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Madhava Martin April 16, 2014

Deliver Me from Nowhere

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An abstract of
a thesis submitted to the Faculty of Emory College of Arts and Sciences
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Abstract

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Deliver Me from Nowhere is a novella about a family in Iowa.

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Bobby Norton did not look at his family. Where they were, he knew. Bottom left of the football stadium bleachers. All seven of them—three brothers, three sisters, and one mother—squeezed in among each other like a package of hot dogs packed among other Fairfield townspeople. He stood now on the squishy outdoor track with the other graduating seniors in Fairfield High School's Class of 2009. They were grouped together stage right of the bleachers. His thick-soled dress shoes seemed to be sticking to the track's black, spongy surface. It felt like standing at the bottom of a cereal bowl: from the ground level where the high school stood to the football field and surrounding track was a steep drop. Bright noonday sun far overhead. Heavy air infused by occasional breezes that rustled the tops of the evergreen trees at the north end of the field. The sand-colored brick high school building rose above the cascading bleachers into the upper world beyond. White paint on the press box at the top of the stands reflecting garish sunlight. Polyester gown insulating his body like a greenhouse gas. Black, of all colors. On June 1st at noon.

He had spotted his family obliquely and looked away before they could make eye contact. Before that, even, he could feel them. He'd heard them calling to him but did not reply as he passed the orange plastic bleachers and descended the concrete steps in a line of graduating seniors. They ambled down to the track that circumscribed the football field and assembled in their assigned order, waiting to be seated. Bobby pretended to be focused on keeping his place in line and navigating the oddly spaced stairs. One of his siblings, a younger brother, loudly whispered, “There he is!” His mother called his name. But he did not look at them. Out of the corner of his eye he saw Anna, his youngest sister, lean over the fence at the bottom of the bleachers to get a picture of him. He tried to look deeply absorbed in thought.

For him, his family had always been like the sun. They were the source, the origin of all

the world he inhabited and for the possibility of navigating that world. Without the sun, no world, and without his family, his world would not have made sense. He himself would not have made sense, to himself or to others. If asked about any detail of his personality or life or interests, the condensed essence of his answer would inevitably have led back to this source. His family was the light that had cast his world into intelligible details. Pride of his life, tether of his existence, memory of his birth. But, like the sun, they had always resisted his attempts to look at them directly, in the face, to grasp them and perceive them as a phenomenal whole. The most other, the hardest to account for. The cause of all his grievances. The sun is what allows you to see anything, but you cannot look at the sun. And Bobby Norton could not look at his family.

He could not look at them conceptually. They were too many: a mutating, chaotic, swirling mess. Six of them born in the span of nine years. So many moving parts, such an absurd history to try to comprehend. His mother had not finished college; his father had not finished tenth grade. The oldest child, his older sister Charlotte, was six years older than he and, if he believed the begrudging admission his mother had whispered one exasperated night, not the child of the man who had fathered Bobby and the next five kids but in fact of the fiancé his mother had abandoned to run off with a man named Jim Norton. Their childhood a distant fever dream. At two separate times there had been three children in diapers. They'd never had money, except at the times their mother, Rose, had managed to convince Jim to splurge on furniture, finally, or new clothes. Rose shunned modern medicine, birthed them all at home in their sprawling but run-down Kansas City house, home-schooled them sporadically, and fed them rice and honey, rice and corn, rice and peas. They had known Jim partially by intermittent dark presences but mostly by long absences, stormy shouting matches about affairs, and silent midnight returns.

Then, suddenly, they moved hurriedly to a nowhere town in Iowa where Rose had family

after she finally divorced the son of a bitch when Bobby was nine. Seven rental houses in six years. WIC cheese and Juicy Juice, USDA beans and cheese, paper food stamp coupons, stale donuts and bread from the local food pantry at the end of the month. Leftovers ferried out of the backs of Indian and Thai restaurants on the town square at closing time. One sudden eviction—a particularly dark time. A court-ordered family counselor who instructed Rose on successful household management after his older sister had called Human Services on their mother after a particularly nasty fight. Threats from his mother that if they didn't behave, DHS might deem her an unfit parent and split them up. Her obesity increasing, her back weakening, once giving out and confining her to a bed for a week. How they'd made it this far, he didn't know.

As the band struck up the school's fight song, the lines of gowned seniors, girls in white and guys in black, snaked into rows of dinky plastic folding chairs facing the stage. Their backs were now to the crowd. Bobby was sandwiched between lispy, fidgety Travis Nelson and rail-thin punk queen Tess Novak. Ever since sixth grade, alphabetic order had fated them together for annual ITBS standardized testing and the occasional study hall. Elizabeth Oliver would have been to the right of Tess, but she'd died in a farming accident at the start of junior year, run over by a combine driven by her own father.

“All right, guys,” Bobby said, turning to look at Travis and then at Tess. “We've been here before. We can do this. This is only like a third as long as the ITBS tests.”

Travis breathed out a nervous laugh.

“Anyone bring any dank?” Tess asked the general vicinity.

“No,” Bobby said. “No, Tess, I don't believe so. But, you know, I think this field has the dankest grass of all.”

“Because they don't let anybody touch it until football,” Travis hissed. “Soccer had to

practice out at the fields by Dexter. Smells like the factory took a piss."

"Good for your lungs," Bobby said, surveying the small lines of students taking their seats in front of him. "Exposure to pathogens."

"But they won't let me expose my lungs to carcinogens." Tess rolled her eyes. "Load of shit."

"Easy, Tess. Just an hour or two." Bobby patted her knee jokily.

"So ready to leave this place. Going to Wisconsin Dells in a week. Might not even come back."

"What will you do?" Bobby asked.

"I don't know. Waitress, maybe. Anything's better than here."

"Well, some people don't hate it as much. Right Travis?"

"Oh, yeah," Travis laughed, wiping his hands fecklessly on the slick gown. "You gotta have someone to watch over the family business while it kicks the bucket."

"Newspapers will be around for a while here," Bobby said. "Don't worry about that. Local news, especially. Longer than anywhere else, at least. You're in a newspaper hotbed."

"Every young guy's dream." Travis gave a thumb's up.

"Silicorn Valley," Bobby said.

"Easy for you to say," Tess said. "Not all of us get to bounce to Massachusetts to go to Harvard."

"Pennsylvania," Bobby said, looking down. "And it's not Harvard. Swarthmore. Nice little school, but no Harvard."

"Stop trying to be humble. You don't have to act like you didn't get a golden ticket."

Bobby leaned down to re-tie a shoe that was already tied. He thought about looking back

to his family, but each passing moment frittered away at his courage, and he remained seated, staring ahead at the empty bleachers on the field's opposite side.

He could not look at his family in person—it wasn't just today. Shy and indirect, he spoke out of the side of his mouth and often mumbled in a monotonous, inflectionless drawl to avoid disclosing any of his real emotions. He feared confrontation of any sort. Every dispute, no matter how small, had elicited the same weak-kneed, empty stomach, prickly neck feeling of alarm and fear ever since he'd first heard Rose cuss out his father and watched her shove him out the back door, locking it quickly before he could re-enter. Bobby's preferred modes of communication were sarcasm, parody, and jokes, and he voiced any criticisms of his siblings not to them directly but instead to their mother. Eye contact was foreign to him. He also secretly battled stage fright that had led him to ask his family not to attend his basketball games in middle school and had caused him to spend most of his high school games nervously distracted, especially if his family was there. And the high school games were such large de facto social events that he couldn't really keep them from attending. But he had always pretended he hadn't seen them, never directly acknowledging them even if they sat only a couple rows up. On most days, if he looked at them, it was out of the corner of his eye or while they weren't looking back.

As the final students filed into their seats, his family continued making surreptitious attempts to get his attention.

“Hey Bobert!”

“He's a big boy today.”

“Shh, guys, that's enough!”

“We see you!”

He turned to peek quickly at them over his right shoulder, hoping to placate them and end

his embarrassment. His mother smiled at him just as he turned back around, her bulging cheeks already looking sunburned. His five younger siblings were crowding around his older sister, trying to get a look at the pictures she'd taken, presumably of him.

He most especially could not look at them now. Not only because their absurdity exceeded his intellectual comprehension. Not only because familial love, pride, and loyalty were, like school or hometown pride, childish and humiliating to him. Not only because the sun bore down directly onto them and made it hard to look directly at anything around him other than the dark colors of the boys' graduation gowns and the track surface. But also because they were embarrassing. Theirs was the town's strange family, the one that confounded stock Midwestern standards of normalcy. Though the stands were full, they were given a generous berth by those sitting around them. They had abrupted into Fairfield in the middle of September seven years before, a gregarious but unconfident mother, overweight and overwhelmed, hauling a passel of seven kids in a 15-passenger Ford van with Missouri plates and piles of clothes, books, and essential toys stuffed into its every crevice. The few family friends they'd made since moving to Iowa from Kansas City had drifted away after spats with his mother. He and his siblings all scored highly on the annual standardized tests but regularly had Rose call them in sick so they could stay home from school. They rarely did things as a family, least of all dinner. They did not see their father and did not speak of him. They were the social opposite of the Kleins, a well-tanned, hard-working family of hog farmers. Despite having six kids, only one fewer than the Nortons, the Kleins always had money and were a functional, loving Christian family. Their dad helped coach his sons' basketball teams and their mom worked at the nicest bank in town, ran a photography business on the side, and somehow managed to stay fit enough to earn double-takes from high school guys every now and then. The Klein brood always brought in heavy boxes of

canned goods for school food drives for needy families, and come December they were one of many charitable families that offered to buy small Christmas gifts for poor families' children. Bobby's family got those canned goods; they were the kids who received those toys.

The seniors had all been seated and the band ceased playing. The principal, Mr. Van Horn, welcomed all the family members, community members, guests, teachers, and students. He asked that no beach balls be released to crowd surf among the graduates this year. The choir began singing some stiff old songs that Bobby didn't recognize.

Bobby snuck another clandestine look at the crowd over his left shoulder. To see so many people gathered together in the stands was impressive but strange. Other than the county fair and high school football games, it was the one event that could summon so many Fairfield residents to one place simultaneously. And he was on stage before them, clumped here with classmates he had warily accompanied through seven years of public schooling. Sitting in the bowels of the stadium, to be offered one moment where each student's name would ring out crisply and reverberate off of the empty field and steps and opponents' bleachers, echoes dying off in the branches of tall, lush evergreens separating the stadium from the neighboring railroad tracks. On the field had been olympian matches of speed and brute toughness played out under an open sky like offerings to a looming god above. Basketball, on the other hand, had always felt claustrophobic, too close to the crowd, too naked. He had mocked football players' machismo for years but secretly believed it must feel incredible to play out there in front of so many admiring, excited people. Graduation, by contrast, was bureaucratic, a formal procession and announcement of names. Spectators were even asked to refrain from clapping for any individual graduate and save their applause for the end. Ten or fifteen rowdy families broke that rule at each ceremony; Bobby hoped to God his family wouldn't be one of them this year.

It was hard not to continue looking around, though. This was the one time every single member of his class would be seated together. It had never happened before, and it would never happen again. It didn't matter that he'd dreaded the first day of 6th grade with a bunch of "Iowa hicks," as he'd called them. He'd let go of the disdain he had cultivated for all things rural and Iowan—pickup trucks and hunting camo and Hawkeyes apparel. His ferocious determination over the past two years to go to college out of state, as far away from this hellhole as possible, now seemed hotheaded and naïve. Whatever this time had been like, it had shaped him indelibly. This was momentous. No matter how short the stay, he'd always felt deep sadness and profound nostalgia upon leaving a house for the last time, be it their house in Kansas City, his grandmother's house after she'd sold it, or any of the litany of rentals they'd left over the years. He always knew, but could never quite believe, that he would likely never be in that particular house ever again, that house that had, through poverty and sadness and childlike play and relief, sheltered him. This, graduation, was even harder. He and his classmates' names would be read into a microphone by the principal, their pictures taken by a hired photographer as they paused at the end of the stage, their hats thrown if they so desired as they stood on the steps leading toward the bell at the south end of the stadium for the ceremony's culmination. And that would be it. He wondered how you say goodbye to something you hate as much as you love. He searched his mind for how he would remember something that had influenced him as much as he had tried to reject it.

He glanced around at his classmates. They were listening to the class speakers, one boy and one girl, sum up their 12 years of schooling and exhort their peers onto better and bigger things. "The journey begins now," a faraway voice announced into the microphone as his attention drifted away. He knew that: something was beginning. Everything was beginning. The

hard question was what just ended. Something was ending, but what? Around him were former basketball teammates, guys who'd called him gay in middle school until he'd proven to be normal and interested enough in sports to be accepted as nonthreatening and familiar. There were girls he'd secretly liked but never asked out. There was Jessica, the chipmunk-cheeked girl he'd dated all of sophomore year, his first girlfriend, to whom he'd been so nice and forgiving and submissive that eventually he realized he didn't know what he liked about her, broke it off, and had not sought out contact with her ever since. There were girls who had gotten pregnant already and barely managed to complete the graduation requirements. Potheads were not going to college and would be working at Walmart, Family Video, and McDonald's within the next year.

The speakers returned to their seats and Mr. Van Horn began speaking about Elizabeth Oliver and the grief everyone still felt for her loss. He asked for a moment of silence in her memory. Bobby lowered his head and closed his eyes.

Tess was right. He'd gotten a golden ticket. Just what he'd wanted. He'd wanted out, and he was getting out. But he realized now that it hadn't brought the release he'd expected. That didn't change the way he felt about his family. That didn't change that they'd still be here. And that didn't mean anything, really. He was no better than Travis or Tess or any of the kids who'd gotten knocked up or dropped out. When it came down to it, he remembered sixth grade. He remembered being scared shitless about going to a new school. He remembered thinking they'd know his family was a mess, that he got lunches for free, that he barely knew his father. But he hadn't been bullied, at least any more than anyone else, and at least not at first. He hadn't been beat up or called names. At first, they'd all been scared, and they all wanted the same thing—although he realized this only in retrospect. It seemed so simple now. They wanted to be loved. And he wanted to be loved. And Elizabeth Oliver had wanted to be loved.

The moment of silence ended and Van Horn started reading off Acevedo, Adam, Bachar, Baker. As he watched, Bobby began anticipating the moment when he'd be standing up there, too. He noticed his body was tense: shoulders hunched forward, neck tight, lips pursed, tongue pushing hard against hard palate and upper front teeth. He let his arms go limp, slackened his jaw. He let go of worry for a second. Elizabeth Oliver returned to his mind. She'd been alive, and then she was gone, like a black hole with no known location and no surviving evidence. There, then gone. Her absence as nonnegotiable and factually intransigent as her presence had been automatic, a given. It could happen to anyone, anywhere, anytime. It could be him that was dead tomorrow, or any of his family members. That was true for today, tomorrow, and every instant as long as he was alive.

Travis Nelson touched Bobby on the arm. He looked up and saw his row of students leading off toward the track and approaching the stage. He hurried to catch up to Tess. A rush of gratitude came over him. He was lucky. Maybe that was cause for relaxation rather than guilt, for relief rather than worry. His father had dropped out of tenth grade. His mother had skipped her high school graduation and holed up in a movie theater, too self-conscious and petrified to walk across a stage in front of that many people. Yet here he was. Maybe something was going right. Maybe, despite everything, he was going to make it. And his family, too. He didn't know how to fix them, but at least he could be some small victory for them all, something to be proud of in the face of a crowd of people who had little to do with their fatherless, destitute family.

