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Extract

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I

ONE

Saturday

I

Wilson's got his arm deep in the twisted mess of wires, pipes, and tubing that festers there beneath his truck's dented hood like the intestines of some living thing. He gropes at the undersides of things, trying to find whatever leaking crack it is that's caused him now to fail inspection twice. That and the broken hinge of the driver's seat, which he keeps upright by stacking milk crates behind it.

"Damn truck," he mutters. "Goddamn." He says it though he loves this truck, he wouldn't ever trade it in. It keeps him busy on the weekends; it's a project, a chore.

Today is Wilson's birthday. He looks younger than his forty-two years, and in many ways he feels it. He feels the same as he always has, all his life, same as he did as a kid stalking through the woods with a BB gun or a young man drunk at a keg party, and so sometimes he doesn't recognize the city businessman he's become, with a weekend house in the country, a

wife, a child who breaks his heart. He'd always thought by the time he got to somewhere around forty-two he'd be ready to accept stiffening joints and graying hair, wrinkles and cholesterol pills, but when these things apply to him he feels as if there's been some mistake; he's not quite ready for them yet.

He pulls his arm out from under the truck's hood and starts to wipe the grease from his hand onto the rag he's taken from the bag of them in the hall closet: old clothing ripped into neat squares. He stares absently at the truck's engine as he rubs the rag over his fingers one by one, then he shuts the hood. He'll have to take the thing in to the shop, he thinks; he's no mechanic. A breeze chills him, and he looks at the sky. The clouds are low and rolling. Fall leaves ride the air, and he imagines gulls at the nearby shore coasting the wind. Late autumn always fills him with something like fear, or dread, or sadness; he's never sure how to label the feeling. It's an awareness of the inevitable impending dark, barren cold of winter, which when it comes is fine, he knows, and eventually ends. Still, he shudders.

Firewood, he thinks. He should chop some firewood. He's bought a new rack to store it on outside this winter, with a tarp attached to keep it dry; he assembled it last weekend, and now it needs filling. He should bring some wood inside, too; it's getting cold enough for a fire, and Isabelle loves a fire. She'll sit in front of one for hours, reading, or drawing, or staring at the flames, rotating her body when one side gets too hot. Like a chicken on a spit, he once said, which made her laugh.

He walks to the garage for an ax. He tosses the dirty rag he's holding into the trash can, which is nearly overflowing with cardboard, Styrofoam, wood scraps, newspapers, empty paint cans and oil bottles, and other rags like this one. He stares at the newest rag and tilts his head in recognition. The rag is flannel, printed with purple alligators. It's from a nightgown he brought back years ago for Isabelle, from a business trip to where? Spain, or maybe Portugal that time; he can't remember. But he does remember buying it, calling Ruth back in the States to make sure that he bought the right size, and the right size slippers to match.

He takes the rag from the trash can and holds it in his hand. He considers folding it up, tucking it away somewhere, but then he sees no point in that. He hesitates a second more, then tosses it back into the can, lifts his ax, and goes outside.

. . .

Ruth stands over the kitchen sink peeling carrots. "I thought I'd make split pea," she says. "A huge vat of it that we can keep frozen and warm up, you know, on those Friday nights when we get here and it's late and cold and the furnace is out or the pipes are frozen. I feel like that happens more and more each winter, but wouldn't it be nice to have a warm bowl of soup? That and a fire, if your father ever gets around to chopping wood." She puts the last peeled carrot down onto the pile of them stacked on the cutting board and watches the skin spin down the drain as she runs the disposal.

"You know," she says, chopping the carrots into coins, "your uncle called this morning. He's convinced he's under surveillance. He's being buzzed by black helicopters. He's counted thirty-six since yesterday." She wipes the hair from her forehead with the back of her wrist. "And," she says, "he thinks Ronna's mind is being poisoned." Ruth looks up. "Because she uses aspartame, not sugar." She pushes the carrot coins to the side of the cutting board and reaches for an onion.

The kitchen opens onto the family room, the rooms themselves separated only by the wide counter where Ruth stands. She looks up over the counter and into the other room, where her daughter sits at the table, her head bent low over her sketchbook, a pencil clutched firmly in her hand. She looks stern with concentration, and Ruth can tell by the whiteness of her fingertips that she is pressing the pencil hard against the page. She is framed by the picture window, and her silhouette is dark against the sky behind her, its steely canvas broken only by the jagged limbs of the apple tree, Ruth's favorite. Bare long before the other trees this fall, the apple tree is dying, Ruth knows. Wilson wanted to cut it down, but she wouldn't let him.

"It's dead, Ruth," he'd said.

"It's not dead," she'd said. "It's dying. Let's just let it die."

The winter will kill it, she suspects. It's meant to be a bad one.

"Do you know what my mother said to me on her deathbed?" Ruth asks, flaking the onion's skin away. "I asked her, I said, 'Mother, what am I going to do about Jimmy?' And she looked at me, and she smiled, and she said, 'Ruthie, I don't know, but he is your problem now.' And, my God, words have never been truer." She picks the knife back up and holds it above the onion, then she pauses. "I'm just not quite sure what I'm supposed to do." She lowers the knife onto the onion. "What do I say about

thirty-six black helicopters, for instance? Do I say I see them, too? That everyone does? Or do I tell him he's delusional?"

