

Water Year
Excerpt from a Novel

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Master of Fine Arts degree

MFA Program for Writers
Warren Wilson College

May 2024

Director

May 2024

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Timekeeper

They say the left foot is a metronome. They say that working the hi-hat with grace can stretch time, but it's not time that stretches. It's only a flirtation, or a suggestion; always only a suggestion. When time flows on the drums, you ride the current even as it reaches from below, wanting desperately to hold you in place. It's not easy, negotiating these waters.

Standing on a California shore, a writer once contemplated the Pacific Ocean, but I can't be certain where he stood. Let's say it was Bluff Cove. Let's say it was Ellwood Mesa. "Ships that pass at night are cruel ships," he wrote, but I'm not here to write of an ocean of unhappiness. I've lived on that waterfront. I'm writing instead about time and how its promise is only that it won't always, inevitably, march forward to its own beat.

Here's what I'll ask of you. Hold your life coolly in your hands. But what, you ask, am I to hold? And for how long? And I'll say, until your signature is more than a suggestion. More than fifty-six names signed on the dotted line in a declaration of independence. Or a hundred names. A million. Each name signed atop another until they grow into a tangle of possibility. A mess of America.

Can you contain a life in a moment of time? In a year? What is a year? I'm asking questions and I don't have any answers. Instead, I'll say, listen. I want you to hear this.

So Long, Marianne

Jack's marriage fell apart two months ago. He's not handling it well. Earlier this week, he went to a bar already drunk and got in the face of some dude who could have beaten his ass. Thomas suspects that was the point. Jack has never been in a fight in his life. He's a musician. Shaggy and thin-limbed. Thomas heard what happened. Jack bumped into the guy—walked into him, really—and spilled beer on his shirt. The guy was just talking to his girlfriend. He got in Jack's face, but people stepped in before things escalated, pulling Jack away. He had this dumb grin like he was enjoying the show he'd created.

Thomas has decided that enough is enough. It's time to check on Jack. It's not an intervention, not yet, but maybe it should be. Thomas's wife, Mel, has been saying so much for weeks. It's not just the destructive behavior. Jack's barely answering his phone. He's blowing off work, opening the auto repair shop late or not at all.

It's a frigid, winter morning in the Southern Sierra. Thomas has been waiting outside Jack's garage for ten minutes, and he bangs on the service bay door again. Jack's inside. Thomas can hear him coughing. Mel paces in the sunlight, blows into her cupped hands.

"It's just a rough patch," Thomas says.

"It's more than that," she answers.

The shop is next to a Dollar General a mile south of the highway. The garage's sign is planted in a barren field, Hermes Auto Care drawn in cursive lettering with paint that's cracked like the striations of a tree. A Nissan Sentra in the parking lot looks abandoned, afternoon winds dusting the car with sand from the hillsides that surround the lake.

Thomas leans against the service bay door and listens as Jack takes the chain and lets the tension off the hoist. It clanks through the pulley system, and Thomas steps back as his friend emerges, first his Timberland boots and then all of him until he pushes the door into place overhead. Jack's hair is tucked behind his ears, and he's wearing his green down vest from Patagonia, a Christmas gift from Marianne. There's been no talk of a divorce. Not yet, at least.

"We stopped by the house," Thomas says.

"I wasn't there."

"No shit."

Jack is fifty-five, a year younger than Thomas. His beard's gray in places, and the tattoos on his forearms are starting to lose their crispness, everything going a little soft, but he's still light on his feet with the same rubbery looseness he's had since they were kids.

A maroon Volvo is in one of the service bays with its hood up, a bib resting over the front and some tools on the bumper. Jack's drum kit is set up in the second bay. It's so out of place. The shells of the drums are the teal blue of a swimming pool, and the chrome is more polished than any car that's passed through the shop.

"When did this happen?" Thomas asks.

"Yesterday."

"You wanted to get out of the house," Mel says.

She places a hand on his shoulder. They share a bond, an understanding. They're both creatives. Thomas has always liked that his wife and best friend have their own relationship, but they can sometimes make him feel like the odd man out.

Jack got his first drum kit when he was fifteen. Thomas picked up the guitar, or tried to, but he didn't like practicing and hated the repetition of playing scales. Music came so naturally

to Jack. Thomas realized early on that music chose the musician and not the other way around. Jack joined a band, and then another, and soon he was juggling commitments and stringing gigs together. He toured the U.S., went to Europe, and crashed into his forties without any savings. He started working at his uncle's garage, and eventually took it over. Thomas noticed the change. The more responsibility Jack accepted, the more he seemed to grow as a man. Marianne encouraged him to keep playing, even if only on the weekends, understanding that music was his first love.

Mel wanders over to the open door of the office. A wool blanket and sleeping bag are bunched at the end of the ratty couch. "You slept here?"

"It wasn't bad."

Only because you were drunk.

"Why not play them at home?" Mel asks.

"No neighbors to complain."

Mel's right. He wants a break from the house even if he won't admit it. Most of the furniture there, most everything, is Marianne's. When she moved in, she brought her stuff from her apartment. A white couch with frilly throw pillows. Ornamental figurines of horses. Pictures of sunsets with aspirational sayings. Marianne's a tall, lanky woman with a coarse laugh. Mel calls her the queen of oversharing, but she likes her. Thomas does, too. She's thirteen years younger than Jack, and she seems—or seemed—to enjoy his feral nature. She once told Mel that moving into his house was like crawling into a bear's cave in winter, but she made quick work of the place. She and Jack got on so well in the beginning. Thomas isn't sure what went wrong.

Mel joins Jack at the car. "Engine trouble?"

"Power steering, cooling fan. A bunch of stuff."

He sounds a little morose, but he's always been moody. Thomas can't say why this annoys him. Thinking back, he guesses that his friend's probably been depressed since he was a kid, some low-level funkiness, but no one ever brought up depression when they were younger.

"Have you talked to Marianne?" Mel asks.

She always asks questions. Nudges him towards answers. Thomas has learned things from her. Jack loves Dolly Parton. He once thought of going to culinary school. Marianne got him to try yoga, and he likes it.

"She's back."

"I saw her," Jack says.

"Saw her or talked to her?"

The hunched shoulders. Bloodshot eyes. He hasn't talked to her. Thomas sits at the drum kit, puts his foot on the pedal of the bass drum. It's like the gas pedal of a car. He stomps on it and the drum lets out a dull thud. There's not a musical bone in him. He's always worked. Days start early. There's always something to do at the hotel.

"You can't avoid her," Mel says.

Jack leans against the Volvo. Crosses his arms. "We've talked."

"What did she say?"

"She wants a divorce."

"When was this?" Mel asks.

He shrugs, doesn't go further. Mel takes Jack's arm, tells him she's sorry. The decision's been made. This is news to Thomas. He's not sure why Jack hasn't told him, but he hasn't asked, and Jack only has himself to blame. His friend has always been willing to roll the dice on a passion like music, and the thing about a career in music is that it suspends adolescence. You

pursue a childhood dream and never stop being a child. You end up doing the same shit at forty-five you did at twenty-five, or even younger, fifteen. Jack was so cocky it would all work out. It was like a religion, his faith that he could make something happen out of it, and the pursuit left no room for a partner. He's never prioritized his relationships.

Thomas managed the hotel for five years before the owner, Lucas Johnson, sold him the property. Johnson lived through the Depression. He always talked about how you could lose everything in the blink of an eye. How you needed to prepare for the worst. Thomas always thinks about that. He never leaps without looking. But Jack's his oldest friend, and he wants to help. He's done it before.

"Let's get these things out of here," he says, glancing at the drums. "Time to open for business."

He begins loosening a wingnut on one of the cymbal stands. Mel and Jack watch, and their silence angers Thomas. His stomach's not right. He's fasting in preparation for a procedure tomorrow, a colonoscopy, but he still feels bloated. Mel's having similar issues. They have the real problems. Stress from the drought. Financial worries. He nods towards Jack's Bronco parked outside.

"Help me load them in the back."

"You do it," Jack says.

"Am I your roadie now?"

"I didn't ask for help."

Thomas pulls the cymbal from the stand but it slides out of his hands and crashes loudly on the cement floor.

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That afternoon, Thomas makes his daily loop through town. The scent of wood fires and burning oak fills the river valley. His Levi's jacket is buttoned up to the fur collar. He walks across the bridge that spans the river where a meager stream flows and the banks are dry and crusty. Gray pines planted along the sidewalk are knobby and withered. Thomas can relate. He feels brittle in the winter air. Near the steakhouse, a few men stand outside, smoking. He recognizes them, nods a hello, but doesn't want to stop and chat. He normally loves this time of year, but he's not well. He thinks, knows, that it's cancer. Mel had breast cancer. His father had cancerous cells removed from his shoulder and face.

Thomas and Mel's house is tucked away in the back of the hotel's grounds. He enters through the kitchen door, pours a glass of sparkling water. He's drinking a horrid liquid to clear out his system in preparation for tomorrow. The fear he feels isn't about the procedure, not really, though he doesn't know that. It's the vulnerability of going under while people work on him. It leaves him agitated and tense, but he would never, could never name it that way. What he recognizes in himself is a stubbornness that surfaces whenever he doesn't want to do something.

Mel's in the living room, sitting on the couch near the fire. She's watching a show, two chefs cooking in some sort of competition.

"Nice walk?" she asks.

"I'm hungry." He sits at the table.

"It'll be over tomorrow."

"One way or the other."

"Don't be so dramatic." She pats the couch's cushion, the red fabric worn in places. "I've been thinking."

Mel always has projects. He brings up a weather report on his laptop.

“I want a new couch.” She looks around the room. “Let’s redecorate.”

“Do you think we’re made of money?” he asks, wound too tight.

She stands, goes into the kitchen. The couch is vintage, a hand-me-down from his family. He slept on it as a kid. The cushions swallow you in a familial embrace. Thomas can hear the knife on the cutting board. Mel preparing dinner. He follows her into the kitchen. Apologizes. She puts the knife down.

“We can find one on sale.”

“Okay.” He sounds unconvinced.

“What if we gave it to Jack? Marianne can’t leave her things there forever.”

He could move her furniture into the garage and reclaim the house. It’s a good idea. They call him. Thomas expects his voicemail, but he answers. He’s silent through the pitch and doesn’t say no. Says he’ll think about it.

Thunder cracks outside, and Mel opens the kitchen door where a thin rain is falling. They leave the door open, the sound of raindrops a music they haven’t heard in over a year. Thomas sits with Mel while she eats her salad, his stomach grumbling. He pours a glass of apple juice, tired of water. He leaves her in the kitchen and walks into the living room, stretches out on the couch, wondering why they need a new one. He listens to rain falling on the roof before he dozes off.

Mel shakes him awake. The living room is dark. She’s on the phone. “I just woke him,” she says into the phone. Then, to him. “It’s Marianne.” Mel’s in her nightgown.

“What time is it?” he asks.

“Midnight.”

“You left me here?”

She ignores him. He often sleeps on the couch, makes his way to bed eventually. She's listening intently. "Okay. Calm down. He's awake."

That jolts Thomas. "What's going on?" He sits up.

