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Opening Extract from...

White Fur

Written by Jardine Libaire

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JARDINE LIBAIRE

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For Neil Barrett Little

I take thee at thy word:
Call me but love, and I'll be new baptized;
Henceforth I never will be Romeo.

—William Shakespeare, *Romeo and Juliet*

I remember a little girl who had a white rabbit coat and hat and muff. Actually, I don't remember the little girl. I remember the coat and the hat and the muff.

—Joe Brainard, *I Remember*

JUNE 1987

Outside their motel window, Wyoming is lurid with sunset. A billboard for Winstons simmers on the horizon of highway, as if the cigarettes might ignite in their box.

Standing rain has collected in the sagebrush close to the road, and heat makes a perfume from these puddles: herbal, medicinal, otherworldly.

Inside Room 186 of the Wagon Wheel Inn, Elise will be kneeling on the carpet, which is orange like a tangerine. Her hair is greasy and braided, and a name—tattooed in calligraphy on her neck—is visible. She keeps both hands on the shotgun—the muzzle pressed into Jamey's breast.

He'll be sitting on a chair in the middle of the room, hands on thighs.

"Don't you love me?" he'll ask, quiet and desperate. "Elise. Come on. Don't you love me?"

She bites her lip.

He's not wearing a shirt—just jeans—and his bare feet are splayed. The couple has been in this position for two hours and fourteen minutes.

Fifteen minutes now.

Her muscles are quaking. His should be.

In case the room seems small in this recounting, be sure it's not. It's gigantic, swollen, pounding on a molecular level like a billion hearts, the way a space does when the people in it realize their power. Elise will close her eyes, turn her head, and push the safety off.

JANUARY 1986

CONNECTICUT IS WHERE IT BEGINS.

Elise sits on the couch and listens carefully to this evening's city song of church bells and police sirens. She tilts her long and fine skull in a minor way.

New Haven winter: sour, brittle, gray like ice that forms on milk.

Robbie's place—*and her place too,* Robbie insists—is bare as a squat, with a mattress and thin blankets in each bedroom. The curtains are smoke-soiled. The fridge door is scaled in decals from radio stations and hard-core bands, and stickers peeled off apples. One Lucky Charm lies bloated in the drain.

Taped to her wall, where someone else might hang a crucifix, is a page torn from *Rolling Stone*: Prince in a misty lavender paradise.

Elise moved in three months ago, after Robbie found her snoring in his boyfriend-of-the-night's unlocked Pontiac; she was shivering under a ragged white fur coat.

At first they thought she was a dog.

She squinted at Robbie and his friend, who both stood there with the door open.

"Whoops. This your car?" she'd asked, smiling lopsided, eyes clear, drug-free.

When she stood up out of the backseat, taller than them, a backpack hanging like a pendulum from her hand—then she looked scared. An elegantly sad runaway in generic white sneakers and gold bamboo earrings.

The men had to unclench their fists.

Robbie took her home, and the two became incongruous animals in a fable—a giraffe that helps a honeybee, or a rabbit who saves an elephant, having little adventures from page to page.

The new roommates bonded by cooking macaroni together, dancing in pajamas and socks to Michael Jackson, drinking soda, and watching late-night public access TV. Shit, neither of them has a clue what to do in life except live.

* * *

She's looking out her living-room window. Her and Robbie's building is rotted from its eaves down, the floors broken into discount apartment units. Their building has stoic—almost happy—bad health, the way a smile is gleeful if it's missing teeth.

Next door is a white townhouse where two Yale guys live. A chandelier glimmers inside, shining with leftover daylight when everything else is dark. Wealthy families lived there before the neighborhood slipped, and the house is forlorn like a society girl forced to get a job.

These boys happen to be smoking on the porch.

Now Elise is going to do it—before she thinks it over and backs down. It's been driving her crazy.