Ruth steps back from the onion to dry her eyes. Isabelle has not looked up. A large pot of water on the stove has finally come to a boil, and Ruth pours several bags of split peas in. "There," she says. "That should last us for a couple months at least. Maybe even all winter. Though I'd like to make lentil, too, at some point." She turns back to the cutting board. Her daughter hunches over her sketchbook, very still except for the slow and deliberate movements of her drawing hand.

"I'd like to see what you're drawing, Isabelle," Ruth says. "When you're finished, if you want to show me."

Her daughter says nothing, though Ruth didn't expect an answer. Isabelle hasn't spoken for nine months now. She has been to countless doctors and psychiatrists, but nothing seems to help, to penetrate the silence. Ruth is sure that she is somehow responsible. There are images that haunt and tease: Isabelle at two, sitting alone on the edge of the sandbox in the same blue overalls every day, watching as the other children play; Isabelle at four, sitting small among her preschool classmates, glancing often at Ruth with her book in the corner to make sure she hasn't left her there alone; Isabelle in tears on her first day of kindergarten when finally Ruth arrived to pick her up, ten minutes late. Isabelle had taken literally her teacher's joking threat to turn the stragglers into chicken soup, and she had nightmares for months. Of all days, on that day, Ruth should have been on time. And maybe she shouldn't have stayed with her daughter at preschool, the only parent, until April, when Isabelle was finally ready to let her go. Maybe she should have gotten into the sandbox with her daughter and helped her to make friends instead of allowing her to sit as a spectator until she was comfortable. She's read countless books on parenting, trying to figure out just where she went wrong, and how she can make it right. Each book tells her something different: she should discipline, she should tolerate, she should encourage independence, she should allow for dependence—and each book points to a mistake. Where she should have tolerated, she disciplined instead; where she should have disciplined, she didn't.

She lifts the cutting knife and begins to chop the second onion. She hears the back door whine open and waits to hear it close; it doesn't. "Shut the door!" she yells. "You're letting out the heat!"

Wilson appears in the kitchen door with a bundle of firewood in his arms. "What are you making?" he asks.

"Split pea. Could you please close the door behind you when you come inside?"

"My arms are full. And I'm going right back out," he says, passing through the kitchen into the family room. "I'm going to bring another load in."

"Yes, well, in the meantime I can already feel the draft."

Ruth sets her knife down and goes to shut the door herself. When she comes back into the kitchen, she sees Wilson crouched at the hearth, building a fire. "It's fire season, Belle," he's saying. "I thought you might like a fire. Doesn't that sound good?"

Isabelle doesn't look up from her drawing. Ruth watches as Wilson balls up newspaper to set beneath the logs. "Don't forget to open the flue," she says.

Wilson says nothing. When the wood catches flame and a steady fire is going, he stands up and takes a step backward.

"It's nice to have a fire," Ruth says. "Thank you."

Wilson brushes his hands off on his thighs. "I'm going to bring a few more loads in," he says.

"Why don't you sit down?" Ruth says. "Why don't you relax, read the paper or something? It's the weekend. It's your birthday. We don't need more wood right now."

"Might as well, while I'm at it," Wilson says. "And I need to get the logs I just cut under the tarp before it starts to rain." He looks out the window. "It looks like it just might rain."

"Maybe snow," Ruth says. "Wouldn't that be exciting? Maybe if it snows you could even sled tomorrow, Isabelle."

"Or we could build a snow fort. Remember that one last year?" Wilson says, going over to stand by his daughter's side. Isabelle slides her hand over the drawing. Wilson's face goes slack. "Sorry," he says quickly. "I'm not looking." He ruffles his daughter's hair and hurries through the kitchen for the door.

"Wil," Ruth calls after him. He turns in the kitchen doorway, his face red, whether with cold from outside or heat from the fire or something else Ruth can't be sure. "I made reservations at Luigi's. For seven o'clock."

Wilson nods and smiles stiffly. "Great," he says. "Sounds good."

. . .

If it does anything, it will snow. Even with the gloves he wears for handling firewood, Wilson's fingers have gone numb. He throws the last of the wood onto the rack and covers the pile with the tarp. He straightens up, pauses to catch his breath. Across the street and down aways, he can make out a moving truck beeping its way backward down the driveway toward Mr. Sullivan's old house. He sniffs, takes the ax from where he's rested it against the side of the house, and brings it into the garage where it belongs.

The garage is a mess. There are boxes of who knows what stacked ceiling high and piles of other clutter: garden hose, sprinkler, paint cans, drop cloths, bicycles and tire pumps, croquet set, deflated basketball, old moldy hammock. There is no room for a car in here, though there could be room for two. He should make room. He should clean this garage out. If it's going to be a bad winter, truly, his truck might appreciate the shelter of a garage. His truck would probably be in a lot better shape if it had wintered in garages all its life. This is something he should do, before the snow, before it's too late, right now.