"Jack went to Marianne's. Demanded she come outside," she says, her voice tense. "He was drunk. She wouldn't come out. He had a gun."

He's never done anything this stupid.

"He was waving it around. They called the police." She sighs. "He pointed it at his head. Said he was going to pull the trigger."

He stands, shakes off the news. "When was this?"

"An hour ago." She tells Marianne they'll call her back.

His cell phone is on the coffee table. He looks for Steve Bryce's number. They played baseball in high school. Bryce made it to the minors before joining the Sheriff's Office. He answers on the third ring. Tells Thomas that Jack is sleeping it off.

"He had a gun?" Thomas asks.

"Afraid so," Bryce says. "Handed it over without incident, at least."

"What can I do?"

"I'll call tomorrow when he's released."

Thomas and Jack were taught about guns when they were kids. How to hold them, store them, check them repeatedly. How they're always loaded even when they're not. Thomas keeps his guns in a locker in the garage. This goes against everything they know. The severity of it all becomes clear. If Thomas had to admit it, he's not sure what his friend is going through. He's never thought to ask. It's not something they've ever done, share things like that. Thomas has never expected anything from his friends, not in that way, so why would anyone expect it of

him? He thinks over the question he asked Bryce. What can he do? What can a man do for another man?

Mel's gone to the kitchen. Now she's back.

"What should I tell Marianne?"

Thomas doesn't know.

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The next morning, Thomas sits moodily in the passenger seat of his Chevy truck. Mel's driving, focused on the steep descent down the canyon. There's a dangerous sense of familiarity to the winding road that follows the curves of the river. People relax, pick up too much speed, and skid off the side into the granite boulders on the banks.

"Careful," Thomas says. A classmate of Shane's died on this section.

"I know." Mel slows at the turn.

It's an hour-long drive to the block of medical buildings. Thomas stands at the front desk of the doctor's office, waiting to be helped. A young woman emerges from the back. She's in her early thirties, wearing a white lab coat over a cotton dress, blonde hair skinned back from her face.

"Can I help you?" she asks.

He doesn't like her tone, the flat affect in her voice as if Thomas is imposing on her morning. He says he has an appointment, and she clicks something on the computer screen. Tells him to take a seat. Mel's at an L-shaped couch in the corner. A glass coffee table has a few magazines spread across it. He sits next to her.

"Don't worry," she says.

"I'm not worried."

A nurse calls his name. Mel stands, hugs him tightly. He follows the nurse through a sterile hallway. She checks his weight, moving metal nodes across the bar of the scale until they hover in place. Her hair has a floral scent, likely from her shampoo. He follows her into an examination room and is instructed to change into a hospital gown. He ties the fabric belt, but the gown still hangs loosely. He feels vulnerable, standing naked with only a thin fabric covering him. More nurses arrive, prep the procedure, get him on a gurney, tell him what to expect. Machines are rolled towards him. It's wires and blips and blue scrubs and an oxygen mask.

When he wakes, he's unsure where he is until the curtains register and he hears the bustle of the facility. Then he remembers. It's cancer. He'll soon learn what he already knows. A nurse steps in, explains the sedation will wear off soon. He's alone again. Struggles to stay awake, dozes off until the nurse wakes him. When Mel joins him, she's distracted and tense.

"I'm fine," he says.

"It's not that. Jack's not answering his phone. Marianne and I both tried."

The night before comes into focus, his memory still foggy. "He's probably sleeping it off."

"He's been texting Marianne. He's not making sense."

A doctor joins them in the room, cutting short their conversation. "Your primary care doctor will discuss this more, but I wanted to give you a quick update," he says. "We didn't find anything of concern."

His words are slow to register. "That's it?" Thomas asks.

"We need to monitor you for a bit," the doctor says.

That's not what he means. Mel places her hand on his arm. They've discussed the possibility that the issues with his stomach aren't cancer but the result of stress. She thinks it

could be irritable bowel syndrome. Thomas has been dismissive. The doctor and assistant leave. He stands unsteadily, tells himself it's the sedative, but a part of him knows something has shifted, a sliver of certainty is gone. He finds his phone in the plastic bag with his folded clothes. No messages. He tries calling, sends Jack a string of texts.

Hey.

Jackass. Call me.

Seriously.

What the fuck.

“Anything?” Mel asks.

He calls Bryce. It goes to voicemail. He dresses, waits for a phone call, for a nurse to discharge him, someone to get things moving. He paces the room until Mel tells him to stop.

“What do you want me to do?” he snaps. “Sit here?”

“That’s what I’m doing,” she says, unflinching.

He sits on the bed.

When he’s finally discharged, he leaves hurriedly, wanting to get out of the building. Outside, the mirrored windows of the medical facility reflect the sun’s glare. He cups his hand over his eyes while Mel gets the truck from the parking garage. She takes the bootlegger route home, following agricultural roads and avoiding the freeways. They pass fields of alfalfa, rusty oil derricks, solitary houses with valley dust caked in the corners of the windows. Normally, Thomas likes the drive. It’s quieter than the freeways. But they pass a liquor store with a broken ice machine in front. Trash bags piled by the bin. A rottweiler snarls from behind a chain-link fence. Nothing about it feels welcoming. His cell phone buzzes with a call from Bryce.

“We got an issue,” Bryce says. “Jack’s texting Marianne. I don’t want to escalate this.”

“Why would you?”

“He’s threatening her,” Bryce says.

“Let me talk to him,” Thomas says. “He’s home?”

“I dropped him off this morning.”

“We’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

The road narrows at the entrance to the canyon. The river’s a hundred yards down an embankment, two hundred, three, as they climb. This is the wakeup call Jack needs, Thomas decides. At a brief clearing, they pass a shoulder with an old wooden dome that once held salt for the highway. It’s overgrown by weeds.

“What about his guns?” Mel asks.

“What about them?” Jack has an AR-15, Glocks, a Beretta. He doesn’t know what Jack’s capable of right now.

A few cars are parked on the street, but most of Jack’s neighbors are at work. The wood siding of his bungalow is stained a dark brown color, and a stack of firewood is neatly organized on the porch. Jack’s always been tidy. Thomas walks up the driveway. Mel trails him a little hesitantly.

“It’s me and Mel,” he says. “Open up.”

Jack appears in the window, his face like a pale moon. Thomas feels a surge of energy rip through him. *He’s not pointing that shit at us.* The front door opens. Jack’s eyes are red and puffy. Mel goes to him first. Hugs him.

“Don’t ever do that again,” she says. “You just can’t.”

He’s five foot ten, has six inches on her, but leans into her. The site of him so helpless leaves Thomas uncomfortable and agitated.

“You pointed a gun at Marianne,” Thomas says.

“At yourself,” Mel adds.

Jack nods, acknowledging what he’s done. “I fucked up.”

“Cause you were drunk,” Thomas says.

“I tried to apologize.”

“You only made it worse,” Thomas says. “We can’t sweep this under the rug.” It’s satisfying to talk of consequences.

Mel gathers mail, coupons, newspapers spread across the dining room table. “It’s freezing in here,” she says.

Jack goes to the porch, stacks logs in his arms. Mel locks eyes with Thomas and glances across the room. Thomas knows what she means. The house is in disarray. Unwashed plates and beer cans on the coffee table. A Barca Lounger pushed into the middle of the room. Clothes strewn about. Mel places the pile of mail on a white credenza, one of Marianne’s pieces. Thomas opens a drawer. Jack’s Sig Legion is on top of some folded napkins.

“You keep your guns in the drawer?” His voice is strained.

Jack kneels at the fireplace.

“Have you already started drinking?” Thomas asks, angry now.

Mel studies Thomas sternly. “Stop,” she says.

Jack gets the fire started, but when he stands, his eyes are watery.

“Oh, Jack,” Mel says. “Sit down. We can talk about it.”

Tears flow that Jack is powerless to stop. He sits on the couch, Marianne’s couch, and Mel wraps an arm around him as he folds into himself, sobbing. Mel urges Thomas to say something, but the words are stuck. He takes a step back.

“I’ll make coffee,” he says. He retreats to the kitchen.

Mel follows him. “What are you doing?” she asks, glancing back into the living room.

“He needs your help.”

“I don’t know what he needs,” Thomas says.

“Because he’s crying?”

Thomas fills a kettle with water from the sink’s faucet, starts one of the stove’s burners.

Doing something, anything, is better.

“Answer me,” she says.

“I’m making coffee.”

She leaves him, goes into the living room. “Jack?” she asks, worry in her voice.

Thomas turns off the burner. Jack’s not in the living room. They call his name and walk cautiously through the house, peering around hallways. He’s in the bedroom, curled up on top of the comforter. Mel calls his name, but he doesn’t stir. She looks to Thomas, then looks towards the bed. He nods a decisive *No*. He’s not doing that. She won’t look away. Thomas feels the pressure of what she wants him to do. He sits on the bed, but wavers in a fear he can’t place. Then he turns towards the headboard, bunches two pillows against it, leans back and extends his arm around his friend. Jack slides over until his head is resting on Thomas’s shoulder. Thomas stays that way, his arm around Jack, and Mel retreats, watchful, until she reaches the door. She leans against the frame. Thomas doesn’t want to do this. Lie in bed with his friend. Mel leaves them alone.

He feels the warmth of Jack’s breath on his neck. Notices it slow until he knows without looking that he’s gone limp with sleep. He’s never been this close to him; this close to any man. Thomas comforted both his boys. When Noll scraped a knee. When Shane tripped and fell on the

pavement. But they were kids. He focuses his sight on the ceiling above the bed, watches the fan spin, notes the crust of dirt on each leading blade. A crack in the ceiling, two cracks, grow from the fan as if it's been dropped from a great height, gravity itself reversed, and landed with a thud on the ceiling. Thomas softens into the pillows, and the ropery tautness of his body slackens. Jack coughs, burrows into Thomas's side. He'll do the right thing, Thomas tells himself. This is the right thing to do. But he's never seen Jack like this. The rawness of it, his inability to bottle it up, this grief or emotion. It's unsettling.

Thomas decides that's enough of that, he's done his part, comforted his friend, but still he stays. He's only felt the body of his wife at his side. There'd been other girlfriends, but it was so long ago that their touch is a ghostly imprint on his body. Jack turns into Thomas, his sleep-filled breaths like Mel's. Judgment rises. He'd never break down like this, sink so low, let whatever Jack's feeling get the better of him. It's weakness. A thought occurs to him then that maybe Jack's gay; maybe that's why he's single, childless, alone. Thomas's body tenses at the thought, but the words don't fit. That's not the reason. Jack's always liked women, and they're drawn to him. His vulnerability. His interest in music.

Thomas leans back into the pillows. Questions arise. What does it say about him to be holding another man in his arms? Men don't comfort men like this. A new anger descends, covers the bed in a fog. Jack threatened to shoot Marianne and then himself. There's no excuse for it, and news will spread through town. People will talk. Women will study him warily from a distance. He'll be ostracized and leave. Return to Los Angeles. Thomas knows it, and he softens again, senses the inevitable loss. The words of Thomas's father return in the darkness of this realization. The first time he took Thomas and Jack shooting, he held the shotgun lightly and gave both boys a list of rules. "Guns don't miss," his father said. "Not if your aim is good. Don't

ever point one without considering the consequences.” But what if you were impulsive? What if you acted without thinking? What if you were drunk and emotional? The only way to be sure would be to point the gun at your own head.