Now she zips up the knee-length rabbit coat with its vinyl belt, the name *Esther* stitched in violet into the taffeta lining that is threadbare and shimmering. (She traded her can of Pringles for the coat on a Greyhound bus one abnormally warm autumn night, while the factories of Elizabeth, New Jersey, ghosted by in the dark. The black girl was strung out and thought it was a good deal since she wasn't cold at that moment and seemed to revel in the dream she'd never be cold again. *But I already ate some of the chips,* Elise joked in protest, handing over the tube and taking the fur. *No, kid,* the girl murmured, *it's cool.*)

Elise leaves the apartment. Night air snakes into her seams within seconds as she walks down the sidewalk.

Everyone sizes each other up. She waves.

"Hey neighbor," says one guy for the first time since she moved in.

"Hey," she says.

"Where you going?" he asks, obviously intoxicated.

She sniffs and looks away. "Buy some beer."

Her accent is harder than they expected.

"We've got beer."

"What kind?" she says, eyes narrowed.

"The kind," he says, "you don't have to go walking in the cold for."

The three of them amble into the house as if this is an everyday meeting, as if no one is curious about anyone else. Inside, Matt goes to the fridge and pops the caps off three Heinekens.

Elise's heart is a broken machine, crashing and thumping.

"What's your name again?" he asks even though she hasn't said it.

"Elise."

Is she frightening? Is she pretty? The guys blink their eyes as if her body is rippling and morphing and they can't finalize an idea.

She's lanky with round and solid tits. Boys' hips. She's a greyhound, curved to run, aerodynamic, beaten, fast as fuck, born to lose. Her face is stark, outlined by dark cornrows. The features drawn down for velocity. The scalp—ghostly. Her skin and hair verge on oily, but the gray eyes are soft in black-liner confines. A divot in her cheekbone might have come from chicken pox.

"I'm Matt," says the one doing all the talking, his own face appraising, unkind. Nothing happens in his eyes except a vague fizz, like flat root beer.

"And I'm Jamey," says the one with the dimple. He looks like a matinee idol who got drugged—waxy, his eyes heavy with lust but also choirboy chaste.

Jamey.

Somehow he gives the impression of being a hustler, but also being the mark, his self twisted into a Möbius strip of innate glamour and his own exploitation.

"Nice place," she says.

Elise doesn't know what to make of it. A camel-hair coat on a chair. *Interview* magazines and *Wall Street Journals,* cigarette packs and folded twenties and coins and Perrier bottles on the coffee table.

She moves around, in boots and that skanky fur, like an inspector.

"You at Yale?" asks Matt with a straight face, even though they know she's not.

"Nah."

Jamey asks: "Are you from here?"

"From around. You guys from here?"

"We're from New York," Matt says, lighting a smoke, his tone polite considering the absurdity of the question.

"You brothers?" Elise prompts.

"No," says Matt, shaking out the match. "Just look like brothers."

"Grew up together," Jamey adds.

She's watched them since she moved onto the block a few months ago, and could barely tell them apart before tonight. Now it's obvious they're opposites. She's watched as they shaved on the other side of a steamed window, white towel around a waist. They buttoned long coats, getting into their cars where they talked on giant blocks of telephones.

Jamey gets up for another beer.

"Grab me one?" Matt says.

"Me too," Elise adds.

Matt shoots a look to Jamey, who just grins and shrugs, comes back with three bottles.

They sit there, drinking. Elise should go home, but she isn't standing up.

Late at night, Elise has watched them bring home girls in gowns (that drag the dead leaves on the ground) and big tuxedo jackets over their shoulders. Or a girl in a kilt will lean her bicycle against the porch railing and sidle inside on golden afternoons. The boys leave early for classes, hair damp and combed, the world moody with sleep. They wave to the elderly landlord shoveling snow from their walk.

"Well," Matt says in a disingenuous voice. "Bedtime for me."