He decides to start with the clutter, since he can't get to the boxes until the clutter is cleared away. He pulls garbage bags filled with clothes for Goodwill off an old loveseat and brings them outside, then he pushes the loveseat itself out into the driveway. He brings outside old paintings leaned up against the wall; these are mildewed, and wisps of a spiderweb stretch across the corner of a frame. He drags out the hammock, the croquet set, several pairs of rusted cross-country skis, bent poles, an old sled. Behind the box the birdhouse came in, he finds a familiar box that he'd forgotten. It contains a zip cord to be stretched between two trees and a swing to ride between them. He'd bought it for Isabelle last year for Christmas, but somehow it hadn't made it under the tree.

He opens the box and unpacks the wire and the swing. The set comes with hooks to drill into the trees and, according to the directions, setup looks easy enough. Wilson steps outside the garage and surveys the edge of the woods behind their house for suitable trees to stretch the cord between. There are two that look solid enough, the space between them clear of other trees and long enough for a decent ride. He takes the power drill from where it sits on the shelf, a tape measure, and the box with the zip cord out to the trees. He measures exactly seven feet up from the

ground and makes a mark on each tree with one of the hooks; seven feet is high enough that Isabelle will be able to dangle without needing to lift up her legs and low enough that if she were to fall she'd be okay. He goes to drill the hook holes, but the power drill is dead. He takes it back to the garage to charge it, but this zip cord is something he wants to set up now, not later, so he goes back to the trees with a large screw and screwdriver and starts to drill the holes by hand. The wood is hard, and his fingers are numb, but slowly, stubbornly, he twists the screw around, around, around.

"Wilson!" he hears Ruth's voice calling from the driveway. He looks toward her and blinks, unsure of how long he's even been standing at this tree. Isabelle is standing at her mother's side. "What are you doing?" Ruth says, gesturing at all the junk he's left out in the driveway.

Wilson sets his tools down and walks toward his wife and daughter. "I was cleaning out the garage," he says.

Ruth looks past him toward the tree he's been working on. "Looks to me like you've made a mess of the driveway and are busy communing with a tree."

"I found a zip cord. You know, one of those things you ride between the trees? I thought I'd set it up for Isabelle."

"I see."

"And the power drill is dead."

"Right. Well, we're going to the grocery store. We shouldn't be more than an hour, but I've left the split pea simmering, so could you go in and give it a stir once or twice?"

She opens the door to their station wagon and gets in. Isabelle gets in on the other side, and they drive away. Exhaust lingers in the cold air even after Wilson can no longer hear the car's engine. He breathes on his hands to warm them, and turns back to the tree.

"I spoke with Dr. Kleiner after your appointment yesterday," Ruth says. She glances over at her daughter in the passenger seat. Isabelle stares out the side window—or rather at it, Ruth thinks; she can't see through it for the fog gathered on the glass. "He says he's not sure he's the right doctor for you, and he thinks we should find someone else." She turns the defrost on high, keeping her eyes on the road ahead. It's a narrow, tree-lined road with blind curves. Ruth drives fast. "He says it takes two to make progress. You can't draw water from stone." Ruth sighs and lowers the defrost. They

come around a bend in the road and up suddenly on the tail of another car. Ruth brakes and frowns. "Fucking asshole," she mutters.

She's quiet for a minute. "Look, Isabelle," she says. "If you don't want to speak to me, and you don't want to speak to your father, fine, but please, please try to cooperate with the doctors. Dr. Kleiner was what, the fourth? They just want to help you. I want to help you. Your father wants to help you. We all want to help you. We love you. Don't you want to get better? Don't you want to get to the bottom of all this shit?" She looks at her daughter hopefully. Isabelle sits like stone.

The two ride in silence for the rest of the drive. Ruth grips the steering wheel hard. She is angry at these doctors. All of them, it seems, have given up on Isabelle after little more than a month, each sending her on to another doctor who after a month will send her on to someone else. Ruth tries to explain to them that Isabelle is shy, that it takes her time to get comfortable, that if they only gave her a little bit longer she might warm up to them, might give them her trust. Dr. Kleiner had used the phrase "lost cause." The recollection makes Ruth fume. That was the only diagnosis he could come up with, since no one can seem to find anything "wrong": it's not Asperger's, it's not autism, it's not anything that can be tested for and named. As far as Ruth and Wilson know, there's been nothing specific to catalyze it, no trauma or abuse. *Lost cause.* She pulls the car into the grocery store parking lot and parks with a lurch. Her daughter is no lost cause. Ruth will not give up. She looks at Isabelle. "We're going to beat this thing," she says. "Now let's go shopping."

Wilson has gotten about a half inch into the wood when he finally accepts the futility of trying to bore these holes by hand. He goes into the garage to test the power drill, but it's mustered enough juice for only a feeble whining spin. He squints at the label; it takes two to three hours to fully charge. And it is not for dental use, thank you. He sets it back in the charger and surveys the garage and the things he's dragged outside. He's lost enthusiasm for this project; he knows from times past that cleaning out a space just makes room for more clutter in the end. And what does it matter about the truck? One more winter won't kill it, and if it does, well, the thing's pretty much had it anyway. What he should do, Wilson thinks, is get himself a sports car or a motorcycle. He's a middle-aged businessman, after all, and don't middle-aged businessmen do these kinds of things?

Though he doesn't know quite what he'd do with a sports car or a motorcycle. He wouldn't dare tinker with either of them as he does his truck, and it's the tinkering he likes best.