It’s too dark a thought. Thomas recoils from it. Jack stirs a little, and Thomas realizes he’s physically shaken the thought away. He holds his breath, not wanting to wake him. Feels Jack in his arms. He’s going to miss his friend. The thought arrives from some far-off place within himself. An unfathomable depth. But he knows it’s true. Things will change. There’s no coming back from this. He’s tired now, fatigued, and he dozes off, but only briefly.

When he wakes, his arm is tingly with a million pin pricks. He slides from under Jack’s body, careful not to move him, and stands. Leaves Jack in the bedroom and finds Mel in the kitchen. She’s made coffee. Thomas sits at the table, watches her fill a mug, bring it to him. When Mel’s father died, she and her older sister mourned him together. They clung to each other. Cooked side by side. Followed each other into the bathroom to pee. Brushed each other’s hair, never out of reach.

“You’re a good man,” she says, love in her eyes. “You helped each other.”

Thomas doesn’t think he needs help. He certainly didn’t ask for it.

“He’s acting like a fucking pussy,” he says.

It’s then that he sees something ugly about himself in his wife’s eyes, but he doesn’t dwell on it. What he thinks of instead are the thin cracks in the ceiling of Jack’s bedroom, how they’ll continue to grow with each day.

Drought

It's March, a week before the last snow survey of the season. The Department of Water Resources will record inches of snow depth in the Southern Sierra on the first of April, and that number will be translated into its water equivalent. Snow-water. The way Thomas sees it, the water will determine if he sells the hotel.

Thomas and Mel own a 16-room lodge across the street from a riverside park. In good seasons, big water years, snow blankets the watershed in winter. Families across Southern California flock to the valley when the river rises in spring, and the hotel can be booked solid for months. But it's been almost three years since a storm hit them. One year of drought can be managed. Two, they can squeeze by. Three they can't do. Thomas has never really considered giving up the hotel, but he and Mel have recently started talking about it.

It's late afternoon. Mel has returned from her cigarette, her nose and cheeks rosy from the winter air. Thomas sits at the living room table studying weather forecasts on his laptop. A low-pressure system is building over the Aleutian Islands near Alaska, teasing a few inches of snow in the Pacific Northwest.

"It's stalled," Thomas says. "But it could open a channel."

"Your mythical atmospheric river."

She's being sarcastic, but he knows she's trying to get him to snap out of it. He's been moping around while tracking this storm.

Their only guest is their youngest son, Shane, who shouldn't be home, but he's flunked out of college. Thomas can't say it that way, but it's what happened. That fall, Shane enrolled in a junior college near Mel's mother. Set on his independence, he agreed only to one phone call a

week, and he was cagey with updates. He said he was doing fine, but he was smoking weed with friends and organizing tailgating parties in the middle of nowhere. Instead of accepting academic probation for failing two classes, he dropped out. Now he announced that he's moving back, but not to return to school. He's talked of a job, but it's just talk. He leaves in three days.

Mel opens the iron grate of the fireplace and breaks up the coals. The red embers pulse and crackle. She grabs another log of pine and loads it in the cast iron stove. There's a banging noise upstairs; something dropped on the floor in Shane's room.

"Don't you want to know what his plan is?" Thomas asks.

"We know his plan."

He frowns, turns back to the storm projections.

"You should talk to him if you have so many questions," Mel says.

He leans back in the wooden chair. "Alright, I will." He returns to the image on the screen, willing the swirling clouds to move. He can feel the heat of her eyes. "What, like now?"

"Yes, now."

It isn't that he doesn't want to talk to his son. He doesn't know what to say. He climbs the stairs. At the bedroom door, he listens, knocks.

"What?" His son's voice is muffled through the door.

Thomas lets himself into the room. It smells of wet socks; discarded clothes litter the floor. There's a skateboard poster above the bed, a guy flying out of an empty swimming pool. It's kid stuff, skateboarding. The poster should have been pulled down by now. Shane's at the computer, and he closes whatever he has open on the screen.

"What are you doing?" Thomas asks.

"Nothing."

The window's open. It's freezing. Thomas goes to close it and catches a whiff of marijuana. He needs to say something, confront his son about getting high at home, but the words won't come. He closes the window. Shane stands, puts on his jacket. He's taller than Thomas, but he's still wiry and unformed.

"You going out?"

"I'm meeting Brett."

Brett's a friend from middle school. He works at the hardware store and lives in a bachelor unit of a vacation home in exchange for watching over the place. Brett's a good kid. He looks you in the eyes when he talks to you.

"Get back here at a decent hour," Thomas says. It's a lame command. He knows this.

"I'll be down in a minute." Shane wants him to leave. Thomas knows this, too.

In the living room, Mel looks up from her book. Thomas stands near the fire until the heat makes him take a step back.

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The next morning, he's up early for his walk. The valley's still dark, but the ridgeline on the eastern range is crowned with early light. The hotel sits on an acre and a half. There's a single-story barrack of rooms, a main lodge with a steep A-frame roof, and their small house tucked away in the back of the property. The buildings have cedar siding that's a faded mustard color. In the summer, dry grass in the foothills turns the same pale shade.

Thomas crosses the cement bridge that spans the river as Joyce Meyer approaches in her Mercedes wagon. She's driven the car for years, since their kids were babies. She stops in the street and rolls down the window.

"Why are you out here skulking around?"

Her reddish-blond hair is combed straight, blow-dried. Joyce is a teacher in the middle school. She taught both of Thomas's sons. She uses words like skulking.

"I'm walking."

"You're brooding."

He doesn't have an answer. He's known Joyce since they were kids. "Going in early?" he asks.

"I'm having breakfast with Buddy."

Joyce's son works at the local diner as a cook. The few times Thomas has been there when Buddy's behind the counter, the kid's worn a baseball hat turned backwards and moved across the range in a manic dance, his buggy eyes peeking out from behind John Lennon glasses. Outside of the restaurant, though, he has a distrustful, sidelong manner. Even in high school, Buddy was already using. After he graduated, drugs enveloped him like a fog—marijuana, prescription drugs, OxyContin, who knew what else.

"I saw Shane," Joyce says.

"When?"

"Two nights ago. He stopped by with Buddy."

Thomas hasn't heard anything about it. He looks down at his feet. "I didn't realize," he says.

"Didn't realize what?" Joyce's voice is controlled and tight.

He's angered her. Everyone says Buddy's turned a corner. "I'm not clear what Shane's doing with his time." He offers this olive branch, a hint of the questions about his own child.

"Have you asked him?"

"I haven't."

“Well, there’s your answer.” She looks at her watch. It’s one of the few things from her marriage she’s kept. “I gotta go.”

“Have a good breakfast,” he says. It sounds like an apology.

A hawk circles above in the pale sky. Thomas feels better when he starts walking again. The River Nook Café is open. No one’s sitting on the deck—it’s too cold—but a few people are inside having coffee. He passes the Forest Service headquarters. As he walks, he does the numbers. If the summer season is a bust, they can continue to pay down the mortgage, but Thomas worries about the lender. They missed a payment last month and it was sent to collections. Without any money coming in, they’ll default. If Thomas were an introspective man, he’d consider that the strain he feels is about more than the hotel’s finances or even Shane’s plan, but the most he’ll allow is a deep sense of fatigue. He’s not ready to keep hustling to stay afloat if the weather patterns are changing.

He makes his loop and returns home. Mel’s at the kitchen table reading the local paper.

“I ran into Joyce,” he says. “Shane’s been hanging out with Buddy. Did you know that?”

Her eyes narrow, something she does whenever she’s weighing new information. “I think he stopped doing that stuff.”

“I don’t like it.” Thomas pours a cup.

“He’s an adult,” she says. “We need to respect his decisions.”

“Only if he’s making good ones.”

Mel leaves for a yoga class. Thomas is at his laptop in the living room. The storm he’s tracked for days has grown. Satellite images show movement, but not enough. He hears the creak of the wooden stairs, the faucet in the kitchen, until Shane emerges with a glass of water.

“Late night?” he asks.

Shane doesn't answer.

Thomas straightens his posture. Takes a breath. "Mom says you're depressed." He hasn't planned on just coming out and saying it like that.

Shane doesn't speak, doesn't even seem to breathe.

"Are you?" Thomas asks.

"Am I what? Depressed? Are you?"

Thomas doesn't think that word applies to him. He's worried. That's the only word that comes to mind. "We're not talking about me," he says.

There's annoyance in his son's eyes. Their youngest takes after Mel. Artistic. He's doodled in a sketch book since he was young. Thomas isn't the one who's depressed. He goes to the fireplace. The embers from the night before are ash. He loads two small logs of pine, gets some kindling burning, blows into the flame until it catches.

"What's up with the job you mentioned?" he asks.

"It's a company that installs solar panels."

"You'd move back for a job? What are you going to do?"

"What do you mean? Work."

It's a dumb question. "Show me the website," Thomas says.

Shane sits at the table, searches on Thomas's laptop. "Why do you have so many tabs open?" he asks.

Solar panels could keep anyone busy the way things are going. "You know the lodge near the hatchery?" Thomas asks. "Larry installed solar panels a few years ago. I could reach out and find out who he hired."

He stands over Shane. His son has opened a tab on the browser to a photo of a naked woman lounging on a brass bed, dark hair falling over her shoulders. Her hands cupping her breasts. Thomas pulled up the image while checking storm projections. Shane clicks through more open tabs in the browser, passing weather forecasts until he stops at another photo of a blonde standing on a deck of a cabin. She's naked except for hiking boots, her pubic hair a chestnut-color.

“Why are you looking at *pictures*?” Shane asks.

“None of your business,” Thomas says.

“There are better options.”

Thomas doesn't know what he means. Shane opens a new tab, brings up a website that looks like Netflix, but the photos are all of women.

“Haven't you ever watched porn?” he asks.

“Of course I have.”

“Probably in like some peep show.”

Thomas can feel his authority dissipating, but his son isn't angry. He's more engaged than he's been in weeks.

“Dad, look.” Shane clicks on an image of a blonde wearing a gray blazer. A video pops on screen. Another click and it begins. The woman knocks on a door, a man answers, and the video shifts to the man's point of view. The camera follows her through the house. “She's like a fake realtor,” Shane says. He skips ahead. The woman's on the bed in lingerie. Then she's naked, straddling the man. Having sex with him. They watch silently.

“That's enough of that,” Thomas says.

Shane stops the video, returns to the homepage of the website. “I’m going to favorite this site so you can find it in your bookmarks.” He points to a drop-down menu in the web browser. “See? It’s there.”

He smiles in some agreement Thomas isn’t sure he’s made. He’s never really talked to Shane, either of his boys, about sex. That’s always been Mel’s department.

Shane stands, pats Thomas on the shoulder. It isn’t condescending, not really. He climbs the wooden stairs back to his room. Thomas brings up the site again and scrolls past the women, an endless stream of them, until he quits the browser and restarts his computer.