She's also watched Matt shadow Robbie down the sidewalk to amuse his Ray-Bans-and-Shetland-sweater buddies, without Robbie realizing it (in fact after he'd waved hesitantly to them as he passed), Matt mincing his steps and hanging his wrist, making his face fey and pathetic.

"Guess we'll see you around," Matt says to her forcefully.

"Sure, yeah." Elise lights a Newport King. She stands to blow smoke in his face. "And if you ever get near my friend Robbie again, let alone make fun of him like I seen you do, I'll burn your motherfucking house down."

The blue smoke hangs, waiting, and she looks at him, her eyes half-lidded and suddenly red, deadened. The tiniest smirk touches her mouth.

"I'm sorry, what?" Matt says shrilly.

"You heard me," Elise says, mission accomplished but now having to control her voice from shaking.

"Are you coming into *my* house and telling *me* what to do?" Matt pushes her shoulder, testing the moment.

Elise looks at where he touched her then raises her head to stare at him.

"Okay, Matt. I don't think so," Jamey says, moving between them.

"She's out of here," Matt says to no one.

"You're fucking correct about that," Elise snarls.

Matt points Elise toward the door. "All right, let's move."

"I'll go as fast as I wanna," she says.

She glances back to lock eyes with Jamey, who—with a mystified half smile—is watching her leave.

* * *

Elise lies in her dark bedroom, ashing into a Dr Pepper can next to the mattress.

She's the uncommon baby left in a crib that consoles itself, that can stare for hours at the ceiling. Most people need to sleep once the lights are off, the sex over, and Carson's said good night; something's wrong if they stay awake.

Elise never separates things into day and night, rarely thinks about being a boy or girl, or alive or dead. Without divisions, there's less work to do. She floats, free in a cheap and magic way.

She happily replays what could have happened. She comes from fighters—her mom can drive a stick shift, smoke a cigarette, drink a

soda, put on mascara, and deliver a smack to every member of the family without taking her eyes off the highway. Elise could knock that kid's teeth out with a single swing.

She grins into the dark, walks herself around the ring with one arm raised.

But it's the dimpled one, *Jamey*—she didn't know he could exist until tonight; it's like she was watching a jet cross the sky then realized it's a bird. She has to reorient herself.

She didn't leave home last summer with a plan. Twenty years old, she never finished high school, she was half-white and half–Puerto Rican, childless, employed at the time, not lost and not found, not incarcerated, not beautiful and not ugly and not ordinary. She doesn't check any box; her face has Boricua contours and her skin is alabaster.

She left her family and everything she knew the morning after a Sunday barbecue in June. They'd all taken over the grill and picnic tables in the Bridgeport park, the Sally S. Turnbull projects looming in the near distance but far enough away to forget for a few hours.

They sat hunched, swatting at black flies, laughing till they cried. Boom boxes, hot dogs, jean shorts and half shirts, Lay's potato chips, cherry soda, and sunshine that fried their brains and hearts. It was a rapturous last supper. She left the housing unit at dawn, when everyone was sticky with hangover. She walked out the way girls do in campfire stories, heeding a knock on the door that no one else heard, and vanishing.

And she hadn't known why till now. Oh, sweet mercy, now she knows.

* * *

New Haven is a skinny, sallow cousin to New York City; it's a town that pretends not to want anything or to need charity. This morning is like most others as the place tries to wake up and get presentable, spilling bums from the alleys, sending parolees to stab litter into a bag, sucking raccoons into drains.

Jamey glides through the cold cityscape, and there are ideas in him, fermenting, the heat of them purring from his mouth.

He walks down the sidewalk behind an old lady leaning into the winter sun. Her plum wool coat is open. Passing, he sees the York Peppermint Pattie of a mole on her jowl.

"Good morning, ma'am," he says, searching her eyes for consciousness.

She doesn't answer.

And he wonders if he meant what he said, if he cares what kind of morning she has. Or if it's just another empty thing he says out loud, a candy wrapper dropped into the street.