Up ahead of him, Rebecca Moore’s name was read into the microphone. Travis would be next, then Bobby. He stole a sideways glance at the bottom rows of the stands where he knew his family stood. Charlotte and Anne stood at the bottom in front of the fence, cameras poised. He smiled a little in spite of himself. He knew they were watching him. Here it was. He tried to

grasp everything. He wanted to remember this moment well. Travis stood ahead of him, cheeks and eyes scrunched together in a pained expression. That, or he was squinting because of the sun's glare.

When he stepped onto the stage and turned to face the crowd, he first stared blankly ahead at an indefinite point above the final row of seated heads topped with rhomboid caps. Mr. Van Horn slowly announced his name to the world. “Robert Joseph Norton.” It resounded briefly before being absorbed into the air. Seeing or hearing his full name had always felt foreign to him, like how a word you stare at long enough starts looking less and less like a real word. Not to mention that no one had called him Robert in years. Now, though, it felt good.

A cry of “We love you!” erupted from his family's corner, followed by a surge of yells from that, his own private cheering section. An involuntary laugh escaped him and he looked up at the crowd. Some warm feeling, a mix of embarrassment and giddiness, moved through his stomach. This place, my people. Family of mine. He took a second longer than he needed to before turning. For the first time that day he looked up and tried to take it all in, one mental snapshot. Familiar faces and sunglasses, summer dresses and bright red sunburned flesh all began to blend together, the serried rows of people piled high into the air, ascending upward to seemingly impossible heights, mixing together and rising like a tidal wave. All was silent, moment split open, the echo of his name having died out. He tried to capture what he was thinking and take in the crowd all at once, head moving over toward his family, but the sun was so bright and he was squinting and, suddenly, he blinked. People were staring a bit awkwardly and the procession had halted. Mr. Van Horn's head was tilted downward, eyes fixed on Bobby from above the wire-frame glasses lying low on his nose. Bobby hurriedly turned and walked briskly off the stage, looking down and growing hotter under his gown.

After receiving an envelope containing a bound leather booklet without a diploma inside (those would be retrieved in the cafeteria after the ceremony, thus discouraging any public shenanigans from newly liberated graduates), he returned to his seat. Everything had moved too fast. He had wanted a triumphant moment, a second where he saw everything clearly, where it all clicked and he understood the answer to everything, to his worries, fears, and hopes. In the days before graduation, he had fantasized about that moment often, hoping he'd have found some resolute, aphoristic judgment on his time in this place with these people, the strangeness of it and the paradoxical role his family had played in his life. He had looked out and grasped desperately for it, but it had been like trying to grab water. The moment had come up empty. He hadn't been able to see anything. All that remained were infinitesimally small splinters of images, the afterimage of a flash. He might as well have been looking at the sun.

Later on the same day, Bobby sat alone in his family's house. He felt very young and impossibly old. He sat in the seldom-used entryway of the old, faded yellow Victorian house his family had rented for the past four years. It had subtle gingerbread detailing where the front porch met the roof and bats that scratched and bleeped their warped strained song in the walls at night, reminding Bobby of the flitting squeaks of a music box cranked backward. He stared out the north window onto the yard and street, still wearing the clunky brown leather Clarks and khaki Dockers and white button-down he had sweated in under his graduation gown hours earlier. A dark pink and teal Polly Pocket car sat in his lap. On the floor lay a Bob the Builder coloring book next to a green plastic Dallas Ware plate. These were objects of his simultaneous dread and deep, almost obsessive affection. Only an hour before, they had obstinately disturbed him, rupturing his day open, hurling years at him, years he hadn't processed yet, from out of the Rubbermaid container he'd rooted out of his closet to fill with mail and advertisements from colleges.

For the past two years he'd kept all the mail from colleges advertising their schools to him and inviting him to apply, generic letters that started arriving after he'd taken the ACT junior year (though he imagined not every ACT test taker got letters from U Chicago and Penn and Pomona). He had pretended to disdain and cast aside these letters without a second thought, but this casting aside was in fact meant to project confidence, as if he were a blue chip high school athletes who got boatloads of pamphlets and lookbooks from colleges to the point of annoyance and genuine disturbance. He'd seen *Hoop Dreams* once and when one of the subjects of the documentary had committed to a school, he took a crate brimming with now obsolete recruitment mail and heaved it into a dumpster, and for some reason that gesture had stuck with Bobby as a sign of abundant desirability and promise. So he'd kept the mail, kept all of it, even

the letters from Iowa State and Coe College, schools to which he'd never dreamed of applying, his only explicit goal (other than getting into Stanford) having been to go to college out of state (in the impossible event that he somehow did not, in fact, get into Stanford). He kept every last thin envelope, most of them unopened. Eventually, the shelf on his cheap white Target bookshelf where he piled them began to sag and threatened to give way, as it still was that afternoon when he'd returned home from graduation. And so he had finally decided graduation day might be a fitting day to gather it all and dump it in a ceremoniously unceremonious fashion outside in the trash can by the back deck. But when he'd gotten into his closet to dig out a large enough receptacle, he had found these odd things, the plate and car and coloring book, lying at the bottom among other knickknacks under old promotional Subway t-shirts whose promotions had passed and were thus no longer viable workwear. He was not sure how they'd gotten there. They were not necessarily his, though he might have saved them stubbornly sometime in the last few years when his mother had been about to throw them out in one of her periodic clutter purges.

He was lost in thought, in the dazed blank staring and churning stomach of sick sweet murmuring nostalgia, rushes of sadness whose waves nevertheless kept cresting against the shore of a vague unease. He had a subconscious awareness that he should be moving, there was something he wasn't doing, that he was neglecting, couldn't put his finger, something he'd forgotten. Where was everyone? This was a big five bedroom Victorian house, but he could detect no noise other than the faint creaking of the camel colored faux-leather office chair in which he rocked lightly back and forth. His Clarks were crossed and propped up on the wooden windowsill of the entryway's wide windows, which unfortunately didn't open. They were just for looking, looking out as he did now onto the yard and sidewalk and dusty gravel alleyway.

But what had he forgotten, where was everyone? Six siblings and a disturbingly

overweight mother and yet he heard no footsteps anywhere, upstairs or down—and if anyone were in the house, he certainly would have heard them. The house's hardwood floorboards creaked and groaned whenever anyone moved around, most especially his mother. But he heard nothing. He was alone in the old house. It was just him and the swaying, fluid light outside, a pool of light shimmering and undulating in the yard. This happened every afternoon before it was really evening, just becoming evening, perhaps, the day evening itself out, when the sun was lower and lit up the earth in a straighter, more direct, even light that cast long shadows and made everything effulgent and spectacularly detailed and radiant and richer, like seeing the world in a higher definition.

This time of day had always hit him with some strange force. The world felt heavy and belated, shot through with some vague pulsating sense of tardiness tinged with backward-looking sorrow. Sundays were the same, as were the last days of holiday breaks from school. He noted with vague satisfaction that today was, indeed, a Sunday. In his mind Sundays were and always had been the death of the week, tired and resigned and forced inside, movies to be watched before they're due, homework to be crammed through the brain, guilt over procrastination to ooze through the mind, family fights to be had. Bland dinners of egg noodles and Hamburger Helper perhaps resorted to if it was right before the sixth of the month and food stamps had run out.

But this feeling wasn't confined to Sundays or holidays: when he'd worked at Subway all through high school, the sun would stream in the big windows at the front of the store at the same point in its trajectory, always around six or six thirty (or earlier depending on the season), stream through the windows onto the bubble glass between him and customers, his role as a "sandwich artist" suddenly lit up, effulgent, more dramatic and watchable. The light illuminated

the whole display behind the counter in radiant detail, the wood counter looked darker and richer and more solid, the small clear shakable bottles of oregano and salt and pepper and Parmesan casting formidable shadows across the plastic cutting board, the miniscule indentations and bumps and crevices in the salami and pepperoni recast in sharp focus, the dinky plastic knives with plastic handles bright and shapely like kids' plastic imitation food and kitchen toys.

But, just as all actual toys inevitably became for him, it was also sad, offset by a darker side, splayed in shadows and fading light and a brightness notable mostly for its waning ache. It somehow evoked for him the late afternoon sun on a Hollywood boulevard he'd never seen. He imagined the startling, relentless, direct light reflecting off tourists and washed-up actresses, literally in your face, a light that made everything prettier and more magnificent but also mournful and bygone. This would last for only about ten minutes before the sun would slide behind the trees across the Subway parking lot and the rush would be back on and he'd be repeating “What kind of cheese?” and “Do you want this toasted?” to soccer moms and to baseball players younger than him driving themselves around on their first mopeds.

Today, however, the bright but waning light seemed fitting. The world, or at least the late afternoon in Fairfield, Iowa, was elegiac and contemplative in his honor. But it had another side: a hopeful, youthful side. The light's effect on the ground and the porch looked like the dappled reflection of sunlight on a pool's lightly glittering undulating surface, a slight sway and breezy sliding back and forth of the light over the yard, the grass cropped and short so it looked less run-down, less low-rent. Low-rent was one of his mom's favorite words for white-trash types, as if being high-rent might be something to be proud of even though the high-rent individual would still, of course, be renting. The yard for a moment seemed aquatic. The flaking bark on the scraggly, small river birch trees that framed the front porch were gold-tipped and the nondescript

white porch railing was resplendent and the drooping bushes bordering the west side of the porch were awash in playful active flirting light. All the while, the tree branches from the maple tree in the neighboring yard swinging ever so slightly, respiring. Long straight light filtered through the leaves and stenciled amorphous shapes that played across the newly mowed, not-yet-summer grass, shadows dancing with the hazy sunlight across the ground and onto the west window of the front room to bathe his bulky square Clarks and reclined legs in swaying halcyon light that moved over his body and enveloped him in an almost animate embrace.

Now he roused himself and wondered again where everyone was. The house was still dead quiet. He sat up and eased his feet to the floor, his legs a bit sore after being crossed like that for over an hour while he sat and watched the shadows outside lengthen and wondered how he'd arrived at this point and why, for the love of God, why did he feel so sad. Why did he feel like he'd missed something irretrievable, why did he feel old, why was he sick with melancholy at an age too young to be sad and for a life and time that, when he'd been in the midst of it, he'd wanted only to escape? He felt like he'd traveled a long way in a short time. He felt as if he'd lived both too many lives already and yet, somehow, not enough of a life, not even a life. His life was full of clear close memories that he couldn't forget if he wanted to and long histories and pasts and stories and events, it was full, he had experienced a lot, that was true. But he felt like he hadn't been able to process that experience, to enjoy it and understand it, at all, and was left only with scattered remnants of a past he remembered so vividly and yet could never regain and indeed had failed, utterly, to seize upon and appreciate. And if this was what it felt like to be 18, what did 30 feel like? 40? 65, for God's sake? He had been born with some remarkable susceptibility to nostalgia and sadness, which made it even more unfathomable that he could have lived the past four, six, 10 years without appreciating them or somehow trying to record

them and reproduce them, knowing as he had that he was stuck in a cycle of reminiscence and grief that made whatever he had done a year or two ago always disturbingly and frustratingly close. The weight of that memory would routinely hit him and cause him to mourn his old age, the unbelievable, weary, achingly old age of 12 or 14 or 17, oh yes, how much innocence he'd already felt had been lost, how much time had already slipped through his fingers. He knew it was irrational and ridiculous but couldn't help it. This feeling was part of him, and he felt that he had somehow been cursed with this memory that was so clear and sharp and stubborn and sad.

That's what had kept him tied to the chair, almost paralyzed, looking every so often back at the Polly Pocket car in his lap, which had somehow ended up in that Rubbermaid container. It had struck him with the weight of seven years and three houses and two girlfriends and a road trip to California and four years of Subway and his mad hopes to get into Stanford and his eventual acceptance to Swarthmore. All that and then some hurtled back at him and ran through him, returning him to days when he'd played basketball in the street at their old rental near the public library, only four blocks south, on a quiet street no one drove down, also with a gravel alleyway bordering it. There, during that first summer before 6th grade, when they'd just moved to Fairfield and he was going through a Star Wars craze that would last over a year and the Lakers had just won their third straight title, Rosie had bought him a portable basketball hoop from Walmart and helped him assemble it. They filled its base with water and stationed it at the edge of the front yard in front of the street to the left of the alleyway.

That summer he pretended he was Kobe Bryant and tried to hit 100 jumpers a day, always losing steam when he'd made around forty, and checked out every Star Wars book the public library had and listened to Cubs games on the radio in his family's silver fifteen passenger van. Anna would have been only seven or so, and Philip six, and Benny just three years old, the

three youngest forming their own little triad to play “story” as they called it or play hide-and-seek or organize Anna's Beanie Babies. When it got cooler in the evening Anna and Benny often played on their own, ditching Philip because he was too rowdy and always wanted to be the one who got to die when they played story. Anna and Benny would play with her miniature Polly Pocket dolls, of which she didn't have many, play with them casually in the dust at the end of the alley of all places, on the border of the grass in the neighbor's yard, sometimes collecting the gravelly dust and sifting it through their hands and building mounds out of it and filling the little car that he now held in his hand with it, this chunky plastic pink convertible whose hood read “Polly Pocket” in gold-colored cursive. While they played, Bobby would be hitting imaginary game-winning threes and beating the Nets for another title as his youngest siblings made up stories and nonsensical ditties, squatting or sitting at the end of the alley. One afternoon, he spotted the car almost hidden under a pile of sandy grit, forgotten. Back then he thought it was odd and a little embarrassing that they liked playing literally in the dirt. He hoped none of the neighbors noticed. Now, though, he thought it sweet and carefree. But he'd never stopped to play with them, not once. He had been a whopping twelve years old and had bigger things to consider: sports to watch, clothes and new sneakers to persuade his mother to buy, sixth grade at a new school to dread.

He had white teeth and soft smooth skin and clear frank eyes, but he also aspired to a stringent monastic schedule and felt guilty and incompetent when he surpassed his self-imposed bedtime of 10:30 more than a couple nights in a row. He had youthful vim and spring, endless energy for basketball and playing catch with his younger brothers, but he also felt the constant looming anxiety of someone with many pressing goals and the subconscious, subdued knowledge that it was impossible to accomplish all of them. He was only 18 but could recall the

first day of the summer after 7th grade, the first days of 6th and 5th, hell, even of 1st grade, with startling precision, making the intervening five and seven and eleven years feel even longer, as if each year had been five, or ten. He'd lived dog years. His past was so close to him that he felt he hadn't yet begun to process it, and nevertheless he was hurled constantly forward, with never enough time to catch up to the past he felt hadn't even ended yet. He was mature and self-aware and self-chastising and consciously non-juvenile and yet also very provincial, having been outside the states of Iowa, Kansas, and Missouri only once in his life, and that time being only a road trip to California a year earlier. He was functionally an oldest child—he had been for over six years, anyway—but was not a natural leader, not vocal, not at all assertive, decidedly indecisive. He had mountains of expectations and guilt and responsibility, a family of five younger siblings and a mother who was obese and unemployed and an absent father from whom one couldn't expect a telephone number let alone regular child support, and yet he would leave all that behind in less than three months to attend Swarthmore College and could, if he wanted, forgo any further responsibility and ride his ticket out.