A gust of wind blows dry leaves and sharp air into the garage. Wilson shivers. Already it's starting to get dark. Wilson looks at his watch: three thirty. Ruth and Isabelle should be back soon from the grocery store. Wilson remembers the soup.

Ruth hands Isabelle the grocery list. This is always how it goes: Ruth pushes the cart up one aisle then the next while Isabelle runs through the store finding all the items on the list and brings them back to the cart, where she arranges them with scientific precision; their cart is always neatly packed. Isabelle has retrieved almost every item on the list and the cart is nearly full when Ruth reminds her to get ingredients for cake. "I didn't write them on the list because I didn't want your father to see. But we need to make a cake to bring to the restaurant as soon as we get home. Or you need to. We always said when you were eleven you could do the whole thing yourself, didn't we?" She thinks, hopes, she catches the trace of a smile on her daughter's face. Isabelle's specialty, learned from Ruth, is devil's food cake with vanilla icing, raspberry jam between the two layers. Isabelle knows where to find what she'll need; she leaves Ruth in the produce aisle to get them.

Ruth pushes the cart to the side of the aisle and out of the way of the other shoppers while she waits for Isabelle to return. She looks at the neatly stacked groceries in the cart in front of her and tries to remember when her daughter developed this grocery store habit. Three years ago? Four? Ruth wonders if she should have taken such perfectionism as a sign that something wasn't right. If she had, then maybe things wouldn't have gotten to this point. And even if she hadn't taken that as a warning sign, surely she should have worried more when her daughter insisted on moving her mattress into the middle of her bedroom and taking the frame away to make things "safe." And certainly she should have thought twice when, at eight, Isabelle cultivated the ability to speak backward. Too many times these thoughts have crossed her mind, and she is getting tired of them.

She wonders what would happen if she rearranged a box or two. She wonders if Isabelle would notice. Looking around her first to make sure

her daughter is nowhere in sight, Ruth puts the Triscuits where the raisin bran had been and the raisin bran in the Triscuits' spot. Just a subtle change. The two boxes are about the same size, so the overall arrangement of things hasn't been disrupted.

Isabelle returns with a box of devil's food cake mix, the icing, and the jam. They already have the eggs and oil at home. She puts the icing and the jam with the other jars—peanut butter, pickles, and pasta sauce—in the child seat, but then she pauses when she goes to put the box of cake mix in among the other boxes down below. She stares into the cart, then slowly, deliberately, puts the Triscuits and raisin bran back into their original positions. She finds a spot for the cake mix and looks Ruth hard in the eye. Ruth feels herself blushing. "Isabelle," she says. She wonders if she should make up an excuse: she was just reading the backs of all the boxes as she waited and must have put them away wrong, she thought the yellow of the Triscuits box would look better beside the red of the Cheez-Its box than the purple of the raisin bran did. "I'm sorry," she says, but Isabelle is already headed in the direction of the check-out lane.

Wilson is staring into the flames and listening to the hiss and pop of the wood when he is startled out of thoughtlessness by the sounds of his wife and daughter returning with the groceries. He turns around. "My goodness it's getting cold!" Ruth says, bustling inside, her arms full of bags. Isabelle follows, carrying bags of her own.

"Is there more in the car?"

"There is," Ruth says. "But we can leave it in there. It's all coming back to the city with us. I've brought everything we need for now and everything perishable in, I think. I hope."

Wilson nods.

"But what you can do," Ruth says, setting her bags on the counter, "is put the stuff you left in the driveway back into the garage. Because it is supposed to snow, we just heard on the radio."

"That's right," Wilson says. He'd forgotten about his unfinished project.

"And take your time," Ruth says, holding up the cake mix while Isabelle is in the fridge.

"Right," Wilson says. "Of course." He heads through the kitchen,

giving his wife a kiss on the cheek and his daughter a kiss on the top of her head as he passes.

"You're probably going to want a scarf and hat!" Ruth calls after him. "They're in the box on the top shelf of the closet!"

Wilson goes outside without these things, though in the time he's been inside it has gotten colder, and dark, too. Wilson rubs his hands together and lugs all that he's left in the driveway back into the garage. He tries to arrange it all neatly this time—organized clutter is better than random clutter, he figures, and he's meant to take his time.

He looks at his watch when he's put everything away. It's taken him less than an hour, not long enough for Isabelle to have made and iced a cake. He surveys the garage, lit dimly by a single bulb, and his eyes fall on the power drill. He picks it up and tests it; it's charged and ready to go. He'll finish up with the zip cord, he thinks. Sure, it's dark, but he can bring a flashlight. And he likes the idea of doing something for Isabelle at the same time that she's inside doing something for him.

He takes the power drill and flashlight out to the edge of the woods. He stands still for a minute and listens: the wind in the trees, the weary creaking of branches, coyote. There is no moon.