In the park, hardy men play speed chess.

The day is warm enough to melt icicles out of trees, making a rain that comes down when it wants, a rain more animal than mineral, a rain with a will, a sentience.

Jamey sees portals—the bubble window of that van, the unlit storefronts, the grate where the gutter ends—his subconscious hunting for patterns since it can't find meaning.

Sometime later, he finds himself drinking coffee from a paper cup, sitting on the steps of a random synagogue. He jumps to his feet, as if he just awoke, surprised to be there, amazed as usual at where he ends up when he hasn't intended to go anywhere.

* * *

Jamey knows what his advisor meeting will be like, and walks across a courtyard that's shellacked in ice. He tip-taps in suede bucks up the marble stairs, an Ivy League paper doll who holds the door for two rosy-cheeked white girls with books in their arms.

Professor Ford has reached the final stage with Jamey. They started the year amiable, but Ford feels played, disrespected. Jilted.

"Jamey," says Ford, opening his door.

"Hello, sir." Jamey smiles, doomed.

Ford's white hair is carved to the side. "Did you see what Professor Hilden gave you on the paper?"

"I did."

"The class is writing on *Othello* and you hand in a paper on the misunderstood altruism of honeybees."

"I was—"

"I *don't* want to know."

Jamey shuts his mouth.

Ford holds out his palms in an exaggeration of inquiry. "Do you not want to graduate next year then?"

"I do actually want to graduate."

"This has become, by the discrepancies between potential and execution, an insult."

Jamey looks down as he's meant to do while the sun creates a muddy heat from the shelves of clothbound books.

"And I do not care a whit who your father is, nor do I care who your mother is," Ford lies.

Ford is like everyone is and has always been with Jamey: Ford had a crush, he wanted Jamey to like him, he expected the world, and now he hates him because Jamey won't respond.

"I'll do whatever you think is best, Professor Ford," Jamey demurs.

Jamey noticed it early in life. In a group of kids, a parent would speak to Jamey as the other adult in the room. Jamey would look at the floor, but whenever he glanced up, the camp counselor or parent or babysitter was still talking at him.

It even happened with people who had no idea who he was, who never saw his house in *Town & Country,* or read about his parents' divorce in the *National Enquirer,* or relied on his grandfather's predictions as quoted in *Barron's,* who didn't realize they were in the presence of a commodity, a publicly traded stock, a prototype of a child—like Huck Finn or the Little Prince.

If someone were fumbling with their wallet, the drugstore clerk would blush and summon Jamey, next in line: *Let me take care of you while this lady figures her stuff out.* Jamey wasn't impatient; he didn't even notice the line wasn't moving!

When he was little, playing at the Morrisons', Jamey cradled their new pet bunny, and Thomas whined and pulled for a turn—it was *his* bunny after all! Mrs. Morrison warned Thomas to stop, and warned him again, and then she violently grabbed Thomas's little hand off Jamey.

"Let Jamey hold the bunny, Thomas, *goddammit*." Her mouth was bright red and open as she furtively stared at Jamey afterward, and he saw something in her face he would recognize for the rest of his life.

He always thought of these moments later as his "Let Jamey hold the bunny" moments.

People looked to him like one of those Tibetan children picked out as a reincarnated lama. They think he knows the secret to life. They get mad when he doesn't offer it up. What happens, anyway, when the village chooses the wrong kid as their prophet?

* * *

EVERY MORNING MATT waits for Elise to walk by so he can glare at her from the porch, ice hanging from the portico. Sometimes he even vaguely ashes his cigarette in her direction, shivering in his white Oxford.

"You're an asshole," Jamey says when Matt comes inside. "Why are you so threatened by her anyway?"

"I'm not threatened," he says.

"But you are," Jamey corrects him. "She's obviously nothing to you, so why don't you just leave it?"

"Because she *came* into our house."