Some days he felt simmering dread and worry over the future prospects for his mother's health and his siblings' future. Other days, at odd and unexpected moments, the late day of a Thursday when he had little homework and maybe a Lakers game would be on later and he had at least some cereal and milk to eat for dinner at the island in front of the bulky 10” black Sanyo TV stationed on top of the cheap plastic cream countertop or while riding his bike to go play basketball at the ratty local rec center at 7 PM, riding his bike down dead quiet reposeful residential streets with the sun drooping down in the sky and only a few wispy tufts from a heavenly cotton ball in the sky, he'd be filled momentarily with an inexplicable and childish surprise and astonishment, a very simple but full gratitude, at being alive. He was a tangle of

memories and a mess of a past facing a potentially clean slate. And on days like this, when he was forced to take stock of things and register the time that had passed so quickly and wonder how he could ever account for it, sort it out, give it its due—days which had become increasingly frequent—all he wanted was a clean slate, a clear history.

The back door opened in the kitchen and heavy, shuffling steps moved through it. He knew it was his mother without explicitly thinking about it. He thought about getting up but wanted to stay here longer and wait for everything to happen.

"Bobby?"

"In here," he said quietly. The entryway was so bare that his voice echoed dully.

"Oh." She pushed the wooden pocket door to his right open wider so that she could fit through. She wore her big pink shirt, one of a set she'd gotten at K Mart in Ottumwa (Walmart had stopped carrying 3 XL cotton shirts, and she hated polyester), and some black cloth stretch capris that reached her ankles. "How are you?"

"Fine."

"So, how'd you like it?" she said, smiling at him.

"Graduation? It was fine. Hot, like always. Where'd you go? I was wondering why no one was here."

"Went to Hy Vee to get the frozen strawberries."

"Delightful."

"And then Marshall wanted me to pick him up from Amanda's so he go could eat at the salad bar there."

"Again? He's doing that a lot. Does he pay for it?"

"Well, yeah. But it's only eight bucks and he can eat as much as he wants."

“And does that seem to be a good thing?”

“I don't know. He sure eats a lot of vegetables. Loads it up with lettuce and carrots and tomatoes.”

“Sounds a little obsessive.”

“Yeah, I'm not sure about the vegan thing.”

“Like, how healthy it is?”

“No, like why he's doing it. I can't tell if he wants to be healthy or be skinny.”

“Why do you think he wants to be skinny?” Bobby asked.

“Well he's just always had that body. Barrel-chested. He's always been thick, sturdy.”

“I don't see why that's bad. Like, I'm *too* skinny. Wish I had a sturdy chest.”

“Exactly, that's what I'd say.”

“So are you going to ask him about it?”

“I don't know, probably not. He's been a little testy lately.” He seemed to want to change the subject. She sat down in a big cloth armchair they'd picked up for free off someone's curb recently and had aired out on the porch. “Hey, so Jimmy called me yesterday.”

“He deigned to contact us? Humble Rose and her seven dwarfs?”

“Hey come on, he calls me. He'll ask me if I want to go out to eat in Mount Pleasant or Ottumwa sometimes and we go and it's nice.”

“That is nice. Just always seems like he only calls when he needs something.”

“Well, you're probably right about that, because you know what he asked? He said they're bringing Grandma up here soon,” she said. “She's going to stay at Jimmy's, I guess.”

“For how long?” he asked.

“Well, I think for good.”

“Really?”

“That's what it sounded like. He said they're going to bring her from her nursing home on Monday and Eddie's going to be her power of attorney.”

“No way,” he said. “You think that'll last?”

“Better than a nursing home. That's for sure,” she said.

“But I thought you said Tony wouldn't admit he's wrong if his life depended on it. How's he going to give her up?”

“I don't know,” she said. “Well, don't tell anyone this. Are the kids upstairs?”

He shook his head.

“Okay. Well I think Tony doesn't know they're taking her.”

“So...”

“They're going to get her while she's in the nursing home. While Tony's at work.”

“Like, illegally?” he asked.

“Well, I don't know if...”

“That's like kidnapping, right? But the opposite. Oldnapping.”

“I don't know. Jimmy wouldn't tell me exactly what they're doing. But it sounds like she's coming. Isn't that exciting?”

“Yeah, I guess,” he said. Truth be told, it wasn't. What would be exciting would be to see his grandma by herself, without his uncles there quietly observing every interaction and controlling the scene. “I just don't see how it's going to work. Like, Tommy's going to take care of her every day? Doesn't she need help bathing?”

“I think she needs a lot more than that,” she said.

“So how's it going to work?”

“Well, I'll probably help.”

“For how long?”

“I don't know. As long as I can. She's my mom.”

“And they're just assuming you'll do it all?”

“Well, Jimmy was acting like we could just stay over there, too. He's got a ton of rooms.”

“Right...”

“And we can all just sleep there and be with grandma.”

“I thought you can't stand Tommy. And Jimmy. You get all nervous the second you hear they're going to like maybe stop by.”

“Well, I can put up with it if they'll just let me take care of her myself.”

“And you think that's how it'll work?”

“Why not?”

“You think Jim 'Tony Soprano' Carmichael's going to let you run the show with her?”

“What do you mean?”

“That's all it is with him. The Big Bad Patriarch. You think he's okay with you having any control?”

“I'm a good worker, they know that,” she said, brushing her black hair with light bits of gray back. “That's why they want me over there.”

“Exactly. Isn't that all they trained you to be? To work for them?”

She looked up toward the ceiling, and then shrugged. “I don't know why you gotta be like this.”

“Isn't that it, though? Do their bidding, don't speak up? That's just what you told me.”

“Look, I just want to take care of my mom. I don't think that's a bad thing.”

He thought about arguing with her but wasn't really up for it. When she was set on something, she wanted to argue about it, just to solidify and justify and entrench herself in her own position. He'd learned a long time ago that, for all of her good qualities, his mother loved to argue. The more friction you gave her, the more she had to latch onto and the more traction she gained. It was best to try to catch her in a different mood.

“Sure, if you think so. So where's everyone else?”

“Charlotte's. They should be coming over soon.”

“So what are you gonna tell Jimmy?”

“Right now, I'm just focused on getting the Alliant Energy bill paid before they shut me off. That's as far as my brain's extending.”

“Well, I'll be able to give you the money from my next check. But I guess that's not until next Tuesday.”

“Yeah. Plus I'll need that money for my water bill anyway. And Anna needs some shoes.”

He looked at her.

“Just kidding.” She started chuckling, big cheeks getting red and shiny and bulging round at the cheekbones. Bobby couldn't help but let out a small laugh, too. She started to get up.

“But really, though.”

“What?”

“Just, you know. Something will probably come up.”

“I can imagine.”

“It always does. So, you know. Don't get too comfortable.”

“Great.”

“Look, I'm worried about you. You have to relax.”

“What are you worried about?”

“You worry too much.”

“You're worried about me worrying. Wonder where I got it.”

“Oh! I think I hear them outside.”

Soon, they were all gathered in the dining room, lights on and the windows opened to let in some air, the normal stack of Rosie's folders and papers and receipts and TV remote all transferred to the counter to make more room on the big Amish-made wooden table they had bought ten years ago upon first moving to Fairfield.

As with every birthday or vaguely festive occasion that they had the wherewithal to celebrate, his mother had opted to have strawberry shortcake as the designated celebratory treat, though after over ten years of the same cake recipe and the same frozen oversweet syrupy store-brand strawberries of which they always had too little and whipped cream of which they always had too much, it was now more of a formal confirmation that an event was at hand than it was a rare treat. No one knew why it had started or when Rosie had become so certain that everyone loved strawberry shortcake; it may have been simply a matter of convenience. By now, it had become a running joke.

“Are you going to wish for new skin?” Anna asked, eyes wide, an intentionally large, disturbed smile revealing her straight, white teeth newly liberated from braces, the same straight large rectangular front teeth as Marshall: their father's teeth.

“There's a wish involved?”

“Well duh. We have candles.”

“But it's not my birthday.”

“But I bought these candles in November for your birthday and then of course we forgot

to use them," Rosie said, walking in from the kitchen with two large candles in the shape of a 1 and an 8 and a red and black long-reach lighter. "So I thought we'd finally use them. Plus, it's not fair you didn't get to make a wish on your birthday."

"Oh yeah, I'm sure he's really sad," Charlotte said, scrolling on her iPhone and wearing a bright orange Puma track sweatshirt. She looked up at him smiling so he could join in on the derision, but Bobby found her immature. What's more, he actually had a secret superstition when it came to birthday wishes. He usually tried to plan them in advance and for some reason, though he wouldn't call himself religious and hadn't been to church since his cousin's confirmation in fifth grade, thought of them almost as answerable prayers. But now, with no preparation, his mind raced to find a worthwhile one.

"I *said*," Anna interrupted. "Are you going to wish for new skin?"

"No. Why?"

"Then you could give yours to me, and I could wear it." She hugged herself. "Then I'd be warm all the time. And I wouldn't even need clothes."

Bobby snickered. She was getting to be funnier than he was.

"Seriously though, what are you going to wish?" Cath asked, laughing uncomfortably to lighten the question. She rarely asked him direct questions and they didn't really make eye contact even now, Bobby instead choosing to stare at the cake absently as if deep in thought.

"Wish for Greg to die and give us the house!" Philip blurted out.

"Wish for a new computer!" Benny offered.

"I don't know," Bobby said to the cake. "For the Lakers to win the title."

"Well now we know that's not it," Charlotte said in her knowing and perpetually condescending tone, turning to Cath as if with an inside joke, small smirk on her lips.

“Maybe wish for something actually helpful,” Marshall intoned, looking at no one. “Like for mom to get a job.”

Philip and Benny laughed immediately, not realizing it wasn't necessarily a joke, but then it got quiet, Marshall twirling his spoon in his fingers and looking slightly pleased.

“Okay,” Rosie said in her nice happy company voice, her taking-charge voice, her let's-move-on voice. “Okay, Bobby, here we go. You got the camera, Cath?”

“Oh, I've got it,” she said monotonously.

He looked at them, faces faintly aglow in flitting candlelight. Which one? It could be anything. It wouldn't be the Lakers. He'd already tried that last year and it hadn't worked.

“New house!” Philip whispered.

Maybe it only worked with personal stuff. They hadn't moved freshman year when he'd wished for them to stay in Fairfield so he wouldn't have to leave Jessica. What an idiotic wish. A disaster. Still made the back of his neck hot. But a blessing in disguise: it had forced him to realize he had to break up with her.

“New computer!”

But it hadn't worked with Stanford, and he'd been dead set on that one. Wanted it bad. He'd used blue sticky-tack to put a bookmark he'd gotten in the mail, with a shot of Palm Drive and Memorial Church with the big mosaic on it, he'd taken time to learn the names, on the ceiling directly above his bed as some sort of daily reminder and motivation and goal, an idea he realized only later he'd stolen from a girl at school who'd done that with a Harvard poster in middle school. But if that hadn't worked, perhaps it was simply too far outside his control as well.

“New skin!”

But when Rosie had hurt her back a few years back and was approaching 45, the age

when her dad had died of a heart attack, he had wished for her not to die, and that had worked. At least so far.

"New mom."

"Marshall!"

"Kidding, kidding."

Maybe Charlotte would break up with her boyfriend and stop playing poker and go to college somehow. Start doing something with her life. That would be worth it.

"All right, Bobby."

Anna was getting older. Almost fourteen. For her to turn out all right?

"I'm getting tired," Benny said, putting his head down on the table.

But Cath was closer to college and closer to Charlotte. Closer to disaster. For her to get it together?

"Okay guys, let's count down from five."

Marshall's forearms were getting thinner. He was like a skinny crane. And his temper.

"Are you ready, Bobby?"

For Rosie to lose weight and not be depressive?

"Bobby?"

But wasn't the whole problem trying to fix the problem? Being a control freak, as Rosie always put it? That's what her brothers had done, and look how that turned out. What a marvelous approach that was.

"Okay guys, let's just start."

Charlotte slipping. Rosie helpless. Marshall so thin. Can't save them all.

"Five."

Anna so sweet. Benny so young. Philip so hopeful. Can't be their dad.

“Four.”

Cath so lost. Fairfield dying. Bobby worried, haunted, too late.

“Three.”

It's not your fault. But he couldn't quite accept that.

“Two.”

Let them be all right.

“One.”

Let me help them.

The camera flashed and the candles died in a rush of breath and the room went dark.

“It needs to go oldest to youngest. I think that much is obvious.”

Silence.

“For the sake of clarity, order. We'll line up in front of you, from me to Benny. Standing or seated, your choice. All six of us. Tallest to shortest, like a cell phone's service bars.”

Bobby stood at the foot of Rosie's king-sized bed, smiling faintly, a wooden ruler in hand.

“Oh, and I got you this,” he said, tossing the ruler toward the head of the bed where she sat on the edge, perpendicular to him, facing the wall that was a few feet from her bed and looking down at some papers atop a blue Rubbermaid container where she kept her most important files: her divorce papers, her seven kids' birth certificates and Social Security cards, credit card notices from the 90s.

She looked at the ruler briefly, staring at it without seeing it, her mind clearly on something else. Probably math: she was nearly impenetrable when doing any sort of math, which usually meant the extemporaneous budgets she prepared to calculate how thin she had to stretch the money she had left for the month.

Bobby waited almost a minute for her to respond. These days she sometimes responded quite belatedly, as if the preceding statement were placed on an assembly line in her mind and would get to her only once the more proximate items had been processed.

Sure enough, she soon said, “What's that?” without looking at him, eyes still on her makeshift desk, blue ballpoint pen in her right hand.

“Gavel,” he said, waiting to see if she was even listening.

“What?” she said to the wall after a short delay.

“Well, it's a ruler. But you can use it as a gavel.”

No reply.

“For the meeting,” he continued. “Gotta have a gavel to lead a family meeting.”

Still nothing.

“Like, that's Family Meeting 101.”

She turned and stared at him with blank eyes. For a second he wondered if she was mad but realized she was still thinking about whatever she had been writing.

“Am I distracting you? Sorry, I wasn't making fun of you, per se. More just the idea of a Family Meeting, you know. It always felt so...Disney Channel.”

She continued staring into the distance at the wall behind him. She looked down and wrote something rapidly, then took off her glasses. “Will you come look at this for me?”

“What's that?”

“Just a bunch of financial rigmarole. As always. I'm trying to see if I got the math right but I'm having a hard time telling between my ones and sevens.”

“Glasses broken?”

“I don't think so. It's the new place I've been going to. The Liebes were great, but they stopped taking Medicaid, so now I'm going somewhere else and they just don't seem to know what they're doing. So I gotta go back and tell them I need a new prescription, but I just haven't had time yet.”

“Aha. Let me see.” He looked over the long string of subtractions she had from the starting figure of 1,050. It looked right to him. “But what's this at the end? Why's there 7,000 added at the bottom?”

“Well, that's if I register for the University of Iowa,” she said. She pronounced it “Eye-wuh,” reminding Bobby of how Jim had always pronounced the letter w “double-yuh,” one of the few idiosyncrasies of his father's that he could recall.

“I see. They still haven't kicked you out?”

“Not yet, apparently. See I told them about how my eyesight got so bad and my memory's been getting worse the last few years, my short-term memory anyway. And how I think that was because of the sleep apnea, you know? Like how can I remember things if I can't get a good night's sleep.”

“Sure.”

“So I told them about that and they said I could get a medical waiver for the classes I failed last year.”