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Mel roasts a chicken for dinner. Thomas and Mel have stopped asking Shane to eat together, offering whatever independence they can, but he joins them.

“I was in a Corvette when Brett caught me in an alley,” Shane says. “I had to bail and run into the building.”

Mel is confused. “Whose Corvette is this?”

Shane snickers. “It’s a video game. We pick cars, drive around. I can play at the same time as my friends.”

She takes a sip of wine, sauvignon blanc. It’s a boxed wine they both like, but Thomas is having a beer.

“You just drive around in cars?” Mel asks.

“Pretty much.”

“That’s what you do here.”

“That’s not all we do.” Shane glances at Thomas.

Mel studies them both. “You two have some sort of secret,” she says.

“There’s no secret.” Thomas sips his beer.

Shane eats quickly and leaves his plate in the sink.

“Give your mother a hug.” Mel stands, arms outstretched.

Shane submits to her affection, and she grips him tightly, eyes closed, until Shane wriggles out of her embrace. He backs away before he turns and leaves. Mel drops slowly into her seat.

“It’ll be fine,” Thomas says.

They clear the table. Thomas runs hot water into the basin of the sink and adds dish soap.

“We looked at the website for the solar panel place.”

“This morning?” Mel asks.

The naked women on the laptop push into the kitchen, their bodies glistening and ripe, crowding the small space.

“He also showed me a porn site,” Thomas says.

“Showed you what?”

“He showed me a site with free videos.” Somehow, it’s easier to talk about it while doing the dishes.

“You watched porn together?”

“We didn’t watch. He just showed me the site.”

She weighs this information. They haven’t had sex since Shane left for college in the fall. He’s never considered talking about it, but something’s unhinged, some stop removed.

“Come here,” he says.

She approaches warily. He leans in, kisses her, but she pushes him back.

“What are you up to,” she says.

It's not a question. Thomas isn't sure what it is.

"Are you going to show me?" she asks.

He's not expecting that. "I could."

"Show me."

He leaves the dishes in the sink, dries his hands. She follows him into the living room.

Thomas opens the laptop cautiously as she pulls a chair over. They sit side by side, and he brings up the menu of women.

"You just pick one."

"I know, dummy." She points to a woman lounging on a sofa with her shirt unbuttoned, the full curve of her breasts clear. "She looks sexy."

Thomas hesitates, and Mel reaches out, glides a finger across the trackpad of the laptop, clicks on the image and starts the video. The woman has sandy-colored hair with pinkish streaks. Her white blouse is unbuttoned all the way, and she's smiling, laughing at the man holding the camera. He caresses her stomach, and the camera pans down to her panties. Thomas pauses the video.

"You don't want to watch with me?" she asks.

"I wasn't planning on watching."

Her mouth gets tight and sour. Disapproving.

"That's not true," he says.

"I know it's not."

"I'll watch with you." He says this almost to himself. He doesn't start the video.

She squeezes his arm. "Maybe later." She stands, goes upstairs.

He finishes the dishes, plates organized neatly in the drying rack, pots on top of the stove's burners. He turns off the faucet, but water's still moving through the pipes of the house. Mel's taking a shower. He goes upstairs into the bedroom. Her clothes are on the bed. It feels, somehow, cinematic. The bathroom's foggy. He calls her name, and she pulls back the curtain just enough to look past it, wipes condensation from her face.

"Let's watch a movie," he says.

"What kind of movie?"

"A normal one."

"I'm just going to read."

She keeps the curtain shielding her nakedness.

"It's a lot," he says.

"What is?"

"All of it. A lot to deal with."

"We're both dealing with it."

Downstairs, he grabs his coat. The air outside smells of wood fires. A gas station is at the end of the block, and Thomas starts in that direction, thinks he'll buy a soda, but then he changes his mind and walks to his Chevy. The throttle chokes, and he leans on the gas pedal as the truck lurches into motion. He heads into town without a plan. A memory from years ago occurs to him of the first time his boys walked to school alone. Noll had just started fifth grade; Shane was in first. The school was only a few blocks from the house they rented at the time, and Mel followed them at a distance, hiding behind trees and neighborhood fences, returning home in tears. Every morning that week, she trailed them to school.

"Why do you keep doing this to yourself?" he asked.

“I’m their mother,” she said.

Approaching The Well, Thomas sees Joyce’s Mercedes in the parking lot. He coasts into a spot on the street.

The ceiling of the bar is covered in dollar bills that have all been signed by years of first timers to the place. Virgins. Thomas has long since lost where his bill hangs, but the bar hasn’t changed. The dingy bathrooms. Two televisions hanging from the ceiling. Joyce waves him over.

“Look what the cat dragged in.”

She pats the bar stool next to her. She’s wearing a navy-blue blouse tucked into her jeans, and Thomas notices the outline of her breasts under the fabric. She’s always had a nice figure. Developed earlier than other girls. He asks for a whiskey. Her pint is half full.

“I saw your car,” he says.

Joyce smiles. “You did, huh?”

“Not like that.”

“Good. Don’t hit on me now after all these years.”

They went to square dances when they were fourteen. She carries herself with the same ease as she did then. She’s always drawn the attention of men, but she likes to be one of the guys.

The bartender has a tattoo on his neck and hair is slicked back with grease or pomade or something. He places the glass on the bar, pours a shot of Makers Mark. Thomas recalls how Joyce made sure every one of her middle school classes understood the basics of sex. She put condoms on bananas. Brought posters that showed the female anatomy. She was unperturbed by the protests of the Christian families until they raised so much hell the superintendent of the district made her stop.

“You always made the kids talk about sex,” he says.

“I still do. Just can’t be so obvious about it.”

She reaches out, puts a hand on his leg. “Oh, Christ. Did Shane get another girl pregnant?”

“There’s no girl.”

It was his last year of high school. Jeanie, his girlfriend. She was fifteen; he was eighteen. Thomas and Mel didn’t know they were having sex. Jeanie’s parents tried to have Shane arrested. Refused to let her see him. They asked Joyce for help, and she found the clinic. Thomas and Mel paid for the abortion. It stayed a secret, for the most part.

“He’s leaving tomorrow,” Thomas says. “Might have found a job.”

“That’s good, right? So, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Tell me.” She’s insistent.

Thomas downs the drink. Looks around the bar. “We’re gonna sell the hotel.”

“When did you decide that?”

“Just now. Tonight.” He catches himself. “We haven’t totally decided.”

Two men are playing pool. One starts a new a game with the crack of the cue ball.

“You better have a good reason,” Joyce says.

Thomas scoffs, thinks it’s obvious. “It’s a drought.”

She finishes her beer, grabs her purse. “Let’s go.”

“Where?”

“I need a cigarette.”

The parking lot is mostly empty. It’s a Monday night. Joyce lights a cigarette, exhales.

“I have my own problem,” she says. “I found coke in Buddy’s backpack. He’s using again.”

“How do you know it’s cocaine?”

“White powder? Folded in the crease of some paper?” She picks a tobacco leaf from her teeth. “I’m worried.”

“He’s hanging out with Shane tonight.”

“Yep.”

“Let’s go find them.” Thomas doesn’t know why he thinks of this, but his heart is pulsing, a movement he can feel in his chest.

“Why the hell would we do that?” She’s smiling. Almost laughs.

“We’re still their parents.”

She stubs out the cigarette, walks across the lot and drops the butt in a trash can. Her purse hangs from her shoulder. “I’m ready,” she says.

They climb into the truck. It’s a short drive to the town center. Thomas slows as he approaches another bar, scanning the street for Shane’s dark-green Dodge. It isn’t parked out front. He circles the block again and goes two streets over. No sign of them.

“Let’s make another pass.” He turns onto a block of shops, the street lined with oak trees.

“I feel like a spy,” Joyce says.

He drives slowly until, startled, he brakes, and Joyce braces herself with her hand on the dashboard. Two hundred yards away, in the parking lot of the River View Market, Shane’s car is parked under the halo of a streetlamp. He sits on the hood, hunched over. Buddy is next to him with a work boot on the front fender, his back arched like a bow. A spark lights Shane’s face and there are two more quick flashes until a flame emerges. Shane lights a cigarette and looks up

toward the night, exhaling the smoke. Thomas puts the truck in reverse and backs away slowly, past the shops, until he's idling in the empty intersection.

"They saw us," Joyce says.

Thomas doesn't think they have. He puts the truck back in gear and coasts into a parking space at the curb. Buddy stands and stretches his arms. Both get in the Dodge and the headlights pop on. Shane turns north onto the highway, heading upriver. Thomas looks to Joyce, considering, and she nods in agreement. He drives to the end of the block and turns north, following them. The highway bends with the river, and Thomas loses sight of Shane's car only to see him again when he emerges out of another hidden curve. They pass a park of motor homes. Nice ones. Vacationers. Thomas hangs back, out of view of Shane. He slouches in his seat. They follow him upriver for twenty minutes. A few cars pass heading back to town.

"They're going to Cathedral Rock," he says.

Shane turns into the dirt parking lot that leads to the riverside beach, and Thomas steers onto the shoulder and cuts the engine. It's a dark stretch of highway; only the bulb of the dashboard lights the inside of the truck.

"Now what?" Joyce asks.

Headlights emerge from a bend a few hundred yards behind them as a car approaches. Joyce turns quickly, slides down onto the floor of the passenger seat.

"Get down," she says.

"Who is it?"

"I don't know. Get your ass down."

Thomas folds over until he's laying across the bucket seat. He can smell the cigarette on her breath. The sound of the engine arrives, and headlights wash the cab as the vehicle passes

until night reclaims the inside of the truck. They stay like that, so close to each other. He can feel her breath against his skin. His eyes adjust in the darkness. Joyce is smiling.

“What’s so funny?”

“I thought you were about to make out with me,” she says.

Thomas sits up and stares at the tear in the roof’s vinyl interior.

“You should take me back,” she says. “Before anyone sees us.”

He straightens his shirt and starts the engine. It roars, chokes. He presses the gas pedal, and it roars again. Joyce puts her seatbelt on. Instead of heading back to town, Thomas goes upriver. He turns into the dirt lot that leads to the Cathedral Rock campsite. There are two cars, Shane’s Dodge and Brett’s 4Runner. He parks near the highway next to some sagebrush that’s grown wild. He gets out of the truck. Joyce doesn’t move.

“Don’t fuck this up.” She’s looking at him now.

“I won’t get close,” he says quietly. “I just want to see for myself.”

The path to the river is through a wooded area, and the canopy of trees is thick and tangled overhead. Thomas stops when he hears voices. Laughter. He can’t make out what they’re saying. He inches forward, listening, and trips over a boulder at the edge of the trail. He falls to one knee and catches himself with both hands. The conversation at the beach goes quiet. He holds his breath, feeling the dirt spread through his fingers, until the talk resumes. They’re fine, he decides. They’re laughing.

Music Note

A song should play in this moment. It should sound like your arrival after a long drive up a canyon to see the spire of a childhood church among tall pines. It should sound like the expression of the loneliness you've brought with you to the steps of the fountain in the town's main square, like water falling into the pool at your feet when you remember you were once happy here.