"We invited her in," Jamey says, stirring hot oatmeal.

"That's because she 'axed' to come in. Doesn't mean she can tell me what to do."

"I don't know. I thought it was hilarious," Jamey says.

"Yeah, it'll be hilarious when our house is on fire," Matt says.

Jamey laughs lusciously, then sighs, and doesn't say anything more. He does this a lot lately.

Matt looks at him like: *What the fuck is going on with you?*

It's strange how much they resemble each other, these two men. But Matt—with his pale skin, dark hair, dark eyes, prominent pointed chin, fine clothes, practiced stances—should be handsome like Jamey. And he's not. There's a sense of moral failing here, the idea that Matt himself is to blame for not being handsome, which somehow makes him uglier.

* * *

Robbie is white and short, and studies airplane mechanics at South Central Community College, and waits tables at Red Lobster. His bowl cut and cornflower-blue eyes are gnome-ish.

With him tonight is a tubby black giant who stoops under the ceiling light.

"What's up, Leesey," Robbie says, chagrined at having yet another guy over.

Sitting cross-legged on the couch, Elise pulls back her sweatshirt hood. "Hey," she says, giving the new guy a once-over.

"Hello there," the guy says in a gracious, Darth Vader–deep voice.

The pair ambles, blushing, into the bedroom, like boys about to play G.I. Joes or Matchbox cars, and Robbie shuts the door softly.

They put on Depeche Mode. Each time a side ends, there's a rustle as someone reaches across the bed to turn the tape over and press Play.

She makes coffee, pages through the newspaper, biting her lip.

Elise grew up listening to her mom have sex in the next room—Denise growling and muttering naughty words—or her cousin giving head in the bed where Elise was sleeping. Hearing other people is arousing and aggravating, the way getting tickled is a mishmash of laughter and the possibility of throwing up.

She puts her hand in her jeans.

* * *

That evening, Robbie and Elise smoke on the roof, squinting at New Haven's squat and dumpy skyline dusted with stars.

The bedroom window next door lights up.

"Oh shit, that's him," she whispers, awestruck.

"The one with the dimple?"

"I'm getting sorta obsessed," Elise says. "His name is Jamey."

Robbie smiles uncomfortably. "They're rich kids. You know that, right?"

"Yeah, I know."

Robbie flicks ash into the abyss between houses, and the coal is fired up by its twirling descent for a second or two. "You like him though?"

Now Elise is shy. "He seems different."

They toss cigarettes over the ledge, pull coats tight, and take the steps down into the building.

"I guess you never know, honey," Robbie says over his shoulder. "Right?"

"Right?" she answers.

Elise trusts Robbie on a gut level. She gets being bisexual, and thinks everyone is attracted to anyone, but gay boys have it rough, they learn fast and cruel. This one kid who worked at a check-cashing place in her old neighborhood was famous for being queer. He was all buttoned up, saving money, determined to get out of that town, always wearing neckties and cardigans, polite in the Plexiglas booth, but he wouldn't hide his wrists or pursed mouth. She walked in there once with her Burger King check, and he was swollen, one eye bandaged, one ear burned. Necktie in place—green polyester with diagonal maroon stripes. She was fascinated by him—nearly destroyed for love, over and over, and refusing to lie.

She survived years of school fights herself, fights that came from real and imagined sexual and social conflicts. She knew what it was like to be forced to take the squatting posture against another girl in the parking lot, hair in her face and mouth, a tribe watching, a random extra girl coming into the fight once in a while to kick or punch, the creepy silence broken with huffing and a whimper. No matter how bad Elise got hurt, she never regretted standing up for herself. She was glad when that stage—fighting every week—was over. Although you have to be on guard forever.

* * *

Dove shit steams then freezes on the road. Icy light radiates into the house.

In the kitchen, Matt unpacks sushi lunch from takeout boxes.

"Let's see—what have we got here," he says.