“And so what happens now, they just act like that didn't happen? How many years can you keep taking the classes online and still get loans? I thought you were at the limit or something.”

“Well it's a long story, that's why I wanna have a family meeting and talk about it all. Cause I think I can pay everybody back, or at least some of you. If it turns out I'll still qualify for the loans, which they said I will.”

“But what about the welfare stuff? Isn't it about to stop, since it's been almost five years?”

“Well, that too, I gotta tell you guys what happened the other day. But first I gotta get everyone in here and you know how it is, it takes me yelling for them five times to get a couple of them to come. So we'll see if that even happens.” She raised her eyebrows, sighed, and turned back to more papers atop her Rubbermaid container.

Bobby knew she knew what she was doing: he knew she knew he didn't like to hear her get fatalistic and pessimistic, how if she just threw something in there like “But, you know, it'll never happen anyway” or “Not like *that*'ll ever happen” or “Life sucks and then you die” (one of her trademark phrases, he'd been hearing it since he was about 8), he'd get scared and worried

and go into a slight crisis mode, snapping into action and telling his siblings to help try to get something done around here for once instead of just sitting there not listening to her and watching TV or playing video games. Right now, what she needed was for her five youngest children to join him in her room so she could discuss the money she'd (maybe) be getting and other serious financial and administrative issues concerning the household's constituents. When they'd first moved to Iowa nine years ago it had been even harder to get everyone on the same page: six kids were between the ages of nine and one and Charlotte, the oldest child and thus the de facto foreman, was sixteen and just beginning to resist the yoke of responsibility that she'd borne since she was about 11. Now at least the youngest child was only 10, but it was still a formidable challenge to get them all in the same room and listening at one time. At the moment, she didn't seemed too stressed about whether or not it would happen, almost as if she'd prefer to avoid another family meeting that would be attended grudgingly and would very likely end in a shouting match or comedic parody of Rosie's seriousness, as these conferences inevitably did.

She'd recently begun to loosen her hold on the kids, generally yelling less often, no longer spanking any of them, and effectively saying, “If that's what you want to do, fine, go ahead, play video games for 5 straight hours and stay up until midnight and be an idiot and don't listen to me.” (In fact, sometimes she did say exactly that.) Things she'd never let Bobby do as a kid Philip and Benny, the two youngest boys, now regularly expected. Getting them to take her seriously, she seemed to have realized, now meant either getting angrier and louder or withdrawing. These days, she seemed to hope they'd simply realize something was wrong and offer to help out of guilt, shame, or necessity. And that wasn't working.

Bobby couldn't help but think that it had more to do with his siblings themselves than with their ages: when he was 10, he often reminded Benny, he'd been far more responsible. He

sometimes couldn't really believe that at that age he'd sometimes watched his five younger siblings alone, back when the lived out in the country in a double-wide near Jefferson County Park and the Waste Management facility, while Rosie went to take Charlotte somewhere in town or go shopping or go to an Overeaters Anonymous meeting as she sporadically did; or how back then Rosie would often send him into Hy Vee alone, store coupons, some of those old paper faux-money food stamp bills that preceded the electronic EBT cards, and a short grocery list in hand; or how at ten he'd bundled up on so many winter mornings in that double-wide on West Hills Drive and tramped out to their old Dodge van in the tundral cold to start the van so it would be warm enough to drive ten minutes later. He hadn't owned a video game until he was 12; his youngest siblings, by contrast, had grown up with Game Boys in their hands, gifts usually funded by the student loans Rosie had qualified for when she'd first gone to Indian Hills to get an Associate's Degree and then started taking classes at the University of Iowa (online, so that she didn't have to drive two hours back and forth from Iowa City three days a week).

At more modest moments he realized he shouldn't blame them, especially the three youngest kids: Anna, Philip, and Benny had grown up far more comfortably and probably had little recollection of the stressful, constant game of musical rental houses they'd had to play when they'd first moved to Iowa, or of a time when Rosie had been far more stressed out and belligerent, or when, before she'd left Jim and begun receiving food stamps (which would far exceed the amount of money their father had been willing to pay for food), rice and honey had often been the exclusive item on their breakfast menu. To the youngest kids, their family's proximity to poverty and, at times, homelessness was far less perceptible. It wasn't their fault that they were younger and that part of their birth-ordered fate was to feel less responsibility than he and Charlotte had felt and, at least in his case, still felt.

He knew all that, and yet some days he wondered how much longer he'd be expected to be their conscience, and the conscience of his family, how long he'd need to stick to his exemplary path until he finally felt as if he'd done what he could and the rest was in their hands. He'd watched his siblings without protest for years. Was five years enough? What about ten, as it was about to become? And he'd researched colleges and completed applications almost entirely on his own and with only harried, distracted help with the financial and household information from Rosie. But would they be ready to do that? Rosie herself was clearly wavering, seeming to leave more and more of their fate up to chance, almost as if she'd gotten this far, gotten the youngest one to live a decade and seen to it that Bobby had walked the straight and narrow and hadn't impregnated any girls or gotten arrested and was now off to college, maybe that was as much as she could do, maybe she could be okay with getting this far. She hadn't said anything like that, and it rang completely antithetical to her personality, but the thought crept into his mind regardless. That unknown was out there; a break was going to happen. Things would be different and when that break happened, so much would be out of his control. But the problem was that for Bobby that felt like a failure, something to be avoided or rectified, not an inevitable fact of life, even though he knew the wise thing to think was that such uncertainties and separations are simply part of living.

But for now he set out to corral his siblings from the four corners of the house so that he could know sooner rather than later about this financial rigmarole and whether Rosie would pay him back the $2,000 she owed him and, concomitantly, whether he'd need to start pressing Subway coworkers for chances to fill in for them so as to ensure he'd have enough money for his plane ticket to Philadelphia and everything else that he'd need to buy before August. He fetched Philip and Benny from the front room where they played a Mario Baseball GameCube game and

told them Rosie had said if they didn't come now they'd have to wash the five days' worth of dishes all by themselves. He told Anna, out in the backyard taking pictures of a small turtle figurine she'd named Timothy, that Rosie had said she needed to go upstairs now or she wouldn't be able to go hang out with her new boyfriend Tyler that night. He went into Marshall's room, next to Bobby's own at the top of the stairs, but stopped himself after opening the door two inches, shut it, knocked, waited for Marshall to tell him he could come in, and upon being granted access told Marshall Rosie was still waiting for him to come and seemed to be getting angry. Marshall at his computer mumbled "Mmkay." He went to Cath's room, a small cubby at the end of the hall that was too hot in the summer and too cold in winter but had a back staircase to the kitchen and, from there, out to the alley and into whatever car might be waiting, all of which was as far from Rosie's large room near the top of the steps as possible and thus provided the only real avenue for sneaking out at night. He knocked on the cubby door three times, but he could hear the country music with which Cath had recently become infatuated (she loved *Tunnel of Love*, *Human Touch*, *Luckytown*, the Springsteen from which country twang wasn't much of a leap) blaring through what he was disturbed to realize were headphones. He opened the door and shouted at Cath that Rosie had said she'd better come now or she'd be grounded, a possibility Bobby wasn't really sure would provoke her but was the only thing he could think of that could make Cath feel vaguely threatened.

To his surprise and slight pleasure, he was soon joined in his mother's bedroom by all five of the siblings he'd summoned less than ten minutes before.

"Record time," he told them. "New PR. Rosie must be just *so* impressed."

A chorus of parodic imitations of Rosie followed.

"*I* was *really* impressed."

"It was *so* good."

"I was just *so* impressed."

Benny and Philip were already giggling as they threw some of Rosie's turquoise Jockey underwear from a mound of clothes in front of her closet back and forth at each other. Marshall was in the corner, headphoned and iPod in hand, staring off at the wall as if to mime his disinterest in the proceedings. He was crouched in a small chair near a pile of old VHS tapes. Cath sat across from and Anna sat diagonal to their mother, Anna surveying California on a 2006 Walmart US roadmap, the three females remaining in the house forming a right triangle on the king-sized bed, which sat frameless atop its box springs on the floor, the head of it pushed up against the wall. Rosie's bedroom TV had recently broken and its absence had, surprisingly, dramatically affected the room's feel: lacking a TV it, seemed also to lack a centralizing principle of organization, liveliness, and general non-poverty. The room seemed several degrees shabbier and emptier without it even though it was stuffed with clutter: wrapping paper, old books, and clothes of hers and some unused, worn clothes the kids had outgrown but she'd been too sentimental to toss out. An entire corner of the room was occupied by a white iron baby bed in which all six of them had spent their first years and to which she'd unreasonably clung for the past eight years despite Bobby and Marshall's exasperated protests against keeping it whenever they'd had to maneuver the ungainly thing in and out of a new rental. Rosie had always said she simply liked it and, by lowering its side and removing the lumpy stained mattress, could use it as a TV stand, which she had done many times.

Marshall stared blankly at his iPod screen and Cath, silencing the noise from her own iPod, asked aloud in a monotonous mumble why Anna had borrowed her shirt yesterday and before Anna had answered said Don't wear my clothes and Bobby leaned against the wall next to

the small closet in the corner of the room, clandestinely observing everything but attempting to appear as apathetic as his other siblings who, like him, always seemed embarrassed and insurmountably repulsed at the mere thought that they were having a Family Meeting, even though it was their private house and no friends would ever have to know that such comically Hollywood occurrences happened in their comically large family.

Rosie looked up from the stack of papers and took off her glasses, seeming to notice for the first time that all the kids were present. She cleared her throat. “Oh, guys. So. I got a lot of things I wanna talk about. Number one. I don't really like the way things have been going, how, just, chaotic the situation is and how you guys don't really listen to me and just think you can run the show.”

“Maybe if you actually punished people instead of letting Cath do whatever she wants...” Anna said.

“Please don't interrupt me. The point is, things are gonna start changing around here.”

“Oh Gawd,” Cath wailed mockingly.

“'All right, guys, get in here, I got a list of stuff to do today!'” Bobby said. This was one of Rosie's patented tag lines. Bobby and his siblings had grown up hearing certain favorite sayings of hers innumerable times as Rosie talked on the phone endlessly, explaining her most recent fight with Jim or one of her brothers or some friend with whom she'd had another falling-out. These sorts of exclamations had become catch phrases of hers, reverberating so often over the years that in lighter moods the kids had taken to imitating her to chide her a bit and delight themselves, competing to achieve the perfect rendition. Mommy's Maxims, they called them. Lines like “Yeah, well, life sucks and then you die” and “This is why we *go* no-where and *do* no-thing!” and “Things are gonna start changing around here” now routinely resounded throughout

the house, light-hearted humor mixed with an undertone of incredulous dismay and parodic eye-rolling. “Shitola!” “They're idiots! They're low-lives!” “He's a fuckin manipulator!” “Yeah, *I'm* the idiot.” “No, I'm not gonna shut up.” “*Why* do I still live in this town?”

At this latest round of parodies, Rosie shrugged, clicked her tongue, and put her glasses back on.

“No, sorry, we wanna hear!” Bobby said. “I was just joking.”

“All right. So the first thing is whether you guys think we should get cable and internet again. Personally, if you wanna know what I think, I think we shouldn't. I think it's just a waste of time and all we end up doing is just sittin at the computer and watching movies all the time and not getting anything done.”

“Speak for yourself,” Marshall said.

“Why? What's that supposed to mean?”

“I'm just sayin, I'm not the one who fails my classes every semester.”

“No, but you do stay up until 2 AM doing homework you procrastinated on—”

“No, maybe that's because I put more time—”

“And then I'm the one who has to unplug the modem and yell at you to go to bed, so yeah, I think you got a problem with the internet and TV, too.”

“Whatever, I'm not gonna argue about it anymore.”

“Anyway, so. I don't think we should spend the money on it again. I don't like the waves from the wifi going all over the house anyway. That shit causes memory loss. And if you need the internet for homework, you can just go to the public library.”

“But mom,” Marshall jumped in. “None of us except Cath has a cell phone, how am I supposed to talk to any of my friends? Or to Amanda? How are they supposed to get ahold of

me?”

“Well, Marshall, you've been working at Hy Vee, if it's that important you should just spend your money on a cell phone like Cath does instead of hoarding it all.”

“Whatever. I don't even see the point of asking us that, we don't have any money anyway. It's like asking me what I want for dinner when we don't even have any food. Not that that's ever happened, of course, since I have to make my own food anyway. But still.”

“Well maybe if you could quit interrupting me and let me talk, I could tell you that I'm gonna have some money coming in cause I found out yesterday I can register for classes at the University of Iowa again. And I'll qualify for as much student loans as I did in the past.

“Aw, sweet,” Philip said. “I can get a new glove for baseball, finally.”

“And we can get Paper Mario!” Benny suggested.

“Oh, and I can get that Alltel plan that's only $20 a month for unlimited texting.”

“No, Anna, you'll have to work if you want anything,” Marshall said.

“Yeah, but Marshall, she's only 14, anymore almost nobody hires 14-year-olds. Bobby said Subway doesn't even want them since there are more laws about kids under 15 now.”

“Either way, I don't get why it's such a good thing you can get more student loans. Like, we'll just go into more debt? Especially since you keep failing the classes and have to repeat them. I don't even know what your major technically is, when my friends ask I say I'm not sure. It's sort of embarrassing.”

“You know, Marshall,” Rosie said. “If you're just gonna sit there, and just criticize, I don't really want you to be in here. I'm not gonna let you keep talking to me like I'm not your parent.”

“Well, maybe you should start acting like one.”

Rosie started to respond but stopped and turned to the other kids. “So, next thing is that because I'm gonna get student loans again, the first thing I wanted to do was start paying you guys back all the money I've borrowed the last few years. Cath and Bobby have both loaned me a ton, and I don't think Anna even kept a dollar of the money she got for grades this year.

“Oh, yeah,” Bobby said. “I forgot all about that, Jesus.” The previous fall, Rhonda, the burly director of the Iowa Promise Jobs program—the official name of the “welfare reform program” all welfare recipients without a job were required to join—had told Rosie that her kids were eligible for a cash-for-grades program: each semester grade higher than an A- earned $50. The program was meant to keep the children of welfare recipients literally invested in staying in school and focused on academics rather than money. Since the kids each had 7-8 classes, everyone except Cath routinely got straight As, and their monthly $1050 from welfare usually was spent before it even arrived, the cash was nothing to sneeze at. But almost all of it had ultimately gone toward school clothes for which Rosie hadn't had money in August and a back Alliant Energy utilities bill whose continued avoidance would have spelled the termination of Rosie's account (she had a spotty payment record already) and a resuscitation of the old tricks—showering in the PE locker room at school in the morning, camping out at the public library during the day, and using candles and Game Boys as lights come nightfall—they'd learned during 6-7 day stretches in the past when they hadn't had enough money to get the utilities back on. So, all told, the money had merely kept the family afloat rather than getting them in any way ahead, but it had still been disappointing that Bobby, already 18, hadn't qualified.

“So do you guys remember exactly how much I owe each of you?” Rosie continued, removing an old calendar from the wall, turning its blank back outward, and fastening the tack that held it to the wall. All told, Rosie owed them almost as much money as she'd get in loans,

and the rest would have to go toward paying the most recent winter's Alliant Energy bill, which had gone neglected as they tried to pay off the previous year's bill.

“But wait,” Marshall said. “If you pay everyone back, you'll just have to borrow most of it back. You gotta pay that bill, and other stuff's going to come up. The same thing happens every year. So it's just stupid.”