The song should be from the car's stereo. It should sound like the beach town where you live now, like waves breaking over damp sand, like the grinding of pebbles pulled back by the tide. It should sound like the wind whipping through the open windows of your car, the sea scent in each breath.

The song should sound like a melody heard from the mockingbirds and California thrashers in the backyard trees of your childhood home. It should sound still and unmoving, not timeless but held in place like the birds are tied to their branches with string.

It should sound like a car's tires on sun-bleached asphalt, like a winding, mountain road that smells of mountain chaparral. The song should fade slowly into the night and the groaning engine of an old truck, a dog barking on a distant street, small waves breaking on the banks of the river.

Painter's Camp

As the owners of a hotel, my parents treated the walls of the lodge like it was their living room. My mother was a collector of found art. Friend's art. Art she defined as art. The walls in the lobby display many things she framed herself. When she and my father bought the hotel, they found some old newspaper clippings about a fire in the 1920's that burned the lodge to the ground. Those articles are framed and hang near the entrance under a wagon wheel chandelier. When a local market closed, my mother took the billboard from the sandwich counter. It's in the dining room of the lodge. A 10-ft. Dewey Webber longboard hangs from the lobby's rafters by two chords of rope. The board is from the 1960's and the white foam has turned opaque, almost brown, but the balsa wood stringer still looks crisp. My mother found it at a garage sale. Whenever someone asked why there was a surfboard in the lodge of a mountain town in the Southern Sierras, my mother would say that the ocean was only a short drive away.

She'd spent summers at the beach in Balboa Peninsula. There's a photo of her near the lodge's stone fireplace. She's standing in front of her first car, a 1954 Buick Century Estate Wagon that is slate blue. The rear bucket seat is folded forward, better to fit a longboard in the back. My mother's seventeen, wearing cotton shorts, and she looks happy; thrilled, even. But her eyes are closed, and her smile is private. Standing in front of the car on a hot California day, she looks faded and ephemeral already.

The walls include family photos, some that date back to the first relatives of my father who moved to the river valley when it was barely a town, just some storefronts on a main street. There are paintings of the river along with some abstract works from a high school friend of my mother, Barb, who used to visit us every summer. My mother loved to collect her artwork. The

summer before their senior year in high school, my mother, Barb, and another friend, Josephina, drove from Claremont to Los Angeles in my mother's Buick for a week of classes at Art Center's leafy campus in the hills of Pasadena. It was a survey course with high school students from across Southern California, and they started with life drawing and worked their way to oil paint and brushes. At the end of the week, the three girls loaded their artwork into the back of the Buick. Nothing remains of those classes, but my mother hung her own gallery of their work in her high school bedroom. I've always thought that her interest in collecting things started then.

In the sitting area, across the room from the fireplace, a painting of the river in our hometown is hung in an ornamental, gold-colored frame. It's not a great work. It's a bucolic picture of a long wooden table perched above a bend in the river. A king's table, so massive it could seat an entire court. Pinyon pines and juniper trees grow along the banks. Painter's Camp is named for the view from the riverbank, a view worth a painting. There are a few abandoned structures from an old lodge, a meadow and a paddock for horses, and the table that overlooks the river. It's deep in the backcountry, accessible only by miles of trail or river. Fly fishermen sometimes visit, hiring a mule team to pack them in with their gear and supplies, but it's mostly left to the black bears and scorpions and rattlesnakes who sun themselves in bare patches of dirt.

The painting was a gift from Tymon Moore in exchange for the room my parents offered him when his life bottomed out. Tymon, or Ty, is a friend of my father's, six-feet-tall with the heft of a linebacker. When he moves towards you, momentum propels him like he's a ship at sea. His beard is long and scraggly, and he can be charged like an electrical current is pulsing through him. To strangers, he's intimidating, but if he knows you, he's a softie. He wraps you in the most genuine hugs I've ever encountered, holding you in an embrace longer than seems comfortable as if he's trying to wear down your defenses until you feel loved.

Ty arrived at the lobby of the hotel one night in early fall when a wing of rooms had been shuttered for the winter. He cupped his hands over his eyes as he leaned into the glass pane of the door. It was dark inside, lights out. He rang the bell once, twice. Waited. Rang a third time.

The lobby's lights flicked on as my mother emerged from the back office, walked across the lobby squinting, not yet recognizing who was standing at the door. She smiled when she saw it was Ty.

"Is someone dead?" She unlocked the door.

"I want a room."

She stepped back to let him inside. "What's wrong with your house?" Ty lives four blocks from the hotel.

"Nothing," Ty said.

My mother sighed. "Let's talk about it."

"I'll just take the room."

My father peeked in the lobby from the back office.

"Ty wants a room," my mother said.

"You need firewood?"

"I only need a room," he said. Ty can have a short fuse. When he first moved to town, a sideways glance at his wife could end in a bar fight. But he'd mellowed.

"This is about Gemma," my father said, stating the obvious.

My mother rolled her eyes. "Of course it is."

"I'd just like the room," Ty said.

He'd spent the previous four nights sulking in the living room of the house he shared with Gemma Francis. The living room curtains were a thin, gauzy fabric she'd picked out. Ty pulled a

chair to the window and sat in the dark, leaving the curtains open enough to watch her walk by on her way home from work, her usual routine, except she passed their house and kept going up the hill to Scott's place.

My father went to the desk, got the key for Room 8 that's set back from the street. "Stay as long as you want."

"Maybe not that long," my mother said.

Ty studied her with a hint of a smile.

"You'd stay forever," she explained. "You don't want to go home, right?"

"It's not my house."

"You pay rent?" my father asked. "It's your house." He handed over the key.

"We won't charge you," my mother said.

"I want this on the up and up."

"Here's what I want," my mother said. "You can't just sit there and stew about how Gemma left you."

Ty nodded. "What should I do then?"

"I don't know," my mother said. "Not what you're doing."

They'd already heard most of it. Town gossip. Gemma Francis worked at the Long Meadow Brewery on the main drag of town, and she'd recently taken up with the brew master, Scott. He was a young guy, younger than her, with two kids and a wife. A studious type with a bushy beard and ever-present baseball cap with the brewery's logo on it. No one expected it from him, but his marriage was failing, and his wife had already taken the kids to her parent's house. And Gemma had always turned heads. A real beauty. Ty arrived in town already on the

defensive, worried that every smile directed at her was an invitation to leave him. It wasn't that far from anyone's minds, how she could do better if she ever decided to, and now she had.

Scott lived up the hill from Ty and Gemma's place on the western ridge. The porch had a view of the river. Gemma, as was her way, liked to walk through the town after work, passing the Forest Service compound, over the bridge and up into the hillside neighborhood. Every night that week, when her shift ended, she followed her usual route except she walked right by her own house and headed up the hill. She didn't take the street over, Sequoia Lane, and then cut up Sorrow Road. She walked right by the house where Ty sat watching through the curtains. He wasn't supposed to be home. He'd told her he was splitting town to go see a friend in Bishop. But he stayed, and after a week of it, he arrived at the hotel.

Ty had a book about John Muir with him. In the hotel room, he took off his shoes and fell back on the double bed, the mattress springs squeaking under his weight. He turned on the bedside lamp. My father closed the door to the room. He joined my mother in their kitchen.

"Could have seen it coming." She had the kettle on, and pulled mugs from the shelf.

My father didn't answer.

"I didn't," she said. "But you could have."

"She's got to know what she's doing?"

My mother thought about it. "With looks like that you don't have to ask too many questions of yourself."

"He brought a book about John Muir, and he's talking about Painter's Camp. He wants to go."

"I thought you needed mules."

“Not if you’re up for some hiking.” Excitement built in my father’s voice. “You take the river trail, go up Diamond Creek, pick up the PCT.”

“I don’t need a map.”

“I’m just saying. A few days in the backcountry will get you there.”

My father loves to go backpacking. He took my younger brother and I all the time when we were kids.

“John Muir was not a healthy man,” my mother said.

“What does that mean?”

“You don’t go wandering around the wilderness like that if you’re not running from something.”

Ty didn’t leave the hotel room the first day. My mother monitored him from a distance, making up excuses to rake leaves, sweep the porch near his room. The light was on, and she could make out his outline through the curtains. He was in there, moving around, sitting on the bed. She finally convinced my father to check on him, and they knocked. Ty appeared at the door. He was wearing glasses.

“What are you doing?” my mother asked.

“Reading,” Ty said.

My father looked at my mother. “He’s fine.”

“Why wouldn’t I be fine?” Ty asked.

“You’re staying here.” My mother was angry now.

Both men appraised her.

“I was worried,” she explained.

“Why are you reading about John Muir?” my father asked.

Ty retreated into the room, and my parents peaked inside. He'd made the bed. He came back with the book. Held it up so they could see the title: *John of the Mountains*. "It's his journal. Tracks his exploration of the Sierra Nevada."

My mother pulled at my father's flannel shirt. "Just don't do anything stupid," she said.

They left him alone. I think my mother was still worried. I assume she was, but I'm not sure.

The next day, Ty woke early and went home. He made a cursory pass through the house. There were plates in the sink. A gray wool blanket on the couch where he'd slept most nights. He went to the garage and pulled camping gear from a shelf next to the washer and dryer. A portable stove, mesh bag with kitchen essentials, sleeping bag and ensolite pad, and a two-person tent. He stuffed it all in a backpack with an external frame. In the kitchen, he packed a small bear cannister with salami, cheese, crackers, and he found the bag of magic mushrooms in the freezer from a friend of Gemma's, Kayla, who had moved to town as part of what she called her wellness journey.

Ten years younger than Gemma and Ty, Kayla had a sort of shell-shocked look in her eyes that most people chalked up to the weed she smoked every day. But there was more. She rarely talked of her six-year-old daughter in the custody of her ex-husband in Cambria, and word was that he'd treated her horribly, yelling and belittling but never actually putting hands on her. She was flighty, but she was the type to give you the shirt off her back, and people liked her. Gemma took to her like a long-lost sister, and she and Ty offered their guest room whenever she needed a break from the property outside of town where she normally stayed. It had a yurt, airstream trailers, and a fourteen-foot-tall sculpture of the bust of a woman with showerheads for nipples. A Burning Man art project from years before. Kayla and her friends were leaders at one

of the oldest camps at Black Rock City. She'd brought the mushrooms to Ty and Gemma's for safe keeping while she was out of town, and Ty dropped a few stems into a Ziplock bag, added it to the cannister of food.

It was an hour and a half drive upriver to the trailhead. He parked next to a horse trailer. By noon, he was on the trail, walking among pines, manzanita, and juniper. He brought a water filter that was slow to fill his bottle, and he left it to wander off-trail. That's how he found the first Sequoia. They grow in bunches like a herd of cattle, and one soon led to another and then another until he stretched his arms out and spun in circles among the colossal, ancient trees.