He holds the flashlight under his chin and uses both hands to drill into the tree. What took him the better part of an hour by hand just to start takes him all of three minutes by drill to complete. He screws the hook into the hole he's made and yanks on it with all his weight to make sure it will hold. He puts a hook in the second tree about fifty meters away and returns to the box to read the instructions for the next step. This involves stretching the wire taut between the trees, from hook to hook. His fingers are numb, and he can hardly feel the wire in his hands, but finally he manages to attach each end of the wire to a hook. His neck is stiff from holding the flashlight, but he is satisfied. Last, the swing goes up. This Isabelle will ride back and forth, from tree to tree, pushing off on one tree and zipping to the other. First time she does it, he and Ruth should probably stand one of them at either tree to catch her in case she crashes. He remembers crashing his fair share on these things.

Putting the swing on the wire is the easiest part. Wilson steps back and admires his handiwork. He is pleased. Probably, he thinks, he should give it a test run, just to make sure everything is solid and ready for Isabelle to

ride in the morning. He turns the flashlight off and sets it on the ground by the power drill. It is so dark he can hardly see the swing in front of him, but he feels his way onto it and with his feet pushes off hard against the tree. Next thing he is flying through blackness, the air cold in his hair, his heart pounding. He keeps his legs stretched out in front of him and ready to cushion his collision with the second tree, which he doesn't see until the moment he hits it, and then he pushes off to soar back through the darkness to the first tree.

"Wil!" He hears Ruth's voice calling him. "Wil!" He lets the swing come to a stop and looks toward the house. The windows are lit, and he can see Ruth silhouetted in the doorway.

"Yeah!" he calls. He is out of breath.

"It's time to get ready for dinner!" she calls. "We need to leave in about twenty minutes!"

He finds the ground with his feet and makes his way to where he's left the drill and flashlight. He picks them up along with the zip cord box and wrapping and heads inside to get ready for his birthday dinner.

Their table isn't ready when they get to the restaurant. The hostess offers to seat them at another table, but Ruth has requested the table in the alcove specifically for the occasion.

"Another table is fine," Wilson says.

"Another table is not fine, Wil. It's your birthday." Ruth crosses her arms. "We'll wait at the bar," she tells the hostess.

Ruth has two vodka gimlets. Wilson has a scotch. Ruth orders Isabelle a Coke with grenadine. That's how she asks for it, "a Coke with grenadine," instead of asking for a Roy Rogers, which, as Isabelle has told her many times, is the correct name for the drink. Isabelle says nothing.

Almost an hour later, they are finally seated at their alcove table. Ruth is hungry; she hasn't eaten since breakfast, and she gets crabby when she hasn't eaten. Wilson knows this and asks for a bread basket and menus right away. "And a vodka gimlet, please!" Ruth calls after the waitress. "I could eat a horse," she says.

The waitress returns with Ruth's drink, bread, and menus, and they are silent as they scan these, though they have been to this restaurant many times.

"Mmmm," Ruth says. "I'm not sure whether steak or pasta sounds

better. They both sound good. What are you going to have, Wil? They have crab cakes as a special appetizer tonight."

"Do they?" Wilson asks. Crab cakes are his favorite.

"I read it on the specials board as we walked in. They must have known it was your birthday."

Wilson smiles. "Must have."

"I think I'll have the steak," Ruth decides, closing her menu. "And a Caesar salad to start."

"That sounds good," Wilson says.

Isabelle has taken a red crayon from the dish of them on the table, but instead of drawing on the kids' placemat she's been given, she draws directly on the sheet of white paper covering the tablecloth.

"I don't know if you should draw right on there, Isabelle," Ruth says.

"I'm sure it's fine," Wilson says. "It's paper. They replace it between meals." He lifts the corner of the paper as proof.

They are quiet for a minute, and then Ruth clears her throat. "I've been thinking," she says. "I've been thinking maybe we should go away this summer. Africa, maybe. I'd like to go to Africa." She stirs her drink. "You've been to Africa, haven't you, Wil?"

"Seventy-five," he says. "My father took me."

"Well, I'd like to go to Africa. I'm sure it's more beautiful than I can imagine. What do you think, Isabelle? Would you want to go to Africa?"

Isabelle switches crayons, red to black.

"Tell Isabelle what Africa's like, Wil," Ruth says. "Tell us about your trip."

Wilson shifts in his seat. He tries to catch Ruth's eye, fails. He glances at his daughter. Her head is bent over her drawing. "Well," he begins. "It was a long time ago. But I remember it was very hot. It was hot, but we had to wear pants because of the rattlesnakes. Or something. I think it was because of rattlesnakes." He pauses. "There were giraffes," he says lamely. "And lions . . ."

He is relieved when the waitress returns to take their order. Ruth orders her salad and steak, and Wilson orders crab cakes and linguini.

"And what would the young lady like?" The waitress turns to Isabelle. Isabelle stares at the table.

"Isabelle," Ruth says. "Tell the waitress what you'd like to eat." Isabelle stares at the table.

Wilson opens his mouth to order for her, and he feels Ruth's foot hard against his shin. He looks at her, and she gives him a warning look.

"Should I come back?" the waitress asks.

Wilson clears his throat. "No," he says. "She'll have the chicken fingers."

"Chips, fries, or coleslaw?"

"Fries," Wilson says. "And I'd like a glass of red wine, please. Whatever the house merlot is."

"Let's have a bottle," Ruth suggests. "It's your birthday. We should celebrate."

"A bottle, then."

They are quiet after the waitress leaves.