“Well, what do you want her to do instead, Marshall?” Bobby said

“I don't know,” he droned. “Maybe finally learn her lesson and not borrow money. Or get a job or move to a house that doesn't cost so much to heat in the winter, or maybe not spend all the food stamps in two weeks and then have to use cash the rest of the month. It seems pretty obvious there's a lot she could be doing, but she isn't, because she doesn't want to listen to me or admit she's wrong.”

“You know, Marshall, all the other kids loan me money regularly, without arguing. But you've never even given any of the money you've earned. I don't think even 10 bucks to buy toilet paper.”

“Yeah, and can you really say that wasn't a good decision?”

“All I'm saying is if you want a say in what happens in this family, maybe you should act like you're a part of it.”

“Maybe I'm fine not being a part of it,” he said, his leg, which had been jiggling the whole time, now bouncing up and down even faster.

“All right,” she said. “Well, why don't you just leave the room, then, because you obviously don't want to help.”

“Yeah, not if you're not even gonna listen to me,” he said in a low, inflectionless voice, getting up slowly and walking stiffly out of the room.

Rosie quickly began again, telling the kids Jim would soon start paying child support again. She'd finally managed to get him in court the previous fall and he was now obligated to pay every month or he'd be put in jail. It was only about $500 more a month than welfare, but it was still something.

“Maybe I'll finally buy a bra without holes in it,” Rosie said, raising her eyebrows. “But anyway, paying you guys back would be the first option. But the other option is I forget about the Alliant bill after a month, I don't pay you guys back right now, and what we do instead is we use that money to move to California in July, or in August if we have to wait another month.

“Oh boy. Again?” Cath said.

“God, I can't tell my friends we're moving again,” Anna said. “They'll make fun of me.”

“And what about Grandma?” Bobby asked. “How would we move if you're stuck taking care of her?”

“Look, I don't know if Grandma's even gonna still be here by July,” Rosie said. “You never know with Tommy and Jimmy.”

“But what if she is here, then what? It's all out the window?”

“I guess I'd think about that when the time comes. But my brain's not extending that far right now.”

“But either way, won't we just end up spending all the money by then and then not be able to move, just like every other summer? The same old thing?” Cath said.

“Well, that's a possibility, yeah. But not if you guys help me and we sell the table and the Cadillac. And I really don't care if we even keep the van.”

“How would we get there, then?” Cath said.

“We'd fly. Plus, Rhonda just told me they're doing a summer jobs program for teenagers

whose parents are on welfare."

"Oh goodie, wonder what that is," Bobby deadpanned. "Do we get to learn why welfare's embarrassing? They gonna reform us?"

"Well wait, I actually thought it could be nice. She said that if you're over 14 you qualify, so four of you guys could do it. And maybe like two of you could work together, like Bobby and Marshall at one place and Cath and Anna at another place. But the best part is you can work up to 40 hours a week, and I think it's 8 dollars an hour. And it's technically for kids they think will need extra help finding jobs, you know, since their parents are on welfare. Which, I don't think you guys need help with that, exactly. Three of you already have jobs. But you still qualify and that's all that matters."

"What kind of jobs?" Bobby said.

"Well, that's the only downside, cause Rhonda said since it's a government funded program all the jobs would be through the city."

"What would that even mean?" Anna asked. "Like, working at city hall or something? Or the courthouse?"

"Oh yeah man," Bobby said. "I'll get to hit on those ladies at the DMV."

"Well, I think maybe, yeah, city hall would be one option. I guess you'd just do paperwork or something. I think it's just any, you know, city-run, municipal thing. So the water department, the library, city hall, the waste water plant Rhonda mentioned, maybe the animal shelter."

"Jesus, did you say waste water?"

"Yeah, but that's just one of the *options*, you know. Nobody has to take it. But anyway yeah I told Rhonda you guys would be interested because it wouldn't hurt just to check it out, see

what the jobs are. Nobody's gonna force you to do it if you don't want to."

"I don't know," Bobby said. "All those jobs sound pretty bad. I don't know if I wanna spend the summer before college working, you know, 40 hours a week at a water department. Why not just keep working at Subway?"

"It's just ten weeks, and you'll make a lot of money. I think it's worth it. Plus if you make some money you'll be able to buy stuff for college and have money when you go regardless of if I pay you back or not. And since I won't need to, I'll have more money to move."

"Yeah, that's true," he said. "If you actually moved, yeah, I guess it would be worth it. But do you even think you will? Like for real, actually move this time?"

"Yeah," she said matter-of-factly. "Why not, there's nothing stopping me. I just can't stay in this town another year. I never shoulda moved here. They're all idiots, guys. We know that. It's just a stupid town for stupid people. And if we don't leave now, I don't know. We probably never will."

"God, but mom," Cath said. "We probably won't even do it. And even if we do, I have friends here. I don't want to go to a new high school as a junior. Everyone already has their friends by now."

"And what about baseball," Philip said.

"Philip, they have baseball in California," she said.

"No but I mean the all star team, the 7th grade one Randy's dad asked me to play on. They never ask 6th graders. And we told them I could do it."

"Guys, everything's gotten worse since we moved here. Charlotte got out of control. We got evicted from that brick house. Rita started calling DHS on me, trying to stir up trouble way back when. You guys have to go to school with kids who hunt and whose parents are all

Republicans. I've gained probably a hundred pounds since 99, when we first got here. My family's not worth staying here for, we don't even like Tommy and Jimmy or Mary and Harley. So what's the point of staying?"

"I mean, if it really means you'll move," Bobby said. "Then yeah, I'd take the job."

"Guys you should listen to Bobby, he's already had to graduate from here. And he just got lucky, he didn't even know about that scholarship thing until he got the letter in the mail. And he only got into Swarthmore—"

"And waitlisted at Pomona," he inserted.

"And that's good but he'd be much better off if he'd gone to a different school, a good school, like one in California."

Cath stood up and stretched briefly. "Well, you know what I think and I have to go to work in an hour, so can I go now?"

"Yeah, mom," Anna said. "I told Tyler we could hang out soon."

"All right, fine. But what do you say, Bobby? You think you guys will try to get the jobs with Rhonda?"

"Yeah, I mean, I'll do whatever. As long as you'll move. If it finally happens, I don't really care how bad the job is or anything. Three months of a dumb job is worth eight more years of living in Iowa, I know that."

"All right then. It's settled," Rosie said. She stared into space for a second, absorbed in some thought. As she watched the kids drifting out of the room she smiled for the first time that day and crooned her favorite line from "Thunder Road." "It's a town fulla losers, I'm pullin outta here to weee-yin."

At noon on a Monday, Bobby and Marshall drove a white Ford F-150 pickup truck west down the highway 34, which shoots East-West straight through Fairfield. The truck had two amber lights up top for ears and storage compartments in its haunches. Bobby drove and Marshall sat back with his knees bent and feet flat on the dash, two one-gallon jugs of water on the leather bench seat, its gray skin cracked on each end and exposing foam innards, crusted and dark. They had chosen the bulkier of the two backup trucks at the water department's headquarters out by the reservoir that morning and now they followed another white truck that, like theirs, had a “Fairfield City Water Department” logo on each door. Though neither mentioned it, Bobby imagined that Marshall, like him, wished the truck had no features that flagged them as city employees. Public: like the welfare they'd received for a few years while Jim had stopped paying child support. Like the housing assistance and food stamps they got each month. Not private, not hired by merit or connection: just a public job that needed to be filled. Barely a step above community service. And even if the truck hadn't identified them, they'd been told to wear thin, polyester, tennis-ball colored vests with silver reflector stripes like other city employees who worked on the road. And like the small army of men working to repave Highway 34 that summer.

“We should burn a CD and leave it in here,” Marshall said, turning off the radio after rejecting four channels.

“Yeah,” Bobby said. “I'm thinking just one song, really,” he said, glancing over and starting to smile.

“What?” Marshall asked. “No, let me guess. That one on the radio at the shop, while Dave was giving us the vests and paint.”

“Which one was that?”

“You didn't hear?” Marshall said, raising his eyebrows. He shook his head. “God, it was something about 'You ain't never seen a country boy with tires on his truck this high.' I thought you were trying to not to look at me and laugh!”

Bobby smiled and shook his head. “Good Lord. I wish I'd heard it.”

“Don't worry,” Marshall said. “I'm sure it'll be on again. I think they just let that radio play all day, same station. Dave didn't even turn it off when we all walked out.”

“Mm-mmm,” Bobby grunted. “Like me some of that.”

“I know. It's like a nightmare. I'm not sure I'd even want to work here if Rosie wouldn't get mad if I'd quit.”

“Oh yeah?” Bobby said, trying both to acknowledge the statement and not get too deep into what could become an argument. He turned on the left blinker and slowed down behind Dave and Wes in the lead truck, about to turn off the highway onto the street bordering Fesler's Auto Mall at the edge of town.

“Wait, so which song were you going to say?” Marshall asked.

“Oh,” Bobby said. “I was going to say 'Working on the Highway.' It's been stuck in my head ever since they started redoing 34.”

“Oh yeah,” Marshall said. “That's on *Nebraska*, right?”

“I think it's *Born in the USA*,” he said. “It's got that catchy blare to it. Like 'Darlington County.'”

“Oh yeah, that's right,” Marshall said.

Bobby did a U-turn and pulled over onto the shoulder opposite the car dealership. He flicked on the amber warning lights like Dave had showed him before they'd left and he and

Marshall pulled on the ill-fitting vests.

“It's just what I wanted,” Marshall said. “For us to be easier to spot.”

“I was thinking the same thing,” Bobby said.

When they stepped out onto the gravel shoulder, a short blond man waved them over to the back of the other truck. He had a tattoo on each forearm, one featuring a gravestone wrapped in an American flag and the other with the word “Brillo” written in Old English font and capitalized. Another tattoo poked out from under the sleeve of his dark gray work t-shirt that had his name, Dave, in cursive on the left breast. The other man, taller, brown haired, all sharp elbows and stiff shoulders and boots that were just slightly too big, had the same shirt with “Wes” on the front instead. He discreetly shot a clot of saliva and chewing tobacco juice into the weeds that ran down into the rut off the shoulder.

“So,” Dave started. He seemed to be always near shouting or at least unaware of his voice's volume, like he perpetually had headphones in or had some bad ear damage. “We found some rags and brushes for you in the back of our truck, we'll get you those. You got the paint in your truck, you got green and blue paint?”

Bobby looked at Marshall, but before either spoke, Dave started again.

“We'll get you some of that at Luckman's. Should get some stirring sticks, too. And some small brushes, remember that, Wes.”

Wes nodded and looked at the boys, who stood with their hands in the pockets of their jeans. Bobby quickly glanced at him but couldn't see his eyes through his semi-rimless, outfielder-looking sunglasses. Bobby looked over into the rut of weeds and the clump of trees it led to. The sun beat down and Bobby wondered where a fire hydrant could be among the tangle of weeds and grass and wild flowers.

“Now, you guys follow us down here,” Dave half-shouted. “There's a hydrant down in the bottom of this ditch. We mowed around it yesterday, so it'll be easier to get to.”

As they walked down the shoulder, Wes pointed to what looked like a yellow flower. “This here's wild parsnip,” he said, his voice a combination of deep croak and nasally country drawl. “Looks harmless, like a flower, but it'll give you a rash worse'n poison ivy. If you see it, avoid it, and try to just kick it aside with your boot.” He stepped on a stalk to demonstrate.

The boys nodded. Bobby looked down at his creased old black and white Nike basketball shoes and thought to himself, My boot.

They walked carefully down the ditch to a short hydrant, red body and white top, rusty and with mowed splinters of grass stuck to it. Dave and Wes showed how to clean the hydrant, first scraping it with the combination putty knife and scraper, then brushing it with the wooden-handled steel wire brush, then wiping it down after dampening the rags with some paint thinner. Then they left the boys to paint it.

“Shit, how do we open the paint?” Bobby wondered as the boys stood at the back of their truck with one large can, “fire engine red,” and one can of “white” paint. “Is there a screwdriver? Guess we could just use the end of the knife.”

Marshall rummaged around in the bed of the truck. “No screwdriver. Don't you mean the 'Five in one painter's tool?' Sure it won't hurt the lid?”

“I don't know. Hurt it? Can it hurt it?”

“Not sure,” Marshall said. “I'm guessing the lid needs to fit back on, right?”

“Jesus, they probably should have showed us how to paint them.”

“They probably thought we knew,” Marshall said, putting the small can of white paint on the rear bumper and working it open with the edge of his putty knife.

“Yeah, probably,” Bobby said, carefully pulling the lid off the large can. “Looks like bad fake blood.”

“Should get a bunch on your hand and run into the store screaming,” Marshall said.

“It'll be the hottest look of the summer. Neon green and fake blood.”

“Blue collar zombies,” Marshall said.

“Green collar, think you mean.”

“Good one.”

After ten minutes, they had averted a minor crisis when Marshall found a white spider sac that looked like cotton candy in the inner rim of the hydrant's top, splattered paint all over the recently mown grass and onto their shoes and pants, and successfully covered the hydrant, even the chain that linked the lids of the arms to the body, in dripping paint.

“Guessing that's good,” Bobby ventured, stepping back from the mess.

“Finally,” Marshall said.

The two walked back to the truck, put the paint cans in the bed, and climbed into the front seat.

“Should we just wait?” Marshall asked.

“I don't know,” Bobby replied. “Didn't they say they'd come back?”

“I don't think so. Isn't it time for lunch? Let's just go.”

“Go where?”

“Back to the ranch.”

“The what?”

“The ranch. You know, the shop, at the reservoir, the building they work in by the water plant office.”

“Oh yeah. But why 'the ranch'?”

“It's like on those TV shows. “Meanwhile, back at the ranch.” For some reason, that's what I thought of it as. Look, let's just go. My shoulders are already burnt.”

“Yeah, probably should've brought sunscreen,” Bobby said, staking a swig of water. “I don't know. I say we wait a bit.”

“Isn't it about lunch time anyway?” Marshall said.

“I don't know. It's the first day, how would I know?”

“I mean, I think it's fine if we tell them we weren't sure.”

“Something tells me they're coming back.”

“Whatever. That makes a lot of sense.” He put his feet back up on the dash and brushed his hair out of his eyes.

Bobby looked out the windshield and said nothing. He figured Marshall was tired and hungry and likely to argue.

“Sure would be nice if we knew someone who was really experience with painting and construction work, you know?” Bobby said after a while, still looking out the windshield. “Like, an uncle,” he continued. “Or multiple uncles on your mother's side who all helped repaint their own house in Kansas City. Or a father who ran his own siding business. Something like that.” He looked over at Marshall, who looked out his own window, not responding. “You know, wouldn't that be useful? To have someone to teach you this stuff already?”

“Why would that be good?” Marshall answered in a monotonous clip.

“It's a joke, dude! Like, to think of all them knowing construction and how to paint and shit, and us here not knowing a damn thing.”

“But even if they taught us, that would still mean we'd have to work this stupid job.”

“Well, it could be worse, I guess,” Bobby said.

“Like how?”

“Would you rather work with Seth and a bunch of low-rent people at Subway? I'd prefer this.”

“I'd much rather do that than this crap. Driving around all day for the city water department? In the sun all summer?”

“I guess,” Bobby said, deciding to drop it. “Get tan, though,” he suggested.

