like a child,” she hissed. “Stop it right now.”

Danielle glowered at her mother. “Dad,” she said, not looking at her father, “Are you proud of me? Just as proud as you are of Mason?”

“Sure,” Mason’s father responded. He was looking down at his phone again.

“We will talk about this later,” Mason’s mother said, staring at her daughter. “But this is not the time or the place.” She glanced behind her, as if afraid that someone was listening to their conversation.

Danielle leaned back in her seat and crossed her arms, her face flat and peeved. There were a few moments of silence.

“Well,” said Mason’s father, projecting his voice and slipping his phone into his pocket. “You should listen to your mother,” he said, directing his voice toward Danielle. “And I think we’ve gotten a little off-topic. We’re here to celebrate Mason’s achievement.” He raised his glass of water in the air. “To Mason!” he said, smiling at his son.

“Congratulations,” his mother said, lifting her own glass. And even Danielle gave an annoyed, belated congratulations, rolling her eyes and muttering under her breath as she patted her brother on the back. And Mason said thank-you. But, narrowing in his seat, he looked off despairingly toward one line of the television screens, where a single pitcher wound and delivered

his pitch in perfect synchronicity.

And as the days became shorter and colder, as fewer birds sung in the mornings above Mason's bus stop, as Mason returned to his house after playing baseball in the sharp, chilly air, his parents began to raise their voices downstairs, and Danielle continued to hole up in her room. His father often failed to come home before dinner had been served, and his mother, after cleaning up the kitchen, would wait for him on the sofa, glancing back and forth between the television and the door. When he arrived, they would always argue about something: dinner, politics, their children's teachers, their working hours, and the dishes that had been meanwhile piling up in the sink. Sometimes, after returning from practice, Mason would wash them off, drying them with a white rag or slotting them into the dishwasher. But most of the time, after returning from practice, he would walk into his bedroom, close the door, and lie in his bed for as long as possible, both before and after dinner. The packets of math homework and his thin readings distracted him, but it was baseball, he thought, coupled with Connor, that was the only source of fun anymore, that gave him power as he fielded a ball at the edge of the infield grass or smacked a line drive into center field, even if their team usually lost. He was someone on the field, he thought. At home, at night, he curled up beneath his comforter and stared up at his blank ceiling, trying to ignore his parents' voices rising up through the stairwell.

"Are you doing anything after this?" Connor said, leaning over to Mason. They were sitting on the bleachers, behind the black net of the batting cage and the single row of seats for the team, waiting for the rest of the players on the field to field their final ground balls of the day and toss them into the catcher. It was a Friday in early November, a practice after a half-day of school, and

the sky was unseasonably blue, the clouds white and puffy, the sun coloring the leaves on the trees a bright red. “Instead of heading back on the bus, we were all going to go down to the farmer’s market in Ardmore.”

“Sure,” Mason said. “I’ll be there.” A surge of excitement coursed through his limbs. He felt that he had been growing closer to the rest of the team, but this was the first real sign of that. Nodding to Connor, he watched the other boy lean over to the other players as they jogged in, and, in the back of his mind, he remembered that his father sometimes saw patients in his Ardmore office, which stood across from the farmer’s market. They might run into him there. That would be nice, he thought. He had not seen his father for a long while without the company of his mother, and, as they were fighting all of the time, that was never pleasant. He sat there on the bleachers, feeling happiness fill his chest like a balloon as the players jogged in, as he imagined what might happen in Ardmore.

The day was still warm, though the sun had begun its slow decline in the sky as they headed towards Ardmore, shouldering their black baseball bags. Hedges lined the narrow sidewalk, and blue-tarped scaffolding concealed parts of redbrick apartment buildings. The players trooped down the sidewalk in a lumpy line, Mason at its end, stepping on the short strip of grass that separated the sidewalk and the road. As they entered Ardmore, passing the glass storefront of an Apple Store and the dark mannequins posing on platforms at Banana Republic, Mason kept an eye out for his father’s office building, a squat, grey edifice. He had not been there in several months, though their path seemed familiar, coated with a thin carpet of dead leaves.

“So, Mason,” Connor said, throwing his words over his shoulder and slowing his pace, “This is your first year doing baseball since fourth grade, right?” He had been walking and talking with the rest of the team.

Mason nodded. "It's fun," he said. "I really like it."

"You don't mind that we lose all of our games?" Connor said, laughing. They were walking side-by-side now, a few feet behind the rest of the group. "Is that why your family hasn't been coming? Sorry," he added quickly. "It's just that my parents never come, either, so I always notice who gets picked up and who doesn't."

Mason shook his head. "They work too late."

"Aw, that sucks," Connor said. "Well, I hope that they make it to one of our last few games."

"Me too," Mason said absentmindedly. He was not paying attention to Connor any longer. He had spotted his father's office building. It stood just across from the farmer's market, which was a rectangular structure of intersecting glass and steel topped with an array of solar panels on its roof. Its parking lot was filled with cars searching for a spot, and its automatic glass doors, sleek and polished, opened and closed to accommodate a steady stream of entrances and exits. Across the street, an office building presented a quiet grey façade adorned with four pairs of bare brown windows. "Come on," Mason said, heard Connor say, walking with him into the market. "Let's get some motherfucking pretzels."

As the sun began to set behind the office building, spreading shades of red and purple into the edge of the sky, the group sat at a silver table on the store's deck, lifting cinnamon sticks into their mouths and sipping lemonade, their school and baseball bags grouped around their feet. They talked about sports, about the World Series and the NBA and who were the hottest teachers at school, the hottest girls in their grade, and Mason tried to enter the conversation, but his attention kept wavering, his sight passing over the crumbed remains of pastries sitting on nearby tables and the white bag drifting along the edge of the deck to finally train on his father's building. The black

placard next to its front door was dulled in the light shadow, and he could just make out his father's name above the other ones: HAROLD M. CROWSER, M.D. Beside the placard, the curve of a small scone stretched toward the sky.

He finished his pretzel, stuffing its hot, soft dough into his mouth, then turned to Connor. "I think I'm going to head out," he said, offering his hand. "Thanks." He waved goodbye to the rest of the team and, descending from the deck, waited on the side of the road. He leaned out over the curb, looking up and down the street. He wanted to surprise his father, to hug him maybe, to watch a smile stretch over his face. But as he finally found an opening in the endless stream of vehicles and began to jog across the street, he lifted his head and, seeing his father open the door to his office building, skittered back, falling on the narrow strip of grass.

The man there was not his father. Or maybe it was his father, adorned with the same brown hair becoming grey, the salmon-colored dress shirt, the smudged glasses, the black computer briefcase, but this version of his father was holding a woman's hand, was kissing her, was so distracted with her that he failed to see his son staring at him across the street. This father turned down the driveway beside his building, walking towards his parking lot. The woman wore blue jeans and a red sweater, and the small glimpse that Mason caught of her face was etched with small wrinkles at her mouth and eyes, though she was smiling up at his father, her teeth broad and white. The pair disappeared behind the corner of the building and Mason sat there as the sun completed its descent below the horizon, as the streetlights and the solitary scone slowly flickered on, as the headlights of the passing cars became yellow lances piercing the shadows of night.

He had meant to tell his mother as soon as she picked him up in front of the Banana Republic. The sky was darker by then, the stars obscured behind a thick mass of clouds. But as

they drove home, listening to the quiet hum of the engine, the low croon of the radio station, he tried to speak, and something caught in his throat. He coughed, blinking away his tears, and when his mother glanced over, asking how his day had been, he told her that it had been fine, that he was just nervous about their baseball game on Monday. He stared ahead at the road broken with white staccato lines, at the asphalt swallowed by the hood of the Honda, listening to his mother tell him about her day: a few nasty parents, an awful salad for lunch, frustration with his father. “He just won’t pick up his phone,” she said, shaking her head. “God, he’s the worst with that. All I’m asking is what he wants from Chinese takeout.”

He nodded.

“What would you like?” she said.

He tried to speak, but his throat clogged up, and he coughed instead.

She patted him on the back. “Are you okay?” she said.

“Allergies,” he croaked, though he knew that the wrong time of year for that excuse. He coughed, rubbing at his eyes.

She continued to pat him on the back. She drove like that, one hand on the wheel and one eye on the road, glancing over at her son, rubbing his back, his face framed by the dark window.

And as he lay in bed late that night, listening to his parents argue downstairs, he raised his comforter over his head and breathed into it, thinking about his father’s smooth, casual way with the other woman: the confident, unashamed manner with which he had leaned in for a kiss, had walked with her behind the office, had perhaps taken her out to dinner and told her that he loved her. Crying, Mason lifted his head from beneath the comforter. He had begun to sweat. Breathing in heavy, deep gasps, he heard, beyond the closed door, not the familiar voices rising through the stairwell, but the faint sound of his sister’s voice, floating through the cracks in the two bedroom

doors that separated them. She must be video-chatting with her friends, he thought. And lying flat on the bed, taking great gulps of air, he somehow felt that he was not alone.

That Monday, before he slipped his arms through the straps of his backpack and slung his black baseball bag over his right shoulder, Mason wrote a note to his mother, rooting through her purse and stuffing it in her pocketbook as she showered upstairs. He felt as if he were standing at the precipice of something unknown and terrifying, at the edge of a cliff with a sea roiling violently beneath him, and as he walked out into that October morning, inhaling the chilly, misting air, he closed and opened his fists, digging his nails into his palms. He regretted leaving the note, had regretted it almost immediately, but resolved to keep walking anyway. He pictured his mother finding it on her lunch break as she went to pay for a sandwich, opening her pocketbook and watching a folded scrap of paper twirl to the ground...he half-hoped that she would miss it, would fail to pick it up, at the same time that he knew she would, that she would sit there in silence in her cramped cafeteria, reading and rereading the words scrawled on the piece of paper, unable to think a single hour into the future.