"Yum, I'm starving," Abigail says self-consciously.

Abigail's Christmas-in-Bermuda tan is amplified by a white turtleneck. She's scared, in a titillating sense, which is how most girls feel near Jamey. He's not charming—it's something weirder, more potent, dangerous. He's so convincingly disconnected from his beauty that people look away, not wanting to be the one who tips him off with their gawking.

Jamey bends over the *Aeneid* in Latin, the only thing he studies anymore.

He's always taken classes off the beaten path: Japanese Swordsmanship, Thermodynamics, the Culture of Belief from Saints to Atheists, a course on Prison Ethics, one on Botanical Drawing, and one on Jainism. The barbs and thistles of these fields caught him. He had a double course load and immaculate grades—until now.

His classes . . . had committed mutiny. The simplest, most innocent concepts turned overnight into enemies, capable of triggering full-system shutdown. Light is not light but energy. A person will never see his own face, just its reflection, or a photograph of it. Brain waves are more active during dreams than waking life. Roses don't smell beautiful; they smell like ripe fruit, which is good for survival, and so they're defined as beautiful in our aesthetic beliefs. These are obvious riddles, in the league of conundrums that blow a thirteen-year-old's mind after his first bong hit.

Jamey wonders, vaguely ashamed, why they're getting to *him* now.

He carved ballpoint *x*'s into B. F. Skinner's eyes. He had to throw out his Kierkegaard.

And now, his last refuge—*amo, amas, amat*—disintegrates: the paragraphs don't hold, words fall apart. Letters degrade into tiny sticks and circles, and Jamey closes the book.

He dispiritedly gets up for water, and Abigail watches like a hawk.

Matt snaps his fingers. "Over here," he says, indicating himself, being funny. "Show's over here."

"Oh, shut up," Abigail plays it off.

"Jamey gets plenty of attention," Matt says.

"Do I?" Jamey asks drily.

"That one over there like spies on you," Matt says, looking to Elise's building.

"What?" Jamey's surprised he's angry.

Matt shrugs, psyched he got a reaction. "I've seen her, looking out the window."

"She's not looking at me," Jamey says, opening the fridge for something to do.

"And you defend her all the time. Fascinating," Matt says, tapping his chin with his finger.

"Oh, whatever," Jamey says.

* * *

JAMEY ENDS UP parking at the Chapel Square Mall, crossing the lot with hands in camel-hair pockets. He wanders the domed hall, following mauve diamonds on the rugs, passing potted plants that don't need sun. He likes the mall because he is *somewhere,* but he doesn't go into the stores so he's also nowhere.

He sits on a bench to observe the population. He's always relied on odd activities to soothe himself, like reading true-crime books in hot baths. As a kid, the encyclopedia was his security blanket. He sucked his thumb until he was eleven and a nanny started dipping his thumb in nail-polish remover.

Now watching strangers is his salvation.

Today it's backfiring, making Jamey feel particularly left out of the world's doings. He looks away from girls in tight jeans, from women in acrylic sweaters. He observes two losers by the food court throw out a nasty hello like a fish hook until they reel in a girl, play with her till she's not so disdainful, and then her friend joins them, and the guys clumsily sneak the girls a look at their freshly rolled joint. They all saunter off, the guys' arms over the girls' shoulders, newly minted couples, for a quick blow job on the loading dock then a grape soda at the arcade, or a car ride and a fuck at one of the girls' homes, with the second couple taking her little brother's room, his turquoise globe falling off the bed stand, cum on his Spider-Man sheets.

Jamey watches them leave the mall, his eyes golden with misery.

* * *

Elise rides a rusting Huffy BMX bike (whose handle grips are gone) to work, her body vibrating with energy. Passing the Harkness Tower and the translucent-marble library of the university, she then navigates a couple bad blocks where boys in black beanies and shearlings stand on corners.

The shop is downtown, past the movie theater and next to a hamburger spot. She unlocks the frozen door to a room humid with fish tanks.