“Oh yeah, I'll get a tan line the shape of this stupid vest. Can't wait.”

Bobby took another drink of water and turned on the radio.

“And it's all because of Rosie,” Marshall blurted out. “Because she's gotta be on welfare and can't get a job for fucking once.”

Bobby turned the radio off and sat up straighter in the driver's seat. “It's just because of that?”

“Well, yeah. Think she's going to keep her kids out of that program? What would Suzy say, that director lady? Think she'd be happy?”

“I think Rosie just knew it'd be a lot of money,” Bobby said.

“Yeah, money she's going to ask us for.”

“So?”

“So I'm not giving any of it to her.”

“I've been giving her money for four years, is that wrong?”

“Whatever, do what you want. But I'm not letting her waste my money.”

“Waste it on what? All the nail polish she doesn't have?”

“I could budget so much better than she does. I don't even think she budgets. She's so

stupid with money," he said. He dropped his feet to the floor and started jiggling one leg up and down quickly. "I think she's just lazy, that's all it is."

"So you think," Bobby hesitated. "So, what, you think it's her fault she hasn't been getting child support?"

"Whatever, she should do something about it."

"And what would you do?"

"Get a job. And stop trying to move to California or take care of grandma or start some dumb business that would never work. She was talking to me the other day about making pies and selling them. Just out of our house. Like that's going to make any money. It's fucking stupid."

"I mean, half the time she's just talking out loud, don't you think?"

"Well she shouldn't talk, then, because it's just dumb. Why are we still waiting here? Let's go."

Bobby sat still for a minute, not wanting to give Marshall the satisfaction of an automatic response, but inside he felt like he did before giving a speech or while playing basketball in front of people. He figured Marshall would apologize later or at least get over it after lunch, and he wondered why he was even scared, what Marshall could do that would really hurt him, but then he didn't want to think about it anymore and turned the keys and drove the truck back into town.

Later that day, after the boys had come home from work and showered, Rosie and the kids all climbed into the van and drove to Jimmy's. Today was the day their grandmother arrived. After they entered the house, which none of them had ever seen before, Bobby shut the colossal wooden front door of the mansion and stood facing the foyer. It was a conspicuously empty and almost drab area. A dry, unused, slightly dusty, light tan and yellow marble indoor fountain sat in the center of the area. Some papers were strewn along the top of the flat side walls of the fountain's basin. In a straight line above the fountain, all the way up about fifty feet, at the pinnacle of the roof above the foyer, was a pyramidal skylight. To his left was a gray carpet mat littered with shoes that belonged to his uncles, Tommy and Jimmy. The mat led to the left of the front door and into a small closet whose door didn't shut all the way. There were penny loafers; beefier brown shoes that vaguely evoked hiking; a pair of meshy, nylon-and-grey-rubber Asics running shoes with details meant to be evocative of stone or mountains (their white laces were immaculate, pristine, clearly untouched); some khaki boat shoes, a pair of reddish-brown leather dress shoes with laces; some tan suede Birkenstock sandals. They were all piled together and seemed not to have been worn much, except for the loafers that were set side-by-side near the front of the heap. Scattered throughout the hodge-podge of shoes were at least four identical pairs of Hurley sneakers, all white with black trim and logo, in various stages of decline, though even the most worn pair had only a few creases and scuffs.

The Hurley shoes were Tommy's. Bobby had first noticed them when he was in eighth grade and Tommy had inexplicably started coming around to visit every so often just to say hi or drop off some bread he'd gotten for free from a co-op in Iowa City. When he'd asked Rosie back then why Tommy was suddenly visiting them after they'd lived in Fairfield on and off for over four years, she'd said he was having a mid-life crisis and had realized how old he'd gotten and

wanted to soothe his guilty conscience. Bobby now noticed that the shoes, which had seemed ridiculous on his uncle even then, cheap skateboarding shoes meant for middle schoolers on a graying man who wore nothing but white polos and khakis, now looked desperate and sad. Like he'd tried really hard for a day or two to find out what was hip or fashionable among college kids and had latched onto these sneakers as his one defense against becoming an aging fogey. They looked cheap and expendable; he guessed Tommy had just decided to buy them wholesale at one point, having seized upon his thing, his last line of defense against the onslaught of age and the withering of youthful vitality.

It was both eery and exciting to be in this house, the one he'd heard Jimmy had bought a couple years prior when he'd moved back to Fairfield from Arizona, evidently having given up on the construction of his hotel in Phoenix, giving up the ghost on a project that had become a running joke in the family, especially between Bobby and his mom. She'd told him when he was about ten that that's what Jimmy did: he'd made some money with his oil brokering firm, Carmichael Oil, and then started in on real estate, living in North Carolina for a bit and then Arizona (all the while supplying money to Bobby's grandma, Virginia, Jimmy and Rosie's mother and the only grandparent still alive when Bobby was born). Whenever it looked like their family might have to move from their current rental or when Rosie wondered aloud whether her hopes to move to California might fall through, Bobby would joke that they could always just move into Jimmy's hotel. Maybe he'd even pay them to help finish the painting. His forest green Escalade still had Oregon plates, so Rosie figured he must still have a place out there. Regardless, he'd decided three years ago to buy the biggest mansion in town. The house was a behemoth, sunglow brick and light yellow, creamy mango colored columns and trim, over 5,000 square feet, just north of town and overlooking the lake and surrounding trails and forest at the city's

waterworks park. And it was this house, the biggest, brightest, most ostentatious display of wealth that the town had to offer that Jimmy had decided to buy, his youngest sister and her six kids living on welfare and food stamps maybe 12 blocks south.

Rosie had been dumbfounded and outraged at first. Explaining the news afresh to each of her three phone companions (Jenny, her old college friend; Eddie, the one brother with whom she still got along; and Betty, the octogenarian and former babysitter who brought them her used copies of the past week's Fairfield Ledger every Sunday) things like "That's *just* like him, that is *so* him, of *course* he would do that" and "Can you buh-*lieve* him?" and "I am *never* talking to that guy again" and "I am so sick of my family, I am *never* having anything to do with them again" and "He is such a slimeball."

But of course that acrimony hadn't lasted, and Jimmy had come calling. If Bobby and his siblings had noticed one thing about Rosie's relationship to her oldest brothers, it was that when they called, she came. In the rare even that they came to her, she was a frantic, distressed, frazzled mess, constantly looking out the window on the front door to see if their car was in the alley while trying to get the house spotless and the kids under control and herself bathed and in a decent outfit before they showed up.

Now Bobby could hear her doing the same thing. She was upstairs, coming out of one of the bedrooms that opened onto the hall that was bordered by the light wood handrail that ran up the stairs and along the hall and open area above the foyer. The wooden staircase and hall floor were covered by a track of dark pink carpet decorated by a gold and blue, vaguely oriental design pattern. Though they were the only ones in the house, Rosie was quietly telling the kids to keep their voices down and follow her orders as she tried to make the bed in a spare room for Grandma and get the lasagna they'd made at home into the oven in Jimmy's kitchen. The only

difference was that they were not in their own house but in this unfathomably spacious mansion in which they might now live for the foreseeable future, depending on how often Jimmy wanted Rosie there.

“And where's Bobby?” she asked them in a hushed voice that was no less frightening and commanding than if she'd been shouting for him in her usual voice.

“I don't know.”

“I think he's still downstairs,” Benny whispered back, trying to position himself on the staircase and slide down.

“Well tell him to get up here,” she told him. “And don't you dare do that.”

“I'm coming!” Bobby called from the foyer, his voice echoing off the walls.

“Shhh,” she replied, looking over the railing and seeing him still at the front door. “Wait,” she called in a crisp whisper. “Make sure the oven's on 375.”

“I don't get why we have to be so quiet,” Anna said.

“Yeah, you always get like this when we're about to see Jimmy or Tommy,” Marshall said.

“You guys don't understand, he gave me the code to get in the house so I could have everything ready when they get here with Grandma.”

“And when are they getting here?”

“He wasn't sure, but it should be soon.”

“And when did he tell you?”

“A couple hours ago, right before I told you guys to start making the lasagna.”

“Jesus, and that's why you're all pissy and we have to be quiet? Because big bad Jimmy's gonna get mad if we don't behave?”

“To tell you the truth, Jimmy's not going to get mad. Jimmy doesn't really get mad. I just want everything to be ready for Grandma. She doesn't like chaos. So that's why you guys have to be quiet when she gets here, she isn't used to being around so many people. You can't be getting all loud and obnoxious.”

“But it's obvious you're scared of something.”

“Yeah, it's like someone lit a fire under you. You get all crazy and nervous and hectic. It's always like that. 'Oh my God, Jimmy's coming, gotta get ready, Jimmy's coming, is he here yet?'”

“'Is that him outside?' You know. 'Is that his car in the alley?'”

“Guys, it's probably Tommy she's scared of, anyone would be scared of him,” Anna said.

“He's so weird,” Philip said.

“What was that story you were telling me?” Marshall asked Bobby.

“About Tommy? With the plates?”

“Yeah.”

“Well Rosie was telling me, why don't you tell him?” he asked her.

“No, I'm not telling it, I have to find some sheets for Grandma's bed.”

“All right, I will. So Rosie said when she was like 12, so Tommy must have been about 25, he came home to Grandma's and somebody had washed a bunch of dishes in the dishwasher, but they weren't totally clean, and Tommy was mad about something else and then saw them and picked up all the plates, they were all glass or ceramic I guess, and he just threw them all on the ground, just shattered them all for no reason, just because he was angry. Can you believe that?”

“Wow.”

“I know. 'Argh. Tommy angry. Tommy smash plates, make everyone scared.' What a baby!”

“All right, Marshall,” Rosie said, walking up and handing Marshall some cream-colored sheets and pillowcases. “Take the sheets off the bed in that room and put these new ones on it.”

“But mom, didn't you say Tommy actually was always scared? Like, he'd never really fight anyone but just acted all violent and tough?”

“I don't have time to talk about it. They're gonna be here any minute! You better stop talking so loud, too, unless you want them to hear you.”

“Oh, what, he's gonna throw some plates at me?”

“I'm serious, I wouldn't be so loud if I were you.”

“Oh come on! Like we're going to come to someone's house and be walking on egg shells the whole time? All because one of them is a big baby?”

“Just sayin,” she said.

Bobby got the feeling she was trying to scare him into shutting up and helping her, but to him, it was the same old pathology, some nervous tic of hers that was activated every time her brothers were around. She wasn't the Rosie who demanded they say “Yes, ma'am” and repeatedly called out “Ask what you can do to help”; now she was head down, get to work, don't upset anyone.

“But seriously,” he said, following her into the bathroom as she looked for towels and toiletries. “Like I have to act scared of him? Isn't it all bark? What'd you tell me people used to say about him? Half-loaded?”

“I don't know,” she said, grabbing a shriveled tube of Colgate toothpaste from a mirror cabinet. “No, it was half-cocked. I remember somebody saying once, 'Oh, you know those Carmichaels, they're always half-cocked.'”

“But isn't that, like, not prepared? Like half-baked?”

“I don't know, maybe. I always just thought it was more like hotheaded, quick triggers, like their fists were always half-cocked, always about to go off. Here, take these towels and put them on the chair next to the bed in there.”

“Aha. Yeah, that makes more sense. Because didn't people joke about how they'd always get in fights?”

“Benny, shut the door and go look outside and tell me if they're here yet.”

“But what was it? I remember you saying something about how everyone would joke about it.”

“Oh yeah. The saying was 'Tommy starts em and Jimmy finishes em.' But people acted like that was because they were some team. There wasn't any fucking team. Because see Tommy was just a bully and was racist against black kids and ran his mouth. But he didn't really want to fight anyone. But he was also just enough of a bully to Jimmy to have control of him.”

“I see.”

“Like I think of it in my head and I imagine all Tommy had to say was 'Sic em, Jimmy,' and Jimmy'd start punching people, all because Jimmy was scared of Tommy. And it's still the same way. Tommy still mouths off and is a loudmouth and Jimmy's actually the one doing anything. Tommy's yelling at all my siblings over email about Grandma, but he's the one living in Jimmy's basement.”

“There are worse basements, I guess. But that's interesting. So it's not like they were close and that's why Jimmy would 'finish em?'”

“No, not at all. It was because they weren't close that Jimmy was scared and would do whatever Tommy wanted. Tommy probably acted like they were close, but they weren't. Jimmy couldn't ever stand Tommy. He still can't. No one can.”

“So why's he let Tommy live here?”

“That's how fucked up the situation is. He thinks he has to get along with him, be the good brother, help him out, save everybody. And because Jimmy can be an ass, too. They're both bullies. But wouldn't you be messed up too if you had Tommy as your older brother your whole life?”

“And how would you be, if you'd had both of them as older brothers all your life?”

“Exactly. So you can start to see what's so nerve-wracking about seeing them. But to tell you the truth, it's really just Tommy. Jimmy's not so bad by himself. But Tommy's just an idiot.”

“And that's who Grandma's about to live with? Jesus.”

“Jesus Mary and Joseph, as she'd say.”

“Jesus Mary and Joseph. Jimmy Tommy and Virginia.”

“Guys!” Benny gasped as he ran up the stairs two at a time, Philip scampering up behind him. “They're here. I saw them.”

“They're here?” Rosie said, her face suddenly grave and anxious.

“Yeah,” Benny said, giggling. “Let's go hide!” Anna and Philip ran along with him into a bedroom where Marshall was looking at a ladder that led to an attic space.

“No, guys, get back here,” Rosie said, but she was already rushing down the stairs as quickly as her ginger ankles could carry her, right arm braced against the hand rail. “Does anyone know where my Birkenstocks are?”

“They're in the kitchen,” Bobby said.

“Hey, tell them to come on and stop acting so childish, and don't you run away with them,” she said, looking back up at him from the landing. “Tell them to cut it out and bring them down.”

She said it like an order, but Bobby couldn't help noticing she sounded a little desperate. Her eyes were a little forlorn like she too wanted to run and hide somewhere upstairs but couldn't, and was exasperated not so much because their reaction was childish and suggested more the arrival of police than of family members but more because she knew precisely that reaction and wanted to give in but couldn't, therefore acting as if it were ridiculous to just run and hide, because such was her confounding position: to want to hide, run, show them that she did not like being around them, get away from them; that was her instinct, but at the same time, she could not run and hide, it was her duty and curse to have to respect them, be with them, pretend they didn't creep her out and scare her and put her on edge. If she did that, she'd be the one with the problem. They'd be able to shake their heads and say "Crazy Rosie," trying to belittle her and rein her back in within the family's domain—and make no mistake about it, the family meant Tommy and Jimmy. It had ever since 1973 when their father died; they'd been running the show since they were in their mid twenties. It struck him as the very paradox she'd lived her whole life, her utter dilemma: to have an allergic reaction to these people but to never have what in their eyes would be legitimate grounds for avoiding or repudiating them. She had to suffer their craziness or be called crazy, reactionary, impossible; and it was this strange contradictory power that pushed her, just as giddily nervous and flighty and unwilling as the kids that she'd just reproached for following the exact same instinct, toward the kitchen to greet them. And it was this that would always be, he thought, her position, her catch-22, that which would never have allowed her to break free and to live her own life: she must either live theirs, which meant subservience, or live her own, which meant rejection and isolation from her family.