Waiting at the bus stop, staring at the sidewalk, Mason heard a car slow in front of him, emitting a short, sharp honk. He looked up. His father had slowed his Infiniti to a crawl in front of him, and was now gazing at him through the window with a wide, expectant smile. Trying to force his lips into a grin, Mason nodded to his father, feeling something sink in his stomach. He swallowed, trying not to vomit. His father waved vigorously before driving off, his engine groaning as he accelerated beneath the yellow traffic light hung above the intersection, heading dumb and confident for the low circle of the rising sun half-hidden by thin grey clouds.

Where We're Headed

Mason stood in the grey mist of a brightening day, waiting for his bus to appear over the slope of the wide road that, stretching past him, wound towards his middle school. Early-morning dew soaked through his thin sneakers, and he kicked at the strip of grass before him as vehicles rushed by, sending small gusts of wind against his legs and torso. Robins chattered in the branches above and the lawns behind him, picking worms off the grass, and hawks floated with wide wings outstretched in the grey sky. His sister, Danielle, stood beside him, shifting her weight back and forth, listening to tinny music through her earbuds. When he saw the faint yellow headlights emerge over the slope, blinking as the bus slowed in its approach, he glanced for a moment at the cemetery across the street, filled with weathered gravestones and flowering magnolia trees, bounded by a stout stone wall topped by a rusted, pointy metal fence.

Connor was not in their shared French or Social Studies or eighth-grade English class that morning, and as Mason watched the teachers stride back and forth in front of their whiteboards, writing notes in squeaking marker, or as he leaned his cheek into his palm and stared down at a worksheet, he waited for the minutes to pass, glancing up now and again at the red second hand that swept over the white face of the clocks hung above each door. The classroom windows looked out onto the field bordering the back half of the school, where a swarm of boys sprinted back and forth, catching and throwing a single frisbee over the cropped grass and the rough infield dirt of the newly constructed baseball diamond. Different students went out in each class period, and girls sometimes joined the swarm, but it was the boys, sweating and dirty and loud, their shouts slipping through the thin glass of each window, that drew Mason's wandering eye. In the back row of his Social Studies class, sitting next to an empty seat, he took out his LG ENV and flipped it open on

his thigh as he sent Connor a text: *yo r we still on for this afternoon?*

Connor never responded, and as Mason sat in the cramped cafeteria beneath a low ceiling, as he watched the sun alternately emerge and hide behind the thick grey clouds, he saw the vast expanse of the weekend stretch out before him like the frozen tundra of some far-off continent, desolate and bare, populated with nothing but the familiar figures of his family.

“I thought you were going over to Connor’s today? Since there wasn’t practice?” His mother lay on the sofa, watching television on their grey, box-shaped television that was over a decade old. The weather had cleared, and bright sunlight streamed through the family-room windows. His mother worked from home on Fridays, and Danielle had taken another bus after school, heading off to a friend’s house. Mason had told her that he would be doing the same and, harboring the hope that Connor might text him back, had not asked her to pick him up.

“No,” he said. “Connor wasn’t at school, so he must be sick.”

“Sorry, honey,” she said, swinging her legs off the couch and touching her feet to the floor. Still thin, she moved with a certain sort of elegance, passing through the world with grace and ease. She wore a pair of grey sweatpants and one of his old, frayed Lower Merion Little League sweatshirts, and she raised her arms in a V as she stood, stretching. “If you have the time, I need some help filling out your father’s tax forms. He can’t do it, and I don’t quite understand how to use Excel.”

“Mom,” he said. “Really?” He imagined staring at the office computer all afternoon, entering numbers and letters into little white boxes as the world dimmed outside, as his sister went for food with her friends and spent hours sprawled over one of their bedrooms, talking to each other. He should have been doing something like that, he thought, with Connor, on their day off

from baseball, playing video-games in his basement. “Is that necessary? Right now, I mean?”

“Would you rather do it now or later?”

“I would rather you got Danielle to help.”

She laughed. “Come on,” she said, heading into the kitchen. “I’ll make you a grilled cheese, then we’ll knock this thing out.”

Mason sighed as he climbed the stairs, tossing his backpack into the corner of his room. Below him, he heard the bread sizzle on the pan. His bed was rumpled, and books, papers, and dirty glasses were strewn over his carpet, dresser, and windowsill. At the windowsill, gathering the glasses in his arms, he cracked the window and pulled up the blinds. Chilly spring air rushed into his room. A pack of teenagers was wandering down the center of the street outside, heading toward the park, laughing and staring down at their phones. He recognized most of them. They were from the neighborhood, lived within a few blocks, and had run with him on the wide green pasture of the local park when they were younger, playing touch football and frisbee and tag as the robins scattered in the air ahead of them.

They ate dinner together that night, after their father was dropped off at the house by a local driving service, grouped around the tan table bordered by the kitchen wall, spooning food from serving bowls onto their plates. Their parents sat at the opposite ends of the table while Mason and Danielle sat in between, Mason next to their father and Danielle to their mother. Crumpled receipts and battered magazines and a few framed photos nested against the wall behind wide bowls of carrots and spaghetti. The house was full of light. When Mason looked around the kitchen and the family room, his eyes seemed even more tired and strained than they already were, and he blinked, rubbing at his temples. He felt slightly nauseated. He had texted Connor twice, and still

had not received an answer.

“Are you okay, Mason?” Danielle asked. She was short and narrow. Her blonde-brown hair ended in a sharp line just before her shoulders. “You look tired.”

“Yeah,” he said, sighing. “I’m fine. Just did a bunch of work on the computer with Mom.”

“Oh,” she said. “I was over at Caitlin’s house.”

“I know,” he said.

Their parents had already begun to eat. The heat for the house thrummed through the floor beneath their feet and, outside, windchimes tinkled and trees sighed in the breeze, the sound slipping in through a crack in the kitchen window. Forks spun spaghetti and stabbed bits of carrot. Next to Mason, his father methodically gathered his spaghetti into one part of his plate, then scooped it into his mouth with the aid of his spoon, scraping both utensils against the glass plate.

On Mason’s right, Danielle stared down at her food. Her relaxed posture had shifted into a hunched, tense one, and she breathed deeply, making an evident effort to control herself. Mason noticed that her left hand had tensed into a fist beside him, could see, out of the corner of his eye, his mother watching Danielle. He continued to loop his spaghetti around his fork and slip it into his mouth. The red sauce stained the white face of his plate, tainting its reflection of the bright yellow lights that hung above the table. His phone sent a single buzz against his thigh, but he did not check it.

“Dad,” Danielle said, “Could you please be a bit quieter?”

“Huh?” their father said, his mouth full of food. He chewed with his mouth open, filling the space between them with the sound of thick, labored mastication.

“Danielle,” their mother said.

“What? He’s being really loud.”

Their father swallowed his food and cleared his throat, taking a deep gulp from the glass of water standing next to his plate. "I'm sorry, Danielle," he said, lifting his chest and making an evident effort to project his voice. "I'll try to be quieter."

"Thanks, Dad."

"Danielle," their mother said. She had put down her utensils, and was now rubbing at her forehead. "That was really rude."

"What? He was being really loud. Wasn't he, Mason?"

Mason shrugged and continued to eat. He had finished about half of the food on his plate. The more quickly he ate, the more quickly he would be able to leave.

Danielle groaned. "Come on," she said to their mother. "You know I'm right."

"I'm not going to tolerate it," their mother said. "You can't just be rude to your father. You know that he has trouble with that sort of stuff."

Their father raised his head. His forehead furrowed, and his eyebrows curved toward his nose. "Linda," he said.

Their mother looked back at him, jutting her chin, widening her eyes and shaking her head in an almost imperceptible fashion. "What?" she said. "What do you want me to say? Danielle's just going to have to learn to deal with it."

"Or I could just eat upstairs," Danielle said.

"No," their mother said. "We eat as a family."

"I can get better," their father said. He was still puffing out his chest, taking extra care to enunciate his words. "I'm going to practice."

Danielle mumbled something under her breath.

"Excuse me?" their mother said.

“Can I be excused?” Mason said, picking up his plate and moving toward the sink. Behind him, he heard his mother’s chair squeak as she pushed out from the table, looking at his back.

“We just started dinner,” she said, speaking over the sound of the running faucet. As he washed off his plate, he discerned a note of shock in her voice. “At least stay here until everyone’s finished eating.”

He flipped on the light over the sink, then turned around, planting his hands on the countertop. He knew that the light shone behind the back of his head like a halo, and spoke in an authoritative tone. “Mom,” he said, “I have a huge headache, and I spent all afternoon working on those taxes with you. Could you cut me a break?” He saw her hesitate, and continued. “I’m just going to take a short nap, then I’ll come back to help with the dishes.”

His mother leaned back in her seat. Looking mournfully back at Danielle and her husband, she shook her head. “Okay,” she said, sighing. “Be down later, then.”

Nodding, Mason walked into the hallway, then up the stairs. Back in his room, he slipped on a coat, zipping it up as he checked his phone. He dug an old pair of sneakers out of his closet, closed the door to his bedroom and tiptoed over to Danielle’s room as plates clattered in the sink below. His mother must have let Danielle leave, too. Moving quickly, he stepped past her clothes on the floor, opened her window and slipped through, one leg at a time, onto the roof of the garage. He closed her window, walked to the roof-edge, crouched, and maneuvered himself so that he dangled off of the gutter, then let go, landing with a solid thump on the blanket of grass below.

He ventured into the thin stand of woods behind the local park, where some of the same kids that he had spotted earlier were milling around, sitting on sheared tree stumps, passing a clear handle of vodka between them. Walking down the path, he recognized Connor’s outline, a broad-

chested boy dimly lit by the falling sunlight filtering through the trees. Mason nodded to him, smiling, and he watched Connor nod back. Connor's hands rested on the waist of his jeans, and when the handle came to him, he took a confident, unbothered swig. The boys and girls behind him were taking small sips, and some of them hopped around after they did it, coughing and cursing and letting out little whoops of excitement, but Connor seemed unaffected. Mason remembered Connor telling him that he had been drunk before, but that he was excited to do it with Mason.

"Hey," Connor said, extending his hand for an awkward handshake. His grip was slightly sweaty.