He got as far as Sandy Flat Cabin that's set in a clearing where the Bureau of Land Management has a locked one-room shack next to a paddock. He camped across a meadow where a roofless old hut had a makeshift table. The night was cold, and the air brittle. The next morning, he pushed on. Spent the day on the trail, climbing up ridgelines and passing through valleys gutted from recent fires, entire moonscapes where every living thing had been incinerated. Husks of trees standing like burnt match sticks. That afternoon, he reached the bridge at Shallow Creek, one of the tributaries of the river. He stripped naked and dunked himself in a natural pool made from granite boulders that shielded the calm water from the main current. The water was icy, and he found a wide, flat slab, dried himself in the sun. There was no one around, not a person in any direction for at least a day.

When he woke, the sun had dropped below ridgelines to the west. Sober now, he set up a hasty camp and put on every piece of clothing he'd brought. He found a fire ring in a clearing just up from the creek, and he gathered wood. Kneeling, making steady strikes at the tinder, flicking his lighter to spark a flame, Ty realized he hadn't thought of Gemma in over a day. Later, once the dry pine burnt and the fire was smoldering, he went down to the pool where he'd

soaked himself earlier. At the water's edge, he traced circular patterns on the calm surface with his fingers and listened to the hiss of whitewater.

He stayed at the riverbank until night descended. He slept, curled up in his sleeping bag, next to the fire. He woke once and felt dew on the outside of the bag. The sound of the rapid just below the bridge drowned out every other thought. When he woke again, it was morning. The sun had topped the eastern range of mountains and blue sky was emerging, a pale and cloudless expanse. Ty climbed out of the bag, stretched his arms wide, and breathed in mountain air that smelled of pine needles and damp soil.

My mother noticed his truck in the hotel's parking lot two days later, a hard-driven Nissan Frontier with a spare tire strapped down in the bed. Ty was in his hotel room, freshly showered. Happy to see him, she asked about the trip. He told her of snowdrifts in the deep pockets of canyons and blankets of snow on the northern faces that barely saw the sun; of hard-packed ground and brittle air; of the narrow pass down to the river that was overgrown in places; of a massive, felled tree blocking the path. He said arriving at Painter's Camp was like stumbling into an oasis among so much wilderness. How he slept on top of the king's table so he could have an unobstructed view of the river. He told her he felt renewed.

But I know this: he never made it to Painter's Camp. I don't know how far he got into the backcountry, at what point he stopped and turned back, deciding he'd seen enough. Red Merrick, the old timer who runs mules into the backcountry, saw Ty's truck at the trailhead but never saw him on the trail while dropping two fishermen at Painter's Camp. Ty would have had company if he'd made it all the way out there.

He thanked my mother and packed his things. Tried to pay for the room, but she refused. When my father returned home later that day, she told him about Ty's trip.

“Sounds like he just needed to get away,” my father said.

“It’s not like you come back a new man,” she said in return.

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They were in the lobby a week later when they heard the distinctive whirring of Ty’s engine. He parked on the street, and they watched through the window as he made his way up the walkway to the lodge. He’d combed his hair and tied it into a ponytail. He was wearing a clean button-down.

“You want your room back?” my mother asked.

“I’m wondering if you’d stop by for dinner tonight,” he said. “As a thank you.”

My father was surprised by the offer. He looked to my mother.

“Kayla’s redecorated,” Ty said.

“We’d love to,” my mother said.

Ty left before my mother could ask him about it. She asked my father instead, but he didn’t know what to make of it, either.

Ty’s house is a ten-minute drive from the hotel, but my parents still readied themselves for a night out. My father wore his favorite pearl snap shirt. My mother, jeans and an olive-green sweater. They arrived after sunset. Approaching the house, Ty’s truck was parked next to a black Subaru. Kayla was in the kitchen, an apron tied around her floral-print dress. Ty met them at the door, and the scent of brown sugar and vanilla extract was strong and pleasant.

“Come in. Come in.” He had a crystal tumbler in his hand, whiskey on ice.

Kayla walked over with the airy gait of a dancer. She hugged my mother.

“Drinks?” Ty asked.

“I’ll have a beer,” my mother said. My father wanted one, too.

“How about something stronger?”

My mother told him she'd take a drink.

“Just beer for me,” my father said.

Ty nodded approvingly, retreating to the kitchen. Kayla's arms were folded into herself. She scanned the living room and asked if they wanted a tour. My parents hadn't been to Ty's house since a Super Bowl party years before. Gemma had been a fun and observant host then, policing the party with refills of whatever her guests were drinking. The living room furniture had been rearranged from where it's had been at that party. The L-shaped sofa now faced the windows and looked over the yard. The rug was new. “It's jute,” Kayla said. “They make twine out of it.” There were two dream catchers hanging from a beam in the corner. “I made those with Charlotte.” Her daughter. My parents wanted to ask about the child but worried about being too intrusive. My mother inched towards the subject.

“Did you get some things from home?”

“I rented a van. The table's mine. The bed, too.”

My father pointed to the painting hanging above the fireplace. “That's Painter's Camp.”

“Ty found it at the swap meet. One of the stalls had some old paintings.” She stared at the picture. “He loves it.”

The bend in the river and a canopy of trees on the far bank were painted with a hushed palette. It looked like late summer when the heat can make everything seem shallow and two-dimensional.

My mother walked closer. “Not sure it fits with the new furniture.”

“I can't imagine the room without it,” Kayla said.

“I can,” my mother answered.

Ty returned. “What are we talking about?” He handed a tumbler of whiskey to my mother and a Modelo to my father. He’d refilled his own glass.

“The painting’s nice,” my mother said. “Did it look like this? That’s quite a view.”

“My Dad and I went once,” my father said. “Stayed for almost a week. Got dropped off with our gear. I couldn’t catch anything the first day, but I eventually got a few. There’s a waterfall just upriver. Impressive. Did you see it?”

“I didn’t,” Ty said.

“But you got some closure,” Kayla said. “That’s what matters.”

Ty sipped his drink. “You know what? I’d like you to have it.”

I don’t know what my mother thought of the offer. It’s one of the many questions I carry with me. My father was surprised. “We can’t take the painting,” he protested. “That’s not right.”

Ty went to the fireplace. He held the frame at the bottom and unhooked the wire from the wall mount. Holding the painting, his drink wedged in his left hand against the gold frame, he turned back to my parents. “I want you to have it,” he said.

“But you love that painting,” Kayla said.

“You don’t,” he said bluntly. “You can hang something else there.”

“We can’t take it,” my mother said.

“It’s yours.” Ty’s voice was loud and electric.

My mother tensed, watchful.

Kayla went to him cautiously. “You love that painting.”

Ty was woozy, a little drunk. He turned to lean the painting against the wall and the edge of the frame caught Kayla’s arm and threw her backwards as he turned. She stumbled but caught herself before she fell.

“Tymon,” she said, but then swallowed her words.

“Christ, you okay?” my father asked.

Ty leaned the painting against the wall. “I get you?” he asked. “Sorry.” He opened his arms and Kayla went to him, burrowed into his body. “We’re happy you’re here,” he said.

My mother nodded towards the kitchen. “What are you baking? Smells great.”

“Chocolate chip cookies.” Kayla followed her. “I used coconut oil instead of butter. Chocolate’s real, though.”

My father went with Ty into the backyard. The coals were already going, spread out in the barbeque. Four cuts of flank steak waiting on a platter.

“We went to the organic market on the other side of the lake. I’d never been there. Smelled like candles.” Ty nodded like he’d acknowledged some private thought. “She doesn’t fit in up here. Everything’s a journey this, or a journey that. It’s all about healing.”

My father sipped his beer. “Looks like you got a good thing going.”

Ty placed the steaks on the grill. Both men watched them cook.

“I hate those fucking hippies,” Ty said. “She likes it there, though.”

Thomas glanced into the house. The women were talking. “Does Gemma know?”

“Kayla called her. They talked. Seems copacetic.”

“But you haven’t talked to her.”

“Fuck no.” He added shishito peppers. “Kayla wanted these.” One at a time, he placed the peppers on the grill with tongs. “They cook fast,” he said. “Kayla,” he yelled to her inside the house. “You set the table?”

She and Mel both walked to the screen door. “We’re talking,” she said. “You in a hurry?”

“We’re almost ready here.”

The words themselves weren't unusual to my father, but they sounded like a threat all the same. Kayla went back to the kitchen, pulled a wooden bowl from shelf, started chopping vegetables, preparing the salad.

Ty brought the platter of grilled food inside and placed it on the counter. Turning to my parents, Kayla gestured towards the table. "Please sit. Ty will make you another drink."

My parents did as told. Ty took my mother's tumbler, refilled it. Did the same for his drink. My father was still nursing his beer.

"You want to serve the steak?" my father asked. "Salad's almost ready."

Ty brought the platter over, placed the cuts on each plate, and added a few peppers. My mother studied him. My father thought she looked ready to spring out of her seat, and he placed a hand on her arm. Kayla followed with the salad.

"I made a vinaigrette with some lemons from the backyard," she said. "Gemma planted the tree, and it's finally showing some fruit."

"I planted it," Ty said.

"There," Kayla said. "Enjoy."

My mother ate quickly. Ty drummed on the table with his knuckles, said again that he was happy to have them over. "We might as well tell you both," he said. "Me and Kayla. This isn't new."

"Tymon," Kayla said. "Let's have dinner."

"It was Gemma's idea." He smiled. "The three of us. Gemma and Kayla."

Kayla looked at him, pleading.

Ty downed his drink. "Mel, you want another?"

My mother said she was fine. He went to the kitchen.

Steak knives scraped against plates.

“How was your trip?” my father asked Kayla. “You go down there twice a month?”

My mother shot a quick look of disapproval at my father. “This was wonderful,” she said of the meal.

“It’s okay,” Kayla said. “I don’t mind talking about it. I stay with my sister.”

Ty returned to his seat with a fresh drink.

“I saw my daughter,” Kayla said. “I hope to bring her up here. She’d love it.”

“We made a guest room for her.” Ty put the glass on the table but missed and placed only an edge of the tumbler down. It fell at his feet, ice cubes and amber liquid spilling, the glass bouncing once, twice, landing intact on its side. “Shit,” he said.

Kayla knelt to help.

“Don’t,” he said loudly, the word sharp like a jab. He scooped up ice cubes from the floor, returned them to the glass. “Apologies.”

“No need,” my father answered.

My mother ate in silence, and my father spoke of the hotel. Kayla began clearing the plates from the table. My parents both joined her. Ty followed everyone into the kitchen carrying the platter, grease outlines of the flank steak still visible. Kayla had to pull it out of his hands.

My mother gathered her purse. “Thank you both,” she said. “This was great.”

They moved in a group towards the door. Ty picked up the painting, handed it to my father. Ty and Kayla followed them onto the porch, and she rubbed his back. Both watched my parents walk to the truck. My father placed the painting gingerly in the bed. The engine choked until he pressed on the gas, pumping it a few times.

“Jesus,” my mother said quietly.

“I forgot my jacket.” My father left the engine running. Went back to the house.

The door was open. Ty had pushed Kayla against the wall and his right hand was gripped around her neck. My father’s first thought was to jump in and pull Ty away, but then Ty moved to the side and my father saw that they were kissing, Kayla’s eyes were closed. She pulled Ty towards her. Wrapped her thin arm around his waist. My father left his jacket there and retreated down the steps.

“You didn’t get it,” my mother said.