Marianne, the shop owner, comes in later, barely ever able to get there at all, dragging a cape of Mylanta and Epsom salts and cat litter vapors.

Marianne feeds the fish and watches soaps on a tiny TV.

"You seem awful happy," Marianne says.

"I'm in a good mood today!"

Elise wishes she could talk to Marianne about Jamey, but there's no point. Marianne has frizzy white hair and is obese, and is impartial to life, to living, without being bitter or blaming anyone. *I get along better with critters* is what she tells people.

Elise sings to Lionel Richie on the stock-room radio; hours pass.

At the pizzeria, she eats a slice while looking at a Jehovah's Witness pamphlet someone handed her. She sips Diet Coke from a wax cup, staring out the window at sun sliming the ice on the sidewalk.

At the Goodwill on Linden Street, she finds mirrored glasses for twenty-five cents.

Loopy Lex waves from the church steps. Homeless, his long hair matted and lip scabbed, he's still a raw-boned, handsome American.

"How's it going, Lex?"

"Going going going."

Back at the shop, she makes a paperclip chain.

Everything is about Jamey now. She'll wear the sunglasses for him. She could introduce him to Lex, tell him about the daughter in Vietnam that Lex never met, how Lex comes in the store to look at the fish. She wants to show Jamey the python Marianne keeps in the big tank, whose markings are like puzzle pieces.

She talks to Jamey out loud. As she bikes home in the dark, she's lost in a complicated conversation with him. Standing on the pedals to stall

for a light, she suddenly worries she forgot to lock the door to the store, and has to go back.

It's locked.

In the evening, from her window, she'll watch him come onto the porch to see the moon, breathing minty air.

Yesterday, she had a clear line on him. He was reading in the chair in the kitchen, and she could see his chocolate corduroy pants and bare foot.

Elise looked at him gently then, the way a mother inspects a son for scratches or bruises when he comes back from a long day playing war in the woods.

* * *

HIS DAD CALLS from Hong Kong as Jamey navigates twilit streets toward home.

Jamey can hear his father's smile—Hyde, Moore & Kent closed on the Ho Lang acquisition. "I had to tell someone, Jamester. What would I do without you?"

Jamey imagines Alex at his hotel-room window, sipping iced tea, flushed from swimming laps, facing a blinking, chromatic, mind-bending cityscape, and seeing his reflection.

"I really want you to meet Randolph Sander's son—you know he's at Yale, right? First year? I've never met him, but his dad is a *good* senator, and they've got a place in Kennebunkport near Aunt Jeanette. Just a thought, Jamey-rooter."

Jamey makes a noise of acquiescence, stifles a yawn. He picks lint off his forest-green sweater.

Alex gossips about a car accident. "Unless you heard it from Sarah already. . . . no? Well, they're saying now Timmy was on drugs. . . . Yes, *terrible* for both families. . . . No, Catherine's a *Rye* Millford."

"How are Xavier and Sam?" Jamey asks at one point, as usual.

"Well, Cecily and the kids are in Vail, yes . . . ski lesson . . . the little one . . . Cecily and the kids . . . Cecily . . . Bats always said that about the Headleys, you know? . . . Cecily . . . This winter . . . to Italy to see

his brother . . . Binkie won the winter orchid at the garden club . . . they fired Kathleen . . . well, the rehearsal dinner's at the Union Club. . . ."

Jamey's parked in front of his house, car running.

Elise taps on his window and he jumps, looks at her wide-eyed through the glass. She waves her pack of Newport Kings.

She waits.

He points at his phone and shrugs melodramatically, mouths the word "*father*."

She finally understands and keeps walking, into the night.

His stomach churns.

"Jamey, have you heard anything I've been saying?" his dad asks after what must have been a long silence.