"Hey," Mason said. He spoke somewhat uncertainly, caught a little off-guard. "Why weren't you in school today?"

Connor gave him a sly look. "Man," he said, "I told my dad that I was sick, and he told me that I was bullshitting him, but he was going to let me stay home anyway. Dad of the year, am I right?" He laughed. Taking the bottle again from one of the other boys, he downed a gulp, then bounced around on his toes, feinting at the air like a boxer. "Then I stole this handle from his freezer, stuffed it in my backpack, and linked up with these guys." He gestured to the people behind him. Mason waved at them, but they did not pay him any mind. "Then, finally," Connor said, continuing, "I saw your text, and I thought, aw shit, we had something planned, didn't we?" He laughed again, then handed the bottle to Mason. "My bad, dude. Sorry."

Mason looked at the handle in the dim light. It was still about half-full, and the liquid sloshed as he tipped it back and forth. "I thought we were going to meet up alone," he said, and felt stupid for saying it.

"Yeah, well," Connor said, looking up at the trees, talking more quietly, "I didn't want you

to get the wrong idea.”

Mason felt his stomach plummet. “What do you mean?”

“Aw, I mean, people say things,” Connor said, swiping at the dirt at his feet. “But we’re friends. You know, I didn’t want you to get the wrong idea. And I wanted to get you a taste of this,” he said, nodding to the drink. “So don’t be a pussy.”

“What do you mean?” Mason said. His voice quivered, despite himself. “Who told you things?”

“Some guys on the team,” Connor said. “It doesn’t matter,” he said, speaking more loudly. He jerked his head toward Mason, calling over to the other kids. “Yo,” he said, “Mason still hasn’t taken a shot.”

A few of them walked towards him. “Do one!” a boy called. They began to gather around him. Mason could not make out their faces in the weak light.

Mason tipped the bottle back and drank. The liquid burned his mouth, his throat, and he grimaced. “Ow,” he said. “Fuck.”

“Do another one!” one of the girls said. They were gathered in a loose circle around him, and began to chant. “Shots, shots, shots!” they called. Mason shook his head, but when he saw Connor nodding, clapping and calling out with the rest of the group, he took another shot. Then he took a longer swig, and then another, and he handed the handle back, comfortably numb to the others around him. He stood there another hour with them in the long evening, talking and laughing as if they were old friends re-discovered, as if they were and had been and would be close forever.

He was walking in the middle of the street, the heat soaking his arms and his legs and his head, passing in and out of the faint white pools of light spilling out around the streetlights that

had just been illuminated. The sky was a brilliant, flat yellow as the sun dipped toward the horizon. He skipped. He stretched forward and shouted and spun, and caught his woozy body just before he fell on the asphalt. His street was quiet. The windows of the houses were blank and the porches were lit with small porchlights. The cars parked in the driveways and on the sides of the street slumbered like sleeping beasts. Walking past a sleek blue Lexus parked in front of his neighbor's house, looking at himself in the reflection of its windshield, Mason imagined what he might do with a driver's license in a few years: the parties, the concerts, the nights soaked in and warmed with the fuzz of alcohol. He thought about the far-off land of college. He tried not to think about Connor, about the way that they had said goodbye, with Mason glancing back at him as they strode away from each other. And as he plodded up his driveway, staring at his feet and slipping past his father's Infiniti, he almost didn't hear the familiar voice calling out his name.

"Mason," his mother called. She was sitting out on the front porch, wrapped in a brown coat, shivering. A light shone above her. Behind her, the house was entirely dark. He walked towards her. He felt no worry, no guilt, no shame. She had seen him. Whatever was about to happen would happen, and there was nothing that he could do to change. As he arrived at the edge of the porch, he noticed that the air had chilled, that his breath plumed white in the air.

"You've been drinking," his mother said, standing up. Her lips were tight, and her shoulders were curved towards her body. "Let's take a walk."

"Okay," he said. He watched her pass him, walking along the stone path, turning down the driveway, and he cut across the grass to follow her, dragging his sneakers in the dew. Her flats clacked against the asphalt. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see," she said. Her voice was strained and angry. She was looking up the street, and he followed her, rolling his neck and extending his arms and stretching each one of his fingers

as if he were piloting an entirely new body, trying to maintain the warmth that he felt ebbing away at his extremities.

They arrived at the cemetery a few minutes later, walking the long way around, pressing at the rusted gate that swung open before them. The wind had picked up, and as they walked along a path overgrown with grass and weeds, navigating their way between columns of gravestones, magnolia blossoms dotted the ground around them, twirling as they fell in the chilly air. Nothing about the gravestones were uniform. There were narrow and wide, tall and short, age-beaten and eroded. Some of the older ones still had legible numbers and lettering on their faces. The road alongside the cemetery was silent. The streetlights stretching over it buzzed with their light, and the edge of the sky still blossomed with bright red streaks. In the near distance, a traffic light cycled through its signals. Walking behind his mother, Mason waited for her to turn, to tell him why they were there. He shivered, stuffing his hands into his pockets.

“Mason,” his mother said, stopping about halfway up the path and turning around to face him. “Do you know why we’re here?”

Looking at her face, which seemed more haggard than usual, he shook his head. “You want to scare me?” he said uncertainly, glancing out at the gravestones dotted with pink petals.

“Look,” she said. “You might not want to realize it, but your father is going to be dead pretty soon. God knows that he’s made mistakes, but it’s a terrible thing. That’s the way things are going.”

He looked up at her. He didn’t know what to say.

“You’re going to have to grow up,” she said, pulling her coat more tightly around herself. “Especially because it’s not looking like Danielle is going to mature anytime soon. Which means that you can’t be sneaking out like an asshole and getting drunk with your friends. I can’t believe

it, and I won't fucking have it. Don't think I've forgotten about that. You're grounded, and if I catch you doing that again, it's going to be a lot worse."

Mason nodded. He was quiet for a moment, looking around.

"We're going to bury him right there," his mother said, pointing to an unoccupied section of the cemetery that sat under the thickening shadow of one of the magnolia trees. Its grass was scattered with pink petals. "Within a couple of years. Mark my words."

"What are we going to do?" Mason said softly.

His mother looked at him. The streetlight tinted the pale hollows of her cheeks with a soft white glow. "We'll get through it," she said. "We'll survive."

The Ladder Propped Against the Garage

Mason knelt behind the short wooden wall, breathing sawdust, feeling his armpits begin to sweat beneath the heat of the lights trained on the stage. The three beams supporting his wall forced him to carefully reverse as he stood and circled upstage, hopping, for every class-wide musical number. When he hopped, Mason puffed his lips like a cartoon rabbit. A pair of pink ears, edged with white fur, pinched the thick brown hair of his head. His cheeks were brightened with pink blush, and his mother had traced black whiskers on both sides of his mouth. Kneeling behind the wall, he looked down at his hands, at the black floor. If he looked up, he was blinded by the bright lights, which were blurred and bright as the sun. And when it came time for him to sing by himself at the front of the stage, he lowered his eyes as he hopped forward, passing classmates dressed as squirrels and butterflies and frogs that kneeled behind their own painted backdrops. He raised his eyes as he came to a stop a few feet from the edge of the stage, gazing at the space where the stage light began to dim as it swept over the student orchestra in the pit just ahead of him then draped the audience in faint, dim vagueness, as if they were seated in murky water. Holding his curled hands in front of his chest, Mason hopped back and forth as he sang, scanning the shoulders and heads of the audience for his parents.

“I am a rab-bit, I am a rab-bit, and I hop-like-this! Hop-like-this!” His forehead had begun to sweat, too, and his notes pitched with nervousness as he hopped back and forth on the stage.

His parents were in the front row, his sister beside them. Her legs swung back and forth in the air beneath the seat, and she sucked on her thumb, looking up at him with a bored, impatient expression. But his parents, who leaned towards the stage, looking up at him, were transfixed. Their shoulders touched, and their hands were clasped together. His mother, her cheeks framed by crescents of black hair, smiled, her lips straining against her skin, as his father’s lips parted in

delight. They were watching him. They loved him and they loved each other, and Mason breathed through his diaphragm, feeling the last notes of his song strengthen and stretch under the tall roof of the gymnasium. In the moments after, he closed his eyes, feeling the applause break through the momentary silence and wash over him, a warm wave carrying his body back to his place, tucking him gently behind his wall where he kneeled again, feeling bubbles of pleasure float up from his stomach, popping sweetly in his mouth.

They took a family photo after the show, backgrounded by the blue foam pads affixed to the walls. And after the photograph, after they drove home and ate cake in honor of Mason's performance, on the following afternoon, Mason's mother went to the film store in Narberth to develop a reel of film from her Canon camera. And after she retrieved the reel a week later, sorting through the photographs in a thick white envelope, she slipped the photograph of the family into a brown, rectangular frame, placing it in the center of the kitchen table. As bills and magazines and scissors and pens around the photograph appeared and disappeared over the years, as stains and scratches and divots formed in and on the wood, the photograph remained, collecting dust, periodically wiped clean.

Mason sat at the kitchen table, biting into a piece of buttered toast. His backpack, filled and prepared the night before, slumped against the wall by the back door. The red letters on the electric stove read 6:40 AM. Dishes were piled in the sink, placemats arranged before each space at the table, and the photograph sat at the center of them, leaning on the white wall, tilted away from Mason. Above him, his mother walked around the master bedroom, getting dressed for work. The house was otherwise quiet.

Carefully chewing the last bit of toast, Mason took the frame in his hands. His parents

looked much younger. His father had a disheveled crown of brown hair, and mother's skin was younger, clearer, under the white flash. He stood between them, his smile white and wide and gapped by missing teeth, his parents' hands linked behind his tall, pink ears. Blush on his cheeks, and a tuft of cotton, invisible in the photograph, that he remembered had been attached to the back of his shorts. Even his sister, standing next to their mother's left leg, had seemed happy, glancing at him with an expression of pride. As he heard his mother coming downstairs, her steps audible on the staircase, Mason put the photograph back, leaning it against the wall, then rose to fit his dish in the dishwasher.