“They’re about to start having sex,” my father said.

He reversed out of the driveway. Neither spoke on the short drive home. Approaching the hotel, my mother adjusted herself in the bucket seat.

“Keep going,” she said.

They passed their hotel, followed the street along the riverside park until it linked up with the highway. My mother kept her window down. No one else was on the road.

“That’s not gonna last,” my mother said.

My father kept driving until the lake came into view. There was a crescent moon overhead.

“What do you want to do with the painting?” he asked.

“What do you mean?” my mother said. “Hang it up. They’ll kill each other if we don’t.”

Weightlessness

Mel knew the point at which her older sister stopped listening to her. Bonnie would hear Mel out, but she'd eventually steer the conversation back to herself or just drift away—still listening, sort of, while focused on some inward voice or thought. It had always been that way. Mel was fifty-two. Bonnie, two years older. She liked dresses and big hair. Her bracelets announced her arrival in any room. She could be dismissive with her advice, but she was also often right. So, Mel called when the idea of a full meal, or even having an appetite, was a distant consideration. She lost four pounds in a week, and her weight hadn't changed in years. She felt bloated and yet her stomach churned.

“Maybe you're just anxious,” Bonnie said.

It wasn't anxiety. At fourteen, Mel had started vomiting after every meal. She hid it from her parents at first, but Bonnie knew, and they tried to diagnose it themselves. But it was some black thing, her anxiousness, that clouded every thought. Their mother eventually sussed it out and sent Mel to a psychiatrist against her father's wishes. A career officer in the Navy, he was nonsense. He truncated the name Mel from her birth name, Amelia. Mel had always liked it, and she took after him in most things, but her mother insisted. Maybe it was the therapy, or a newfound toughness, that fixed the problem. Mel thought of it like triage. They addressed the wound in any number of ways, never sure if it was a single approach or the combination that found the issue. That had been an anxious year, and Mel could call back the incessant nervousness that had overwhelmed every other emotion. This wasn't that.

“Well, I don't know then,” Bonnie said.

Mel stopped consulting with her sister about it. Thomas pushed her to see a doctor, but she demurred. It would pass, she insisted. Her family didn't go to the doctor unless it was serious. Her father was so stubborn he'd need a broken bone or a heart attack before consenting to a visit. She decided to wait and see what happened, hoping it would take care of itself.

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She was in the living room with her purse in her lap when she noticed Thomas had sneakers on. They were going to a birthday dinner for a friend at the steakhouse on a bluff that overlooked the river. She sent him back to the bedroom to change his shoes. When he returned, the New Balance running shoes had been replaced by Oxford loafers. He'd added a corduroy jacket. She'd been pushing back a feeling of queasiness all day, and a wave of nausea surfaced. She gagged, covering her mouth, and went to the bathroom.

"I look that bad?" he asked.

She kneeled over the toilet and vomited. Afterwards, her mouth bitter from the bile in her stomach, she felt better, but when she stood, she was light-headed and braced herself by holding onto the sink.

Thomas had followed her into the bathroom. "Jesus," he said, placing a hand on her shoulder. "Are you okay?"

He walked her into the kitchen, got her some water. She was unsteady and feverish.

"Tell me what to do," he said.

"Go have a good time."

He was unconvinced.

"I'm fine," she said. "I just need to rest."

She didn't think there could be so much the matter with her. After Thomas left, she had another glass of water. She went to the bathroom one more time, feeling like she might be sick again, but she only leaned over the toilet.

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Despite her efforts to ignore her queasiness, it persisted. Her health would improve to the point that she would declare to Thomas that she felt fine only to feel sick again. She finally relented, agreeing to see her oncologist. He put her through a series of tests—bloodwork, a colonoscopy, a biopsy—and she and Thomas ran laps over the next two weeks from their home to the medical facility, driving down the canyon for whatever test had been scheduled.

They'd arrived first thing in the morning for an appointment where they were going to review the results. The oncologist was named Dr. Anders, and his neck was sun-burned like he'd just returned from a day of golfing. His blonde hair was thinning, but he was sporty. His teeth were perfectly straight, almost comically so, but his normal, amiable manner was absent as he studied the charts.

“There's something we need to discuss,” he said.

He didn't need to explain. “I have cancer again,” she said. “Don't I?”

It was her colon this time. The polyps they found were cancerous. He laid out the options. They would need to operate. They would need chemotherapy. He was confident—he said this while smiling, but it was labored, she could tell—that they could remove it all. They'd caught it early. He involved himself in the cancer, saying *they* as if he would go through it with her, but he wasn't going to have to weather the rounds of chemo that would leave her too depleted to function.

The strain of her previous recovery years before was still a sour, troubling memory. It was decade before. A regular checkup had revealed a lump in her left breast and the mammogram revealed the tumor. A long recovery followed. Lasting pain spread from her breast to her back and arm like white noise that never ceased. Noll was an introverted and bookish middle schooler, but Shane had been eight at the time, a terror of tireless energy. She couldn't keep up and started issuing commands to try to corral him. She hated who she became, a stationary mother yelling at her children from the couch. She tried aspirin. She tried yoga. But the pain persisted. She snapped at Thomas, at the boys, at everyone.

The illness was a sign of her failings. Thomas had tried to manage the boys and the house, but he couldn't keep it all in his mind. He would keep the house organized, but then forget to pack lunches for the boys. Or he'd make dinner, but then leave the dishes in the sink until the following evening. He'd never been too organized, and the responsibility of holding it all together wore him down. He wouldn't lash out so much as slide comments off his tongue. Finally, half a year after the procedure and the long recovery, the pain subsided. But the strain in their marriage only grew. The affair followed, and Mel had always pointed to those months of recovery as the beginning of it.

Infidelity was too pleasant a word for how despondent it could leave you. Thomas was always vague about when it began with Gretchen. A single mother, she had organized the shuttling of boys between baseball practices and games, needing help on days when she worked late. It was over quickly, and Thomas groveled in apology. Mel thought of leaving him every day for months, but then Shane would hug her in the morning or Noll would ask for help with his homework, and she couldn't do it. It was for the children, she told herself, and she eventually forgave Thomas or forgave him enough that things returned to normal.

But this was not normal. It was a return of the cancer, and Mel couldn't help but feel unsteadied by the hurt and mistrust that lingered. Outside the doctor's office, she waited for Thomas to bring the truck around. She was shaky and vulnerable. City sounds stabbed at her: A bus wheezing as it stopped to deposit a few passengers. A dog barking from the back seat of a car. Her body had betrayed her. Thomas steered the truck to the red curb where she stood.

"We could get coffee," he said.

They often stopped at a restaurant a short drive from the medical facility, but she couldn't imagine stopping for breakfast.

"I love you," he said. "We've been through this before."

Something like understanding passed over him.

"You're the love of my life," he said, trying again. "Tell me what to do. I'm here every step of the way."

It was performative. Mel had heard an expression that kids used, love bombing. He was overcompensating, still apologizing. It wasn't a tactic, her indifference to answering. She didn't have an answer. Thomas needed to be told what to do, and there wasn't anything to say. She told him to take them home, sinking into the bucket seat of the truck. Thomas followed the agricultural roads of their bootlegger route home, passing crops of almonds, oranges, alfalfa, plots of fallow fields.

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With Thomas, the smallest idea could set him in motion. Mel had long noted how he would leap into action before thinking, always more comfortable doing something. When the boys were young, they had a passing discussion about visiting national parks over the summer break. Thomas returned home two days later in a Winnebago he'd picked up on the cheap from a

dealership one town over. It had gone like that time after time. An idea presented itself and Thomas leapt into action. All these years later—they were approaching their thirtieth anniversary—Thomas was still easily excited, but his enthusiasms had mellowed.

She met him on a weeknight in May before Memorial Day. She was an art major in college in Claremont studying painting, and she'd gone to a bar near campus, a dingy place crowded with students. Bartenders yelling over people. The floor littered with peanut shells. Thomas was at the bar waiting to order a drink when he leaned over and said hello. She could already tell he was full of himself, but she liked that about him. He was tall, just under six feet. Clean shaven. But there was dirt under his fingernails. He was one of a team of electricians working on a new subdivision of homes nearby. He started chatting her up, describing his hometown in the mountains of California's Southern Sierra. It was exotic. Mt. Baldy dominated the skyline north of Mel's hometown, but the rest was just low-lying hills and tracts of housing developments. She wrote down her phone number and told him he should take her out for dinner. She felt bold. A girlfriend was sitting next to her following the flirtation.

Within a month of meeting, he took her to his hometown for a weekend visit. She slept in his old bedroom while he was on the living room sofa. His mother's rules. They walked along the riverside park trail. They took a fire road above the town until the valley came into view, trees following the sweep and bends of the river as it cut through the land. They drove thirty minutes north to a bridge that spanned a steep, tree-lined gorge. Cement arches climbed gracefully from the valley floor, the river a hundred feet below. The bridge was named after the highway, but it was known locally for something more morose, Suicide Bridge. The first one was a young man who leapt from the skeletal, unfinished structure in 1920. Mel hugged one of the lamp posts while leaning over the side. Thomas hadn't picked up on her fear. He wasn't

oblivious, not exactly. She learned quickly that she had to parade an emotion in front of him. Or not. It was preferable at times to leave things unsaid, knowing he'd never bring it up. She didn't understand this until later.

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Mel began making practical arrangements. She hired a retired teacher, Sharon, to help with some of the administrative tasks of the hotel. She spent days creating lists of instructions. How to hire the cleaning company. How to reply and confirm a booking. How to manage various spreadsheets of costs and reservations. She hired a gardener and wrote another list. What to leave and let grow. Shrubs that could use a trimming. Roses that needed only a light watering. Mel wrote notes about their finances, mortgage payments, bills. The operational costs of the hotel and the house. Her lists grew less focused on money. She put down a list of key birthdays, a list of holiday preferences. Noll didn't like to be given books and preferred cash to buy his own. Shane would take any present and exchange it for what he wanted. Noll's wife Melissa liked a rosemary mint bodywash from Aveda. Mel wasn't sure who she was making these lists for, but the need to complete them weighed on her, and she snapped at Thomas one afternoon when he asked what she was writing.

“You'll need this,” she said.

“What is it? Instructions?”

He read over her shoulder, crowding her.

“I could just ask you.” He kissed her cheek. “Why so much planning?”

She didn't think she needed to explain.

“You're not going to die,” he said, stricken. “I won't let you.”

He doted on her then, offering to run errands while encouraging her to rest. Followed her around the house, pulled her into hugs, told her how much she meant to him. He seemed energized by his attempts to support her, but Mel felt smothered by his affection, and he could waver like a teenager—hovering and attentive one minute; obtuse and distant the next. What she felt was not love, but consideration. Worse, pity. And still he remained inaccessible as if he was holding onto some part of himself that was healthy and steadfast.

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The garden in front of the hotel's lodge was barren. Skeletal rose bushes, a browned patch of grass. Someone—the previous owner, maybe—had planted two mountain dogwood trees that flanked the front gate. They were deciduous, and their spiny limbs looked gaunt and withered. Mel went to a local nursery and bought purple violets, faint-colored orange poppies, and buttercups that were turning from white to a dirty yellow. She'd been working all morning, raking the dirt, removing rocks, pulling weeds, digging holes, and planting the flowers adjacent to the walkway that led to the lodge.