* * *

At the Laundromat, a man in Carhartt khakis taps his cock, telegraphing with his eyes an invite to his truck. Elise doesn't even shake her head but still communicates *no*. They both go back to looking at magazines.

Aficionados of sex see her in a crowd. Some guys stumble upon her and crudely realize their luck halfway into it. Some have no idea, and turn her out of bed as if they did what they'd come to do, not understanding they hadn't even started. Those dudes smoked and hummed while they dressed and she felt sorrier for them than she felt for herself.

Redboy was one of the connoisseurs. He was something beyond this world himself—hungry, roaming, and furious. That boy would stay with her forever. It was something she couldn't regret, and she'd tried.

As early as seven she knew about sex, she felt it, she understood things. And she wasn't precocious from being abused, though she knew girls who were. Her mother was paranoid, for good reasons, and protected her—at shelters, Denise made her kids shower with her, and she tried to be meticulous and demanding about who watched them while she worked.

The first time Elise had an orgasm was at eleven years old, on a Bridgeport bus coming home from school—the seat was vibrating. Her

cheeks got hot, and she felt a pressure, this sickness or desperation, the sense that something had to happen or she would die, and then it all broke open in her, hot syrup spreading in her blood, and she swiveled her head on her long neck like a bird, having missed her stop, trying to understand where on Earth she was.

* * *

HIS CLASS WATCHES the *Challenger* launch on the CNN school emission. Jamey slouches while a guy to his right jokes about gravity. Normally, Jamey would volley like a gentleman, but lately he doesn't have the energy, so he nods gently and doesn't answer.

Announcer: *It's the 51-L mission, ready to go.*

The rocket on the ground makes smoke and moves slowly out of the gate, like a sedated bull from a pen. Jamey is surprised when his stomach tightens up. Is he patriotic? That's mortifying—Jamey's always embarrassed when he catches himself being sentimental.

T minus fifteen seconds, we have main engine start, and four, three, two, one—we have lift-off! Lift-off!

The man's voice is so jubilant, Jamey pictures him as a kid in a Depression-era dirt backyard, squinting at the solar system and dreaming.

Challenger*, go with throttle up!*

The machine glides into the teal of the Florida sky.

And then: a disruption.

Flight navigators are looking carefully at what has happened.

Two bunny ears grow off a head of smoke. This chandelier of plumes comes slowly down the blue. The antlers, or jellyfish tendrils, drop: *Obviously there's been a major malfunction.*

Students whisper, transparent and shocked. The professor stands cross-armed near the television set, her back turned to the class.

Christa McAuliffe. The everywoman. Her face was as familiar and American as a gas-station logo or a rhubarb pie. She was someone you saw every day but only waved to, never knew. A woman of such bionically sober ambitions that the country agreed to take her into space. She was sent on a pyre into the big night.

Jamey walks out of the classroom—trying to hide his smile.

He crosses campus, passing under stone archways.

Jamey has a disconcerting flashback to his uncle's property on Long Island, many years ago. The parents talked and drank inside the main house, the kids set free for the day, moving through shadows and sunspots, woods and fields, running or loping, showing off, squinting into the sky at the roar of a plane, hanging in trees like leopards, making those connections cousins make that are almost lustful, the kids wanting to trade places, trade lives.

On this unchaperoned afternoon, the children ate at a picnic table while dogs swarmed around their legs, waiting for the crust of a ham sandwich. Topper, who was a perfectly likeable child, went into the potting shed. He screamed, hoarse and sincere, after the door closed behind him and he was trapped by a corn snake.

Jamey had a clear thought the second he heard his cousin's cry: *I hope he dies.*

Jamey's young eyes opened wide, ashamed, and he tried for weeks after to either delete the memory of what had flashed through his mind, or to forgive himself—and then he worked instead to be comfortable with the fact that he's just a wicked boy.

Now Jamey gets into his car under a dingy Connecticut sky pierced by gargoyles and turrets. He doesn't start the engine.

I'm failing, he realizes.