"Do you want a ride?" His mother was dressed for work: blue blouse, black pants, her high-heeled shoes in her left hand. "I still have some time left before I need to drive your father."

Mason bent to slip the plastic plate in the dishwasher, glancing up at his mother. "No thanks, I'm good," he said. His mother was rounder than she had been in the photograph, he noticed, and her cheeks were beginning to sag. All of her movements were quick, and she sighed often, as if she were eternally disappointed. "I'll take the bus."

"Even on your first day of high school?"

"I'm fine," he said, closing the dishwasher. "Don't worry about it."

"Okay," his mother said, walking to the couch by the back door, where she sat down and turned on the news, filling the room with the blaring sound of the CBS News morning jingle. "You're going to do the dishes when you get home, right?"

"Of course," Mason said. As he headed towards the back door, he glanced regretfully back at the dishes in the sink. To the left, the cutting-board on the counter was covered with bits of fruit, and the stovetop was stained with thick splotches of sauce on the right. It would take him at least an hour to clean up. And he might as well sweep the floor and wipe down the table, too.

“Thanks,” his mother said. As a bow-tied man on television gestured toward a map of southeastern Pennsylvania, sweeping his hand over a range of numbers demarcating different places, from Bucks County to Philadelphia to Morristown, she turned down the volume, looking over at Mason as he tied his shoes. “I’m sorry about last night,” she said. “I didn’t mean to get that angry.”

“It’s okay,” he said. He finished tying his shoes and, standing, slung his backpack over his right shoulder. “I’ll live.”

She nodded and opened her mouth as if she was going to say something else, but decided not to. Something faded behind her eyes. She turned her gaze to the television, turning up its volume, as he gently closed the screen door behind him.

At lunch that day, sitting at the end of one of the long, yellow tables of the high school cafeteria, Mason saw Connor O’Hara wandering around with a tray in his hands. Connor had a dumbstruck expression on his face, as if he were walking through an alien world, and scanned the tables around him in obvious bewilderment. Mason had not seen him regularly since they played freshman baseball together. Both had been cut from the JV team last year, and though Connor had invited him to a few baseball games over the summer, Mason had always refused, citing one excuse or another. As Connor saw him, Mason gave a half-wave, then almost immediately regretted it as Connor walked over to join him. In the half-moment before Connor pulled out a chair and sat down, Mason wondered how well he remembered their friendship, what he thought about that night in the park.

“Hey, dude,” Connor said, sitting down across from him. He was a muscular boy, and wore a short-sleeved blue-and-red PHILLIES T-shirt. “You have a good summer?”

“It was all right.”

“Sucks that you couldn’t make it out to those games.” Connor unscrewed the lid to a small bottle of milk, then tipped it toward his mouth. “My dad had great tickets.”

Mason looked down at his own lunch: a ham-and-cheese sandwich and a granola bar. “Well, you know,” he said. “I had work, and I had to get up pretty early.”

Connor nodded. “Well, what do your classes look like?” He leaned down and, digging through his backpack stuffed full of loose paper, extracted a battered paper schedule, sliding it over the table. “You got any of these?”

Mason skimmed the list. College Preparatory Algebra, English, Biology, World History, and French. An elective in Metal Arts. His own schedule had nothing less than honors, and even included some AP classes. “No, sorry,” he said, sliding the paper back over the table.

“Ah, that’s okay,” said Connor, stuffing the schedule into his backpack. He had taken a few bites of his cheeseburger while Mason was looking at his schedule. “Hey,” he said, regarding Mason with a new, more critical eye. “Are you going to do the play?”

“There’s a play?” Mason said.

Connor nodded. “Sure is.” He retrieved a yellow flyer from his backpack, turning it to face Mason. STORY OF A MARRIAGE, read the flyer in thick black ink. AUDITIONS SEPTEMBER 9TH, 2:45 PM, BLACKBOX. “I’m going to audition,” Connor said, leaning back in his seat. “You should come.”

Mason touched the flyer with the tips of his fingers, as if it were a fragile piece of china. He vaguely remembered seeing a play once before, in his freshman year. “I thought that you were just interested in sports,” he said. “Have you acted before?”

Connor flapped his hand, stuffing more of the cheeseburger into this mouth. “Bullshit,” he

said, speaking through a mouthful of food. “You’re acting all the time. All of us are. All the world’s a stage, right? So I should be fine.”

“What’s it about?”

“I don’t know, dude. Some guy whose wife is dying. I think it’s just a story of their relationship?” Connor shrugged. “To be honest, I’m just doing it because I want to make friends, and because I think I’d be good at it. You know, my parents have given me a lot of stuff to channel into this sort of play.”

Mason nodded. “Don’t you have friends, though?” he said. He remembered the boys on their middle-school baseball team, the kids at the park, the kids that he saw Connor laughing with in the hallways.

“Sure,” Connor said. “But you can never have too many friends. Like, where are they?” He swept his hand over the cafeteria, a wide room filled with students bent over long yellow tables. There were booths set up against the tall white walls at the end of the room, and upraised tables to the left, bordering the hallway that led to the theater and the rest of the school. On the right, a massive set of conjoined windows allowed sunlight to stream into the cafeteria, spilling boxes of yellow light and borders of shadow over the tables and students. Outside, on the patio, students sat at red fiberglass tables that shone in the sun.

“Maybe they’re outside,” Mason said, pointing.

“Oh shit,” Connor said, craning his neck. “I always forget about that. That’s probably where they are. Eh.” He shrugged again, looking at Mason. “Whatever. I like sitting with you.”

Mason smiled. Despite himself, he wondered if there might be something between them after all. “You do?”

“Sure.” Connor slid the flyer all the way over to Mason’s side of the table. “Take it. I’ll see

you there, all right? We'll try out together."

"Okay," Mason said. He took a small bite of his sandwich. He raised his eyes and smiled. He could feel his heart beating. He made plans in his mind to stay late at school on Friday, to try out together, and to see Connor again.

That afternoon, as Mason stood at the sink, rinsing dishes and slotting them into the dishwasher, he heard Danielle swing the screen door open, stepping into the family room. "I'm home!" she declared. "The first day of high school is over!" Her voice rose over the sound of the running faucet and the faint hum of the air-conditioner, thrumming through the walls of the house. Mason heard Danielle toss her backpack to the floor, kick off her shoes, and walk into the kitchen, standing a few feet behind him. Turning off the faucet, drying his hands, he turned around to face her.

She wore a pair of baggy red pants and a tie-dyed T-shirt, and she stood just beyond the stove, eating a banana. Her brown-blond hair straggled down her shoulders, and she nodded to him when she saw him looking at her. "Hey," she said. "What's up?"

"Nothing," he said. "My classes were fine, so nothing to say, really."

She groaned. "Ugh. Why are you so boring?"

He laughed, though he was a little hurt. "I just am," he said. "How was your day?"

"My classes sucked. I have the worst teachers."

"It's the first day of school," he said, cocking his head. "How do you know?"

"*Because*," she said. "Everyone says that they're the worst. And my math teacher gave me four pages of homework today, and I have a three-page essay due by Friday!"

"Sucks to be you," he said. She punched him lightly on the shoulder as he turned back to

the sink.

“Anyway,” she said, “I’m just dropping my stuff off, and then I’m going to hang out with Declan for a bit. Will you tell Mom that I’m doing my homework upstairs?”

“Are you going to be out that late?” Mason called over his shoulder. Instead of answering his question, Danielle ran up the staircase, and he could hear her now, darting through her room, searching for something. When she returned a few minutes later, she stood a few feet behind him, holding a copper key between the forefingers of her right hand, grinning mischievously.

“I’m going to do it,” she said. “You just tell Mom that I’m upstairs doing homework.”

“Danielle. She’s going to kill you if she finds out. And then she’ll kill me for not telling her.”

“I’ve done it like three times before. She won’t notice. You just have to cover me for a little bit.”

Mason shook his head. He knew what she planned to do: walking back from Declan’s house, she would take the long way around, jump over the rusted wire fence and into their backyard, stack the patio chairs on top of one another, and climb on top of the garage. From there, she could use the key to gain entry to the office, which had a door opening onto the garage, then come downstairs as if she had been up in her room the whole time. “Fine,” he said, turning back to the sink. “I guess that I’ll do it.” He tried to focus on what was in front of him. He only had the cutting board and a leftover pan to clean now, and then to sweep the floor and wipe off the countertop and the stove and the table.

“Thanks,” she said. “By the way,” she continued, “Thanks for doing the dishes, too. She would be really pissed if they weren’t done when she got home.”

“You’re welcome,” Mason said. As he scrubbed at the surface of the cutting board,

scraping off bits of bell pepper and onion and mushroom into the disposal, he heard the screen door slam shut behind her.

When his mother pulled into the driveway that night, Mason got up from the table, where he had been doing homework, and helped her bring his father into the house, setting him down with a thump on the motorized chair that sat directly across from the television in the living room. As his mother went to her room upstairs to change into more comfortable clothes, Mason stayed downstairs with his father, who was dressed in his rumpled dress pants and shirt, sitting on a couch near him as the evening news blared from the television. His father's hair, so neatly combed each morning, had devolved into a messy swath of grey above his lined forehead. His smudged glasses hung from the collar of his shirt, and, when he spoke, his voice was low. Mason turned down the television volume. He glanced towards the hallway that led to the stairs, wondering if his mother would check on his sister.

"What was that, Dad?" he said, leaning forward. "What do you need? I'll get it for you. You don't need to get up."

"I asked you how your day was," his father said, raising his voice. He was older, much older than in the photograph, with lines drawn all over the sagging skin of his face. He moved awkwardly, slowly, as if his limbs responded a few seconds late to every command from his brain and he had no inner sense of balance. And as Mason sat next to his father, watching him, he saw the long brown cane slip from his fingers, falling to the floor.

"It was fine," Mason said. He picked up the cane, putting it by the back door, before sitting back down. His father was looking over at him. His eyes were green and vibrant. "I just had class. Nothing special."

“Mason,” his father said, “We don’t talk enough.”

“Okay,” Mason said. “What do you want to talk about?”