So she, his grandmother, Virginia Carmichael, was coming. She was already here. And he had no illusions about what it meant for Rosie and their family. There was no way anyone but

Rosie would take care of her for the majority of the time, but there was also no way that Tommy and Jimmy would allow her any control or freedom. Bobby felt alarm and distrust and suspicion and foreboding and weary unease but also familiarity, a calm alarm, a familiar one, just another cycle, too familiar to be very dangerous, both frustration and knowledge of the futility of that frustration. For it would play itself out as it always had, let them repeat this old sad hollow disingenuous play-acting farce again, one more time, for old-times' sake. A farewell tour of the old characters going through their uncanny motions trapped in a tuneless waltz, a dirgeless, drumless march of fading time and memories and hate, elegizing their own futility as they re-enacted it, the simulacrum an homage to simulacra past, diluted deja-vu, as much a tradition as Thanksgiving and as American as impotent blind dislike of that which is closest to you.

Virginia Carmichael was a nervous woman. Her middle name, Constance, might as well have been Survival or Anxiety. Born in 1926 and raised on the broth of the Depression, hers had been a life of retention, calculation, and worry. Sixteen kids had only heightened these qualities. The early death of four of them hadn't exactly helped, either. Or her husband's death at 45, only a month after she'd learned to drive. Her fingers were swollen zigzags nestled together, her hands knotted by purple veins and never steady. Her eyebrows were still dark and lent her eyes a serious cast, but her eyes themselves, hazel and still wide open after so many years, were darting, unsure, constantly searching. No, ease and security and confidence had never found purchase in Virginia. But today she found herself riding in the front seat of a forest-green Cadillac Escalade driven by her second-oldest son.

Her loins had birthed a myriad. A multitude had tumbled down the years, families within the family, factions and alliances and cliques rotating and mutating and shifting over the years until there wasn't enough familial wood and jealous pulp to splinter further and they began simply replaying the same tired nasty game over and over like reruns of game shows on weekday afternoons, shows where the contestants seem merely programmatic and too familiar (the young white Old Navy employee, the middle-aged overexcited black woman, the retired but spry, childishly happy grandma) and automated in their excitement. Blank cartridges. After so many years, and for contestants who have to have already seen untold numbers of episodes, anything like interest in game shows, beyond the participants' fleeting rush of adrenaline, can belong only to a viewer outside the fray. Those inside are simply elements to be expended, playing their role and receiving only superficial gains. And even the viewer can't withstand the tired recycled blank-shooting for very long.

One might say, though, that families are distinct in their humanity, whereas a game

show's just a game show. But think about the energy it would take to be that excited for something trivially interesting and ultimately empty, the calories expended to keep up the throes and kinetic energy of the contest's frenzy. Consider the hours spent by how many millions of people over the years when they could have been doing anything, anything else in the world. Game shows are simultaneously trivial and consuming. Inconsequential and yet, given enough time and absorption, utterly decisive. Ask anyone who's wasted enough time on them. Families, at least certain types of families, big crazy in-bent political clans, might be no different.

Might. Because the one thing a game show doesn't have is something like love, which a family, no matter how fractured and ragged, must have had somewhere if only in some small, hidden reserve. Or otherwise it at least had, at some point, if for only a moment, something like a desire for life beyond the transactional and the calculative. Somewhere way back was an affirmation of an unknown regardless of the economic consequences. Perhaps love is just a name given to this affirmation of an unknown. A game show, however, has nothing outside of economic consequences. If no one watches, there's no ad revenue. No ad revenue, no game show, no matter how beloved. More properly said, even if a family could somehow lose all of its love, a game show never had love to lose. Even if a family has lost all of its love, if it has all evaporated and the name dies out and no contact endures, it still is characterized by this loss. (And this would be quite different from a family that hates each other; you can muster the energy to hate something only if you first love it, know it, are bound to it.) Whatever that love or binding force or unknown was for Bobby's mother's family, that warped tattered tribe, was embodied by Virginia Carmichael. She was his grandmother, the only grandparent he'd ever known, older than Bob Barker by a few years and the inadvertent producer of what Bobby often thought of as this living game show.

The Escalade pulled through the green wrought iron gate and into the roundabout driveway in front of Jim Carmichael's hulking mansion of tan stone, white marble, and sunglow brick. A silver fifteen-passenger Ford van sat under the basketball hoop by the four-car garage. The blue-and-white tiled fountain was empty and covered in a film of dirt. Virginia peered over the dash as the SUV rounded the drive and stopped in front of the mansion.

“Here we are, mom,” the driver said. He had a thick head of light grey hair swept to the right. “This is it.”

Virginia fiddled with the wooden bracelet featuring twelve square pieces, each featuring a different saint, as she looked out the window at the dying flowers in pots and the weeds crowding the edge of the driveway's center patch of grass. “Now where are we?” she croaked, her voice shaky.

“We're in Iowa now,” Jim said, putting his hand on her left arm.

“And we came from Kansas City?” she asked, turning to him.

“That's right,” he said. His eyes were narrower than hers, more skin and fat on his face to hide them. But the irises were the same, a dark hazel that was almost brown. “Tom and I brought you up and now you're going to stay with us, here.”

“That's right, mom,” said a man in the backseat, suddenly opening the door, getting out of the car and opening Virginia's. “Brought you up from Kansas City so you don't have to stay in a nursing home.”

“I was in a nursing home, that's right,” she said, nodding slightly and gazing off toward the pool on the other side of the grounds. “And why did you come to get me?”

“Well,” said Jim, “Tony wanted to use your money, the money from the house and the Social Security and all the rest, for a nursing home.”

“And we don't want to see that,” said Tom, raising his hand so that his mother could step slowly out of the Escalade.

Virginia didn't move. “Well, what am I going to do now?”

“You'll be here, with us,” Tom said, moving closer.

Virginia looked at Jim, who stared back. He sensed she was nervous. “That's right, mom. Got this big old house and just Tom and me here. No better way to use it than to have you here.”

“Sure,” Virginia said. “But who will take care of me?”

“Well, Tom and me.”

“It'll just be us?” she asked.

“That's right,” Tom said, holding Virginia's hand. “Come on, let's go in.”

“Yeah mom, you want to see the place?” Jim said. “Finally have a nice place for you to live in.”

“But who's going to be with me? At night, who's going to help me in the bathroom? And help me get dressed?”

Jim looked at Tom, who had his hands on his hips and was staring at the ground. “Well, Tom's got a room downstairs too, and he'll be able to help you.”

“Downstairs? I can't be going up and down stairs all day.”

“That's fine, we'll work it out,” Jim said, starting to pick at the skin around his right thumbnail.

“And I'll have to take a shower. Who's going to help me? Where's Rosie?”

“It's fine, mom, we'll help you,” Tom said, turning away from looking at the street running past the gate. “Jim, you see that white car, that Chrysler earlier?”

“Nope,” Jim said.

“Rosie could help me, couldn't she?”

“I did,” said Tom.

“Let's go in, mom,” Jim said. “We'll talk about it later.”

“But she could come over, the kids are older now,” she said. “You know I always said she was the best worker I had. Best one.” She turned to Tom. “She used to babysit all your kids, remember? She was with the twins all those years for you and Debbie.”

“Rosie's too busy,” Tom said, looking at Jim over Virginia's shoulder. “Let's go.”

“Will I get to see her?”

“We'll have to ask,” Jim said. “Tom, did you see the plates?”

“Ask? Won't she want to?” Virginia said, trying to keep ahold of the sweater in her hand as Tom began to help her down.

“Nope,” Tom said.

“Now are you sure I can stay here?” she suddenly asked Tom once her feet were on the ground.

“Of course, mom,” Tom said. “Here, hold onto my arm.”

“I'm all right,” she said, leaning on her steel cane. “And I'm not going back to Kansas City?”

“No, mom,” Tom said.

“And where's Rosie?”

“At her house.”

Virginia finally reached the front of the car and looked up at the entrance.

“Anne's got a Chrysler, Jim,” Tom said. “You know that, right?”

“Such a big house,” she said. “How am I going to get around? Such a big house, Jim.”

“She can't get in here,” Jim said, waiting at the bottom of the steps. “Come on, mom, you need to see the place.”

“Whoever needed such a big place?”

“Tom, you get the gate?”

“She might call the cops, Jim. She's good at that.”

“What's the gate for?” Virginia asked.

“Came with the house,” Jim said, smiling. He reached out and Virginia grabbed hold of his arm. “We're very important, of course,” he said in a mockingly deep, grave voice.

“Such a big place. Don't know what you're keeping out.”

“Let's get inside.”

Jim Carmichael was large. Large-faced, large bulging cheeks, and large puffy white hair combed to the right and large nondescript eye glasses that had been out of style by the late 90s, not as thick as your classic nerd goggles but still conspicuous. He didn't do inconspicuous. Or small. The glasses contrasted with the rest of his persona, which Bobby imagined could be branded with a name like Abundance or Ample (Heft® by Carmichael: Throw Your Familial, Financial, and Physical Weight Around). His was the impatient utilitarian aesthetic of a man rich and lazy enough to not care about clothes anymore, all XXL clean white Polo shirts and leather watches and loafers and khakis or the occasional giant corduroys that may have cost $90 but did his profile no favors.

He was large not in an oafish, outlandish way, and not large or fat in an embarrassing, humiliating, tactless way like his youngest sister (though given a few more years of potato-chip-and-avocado sandwiches, he'd perhaps get there). No, he was large in portions just tame enough to remain intimidating and hovering above comical. He was 6 feet tall but even more formidable thanks to his round, ample chest and shoulders and ballooning potbelly and long pressed pants. And he seems even taller when uncomfortable and trying to assert himself, remaining stiff and erect, head back, dark hazel eyes pinched between the heavy flesh under his eyebrows and bulging cheeks, surveying his guests from as far a distance as he could get while retaining some sense of interpersonal relation, arms crossed to hide his nervous habit of scratching at the calluses around his thumb with his other fingers, whole body tensed up and torso straight as an arrow. There is a subtle difference between austerity and timidity, between respectful politeness and reticent fear, between observant and suspicious, but it always took Bobby a while to realize this conflation in his uncle's self-presentation.

Jimmy's whole professional and much of his personal life, as far as Bobby could tell, had

been founded upon this affected gravity, this autistic fear of speaking that projected solemnity and discernment and that kept others suspended in doubt and nervous prattling, allowing him to dictate terms with as few words as possible and without having to risk disclosing his own thoughts or risk lying about them, neither of which he could seem to do with finesse or tact. But it was easy for Bobby to forget this, especially whenever much longer than a month passed without seeing Jimmy. It was only more difficult to forget Jimmy wasn't actually that threatening now that he housed Bobby's only living grandparent. What's more, Rosie was now more or less employed as her caretaker and her kids were allowed over only if they behaved well and did not disturb their fragile grandmother (“wear out” was his phrase: they better not wear her out, she mustn't be worn out, their energy and excitement a blot on their status like a pack of orphaned puppies). On top of that, Jimmy was liable to kick anyone out whenever he pleased and decide to bar someone from returning whenever he pleased (he had done so with their oldest sister, Charlotte was not welcome here, her of the gambling and parties with high schoolers and putative pharmacological cocktail parties, though of course James and Tom hadn't been shy about joking about pot throughout their teenage years and Vietnam, and it would take only a change in his opinion for him to do the same to any of the rest of them). Not to mention that Jimmy owned the house and had the money that may or may not allow anyone to be fed that night since it was after all his house and Rosie was beholden to caring for Virginia as dictated by him and he has become more or less a father figure for the time being.

For Bobby, that time could not be short enough, as he could stand fake smiling and feigned comfort and relaxation and enjoyment for only so long before it became tiring and wore on his nerves. After only a week, he'd already started wondering whether all the anxiety and walking on eggshells and acquiescing was worth it just to be around a grandmother one must not

wear out by talking too much about anything other than weather, saints, or the crossword puzzles she did incessantly because “they keep my mind focused.”

Focused on nothing, Bobby mused to himself as he watched her try to find “Bahamas” on her latest word search (theme: “Vacation”). It was her seventh such puzzle of the day and it was only 1:30 pm.

But if Jimmy was a man still trying very hard to affect luxury and the easy health of the well-off, the enveloping consumer with the wherewithal and self-awareness to both amass a stockpile of flaxseed and fish oil and herbs and vitamins and spa treatment every other week and to indulge constantly in rich cheesecakes and ice creams and juices to offset this wealth of health, Tommy looked like the aged version of a man who had known that life and tired of both ends of its self-indulgence. Though he was only a year Jimmy's senior, he looked and sounder far older. His clothes, though more or less the same white-and-beige uniform Jimmy wore, were always more haggard and often slightly dirty from his sporadic campaigns against the invading weeds crowding all sides and crevices of the modestly kept grounds. His swab of hair contained considerably more white than Jimmy's and his face, already leathery and pock-marked along the outer cheeks from his adolescent acne, was far more creased, the bags under his eyes far more saggy, the lines around his mouth from his default frown more firmly set. He made Jimmy look happy-go-lucky by comparison. Relative to Tommy, Jim was just an easygoing jokester who, for whatever stubbornness, was at the end of the day out for the good of those around him, just trying to make his money, help his mom, live a long life, and do the right thing. Tommy faintly radiated some sort of simmering anger that his smile, when he made lackadaisical attempts at one, seemed only to highlight more as it lit up his cold light blue eyes somewhat manically and bared teeth that looked unnaturally, disturbingly white.

“Hey, so you excited about school?” Tommy suddenly barked at him from the sink, where he was rinsing out dishes.

Bobby jolted to attention but noticed Tommy wasn't even looking at him, per usual.

“Yeah, it should be nice,” Bobby said.

“You know what I'd do, if I could go back?”

Bobby knew that Tommy had no college experience to which to go back, but nevertheless muttered “Hmm?”

“Business. Go into business. That's what all those rich kids, their parents send em to tutors so they get in these places, that's what they're doing, you know?”

“Uh huh,” Bobby said, nodding lightly. It sounded just wonderful.

“That's what my oldest boy, you know, Anthony, that's what he did. Livin out in Malibu now.”

“That's cool,” Bobby offered.

For a while Tommy fell back into silence, rattling spoons and cups in the sink before placing them on the counter to dry atop a thin, worthless dishtowel that was already thoroughly soaked. Then: “Hey, you got an iPhone?”

“No,” Bobby said.

More silence.

Bobby considered asking Tommy if he had one, but he knew that Tommy's interest was truly as shallow as knowing whether Bobby had an iPhone. Bobby wasn't sure exactly why this piece of information was so critical, but he wondered if Tommy's own accelerating age made him competitive around younger males.

“You ever been out of the country?” he asked suddenly.

"Nope, not yet," Bobby said. "That would be cool."

"Yeah, maybe you could study abroad. Though I bet that's real expensive."

"Uh huh."

More silence. Tommy opened a bag of Calimyrna figs on the kitchen island and stared out the window above the sink that looked out toward the fence and street in front of the mansion.

"You still watch the NBA?" Tommy barked after a few minutes.

"Yeah, for sure."

"Still like LA?"

"Definitely."

"Think they're gonna pull it out?"

"I think so, yeah."

"Yeah, me too," he said.

Bobby considered probing to see whether Tommy had actually watched any of the playoffs but decided to spare them both the pain.

"You ever go up to the rec center to play ball during the week?"

"Yeah, they still play Monday and Thursday nights."

"Good competition?"

"Yeah, usually."

"Yeah, man. I used to be pretty good. When we were growin up we had that court out back, you know, at Grandma's, and we'd all play, we had like five or six of us guys once Tony got a little older. But man, I tell ya, once you started playin those black kids, man. It was another story."