"You know," Wilson says. "I think we might have new neighbors. I saw a moving truck over at Mr. Sullivan's this afternoon."

"And what were you doing at Mr. Sullivan's?" Ruth asks.

"Nothing. I wasn't. I saw from the driveway when I was doing the firewood."

"Who are they? Or he, or she?"

"I don't know. I just saw the truck." Isabelle has looked up from her drawing, and the curious look on her face makes Wilson desperate to go on. "It was a big truck," he says. "Maybe it's a family. It looked like a family-size truck. Or like a truck that would have a family's worth of stuff in it."

The waitress returns with their wine, and in the time it takes to taste and pour, the subject of the moving van seems to evaporate; Ruth is buttering a piece of bread from the basket, and Isabelle has returned to her crayons. Ruth sets the buttered bread on Isabelle's bread plate.

"Presents!" she says. She bends down and pulls a gift from the shopping bag at her feet and hands it to Wilson across the table.

"Here?" Wilson says.

Ruth gives him a look. "Yes, here."

Wilson swallows and tears the wrapping away. Inside is a box with three two-way radios, high-tech walkie-talkies. Ruth smiles. "They're for skiing," she says. "We can each carry one on the mountain when we go, in case we get separated or go on different runs or something."

Wilson looks down at the box and pretends to read the side. He wonders if there will be any skiing this year. It is something Isabelle has

always loved; he taught her when she was four, and he's fond of saying that she took to it like a fish to water.

"Isabelle picked them out," she says. "It was her idea."

Wilson wonders if there is any truth to that. "Well, thanks to you both," he says, and leans over the table to give each of them a kiss.

Their appetizers arrive, and they eat in silence. Before either Wilson or Ruth has finished, the waitress appears with the main course.

"My," Ruth says. "That was awfully quick."

The waitress looks worried. "Should I bring it back later?" she asks. "I don't mean to rush you."

"No, no," Wilson says through a mouthful of food. "It's fine. Just set it down."

"How were the crab cakes?" Ruth asks when Wilson pushes his empty plate aside.

"Mmm," Wilson says. "Delicious."

"Good."

They start in on their main courses. Ruth looks up from her steak and sees their reflection in the alcove window, the three of them bent over their dinners, their faces flickering in the light from the candle. They could be anyone, she thinks. They could be their old selves. She blinks at the reflection. Behind it, outside, snow is beginning to fall. "Look," she says.

Wilson turns in his seat to look; even Isabelle looks up from her chicken fingers. "I see a snow fort in our future, Belle," Wilson says.

"I think I made that split pea just in the nick of time," Ruth says, picking up her fork again. "Just in time for winter. We got cocoa at the store today, too. That was Isabelle's idea."

"Always thinking," Wilson says. He pours more wine for both himself and Ruth.

"Speaking of split pea," Ruth says after a minute, "did I tell you what my brother's up to now?"

Wilson looks puzzled. "What does Jimmy have to do with split pea?"

"What?"

The waitress interrupts to ask them if they've finished. They are quiet while she clears.

"What?" Ruth repeats once she has left.

"You were going to tell me about your brother," Wilson says.

"Oh!" Ruth says. "Well, he's currently convinced that 'they' are spying

on him. Via black helicopters. Thirty-six since yesterday, though now it's probably more." She sits forward. "He wanted me to advise you against aspartame. Or saccharin. Whichever it is. It's altering Ronna's mind."

"Jesus," Wilson says.

"Not only that," she says. Her voice is loud. "But he's had Harry, you know, that bizarre friend of his, stalking Ronna. Or *following,* as he says. Into *adult stores*."

Wilson clears his throat. "Maybe," he says, "we should talk about this later."

Ruth stares at him and sips her wine. "Why?" she says.

Wilson stares back at her.

"Because of Isabelle?" Ruth says. "You think she shouldn't hear about these things?"

"I'm just saying that maybe we should talk about your brother later."

Just then the restaurant lights dim, and a little group of waiters and waitresses cross the room with Wilson's birthday cake. The rest of the diners join in singing. "Happy birthday to you," they finish, setting the cake in front of Wilson.

He and Ruth both stare at the cake, which Isabelle had carried on her lap in the car on a plate covered with a blue cake lid. It is lopsided, and the icing is thick. Isabelle has decorated the border of the cake with a flowering vine encircling, in the middle of the cake, the word *Sorry*.

"Make a wish!" their waitress says.

Wilson hesitates, blinking at the flames. Ruth touches his hand on the table, and he blows the candles out. "We can cut it ourselves," Ruth tells the waitress, and the flock of singers disperses. "Here's a knife," Ruth says, handing it to Wilson.

He holds it above the cake and pauses. "It's a lovely cake," he says to Isabelle. "And I bet it tastes good, too. Thank you."

Isabelle sleeps stretched out on the backseat as they drive home. Ruth falls asleep in front, her hand on Wilson's leg. Wilson concentrates on the road and as much as is illuminated in the pocket of light the headlights afford. The yellow line curves and straightens, telephone wires belly down and then sweep back up between the poles along the road, snowflakes flash toward them like sparks. It all looks the same along this road; Wilson can't be sure where between the restaurant and home they are, won't know until

suddenly out of the darkness their house appears, windows lit and warm. And it will appear, he knows, and the thought is comforting—they'll have a fire, maybe some hot cocoa, maybe Wilson will bring out the slides he has from Africa—but until then, Wilson will keep his eyes on the road.