His father smacked his lips and looked towards the hallway. Above them, they could hear Mason’s mother walking in their bedroom. “Your mother,” he said. “She’s trying to control me.”

“Dad—”

“It’s bullshit,” he said quietly. “Fucking bullshit. And then she feeds you the bullshit, too.”

Mason sighed. He looked towards the hallway. “You should not be working,” he said under his breath. “Whatever,” he said more loudly.

“It’s true!” His father looked at him with wide, pleading eyes.

Mason looked down at his hands, then up at his father, then back down at his hands. “I’m thinking about trying out for the play in school,” he said. “What do you think about that?”

His father leaned back in the seat. “Wow,” he said. “Didn’t you do that when you were younger?”

“Yeah,” Mason said. “I was the rabbit in my second-grade play. Remember?”

His father nodded, then looked slyly over at his son. “Is there another rabbit role available?”

Mason laughed. “No,” he said. “No, no. I’m trying out for a human part this time. I don’t think that I’d be good as a rabbit anymore.”

“Bullshit,” his father said. “You would be great.”

The sound of his mother’s footsteps again sounded on the staircase, and, in a few moments, she appeared in the kitchen, glancing towards the sink. “Thanks for cleaning up, Mason,” she said. “I appreciate it.”

“Sure,” he said.

“Mason’s going to try out for a play,” his father said, leaning over the arm of his chair and

turning around to speak to his mother. “We should go see him when he makes it.”

“Aw,” said his mother, smiling at her son. “You should. That would be just wonderful.”

Mason felt his chest swell with pride. Sitting there, he closed his eyes and imagined standing on the stage, gazing out at a vast, enraptured audience. He saw his parents sitting in the front row, looking up at him, and he imagined the sound of applause filling the bowl of the auditorium as he bowed beside the rest of the cast after the show. He decided that he would win a part and that he would see his parents on opening night, clutching each other, restored to their youth for that one singular moment of existence. And, beneath the lowered sound of the television, through the screen door, he heard the faint, almost imperceptible grind of Danielle dragging chairs over the patio.

“Hey,” his mother said. She was standing next to him, handing a drink to his father. Her lips were pursed. “Did you hear me?”

Mason shook his head.

“I understand if you want to try out for the play,” she said, “But I will need you to keep helping out at home. I just need you to keep that in mind.”

The auditions were held in the auditorium and, as Mason paced in the semi-darkness backstage, gripping the paper filled with three black paragraphs, he tried to convince himself that the pain printed there was his own: that he was the aged writer looking out into the empty space of his memory, the middle-aged man gazing at his baby’s swaddled body, the college sophomore meeting his future wife for the first time. He was none of these three people and all of them at once, and when he was called forward to the front of the stage, after Connor clapped him on the back, he gazed out at the three parallelograms of plush red seats that stretched to the doors,

speechless. His mouth was dry, and his hands shook. He did not hear the director who leaned over the white table in the pit, waving at him.

“Hey,” she called, cupping her hands around her mouth. The stage manager and assistant director sat silent beside her standing figure. “Are you all right up there?”

He nodded.

“Just relax. Stop shaking. And start with the first monologue.”

He nodded again and, looking down at the page, began to tentatively read his lines. His heels were touching, and he put his left hand in his pocket to keep it from shaking in the open. His voice seemed thin and weak, fading in the dry air of the empty auditorium. He stopped his first monologue twice, restarting from the beginning both times, and when he finally finished, daring to look up at the three figures sitting before him, he saw that both the stage manager and assistant director were staring down at their phones. The director was scribbling something on a piece of paper. She looked up, giving him a polite smile. “Okay,” she said. “Thanks for coming in. Send the next person in, would you?” She consulted her list. “Connor O’Hara.”

He nodded and turned away, heading backstage. His limbs were ached, and his heart, which had been pounding against his left breast, gradually slowed its beat as he took deep, long breaths. The sweat began to cool on his skin, and as he told Connor to head in, Mason dropped his head, looking down the dark shape of his reflection in the polished floor beneath his feet. He waited for the late bus outside, sitting in the grass, his head in his hands, and heard the conversation and rustling leaves and beeping vehicles around him in a muffled, distant way, as if he were wearing thick headphones. But the sounds sharpened into focus when Connor sat beside him, landing on the pad of grass with a soft thump, and Mason lifted his head.

“You okay?” Connor said. “You look pretty down.”

“I don’t know,” Mason said. He shook his head. “I’m fine. I just feel like I did a bad job. Like I could have done better.” He breathed. For a moment, he wanted to tell Connor about his father, to tell him everything, but he breathed, and the desire passed. “It just sucks,” he said.

“Eh,” Connor shrugged. “So do I. But it’s fine. The play isn’t everything.”

“Yeah,” Mason said. He nodded. He looked over at Connor, who was leaning back on his hands, wearing sunglasses and staring up at the sky. His neck was casually exposed, and the sunlight turned his face and neck and arms and calves golden. Mason envied him. He wanted to live that freely, without consequence, to lie on the grass without worrying about what might happen next.

“And besides,” Connor said, “Did you see how few people showed up?” He shook his head. “There was barely anyone waiting to try out. You might get a part anyway.”

“I hope so,” Mason said. He held the image of the packed auditorium in the back of his mind, his parents visible in the first row of seats. Then he thought about what the sink and the counter would look like when he got home, and, looking past Connor, gazing down the road, he watched the grumbling yellow face of the bus approach.

On the following Monday, after getting home from school, he checked his email on his laptop and learned that he had been cast as the six-year-old version of the protagonist, who appeared near the beginning and the end of the play, timid and afraid. The role almost did not matter as much as the fact that he had earned one at all. Shutting the laptop, he walked outside, into the backyard, sitting in the shade of an old oak tree leaning away from the house. He texted Connor, then slipped his phone back into his pocket. The sun emerged from behind a thick pack of blue clouds, and the robins sung above him in familiar notes. Squirrels scabbled up the stem.

A lawnmower grumbled in the distance and, a few houses over, a child laughed and screamed in a backyard. Everything seemed new and somehow soothing, and, leaning back on the old bark of the tree, he eventually drifted off into a peaceful sleep.

It was colder when he woke. The sun was setting in the west, the sky above it tinted in an orange conflagration. The wind had picked up. Goosebumps speckled his bare arms. And, he saw groggily, as if through a thin film, Danielle standing before him, yelling.

“Come on!” she yelled. She kicked at his sneakers. “Get up! Mom needs you!”

“Let me sleep,” he moaned. He cast his arm over his face. The bark was hard and uncomfortable, and the cold ground beneath him had begun to permeate his shorts.

She yanked at his arm, pulling it away from his face. “Come inside *now*.”

“Why?” He said. But he already knew why, and raised himself to his feet, blinking away the fuzzy dots at the edges of his vision as he jogged towards the house.

As he walked inside, grabbing at the screen door that Danielle held open for him, Mason saw his father lying on his side, slumped on the floor, panting. Beside him was Mason’s mother, her face red and sweaty. “Jesus Christ!” she yelled. “Where were you?” The television was muted, playing a scene in which a couple kissed in the moonlight on the beach, a Hallmark Movies logo hovering in the bottom right corner of the screen.

“Outside,” Mason mumbled.

“It doesn’t matter,” his mother said. “Help me get your father up.”

Together, tugging at his father’s armpits, Mason and his mother guided him into a quadruped position, then bent their knees and lifted him by taking one of his hands into both of theirs. They had to be careful; he had bruised his hip falling, and groaned whenever it came into contact with something else. And as they brought him to his feet, as he wavered like a weak-rooted

tree in the wind, they guided the motion of his fall toward the motorized chair raised on its black haunches. Taking the remote for the chair, Mason watched him sink, listening to the motor whirl. He sighed. "Why did you get up, Dad?"

His father said something.

"What?"

"He was trying to turn up the volume," his mother said. She was still wearing her work clothes, even the heels, and stalked away from them, toward the kitchen, her hands on her hips. "Please help out with the kitchen, Mason," she said, gesturing to the dirty dishes and the crumbs scattered over the counters. "I work all day, then I have to pick up your father, and then I have to cook dinner. I know it's hard, but please make my life a little bit easier." With that, she walked away, her heels clattering on the floor as she mounted the stairs toward her bedroom.

Mason turned up the volume on the television. "Is that okay, Dad?" he said, putting the remote on the table next to his seat.

His father nodded.

Mason noticed that Danielle was still there, sitting on the couch, watching them, running her hands over a braid in her hair. "Come on," he said, speaking over the noise of the television. "Aren't you going to help?"

She did not respond. She just looked at him and bit her lip, and eventually he turned away from her, walking towards the kitchen. He banged a pan against the walls of the sink, dusting it the space with the white powder of Barkeeper's Friend. He hoped that his father would not get up again. When he glanced back to check on him, he saw that Danielle was standing behind him, still tugging at her braid.

He turned off the water. "What?" he said, exasperated. "What is it?"

“I just—” she said. She paused. “I’m just wondering,” she said, lowering her eyes and speaking in a quiet voice, “Whether you think Dad is going to be able to keep working.”

Speechless, Mason looked from her to their father, who was still sitting in his seat, staring up at the television screen. “How would I know?” he said.

Danielle shrugged. “It just seemed like you might.” She was stepping back and forth, moving sideways now, staring at the tiled floor. Her shoulders were slumped, and, in that moment, Mason pulled her in for a hug. He hugged her tight against him, and he felt her hug him back, and they stayed like that for a few moments as advertisements blared on the television and their mother paced back and forth above them, striding over the floor of her bedroom.

The play meant that Mason came home later in the day, walking home from the bus stop as the days shortened, as the sun sank towards the western horizon and the birds shrieked from their nests in the trees. As he entered the house, laying his backpack down by the door and assuming his spot at the sink, he took a breath and a drink and looked at himself in the faint mirror of the kitchen window before he began rinsing the plastic plates before him, scrubbing at the pots and pans. When his stomach grumbled, he distracted himself with small snacks, biting into a pretzel stick or downing a handful of goldfish. If there were not many dishes left over, he cooked dinner, boiling pasta or scrambling eggs as he listened to Danielle upstairs in her room, her chair wheeling over the ceiling as she typed on her computer. When his mother came home with his father, pulling up with a soft, sudden whoosh at the top of the driveway, he walked outside to spot him, standing by his father’s side with his hands raised in case of a stutter-step or fall.