She meant to use her time in the valley to be creative. She never considered herself an artist, but she had studied painting. After a weeklong pre-college course at Art Center, she returned home with paint-splattered chinos that she wore for the remainder of high school. Mel thought there would be time to pick up painting again. What she'd done with Thomas was renovate the hotel. There'd been so many essential and labor-intensive repairs. They'd gutted and rebuilt the interior of the lodge, leaving only the wooden beams. Mel had found a wagon wheel in the yard and refinished it as a chandelier. They'd reframed the windows of the rooms, added sheets of insulation. Redone the roof. Over several years, they repainted and redecorated every room until they were distinctive and given names from the valley. The Limestone room had a

green hue like the moss that grew on the limestone rocks along the river. The Geologies had a massive granite boulder as a bedside table. Mel had learned to garden through her improvements. When they bought the property, the garden had been overcome by weeds. She added new shrubs and a small bamboo forest along the exterior of the property. She pulled every weed and every desiccated and dead plant and added a willow tree and young oaks and pines until a small grove emerged along the northern border that faced the highway into town. In the spring when the garden bloomed, she would stand among the trees with her morning coffee.

Kneeling in the dirt while planting the tulips, Mel wondered who would maintain it? Who was it for? Across the street, people were walking dogs along the trail of the riverside park. The sun was out, the sky cloudless, but a chill lingered. Mel sprinkled the soil with water from a rusty watering can when Joyce's Mercedes turned onto the street. Joyce waved while coasting into a parking spot. School had let out for the day, and Joyce sometimes stopped by on her way home.

"Those will be nice when they bloom," Joyce said.

"Farmer's Market?"

Joyce nodded yes. "How are you?" She kneeled and Mel caught the faint scent of hair spray.

They'd known each other almost as long as Mel had known Thomas. When she moved to the river valley with him, Joyce was her first friend. Thomas introduced them. Mel had called Joyce when she returned from the oncologist the afternoon she'd learned about the cancer.

"I'm not doing another round of chemo," Mel said.

Joyce brushed some strands of Mel's hair behind her ears.

She said: "You don't have to do anything you don't want to do."

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Joyce invited Mel and Thomas to join her at the harvest festival that Friday night. She arrived with a package of gingerbread men outlined in frosting that she'd picked up from the bakery. She'd been separated from her second husband for five years, and she was dressed for a night out in a tight-fitting blouse and jeans. She had news. Marianne and the brew master were moving in together, but not into his house. He was selling it as part of the divorce.

"It's moving too fast," Joyce said. "You watch. They'll run out of steam."

"Jack's been a hermit," Mel said.

"I boxed up Frank's things and put them in the garage."

Frank, Buddy's father, lived in Prescott, Arizona.

"Everyone reacts differently," Mel said. "My aunt joined a group who thought they could communicate with aliens."

"How have I never heard this?" Joyce asked.

"They were supposed to arrive in UFO's. Help humanity advance to a new age."

"What a fruit loop," Joyce said. "I'd love her."

"My mother wanted to support her sister after the divorce, but he couldn't stand her ideas," Mel said.

"But she left eventually?"

"Took a few years," Mel said. "Did I ever tell you what my mother said to me after Shane was born? She wanted to make sure both boys experienced religion at a young age so they wouldn't get drawn into a cult when they grew up."

"Like her sister," Thomas said.

Talk turned to other mutual acquaintances. Thomas and Joyce's families went to the same church, and the updates focused on friends they'd known for years. One friend was running for a

county commissioner seat. Another had been arrested for drunkenly rear-ending someone. Thomas and Joyce were from large families with long ties to the river valley that went back generations. Joyce was the same age as Thomas, four years older than Mel. She could hold her own with the crassest of men, never censoring herself for the sake of appearances. That's how Mel had learned about her and Thomas. When they were young, they'd gone to church dances together. Joyce called Thomas her first love, but he'd never said anything about it. Mel brought it up with him, and he dismissed it, describing it as kid stuff. Puppy love. Mel wasn't convinced, but Joyce was so easy with her affections. She'd reach out and touch anyone she was speaking to almost unconsciously. It had left Mel queasy and never quite safe, but that had been years ago. Time had dulled the feeling, but it lingered.

“Make yourself useful.” Joyce dangled her empty glass at Thomas, shaking the ice cubes.

“Yes, boss.”

He took the glass.

“Sweetie, have another?”

“I shouldn't.” Mel said.

“She'll have one, too.” Joyce said to Thomas.

Mel liked how Joyce could still order Thomas around. There was a closeness between them, a shorthand in how they referenced a lifetime of people they'd both known in the valley. She'd been thinking about her health for days, and her lists had grown to include conjecture, the what-ifs of her illness. It was easy to remove herself from the specifics of what she had written down. At one point, she even wrote, *Thomas and Joyce*, part of the logistics of planning for her cremation. What if he'd married her instead? What if Thomas and Joyce had been high school sweethearts who walked across the stage at their graduation and then proceeded down the aisle?

The river valley was full of couples who had married out of high school, Joyce among them in what she called her starter marriage. Almost all those high school sweethearts were now divorced. They never would have made it, Mel decided, not in a million years. But this was different, the possibility of a relationship between two lifelong friends, the reunion of first loves. Mel knew it was a wild thought, something she couldn't share.

"You look tired." Joyce pulled out a chair from the kitchen table.

"I feel fine."

But the way the two of them stood and waited, trying to console her, felt like pity. Joyce leaned on one leg with a hand on her hip and gestured towards the seat.

"Take a load off," she said.

Joyce smiled warmly. She had always been unabashed about her sexuality, and her presence left Mel confronting her own frailty. She sat down. Thomas placed a second drink on the table for her.

"Tell me more about this aunt of yours," Joyce said. "Where is she now?"

"She lives near my sister in Leucadia. They both sing in a choir together."

"Two peas in a pod," Thomas said.

"In their church?" Joyce asked.

"It's nondenominational," Mel said. "But they still sing traditional music."

"Worship music for people who don't want to call it worship," Thomas said.

Joyce attended mass almost every Sunday. Mel had always been ambivalent, but Sunday masses were important to Thomas when the boys were younger, so Mel went until they lost interest.

"You still go every week?" Mel asked.

“Want to come with me?” Joyce said. “It’s been ages.”

“I was thinking about Jack. He needs to get out of the house.”

“That’s a good idea,” Joyce said.

“I like it,” Thomas added.

“What if you two took him?” Mel asked.

Joyce looked from Mel to Thomas.

“That’s enough of that,” Thomas said.

Didn’t they know what was happening? But Mel had gotten too close to a lingering desire, unformed and yet amorphous, seeping everywhere between the three of them. Now she wanted to wedge herself between them. Be the rock the river had to go around. This wasn’t the end, she realized. Not really. Not yet. It was only another stage.

They gathered their coats. It was a brisk night and they walked towards the low bridge that spanned the river. Thomas and Joyce went ahead as Mel drifted to the low cement wall. She was a little winded and sat on the edge, peered over the side at the short drop to the bottom. A streetlight lit the riverbed below. Small boulders peeked out of dry mud, and the reeds clustered on the banks were thin and papery.

“You coming?” Joyce asked.

The festival was crowded. Restaurants had set up booths next to a beer garden, and bales of hay flanked a stage. A Dixieland band of long retired locals were performing. Thomas went to fetch drinks. The musicians invited a waifish girl to the stage. Her acoustic guitar was almost as big as her. She was probably fifteen, and one of the musicians introduced her as his granddaughter. She was nervous, but then she started to sing, and her eyes went wide with surprise that her voice could move a person.

“She’s good,” Joyce said.

After the young girl finished and the crowd hooted and cheered, Mayor Town walked towards the microphone. When he spoke the audio speakers flanking the stage sparked with feedback. He recoiled and looked over at the young guy standing behind the mixing board.

“Sorry about that,” Town said.

“That was so loud.” A group of high school girls were standing near Mel and Joyce. The leader, the one who spoke, was fair-haired, wearing Converse sneakers and a short cotton dress that showed off her bare legs. Her hair was combed back, and the sleek look highlighted her cheekbones and the delicate curve of her nose. Mel thought she was testing how much attention her beauty could command. That would have been fine—everyone tested limits—if not for the dismissive way she waved off one of her girlfriends and scanned the crowd, noting who was watching her. Mel followed the girl as she leaned in towards another girl to whisper something and laugh while the one who had been chastened looked on sheepishly. Mayor Town retold the story of Jed Wilson, a young man who came to valley at the height of the gold rush and stumbled into a chunk of gold the size of a baseball, or a golf ball, some even said a softball. It grew or shrank based on who was reminiscing.

“That young man made his fortune in one day,” Town said.

The pretty girl yelled across the field. “Dorks!” Two teenage boys were wearing overalls like they’d just slept in the dirt and hiked out of a hillside camp. “That’s so nerdy!” A few people turned and one woman shushed the girl, but she was oblivious. She bounced over to the boys and poked at their clothing. The mayor introduced Laurie Douglas who ran the volunteer historical society that organized the event. The girl returned to her friends talking loudly about a party later while ignoring the speech. When Laurie finished to applause, the girl clapped sarcastically and

hooted. Mel went towards her then, and took her right arm, squeezing tightly while turning her away from the stage until she was forced to look at Mel.

“You’re being obnoxious.” Mel tightened her grip on the girl’s arm.

“You’re hurting me.” The girl tried to pull away. Her eyes were scared.

Mel was then aware then that people had turned to watch. She let go and the fair-haired girl stepped back. Joyce moved between them.

“Sweetie,” she said to the girl. “Keep it down a little?” She took Mel’s hand and pulled her towards the stage. “The band’s about to start.”

Mel let Joyce lead her away, mortified by how she’d just snapped at the girl. She kept her head down, looking only at shoes of the people Joyce led her past until they were away from the girls.

“I’m okay,” Mel said.

Joyce wouldn’t let go of her hand. “What was that?”

“I don’t know.” Mel stepped back, and Joyce let her hand fall. “She was so loud.”

“She’s a kid.” Joyce glanced back at the girls.

Thomas found them, a drink in each hand.

“Vodka tonics,” he said. “I ran into Veronica. She was on her way to the truck to get a bottle of Macallan for the Mayor.”

“True love,” Joyce said. “Sneaking in booze for your new husband.”

“She said I could have some.” He turned towards the bar. “I’ll be back.”

Thomas dodged groups of people watching the performance while moving through the crowd.

“He’s trying,” Joyce said.

“I know he is.”

“Is that what you’re mad about? He called me, asking what he should do.”

“He calls you for advice?”

“Once. No, twice.”

An opportunity presented itself, a chance to control something.

“Just wait,” Mel said.

“Wait for what?”

Mel didn’t know if this was the right way to respond. Didn’t know if things would go how she wanted them to go. What she felt was a sense of falling, a drop from a great distance, weightlessness. The band started a new song. Thomas had given them both red plastic cups. Joyce held hers tightly.