II

She *is* sorry. Now she is.

Isabelle lies on her back in the dark. She hangs her head over the bed's edge and feels her cheek skin sink into her eyes and the veins in her forehead start to bulge. Gravity pulls her lips slightly apart, and her teeth dry in the air. On the ceiling, she has pasted glow-in-the-dark stars in the pattern of an August sky: Cassiopeia, the reclining queen; the Big Dipper, low on the horizon; Cygnus, with his swan wings wide. Orion is shouldering his way into the sky of her ceiling, but his three-starred belt is in another hemisphere, where it is daylight still. He is a winter figure; she knows that if she could see the stars outside tonight, he would be directly overhead. She rolls her eyes toward the window. Her father has left the porch light on for her as a night-light. Snowflakes coast through its glow.

She shifts her focus from the snow outside to the window sash, which her father sanded flat and painted blue after last winter, when they arrived one Friday night and found a squirrel had come down the chimney into Isabelle's room. Her door had been shut, and the terrified squirrel had chewed at the window sash for three or four days, trying to get out. Isabelle opened the door to her room that night and turned on the light; the squirrel cowered in the corner of the room. The sash was gnawed and blood-stained; the window glass, too, was smeared in blood. Her father had gathered the squirrel up in a bath towel, and Isabelle had offered it milk and nuts. It wouldn't eat. Her father promised her that in the morning they would take the squirrel to the vet, but by morning it had died.

That was the first day she remembers experimenting with silence. She had cried and cried when she'd looked into the squirrel's box beside her bed, not because the squirrel was dead—she'd expected that—but because of how it had all happened, the senselessness of it, how it was just a squirrel, looking for nuts on the roof one day, then the next day toothless and bloody and terrified, and then the next day dead in a shoe box by a girl's

bed. But how could she explain that? What was there, really, to explain? Silence had been easier.

Upside down, her brain begins to tingle and her vision starts to pixelate. She blinks once, twice, and then she sits up and rubs her eyes. She pulls her covers back and steps into the slippers she's left on the floor by her mattress, opens her bedroom door, and walks softly down the hall, past her parents' room, and down the stairs.

Ruth hears her passing footsteps. She waits to hear the whir of the fan that comes on with the bathroom light, the gentle clink of the toilet lid raised; instead, she hears Isabelle descending the stairs. She opens her eyes and waits until she hears the footsteps reach the ground floor and fade down the hall until she gets out of bed herself and follows. She is cold in her silk nightgown and bare feet, but she doesn't pause to find her robe or slippers. The stairs creak; she knows from Isabelle that to walk quietly she must put her weight on the edge of the steps, where they give less. She presses her body against the wall and makes her way slowly down. Halfway she pauses. The hallway downstairs is cast in a dim glow from the closet light. She watches the blurred shadow of her daughter on the hallway floor and listens to her rummage. After a minute, she hears Isabelle's footsteps again, slower now, and heavy. Ruth watches her pass by the foot of the stairs to the porch door.

Isabelle wears Wilson's warmest down parka over her nightgown, and a pair of his boots with feet as long as her shins. She's put on the fur hat Wilson brought back from a business trip to Russia and Ruth's fleece-lined leather mittens. One of these she takes off for a minute to grip the door handle, then she steps outside into the snow and pulls the door quietly shut behind her. Ruth descends the rest of the staircase and hurries to the door, worried that Isabelle might have already vanished into the darkness. But when Ruth looks out through the door window, she sees by the porch light that Isabelle's footprints lead only to the steps that lead down to the lawn. Isabelle sits there with her chin in her palms looking out into the darkness, snow collecting already on her head and shoulders.

Ruth stands at the door for some minutes watching her daughter watch the snow, wondering whether she should go to her, usher her back to bed. She wonders what Isabelle is thinking as she sits there, or whether she has let her mind go blank. Ruth would like to go outside and ask her. She would like to go outside and sit beside her daughter and say, *Isabelle,*

tell me what you're thinking, and she would like for Isabelle to answer, *I am thinking about my drawings,* or *I am thinking about Africa,* or *I am thinking about the cold,* which now, sitting there bare-legged in her nightgown and Wilson's parka, she does not even seem to notice.

But if Ruth did that, if she put on her own boots and jacket and went outside to sit beside her daughter, none of that would happen. Instead, Isabelle would go back inside, or she would stand and walk out into the night, or, maybe worst of all, she would let Ruth sit beside her in what has come to seem a deafening silence. Ruth puts her hand against a pane of the window's glass and holds it there above her daughter's body. She sighs, and after a minute she takes her hand away and walks down the hallway to the laundry room, where she pulls one of Isabelle's nightgowns from the dryer. The one her daughter is wearing now will be wet.

She pauses at the porch door before going back upstairs. The mark of her hand is still on the glass, traced in a blur of fog. Outside, Isabelle sits motionless, her chin still resting in her hands. Ruth turns and goes quietly upstairs. She walks to Isabelle's room at the end of the hallway and spreads the dry nightgown on her bed before returning to her own room.