He finished the dishes as his mother changed her clothes and his father watched the evening news, or a tv show or television movie, and then retreated into his room, finishing his homework

and waiting for dinner. After the dinner, which Danielle would finish in about five minutes, Mason reclined on his bed, wearing U-shaped black headphones and staring at his small red playbook. He had framed his lines with yellow highlighter, and he read them over and over again, bending and fraying the spine of his book until he had to tape his pages together. He wore the headphones because they gave him a sense of distance, of space, from the first floor, though he still slipped them off at the slightest groan from the kitchen tile or the wooden floor below. Sometimes there was a terrible crash. And when his mother called up the staircase at about nine or ten, he returned downstairs, spotting his father again, walking alongside him as he raised himself out of the chair and ascended the staircase with slow, tortured strides. At every step, his father needed to lean back and forth to raise himself to the next level, gripping the banister on both sides, and every time that Mason, standing with his hands raised behind his father's back, felt the cloth of his dress shirt or the faint hint of his skin, he almost panicked, terrified that his father might fall back on him.

After standing at the top of the staircase, closing his parents' bedroom door to the image of his mother undressing his father, Mason walked into his bedroom and closed his own door, opening a window. Lying flat in his bed, he texted Connor or booted up his laptop, watching videos or playing Minecraft late into the night, until his window was a beacon of light in a house, a street, of darkness. When he finally closed his laptop and turned over in his bed, pulling the comforter up to his chest, feeling the cool breeze course through the crack of his open window, he imagined the same old dream that always hung in the back of his mind: the vast, filled auditorium, the audiences' enraptured faces, his parents leaning forward in their front-row seats. He added Danielle to that picture; she sat beside them, her chin on her hand, watching his performance with an amused expression. She hugged him after the show, they all did, handing him a bouquet of roses, and they smiled for a picture before the tall, red curtains, his father standing without the aid of his cane.

And they all drove home together. He would leave his friendship with Connor, or whatever it was, for another time. It was probably just friendship, he thought, gripping his comforter, then releasing it. He had made that mistake before. And as these thoughts floated through his mind, as he drifted towards sleep, he sometimes heard Danielle walking up the driveway, her sneakers squeaking softly on the asphalt, loud in the quiet night, and realized that he had never seen her leave.

After the last of a series of dress rehearsals that kept him at school late into the night, Mason dragged his feet on the lawns of his street as he walked home under the crumpled leaves hanging by a thin thread from the twigs of the trees. There was still garish make-up drawn on his face, though he had left his costume at school, and now wore sweatpants and a sweatshirt. Connor had dropped him off at the head of his street, waving good-bye and speeding off, and Mason thought of him as he looked up at the sky, dotted with cold, distinct stars and a bright moon. As he approached his house, he wondered whether he would perform *Macbeth* in the next semester, too, just to give himself something different, exciting, to do.

Walking up the driveway, he heard his mother. Up ahead, in the back yard, the highest rung of a ladder poked out over the top of the garage, glinting in the moonlight.

“God-dammit,” she yelled. “Why isn’t there anyone who can help me in this house? No, no,” she said. “That’s the last thing I need: you getting up and falling.”

Mason knocked on the kitchen window. His mother turned, and as he waved to her, he saw her shoulders loosen in relief.

Later, after everything had passed, he was lying in bed when he heard a soft knock at his door. “Come in,” he said, almost unsure that he had heard it in the first place. His room was crisscrossed with streetlight pouring in through both of his closed blinds, and when Danielle

entered, he squinted to see her. As she entered, he could only make out her hair, glowing in the white light. “Hi,” he said.

She sat on the edge of his bed, next to his feet, swallowing as if she were about to say something difficult. “Thanks for everything,” she said. “You know, for coming in tonight and helping out. I skipped when it started getting really bad, especially because I knew that you would help.”

“Sure,” he said. He had an unsettled feeling in his stomach.

She looked at her hands, twisting a ring on her finger. “Anyway,” she said, “I’m not going to be able to come to your play tomorrow.” She raised her eyes to meet his. “I’m sorry.”

He breathed. “Why not?” he said.

“Declan just managed to get a decent amount of weed, and he wants to spend the day smoking it.”

“Are you kidding?” His voice was louder than he meant it to be, and he was quiet for a moment before he continued. “You’re missing my show to get high?”

“Listen,” Danielle said, raising her palms. “This isn’t just any weed. This is the good shit. And it’s not a big deal. I’ll come to your show on Saturday instead.”

Mason shook his head. “Unbelievable,” he said. “Just when you were in the picture, you take yourself out of it.”

“What?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Mason said, still shaking his head. He tried to be patient. “You haven’t planned this out at all,” he said. “What’s with the ladder on the garage? You have to hide it better, or Mom’s going to see it. And how are you going to convince her to let you skip?”

Danielle paused. “I didn’t think about the ladder,” she said. “I’ll fix that tomorrow. But for

skipping, I taught myself to throw up. I'm going to get out of school, too." She grinned.

Mason sighed. He leaned back on his pillow. "Okay," he said. "Okay." He breathed. Everything would still come together, and his performance would be fine tomorrow, even if Danielle wasn't there. Maybe they could photoshop her into the picture later; maybe his parents would come the second night, too, and they could take a second photo. "Okay," he said, imagining the scene. "Okay." A small, anticipatory happiness rose from his chest and lodged in his throat, and he felt tears edge his vision. "Okay," he said finally, sitting up and drawing Danielle towards him, crying into her neck.

A Day in the City

Danielle Crowser woke at dawn on a Saturday in late October, blearily opening her eyes, leaning over her pillows, and peering through her window at the flat expanse of grey sky. In the backyard, past the grey veranda with its cushioned chairs and furled umbrella, the Japanese Maple tree had allowed its purple, five-lobed leaves to fall to the ground. They lay stringy and scattered on the unmown grass. Swinging her feet to the floor, she walked to her hip-high brown dresser and stared at herself in the mirror, idly scratching at a pimple that had sprouted overnight in the smooth skin of her forehead. The grey, overcast light seeping through the bedroom window greyed her pale cheeks, dirtied her blonde-brown hair, and glinted on her nose-ring. Shallow blue bags had formed beneath her eyes, and her hearing was still blunted from the concert last night. Pulling on a pair of jeans, she picked a sweatshirt up off the floor—a sweatshirt reading BAD RELIGION in red letters beneath a black-and-white picture of a monkey in a papal mitre. Opening the upper drawer of her dresser, she withdrew a thick wad of cash—her café money—and stuffed it into the left pocket of her jeans, where it bulged against her thigh. Closing the drawer, she surveyed the clothes strewn over the floor, the posters hanging by one corner to the walls, the beaten folders and crumpled papers lying next to the shell of her backpack, and she felt a little guilty, despite herself, for what she was about to do. She tossed and kicked her clothes into a single mound, shoved the folders and papers into her backpack, and stretched her comforter over her bed, hiding the rumpled sheets. Her mother deserved that, at least.

Slipping out her bedroom door, the carpet sunk beneath her socks. She tiptoed down the hallway, careful to step past the creaky parts of the hardwood floor, pressing her palms against both walls. On the right, her mother's snores vibrated through the plaster, while, on the left, her brother's low, frustrated voice radiated against her palm like rough ripples on the surface of ponds.

While their mother slept, Mason would stay up a few more hours, playing first-person shooters on his desktop computer, and when she woke a few hours later, the sun high in the sky, the birds singing and the squirrels screeching, the vehicles passing with their soft wind, Mason would be curled like larvae in his bed, a pair of cushioned headphones circling his head, a mask drawn across his eyes. That had been his pattern for over a year. She wondered if, when he wandered out of his room, looking for food, he ever glanced at the framed photograph that hung beside his door: their parents, young, smiling, cradling their children and staring into the camera. Their mother, wearing red lipstick to match her dress, her brown hair cut short, a pearl necklace strung about her throat. Their father in a blue polo, tan khakis, the muscles of his shoulders pressing through his shirt. Their mother was leaning against him in that photo, her shoulder resting against his.

At the back door, Danielle checked her Instagram account, her Airbnb account, replied to a few texts and snapchats, and drew her father's old polyester jacket over her sweatshirt. The keys for her mother's Honda Odyssey sat in a maroon bowl on the table, and, carrying them outside, she tossed them into the backyard, beneath the shade of the tree. Leaving the back door open a crack, she jogged down the driveway, breathing the cool, fresh air of morning. The street, lined with Lexuses and Range Rovers and Nissans, shaded by tall elms and oaks, was deserted. No one stepped out from their front porch to stop her, no vehicles revved and gave chase. Her breath plumed white and, behind the blinking red dots of the cell towers, the sun sent yellow shafts of light through a gap in the grey, overcast sky.

Linda woke a few hours later, when her daughter was already wandering through Philadelphia, looking for the apartment where she planned to stay the night. She woke with a groan, reaching towards the other half of the bed, searching for some arm or shoulder or chin to draw

towards her, against her. Her claw-like fingers scraped over her sheets, returning in a fist to her chest, and she emitted a frustrated, muffled moan. She was awake, and she knew that she was awake. Any effort to stay asleep, to yank the comforter over her head and screw her eyes shut, to down a few pills of the melatonin sitting on her bedside, would fail. After a few minutes of quiet breathing, she sighed, maneuvering her body towards the edge of the bed. As she sat up, she felt her shoulders hunch, sloping towards the floor, and she thought of all the tasks that she needed to finish, knowing, in the back of her mind, that she would not finish them. Mason was no help anymore.

She had been comparing herself to Atlas since Harry died: a widow supporting the world of her children. Not that Harry had helped much, or been able to, she thought. But if it were not for her children, she might have instead spent the rest of her days in pajamas, eating Cheez-Its, watching *The Price is Right*, *Family Feud*, and reruns of *Jeopardy* on television. Cinching a pair of sweatpants at her waist, she ran through the things that needed to be done: she needed to buy fresh groceries, to force Mason to finally mow the lawn, and to spend at least a few minutes walking through the neighborhood, or at least in the backyard. She knew that she needed to lose weight, but solutions to big problems started small. Since it was Saturday, Mason and Danielle could sleep as late as they liked. Well, Mason could, now that she thought about it, but Danielle—she remembered the hours of the night that she had spent pacing back and forth over the living-room floor, the blue minivan that had dropped her daughter off at the bottom of the driveway, the yelling, her daughter's steps pounding upstairs, her door slamming into its frame.

She had forgotten to confiscate her daughter's phone, she remembered, to deliver on the one punishment that seemed to matter. Stepping into the hallway, stretching her arms and cracking

her neck, she felt the floor creak beneath her. She knocked on her daughter's door, and only heard the birdsong filtering through the window. "Danielle," she called. "Could you open the door?"

Nothing.

Turning the doorknob, pushing in, she saw the mounded clothes, the slumped backpack, the comforter drawn over the bed where her daughter was supposed to be sleeping.

She shuffled back across the hallway, then, taking a moment to catch her breath, banged on her son's bedroom door. "Mason," she yelled. "Get up. Your sister's run away."

He groaned.

"Mason!" She shouted. "Get your ass up! This is an emergency!"

"I just fell asleep," Mason moaned.

Forcing his door open, Linda stepped into the room. The light from the hallway illuminated the clothes sprawled over the carpet and chair and bed, the crumpled tissues lying by his trash can, the soda bottles and cans standing beside his keyboard. The stench of sweat filled the room. She pinched her nose. "Mason!" she yelled, advancing towards a lump under his comforter. She pictured Danielle, soon to be lying dead in a shadowed, trash-filled alleyway. "Get up!"

Danielle watched the light slowly rise behind the overcast sky through a scratched, smudged train window. She was riding on SEPTA's Malvern-Paoli line. Having stopped in Bryn Mawr and Overbrook, the train was well into its fifteen-minute trip through the boarded-up outskirts and the railyards of Philadelphia, rocking gently back and forth on its tracks, when the conductor asked for her ticket. Past him, in the opposite window, the crew-houses of Boathouse Row shone brilliantly in the sunlight, and squadrons of racing shells, oars extended like the legs of millipedes, dragged their long red bodies through the Schuylkill. As the train slowed on its

approach to 30th Street Station, Danielle saw the broad Roman columns supporting the rear entrance to the Philadelphia Museum of Art. To the right of the entrance, vague figures leaned over the edge of a gazebo overlooking the river, watching it shift beneath them and reflect the grey sky.

Once, when she and Mason were little children, Danielle remembered visiting the museum with her father and mother. Her father had pushed her in a stroller up to the five sets of stairs as Mason walked beside them, and, after much pleading on his part, she had walked up the steps herself as he carried the stroller behind her. After the cool, muted air of the museum, where they had stared at the tapestries hung from the ceiling and the golden statue of Artemis drawing her bow at the top of the staircase, they had returned outside, buying ice-cream sandwiches and plastic bottles of water from a street vendor just beyond the back entrance. They had stood at that same gazebo, their parents standing behind them, their mother leaning her head on their father's shoulder. Across the Schuylkill, vehicles clogged in highway traffic had glinted in the sunlight. The train dragged its segmented body into the city, and a breeze brushed at their faces, tugged at their hair. Danielle draped her own arm over her brother's shoulder, and they stood there as if they would be pleased to be statues, to stand there forever.

Now, beneath the intricate, gold-layered ceiling of the 30th Street Station, watching the grey light sift through its enormous floor-to-ceiling windows, Danielle clung to that memory, to the memory of the concert the previous night, with its flashing, multi-colored spotlights sweeping through the crowd, the bass thrumming through tall black speakers, the bodies colliding against each other, sucked into one wide mosh pit. She had cheered when Greg Graffin, wearing a grey tank top, had called out to Philadelphia, and, in that moment, had felt like a part of the city, contiguous with the narrow apartment buildings and windowed liquor stores and jacketed

pedestrians that she and Jake had seen as he drove them to the Electric Factory, slowing through the narrow, double-parked streets. On the way back, gazing out at the shadowed city, she had rolled the window down and cheered. But now she felt as if she were both ignored and perceived, both invisible and highly visible, someone who everyone else watched from the corner of their eyes. The harried businessmen talking on their phones, the irritated, clumped families with raucous children, the blue-uniformed employees guiding crowds into the stairwells, they all had their own purpose. What was hers?

There was a homeless man here, slumped on one of the benches, who reminded her of her father—or a version of her father. His metal cart was filled with plastic trash-bags, and his stretched skin was wrinkled and patched with brown spots like coffee-stains. White hair sprouted unevenly, like weeds, on the pink dome of his skull, and his chin was unkempt and hairy. His mouth had swung open; she could hear him snoring. Danielle stepped away as she noticed an officer beginning to move towards the homeless man, hands on his hips, and looked away. Standing in the center of the station, she took a selfie of herself before the ticker-tape in the middle of the station, sending it to her mother. *big girl takin on the big city :)*

As Danielle strode toward the brass-lined doors that stood just beyond the bronze, winged angel lifting a slumping man by his shoulders, she tried to think of herself as a Philadelphian, as someone who belonged beneath the towering buildings with windows like tiny, brilliant mirrors, posing in front of the red LOVE sign or cooling her feet in the fountain that sprouted before the museum. She imagined listening to the chatter emanating from storefronts and restaurants, the strong scent of Chinese and Italian and Mexican food wafting over the sidewalk, and her fellow pedestrians, connected by the same place, passing her without a second glance. But as she pressed her shoulder into the door, glancing down at her phone, she realized that she was heading towards

Drexel and Penn, when she should be walking on the *other* side of the station, heading into the *real* heart of the city, where her Airbnb was located. Glancing around, hoping that no one had seen her, she turned around, retracing her steps.

Mason rubbed his eyes, looking at himself in the black mirror of his computer display. His mother had ripped off his headphones and mask, yanked open his blinds, and stopped at the door on her way out. He had heard her weight pause, had felt her gaze turn upon him. “I’m going to go downstairs and get the car ready,” she said, enunciating each word. “If you’re not down there in five minutes, I’m going to come back up here and drag you down.”

It had been about ten minutes since, but nothing had happened; he stood in the semi-lighted room, dressed in a soda-stained sweatshirt and loose, brown sweatpants. He rubbed at his eyes again, bending to gaze at himself in the display, and sighed. His belly had begun to slip over the waistband of his pants. His head felt like a heavy, blunt object, and his temples ached. His other limbs were ethereally light, as if they did not weigh anything at all, and he staggered back towards the cool shadow of his bed, hoping that he had been dreaming. But as he began to climb back in bed, to slip beneath the comforter, he heard his mother’s shouts tunneling through the stairwell.

“Mason! I swear to God, get your ass down here!”

It took them half an hour to find the car keys. Mason, sifting through long strands of grass in the yard, had a vague idea of where they might be. Danielle had thrown them into the yard the last time that she ran away, and she had a weak arm. Knees soaked by the dew, he remembered the catches that they had once had in this yard, when he had been athletic and lean and when she had been interested in sports, not in weed and punk rock and boys. At the time, when he was ten and she was eight, he had tried to fix her form, to teach her to push off with her legs, to channel

the natural torque of her throwing motion through her arm. But, after five minutes, she had thrown her glove into the grass and stalked into the house. “I don’t need you telling me how to do everything!” she had yelled. “Screw off!”

His mother watched him from the edge of the driveway, smoking a cigarette. Another new habit, he thought. Stealing glances back at her, feeling small pieces of grass stick to his hands, he heard himself speak in a snide tone.

“Did you have to get into it with her last night?” He said. “I mean, Jesus Christ, you probably woke the whole neighborhood up.”

Linda pursed her lips. She held her cigarette between her index finger and her middle finger, and looked away. “Now is not the time, Mason.”

“Well, you could help, at least.” He scowled at her. “It’s your fault that I’m out here doing this.”

“I am not doing anything more,” Linda said. “I did enough of that rooting-around before you managed to get out of bed. And,” she added, raising her chin, “I don’t ask you for much anymore. It’s not my fault that you have decided live like a goblin.”

His face burned. “Whatever, Mom,” he said, turning around, bending back down into the grass. He felt as if he were going to cry. He was ashamed that he felt as if he were going to cry which only intensified his impulse to cry. Blinking through tears, he searched the yard for the keys. Above him, blue jays and crows emitted harsh squawks. A red-tailed hawk floated in the distance. After a few more minutes, he found the keys under the tree, concealed in a blanket of dead leaves.

Taking the passenger seat in the minivan, pushing aside plastic bags with his feet, he looked out the window as his mother began to back the vehicle down the driveway. It was mid-morning, and their neighbors were outside, walking their dogs, raking their leaves, wheeling their wagon-

bound children down the street. At the bottom of their driveway, an elderly man drawn forth by an exuberant husky forced Linda to brake, her mouth tightened into tight lines.

She tossed her phone into his lap. "Figure out the directions to 30th Street Station," she said. "She sent me a picture."

Mason unlocked the phone. "Do you think that she went to Dad's old office?" he said. He swallowed the tears in his throat, hoping that his mother wouldn't notice. "That's where she was trying to go last time."

"I don't know," Linda said. "She went last night to one of those horrible shows in North Philadelphia. God knows what she did there, or who she went with, or what kind of *characters* hang around those concerts. And maybe there was more than that. I just don't know." She paused and pursed her lips further, into pale, bloodless lines. "A boy drove her home last night, you know," she said. "After curfew."

Mason shrugged. "So?"

Linda turned onto Montgomery Avenue, and the car roared forward. Mason leaned back in his seat, grasping the door handle. Leaves that had been clumped by the edge of the sidewalk rose and scattered in their wake. "I understand it's a normal thing to do," she said. "But I just want to meet them before your sister goes out with them." She sighed. "Not that your sister seems to care about what I think."