Wilson has rolled onto his back and is snoring loudly. She slides into bed beside him; he is warm. She slides closer against him, nudges his shoulder.

"Wil," she says. "Wilson."

His breath catches in his throat, and his eyes open.

"Roll over," she says. "You're snoring."

"Sorry," he says. He rolls onto his side, facing away from Ruth, and she presses her body against his, her arm wrapped around him. Her breath is warm on his neck and still smells like wine from dinner. He looks out the window beside the bed and watches the snow fall beneath the single streetlamp mounted to a telephone pole. He has always liked this streetlamp because, he figures, it is theirs to the extent that it is there only because their house is. In the city, the streetlamps are anonymous and everywhere; they don't care for whom they shed their light.

Wilson blinks. He is wide awake now. He tries to let himself be lulled by the falling snow, by the infrequent sweep of headlights from passing cars, by Ruth's breath against his neck, even now and slow with sleep. He glances at the clock on the bedside table. It is still his birthday. The blue of the clock numbers reflects in the glass of water beside it and casts in a

neon glow the folded piece of white paper Wilson has set there beside his wallet and the car keys. He has looked at this paper many times tonight already, but he reaches for it on the bedside to unfold and scrutinize again.

He looks at the paper, ragged-edged and palm-size, by the light of the clock. A lion drawn in red looks back at him, his huge mouth open in a gaping roar. His teeth are sharp, his mane wild, and his mouth tunnels into blackness. He is sitting underneath a black tree, one that is low-branched and reaching from the sweep of wind cutting across the plain.

After they had paid at the register for dinner tonight, Wilson returned to the table to leave the tip, though he had the cash to leave it to begin with. But he wanted the excuse to return to the table alone; he wanted to see what Isabelle had drawn, what she had covered with her plate while they ate. He returned to the table just after it had been cleared, and the busboy was about to strip the paper off the table when Wilson stopped him and quickly ripped his daughter's drawing from among the wine stains and cake crumbs surrounding it.

He squints at it now again and wonders how his daughter knew to draw the tree that way. He wonders what else she knows if she knows what a tree looks like in Africa, little things, like what a cactus looks like in the desert, or how to draw a Buddhist temple. He wonders what else she's learned from those books of hers. He holds the drawing closer to his face. Africa. Maybe it's not a bad idea after all. He makes a mental note to dig out his slides from the attic tomorrow, if they're there, to maybe contact his travel agent this week.

Outside, Isabelle shivers once, not so much with cold—she is warm inside her father's down—as with the idea of it, the idea of nighttime, darkness, snow. She's not sure why exactly she's come out here, and so to give herself some sense of purpose, she's told herself that she will not go in until the footprints she has left across the porch have been snowed over. She peers over her shoulder. She hasn't been out for long, but already the snow is doing its work and the footprints behind her are losing definition. Across the street and beyond the roadside trees, she can see Mr. Sullivan's old house. Normally nothing but a hulking black shape at night, tonight the downstairs windows glow, and smoke whips from the chimney. She vaguely remembers the quiet ambulance that came to take Mr. Sullivan away, and how her father had explained to her that he had died in his sleep, which was the best way to die. It strikes her that Mr.

Sullivan was the last person to light a fire in that fireplace until now, and maybe the last person who had touched the light switch, or used the bathroom, or run his hand up the banister. She would never want to live in a house where someone had died.

A gust of wind roars through the upper branches of the trees, loud as a passing train. There was a time when she might have been afraid of that sound, afraid to be out here in the dark alone. She might have jumped at the crack of branches breaking under snow, or the hoots of owls or howls of coyotes or the marble pairs of eyes she sees frozen by the porch light even now on the edge of the woods. None of these things scare her now. There is comfort in her silence, a sort of safety, an invisible wall between her and the world that makes her feel untouchable. That is partly why she chose it, she thinks. Though maybe it has really chosen her; she hadn't realized she would become trapped, unable to break out. She has lost control of her control. This is why she is sorry; she knows she is causing her parents pain.

She stands and steps out of the glow cast by the porch light and into the darkness beyond it. Placing one foot carefully in front of the next, Isabelle walks slowly in the direction of the apple tree, lifting each foot gingerly so as not to step out of her father's overlarge boots. It is less dark out here than it looked from the porch. Her breath catches what light there is and glows a gentle bluish white as it curls from her mouth. She wonders what happens to a breath when you can no longer see it, whether it adjusts itself like a chameleon to the cold until it's out of sight, or whether it spreads too thin to see, or whether it is taken in by unseen things around her in the way she takes in air.

She crosses the last few yards to the apple tree and then stops in the snow to look up at it. It looks thin without its leaves, sickly; it lost a limb to gypsy moths last spring. They'd covered the tree entirely, those parasites. She'd crushed a dozen with her hand trying to climb before she realized they were there. The thought, or maybe the cold, makes Isabelle shudder, and she continues on her missionless mission around the apple tree and back again to the porch. She steps in the footprints she's already made so as to leave as much of the snow untouched as she can. In the morning, she'll shovel paths through the yard for her parents and herself to follow if they want to get to the tree, or the swing set, or around the house. She doesn't like a field of messy snow.