"What if I had a girlfriend?" Mason said. "Would you want to meet her?"

"Sure," Linda said. She took a right on red, merging into a broader, four-lane road. "But it's not the same."

There was not much traffic; there was no one waiting at the light beneath the blue CITY AVENUE sign. The sky behind the sign seemed to have grown darker and heavier, foreshadowing

rain. Leaning against the window, looking at the distorted reflection of himself in the sideview mirror, Mason touched the scraggly black hair growing along his cheeks. He wondered who Ashely had gone with to the fall dance in the previous week, and thought about looking her pictures up on Facebook. Maybe, if Connor was around, they could get drunk that night. It had been a while since they talked.

Thin dots of rain began to fall on the windshield. His mother flipped up the knob for the wipers, and, as the black arms squelched back and forth over the glass, he noticed that her hands were taut and bloodless against the wheel. She stared forward at the road ahead, he thought, like a warrior entering battle.

Danielle was lost by the time the sky darkened and, as it began to rain, she sheltered beneath the black awning of a bustling, rust-colored pizzeria. The white-shirted landlord of the Airbnb, his skin pink with sunburn, had frowned as he looked her over. “Too young,” he said. “There’s no way you’re eighteen.”

“But I paid—”

“Too bad,” he said, drawing the black grille back over his door. “Don’t care. Sorry.”

After that, she had walked to Love Square and back, had strode past the Ben Franklin Museum and the Museum of Natural History, had watched a squadron of schoolchildren heading to the Liberty Bell, had passed a couple holding hands before the Logan Square fountain, and had eyed the homeless men, laying on blankets toward the back of the sidewalk, in the periphery of her vision. If you made eye contact, she had noticed, they felt emboldened to approach you, to ask you for money, to tell you that you looked nice. Some of the other men, sprawled on benches or standing at the edges of construction sites, had not even needed eye contact to call out after her as

she strode ahead, her arms bunched up at her chest. Standing there, under the awning of the pizzeria, shivering in the sharp breeze, she peered up at the implacable brown buildings that surrounded the store, wondering if her father's former office was in the neighborhood.

The thought clogged her throat for a moment, and she shook her head, forcing it from her mind, focusing on the street around her. The other pedestrians on the street had largely vanished, taken shelter in cars and stores and office buildings, and the ones that remained shielded themselves with umbrellas or jogged forward, their jackets yanked over their heads. Behind her, in the pizzeria, rustic pipes and ventilation gleamed in the illumination of the naked lightbulbs dangling from the ceiling. Peering through the window, she failed to find a single person out of place at those long, narrow tables, a single person who sat alone in the same way that she would. Resisting the urge to reopen TikTok and Instagram—her phone battery was already below fifty percent—she decided to keep walking, to raise the hood of her sweatshirt, to head back towards 30th Street Station. Before she slipped her phone into her pocket, she opened her text messages back up, looking at one from her mother: *Stay where you are. I'm coming.*

Staring down at the text, Danielle resolved to keep walking, to stride proudly through Philadelphia, but to refuse to let her mother know where she was. She wanted to force her to search through Center City, panicked, and to only reveal herself later, standing safely in 30th Street Station, waiting with the other travelers, safe and bored. Slipping her phone into her pocket, Danielle walked into the rain, flipping the hood of her sweatshirt up over her head. The rain, falling at an angle, began to pound against her hair, her forehead, her face, and she planed her palm, raising it over her eyes. She spit out the drops that slipped into her mouth. As she passed a man leaning under the awning to a movie theater, wearing a ripped tank top and stained jeans, she heard him call out: "Hey! You're a fuckin' hot scene girl, you know that?"

She stared straight ahead, ignoring him. Behind her, he emerged from the awning, skinny, with black tattoos on his forearms, and patched and uneven brown stubble on his hard, pale face. The rain pasted the shirt against his thin, bony chest, his hole of a stomach.

As the houses that they passed on either side of the highway became narrower and more cramped, boarded-up stoops jutting onto cracked roads, Linda remembered her work as a nurse at CHOP and Harry's freelance work as a psychiatrist in Center City. She rarely visited the city without thinking of him. He had used to drive them both into the city, she thought wistfully. Then, after his diagnosis of Parkinson's, she had taken over at the wheel, had guided them towards the skyscrapers and high-rises gleaming in the morning sunlight while he sulked in the passenger seat, keeping himself upright by grasping the handle above the door. It was then that he had begun to gain weight, that he had stopped shaving. And it was about a year ago that Linda, worried about Danielle, had stayed home to take care of her, telling Harry to call the driving service that occasionally took him in and out of the city, when she did not want to drive. He had pulled out while she was upstairs, checking on Danielle, and when she looked outside, his Infiniti had disappeared. He had wanted to prove something to her, she thought, and sniffled, rubbing at the space below her eyes. Just as he had wanted to prove something with the affair, too. Since then, she had resolved to keep her children safe. And Danielle was not lost yet. Linda, feeling her stomach tense, raised herself up in her seat, looking hard over the steering wheel as they approached 30th Street Station.

They drove past Drexel, passing the statue of a bald old man and a dragon, the shining red brick of new construction, a bridge rusting above the road. The station was being renovated, and scaffolding covered much of the upper stories, blue tarp flapping in the wind and rain. A four-lane

road wound around the station, and Linda followed it around a few times, glancing back and forth between the road and the station. “Do you see her?”

Mason slumped back in his seat, looking lazily through the window. His head had begun to ache. “No,” he said. “Let’s go back home. Nothing’s happened to Danielle. She’s probably just waiting for us to pick her up in there. Let her take the train home.”

“Goddamn it,” his mother said. She swerved across the lane, pulling into the parking lot alongside the station, provoking honks from the street. “Head in there,” she said. “Look for her.”

“Why don’t you do it?”

She looked at him. “Mason,” she said. “Just do it for me. Okay?” She stared at him, her lips tight and bloodless, her hands gripping the steering wheel, her eyes narrow and anxious until he sighed and, rising from his seat, gently closed the car door behind him.

Danielle watched her brother enter the station from her seat in its Au Bon Pain, behind its broad window. He seemed tired. His shoulders and head slumped forward, and he stubbed his toes on the floor. *Finally*, she thought. *Awake with the rest of us*. When his long route around the station arrived at the door of Au Bon Pain, when he peered into the café-style seating and the open arrangement of pastries and sandwiches and salads, she watched his knees from beneath the silver canisters of chicken noodle soup. And as he stepped away, pulling out his phone and muttering to himself, heading for the same brass-lined glass doors, she felt a pang of guilt strike her like, a gong in her stomach rippling out through her legs and chest and arms and head. Maybe what she was doing was wrong. She stood at the entrance to Au Bon Pain, watching her brother leave the station. There was someone else sitting on the brown bench just outside the café, pretending not to look at her. She turned her gaze on him, and he grinned, showing her his yellow and blackened teeth. It

was the man from the awning, his thin hair soaked with rain, his pants and shirt stuck to his skin. He raised a hand and waved, lifting himself up off of the bench.

She turned away from him, walking towards the exit to the station, moving into the blue-grey light pouring through the windows. The police officers that had been standing by the ticket booth and the ticker-tape had vanished, and as she walked towards the exit, knifing her elbows in the air, she felt her stomach drop. Her armpits began to sweat. She was sorry for having taunted her mother, for having hidden from her brother, for leaving the house in the first place. Worried that her family had left, that the man would seize her as soon as she turned back toward the station, she broke into a run, pumping her arms, hearing her sneakers squelch on the floor. She felt the eyes of the station, of the businessmen and families and college kids and homeless men and women were upon her and, staggering forward, she glanced back as she pressed her weight against the glass door. Behind her, the station was lit in a bright, safe, yellow shade. Lights were suspended from the ceiling. Announcements echoed against the walls, the black ticker-tape shifted its names and numbers, and police officers milled around beneath it, talking to each other, German Shepherds lying at their feet. Danielle breathed. Then she turned back towards the door, pressing her palms against its cool surface, and pushed away from the city.

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ACADEMIC VITA

Education

The Pennsylvania State University, Schreyer Honors College
Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in English; B.A. in Philosophy;
Minors: French

Class of 2020

Dean's List

Work Experience

Penn State Learning Center, Pennsylvania State University

Trainee/Writing Tutor

- Work with tutees to improve style, grammar, and structural emphasis on papers, resumes, applications, and multimedia projects.
- Consistently receive positive feedback from tutees.

Communications Intern, Pennsylvania State College of Agricultural Sciences

Freelance Feature-Writer

- Interview and write feature-length articles on students and agricultural science clubs in APA format.
- Finished articles are published on Penn State News.

Associate at Harwood Institute, Bethesda, Maryland

May 2019 – August 2019

Writer/Editor

- In first stint at the Institute, researched contemporary American politics and attitudes toward American politics and previous social movements such as Communitarianism and New Urbanism, while also writing an article that appeared in *Public Library Quarterly* on the Harwood Institute's involvement in Youngstown, Ohio.
- In my latest stint at the Harwood Institute during Summer 2019, I performed research on the Institute's work in Battle Creek, Spokane, and Oak Park, as well as research for a Kettering Foundation study and Rich Harwood's newest book, *Stepping Forward*.
- My articles on these subjects will be published as community case studies on the Institute's website for its thirty-year anniversary.

On-Campus Activities

Kalliope Literary Magazine, Pennsylvania State University

Poetry Coordinator

- As Poetry Coordinator, vet and proofread submissions, plan committee meetings, and present my own notes on poems for the benefit of the committee.

Additional Activities

Paterno Fellows Program, Pennsylvania State University

- Participate in liberal arts honors program including advanced academic coursework, intensive study, and thesis
- Fulfill additional requirements such as study abroad, internships, ethics study, and leadership commitment

Study Abroad, Institute for American Universities

Aix-En-Provence, France

- Studied abroad for several months; lived with a host family, attained conversational fluency in French, and took classes in art, literature, grammar, and cinema.