Bobby thought of Rosie explaining how Tommy would run his mouth and start fights

Jimmy would then finish when they were growing up, and how often he'd argue with black kids just because it was easy. Tommy'd start em, and Jimmy'd finish em.

"Some people are just born good at certain things, you know? And once they started playin, it was a whole nother game. They're just too athletic, man, and you just couldn't compete. That's just their sport, you know it?"

Bobby made as noncommittal a noise as he could, unsure whether Tommy even heard it.

More silence. More tinkering with dishes and rinsing them and setting them pointedly and silently and self-evidently on the counter to dry. Reaching for more figs, staring at the fridge door, jowls moving lightly with his aggressive munching.

"Yeah, man. I tell ya. That's just their sport." He started moving away toward the hall.

"Hmm," Bobby offered as he feigned deep interest in Virginia's word search progress. He followed her eyes pinballing back and forth from the bottom of the page and back to the maze of letters, back and forth, back and forth, almost as if she wasn't doing the puzzle but was in fact surreptitiously eavesdropping on whatever Tommy had to say but was too nervous to listen openly.

Bobby thought about how scared she seemed even in front of her own son, her oldest son, the one who had been granted her power of attorney. Were it not for Rosie, Tommy would be the one helping Virginia in and out of her clothes and into bed at night and to the bathroom whenever she needed. He thought of Tommy's cold, rough hands helping her get her shirt off and step up from the toilet. Of his clipped, impatient voice rousing her in the morning instead of waiting for her to awake naturally like Rosie would. And he thought of how nervous Virginia was in general, regardless of who was around her. How she cupped her aching, swollen, crooked fingers around the mugs that Rosie had him fill with warm milk at night before she went to bed

and how she raised it gently to her thin lips, her long upper lip faintly fuzzy with hair, her thinning, brittle teeth shaking and bumping up against the ceramic mug as she gulped down the milk obediently, not enjoying it so much as completing it. How that sound of her teeth against the lip of the mug both disturbed Bobby and made him pity her, how it seemed both a sign of her innate inability to relax, the product of so many years of tense grasping after control of her family without ever having the courage to assert herself fully, and also something beyond her control by now, just the way she was at this point, her brittle teeth no longer fully hers, even, simply to be run over the edges of the mugs of whatever was given to her and over the prongs of the forks that held whatever food would be served to her at whatever child's house or whatever nursing home she wound up in next.

And he thought of how anxious she'd always been, how for the last ten years she'd had continual bouts with fears that she was dying when she was relatively healthy given her age and life's duress. How she was always convinced something was wrong with her, something, anything, like she was desperate for something to be wrong since for so much of her life something had been wrong that she couldn't feel right unless something was wrong, such that her mind couldn't be at ease unless it had found something about which to obsess and worry. How she inexplicably pressed on through the years, almost against her will. She was not a strong-willed person in any usual sense of the word. She'd made it through a lot, but she was not exactly someone who seemed to derive much pleasure from life or had many reasons to continue to live. She seemed, rather, stuck on Go. He'd once asked Rosie if she was surprised Grandma was still alive given how unhappy and grief-stricken her life had been and how passively she seemed to engage with the world at this age.

“She hasn't died yet because secretly she wants to die,” Rosie had told him. “I think

inside she wants it to be over, but because of that God won't let her die yet. It'll only be when she accepts her life rather than just waiting for it to end that she'll finally die, I think."

That had stuck with him and had hit him as bitterly true, unfathomably sad and depressing. He felt sorry for her. He knew there was another side to her, that she was capable of something other than anxiety and worry. When his family still lived in Kansas City, Virginia would periodically offer to have one of the kids over to her house to spend the night, and although everyone got their turn, Bobby seemed to go more often than the others. Charlotte was getting too old to be very interested in going to her grandma's house and the Cath and Marshall were younger and still a little scared of sleeping alone. But he, 8 or 10 years old, loved running around his grandma's house. He'd sneak up into the hot creaky attic to look at old books and records and suitcases stored there. He shot baskets on the cement half-court she had in the backyard, installed sometime long ago, the late 70s basketball hoop's iron pole rusting and red backboard square sunbleached and ancient cotton net brown and crusty with dirt. He'd stay out there until dark, and even then the garage light provided enough fluorescence to see the hoop, and would retreat inside only when she told him she was about to go to bed. He liked the smell of her coffee in the morning and how they'd usually go to McDonald's either for dinner or breakfast, to "get a bite to eat," as Virginia always said, an expression he'd never heard from anyone but her.

As he got older, he grew to love how she understood when he was joking with her. She could spot sarcasm immediately and give it right back, even if her short-term memory was already a little slow. And she was good at giving it back. She often called him Gary. She'd first said it was because he looked like a Gary more than a Robert. But it had become a running joke after Bobby had imitated Virginia's habit of cycling through four or five of her own 16 sons' or

innumerable grandsons' or Bobby's three brothers' names before remembering his own name. It didn't happen all the time, but when she hadn't seen him for a while, she would start in on different names, like looking for a given card in a deck and tossing it aside after a quick verbal glance. “Ed—Luca—Henry—Brand—no, Marsha—no. Bobby, that's right.” Since Bobby had started doing it back to her, she told him she'd just call him Gary from now on since it was easier, she had no trouble with that. Ever since, it was like she'd re-christened him, and even now, when she was always mentally fatigued and her memory was even more unfit, her eyes still lit up when he saw her again and said, “Hey Grandma, you remember my name?” And she would reply, “Oh of course, Gary,” chuckling at him.

But her worried and tense side was also very real and imaginable. Her life had, at least from his vantage point, been defined by deflections and denials and failures to embrace what she really wanted and own it. What his mother said about Virginia wanting to die stuck with him also because for a long time, ever since he'd started spending the night at her house and gotten chances to glimpse her asleep, he'd noticed how she always slept on her back, closed eyes toward the ceiling, body straight and a little stiff, arms bent and hands clutched together at her chest. It was like she was dead every time she went to sleep.

So maybe, he thought as she continued to mutter to herself and rub her left eyebrow with her left hand as she concentrated on finding the next word in her umpteenth word search, maybe it was the least that could be done for a dying woman whose existence was slowly and stubbornly withering away in front of their eyes. Maybe these empty afternoons when she was too afraid to say anything substantive and too tired to do anything other than the routine meals and light walks and word searches and watching the Mass on TV really were worth something, at least to her, to someone whose life had been so hard for so long. Maybe this long empty

meaningless break was some sort of reward, an end to all the fighting and reflecting and remembering that could have only brought her more pain, a nice retreat as she waited out her life. Maybe having Rosie there at night and her soft voice in the morning and her warm hands were as close to happy as Virginia Carmichael could get at this point. Maybe someone who wanted to die couldn't ask for much more. He didn't know if she was happy, or if she'd ever been happy, and he thought he'd probably never know for sure.

Even the air, the sky, the landscape seemed different at Jimmy's. From his daily post at the kitchen sink, where he organized dishes, loaded the dishwasher, washed any unwieldy pots and burned pans, and rinsed lentils or rice or vegetables for the next meal, Bobby saw the quiet street running in front of Jimmy's green iron fence. One half of the front gate was kept open to allow entry for Jimmy's Escalade and whichever of his three old Lexus sedans Tommy was driving and, in the rare event she got out of the house, Rosie's van. The empty plot across the street was overrun with amber prairie grass that obscured a Fairfield Realty sign. Beyond that climbed the skyscraping coniferous trees surrounding the reservoir and the adjoining park to the east, the tops of the clusters of lush, dark green trees swaying with the wind that swept across the flatter northern edge of Fairfield more strongly than in other parts of town. The sky, unobstructed by any neighboring houses or buildings, opened forever in reposeful indifferent wide cool blue, touched only by the gentle sweeping of the treetops like paintbrush bristles smoothly caressing paper. The land seemed slower and older but more vibrant, the wind quieter but more forceful.

As Bobby slopped a wash cloth around cups used the night before only for water or juice for his grandma, hardly deserving to be put in the dishwasher, a white patrol car crept past, its doors reading “Fairfield Police Department” in sky blue paint. Bobby thought of Tommy, the police sheriff of Jimmy's house, moseying about and putting people in their place or simply trying to remind people he was capable of putting them in their place if he so chose. Bobby started rinsing the cups even more quickly, noting as he had the previous mornings that 8 cups had been dirtied in the time since he'd wiped off the counter and turned off the kitchen lights the night before. His mother didn't like grape juice and certainly didn't drink coffee, so he figured Virginia was still waking repeatedly at night, unable to sleep. And the large mug with sunflowers printed on the side, with a cloudy film around the sides and a small white puddle at the bottom,

was of course also Virginia's. Rosie gave it to her every night at 9 pm before putting her to bed because she said it would help Virginia sleep and soothe her constant anxiety. Clearly, the milk wasn't helping that much and she was still restless. Bobby hurried to dry the cups before Tommy reached the kitchen on his billy-clubbed rounds. The same police car crept by outside again, going the opposite direction, even slower this time.

Bobby lined the cups in the cabinet and shut its artful, wood-and-glass door. The kitchen was spotless and it was only 10 am. He wondered where the kids were. In the foyer, he froze and put a hunting dog's ear to the air, waiting to hear where the house's occupants were gathered. Nothing from upstairs: Philip was likely still hiding from Tommy and Jimmy and begging the other kids to keep him silent company. A window in Jimmy's living room had gotten in the way of Philip's fastball the day before. Benny had been the intended receiver, but he was only in 4th grade and still scrawny and jerky, hardly prepared to catch any ball thrown that high and fast, and so it had ended up on the living room floor instead, a trail of glass shards behind it. Philip momentarily became a Grecian figure fashioned out of alarm and embarrassment rather than marble or bronze but soon fell upon Benny, issuing hot complaints about Benny's lack of agility and general tactlessness.

Bobby had told Philip both that it was really neither Benny's fault nor his and that Jimmy wouldn't be that mad. If he was, who cared, he was a selfish, power-tripping megalomaniac whose opinion didn't matter anyway. But Jimmy had reacted as gravely as if his car had been stolen, making a show of summoning all three boys to his office, asking who was responsible, telling Philip to clean it up himself and that he'd have to work to pay Jimmy back for it, at which point Bobby piped up and said it was only an accident, just some broken glass, and that really if Jimmy'd seen how strong of an arm Philip had at only 12 years old he'd be awash in excited

rather than angry. Mildly irreverent peacemaking, he'd soon learned, was about as far outside of Jimmy's wheelhouse as Philip's fastball had been out of Benny's reach. Jimmy quietly asked Philip and Benny to leave the room and with the affected measure and reticence of someone trying to appear far smarter and in control than his listener, began to explain to Bobby how things worked in the real world, and by extension in this, his hard-earned, well-ordered, patriarchal household.

"My dad didn't let me get away with shit," he told Bobby, hands steepled together and meaty elbows propped on his desk. "That's the only way to be a man: you take care of what's your job. Nothing less, nothing more."

Of course, Bobby thought, only Jimmy got to decide where his job started and ended, but Bobby neglected to point that out.

"And who do you think you are, trying to be coy with me? Telling me I shouldn't be mad. You think you're able to address a man like that? You, a little kid still doing dishes for his mom?"

"I got a job, I give her money—"

"Oh yeah? How much did you make last year? When I was your age I'd already started my siding business with Tommy and we were pulling in fifteen thousand a year. And your dad, whatever his faults, was married with a kid and working for us seven years later when he was just 18. What are you doing? You think you're setting any example? You gotta learn to take control. You gotta learn to be a man. Somebody has to be a man in your family. Somebody has to get control of that situation.

"I don't—"

"When my dad died, you know, there were fourteen of us still alive and ten still at home, and I was the second oldest. Somebody had to step up, you know."

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah. That was my responsibility. Somebody had to be the boss.”

“Yeah? And how'd that work out?” The floor gave out beneath Bobby's stomach, but he knew he had him. He'd thought about this.

Jimmy narrowed his eyes.

“How'd that work for Mike, Jim? Why don't we go to his group home and ask him what he thinks?

“You—

” How'd it work out for Johnny? Fuckin slit his wrists.”

“That wasn't anyone's fault.”

“Sure Jim.” Bobby's knee was bouncing up and down rapidly, but his voice was steady. “Least of all you, his next oldest brother.”

“Don't talk to me about shit you don't know.”

“All right. I don't need to. What about my mom? How'd that turn out? This chaotic situation I gotta be the boss of, how's her life going?” The emptiness in Bobby's stomach was now acidic, burning. For a millisecond, he wondered if he'd choke up. He'd never said any of this, anything even like it. “Who introduced her to my dad? And who shunned her when she finally left him and moved here? You wanna take responsibility for that too? Or was that not your job? Is it just your job when you wanna bloviate to some scared kids?”

At this, Jimmy's hazel eyes were clouded over by his narrowed eyelids and furrowed brow. The heavy skin between eyelid and eyebrow weighed down on his eyes, making them seem more distant. “Don't you talk to me like that,” he said quietly. “You don't do shit, and you aren't doing shit. What are you doing? Going to college? Big whoop. Like I give a fuck. I went to

one year of community college and knew it was for suckers. And I'm the richest one in my family." His voice grew louder. His cheeks were beetish and small deposits of spittle had collected in the corners of his mouth, his voice lisping over s and sh sounds as he blustered his reply. "I'm the one taking care of my mom. I'm the one who got her that condo. Got the biggest house in this town. I didn't need business school or some degree. What are you gonna do? Journalism? English? You're gonna write? And what good's that gonna do? How's that gonna do your mom when she's grandma's age?"

Bobby stared back blankly. He didn't know if Jimmy actually wanted him to reply or was pausing only for dramatic effect, but Bobby knew he didn't have an answer to that question.

"I'll tell you, in case you're still too idiotic to get my point," Jimmy said, leaning back in his chair, seeming satisfied that he'd hit a nerve. "Nothing. Not a damn thing. What do you have to write about? Your little world? It's a joke. Become a man first, kid. That's my advice. I'm done with this."

He rolled his chair away and stood up. Bobby stayed seated.

"Right on, Jim," he said. "Whatever you say. You're the boss. No one's gonna say you're wrong. No one's gonna call you stupid. You had it all planned out, and you did it." He spoke without thinking, the words coming out suddenly and surprisingly, voicing things he'd never coherently thought before. "Maybe I'm okay with not winning it all. Maybe I'm okay letting shit happen, letting some stuff go wrong. I can't control it, and maybe I'm okay with that." It didn't sound like him, and yet it also felt like the truest thing he could have said at that moment.

"You really believe that crock of shit?"

"I don't know," Bobby said. His heart beat noticeably under his shirt. "But I think so."

"You're in for some awakening. Scared little kid."

Even now, back in the foyer, Bobby's heartbeat raced as he recalled the conversation. As he monitored its gradually slowing pace, he noticed muted, muffled noises coming from the large carpeted front room with no doors and some couches and large windows looking out onto the sweeping lawn and willow tree in the back yard. The room also led to Jimmy's office. None of the kids had ever been in there until Jimmy had brought the boys in to stand trial for the broken window, and Bobby was fairly certain even Rosie had been inside only once or twice. She seemed scared even to knock for Jimmy if she needed to talk to him, interrupting him only as a last resort. And as far as Bobby knew, Jimmy encouraged the distance and Rosie's avoidance and downright fear of encroaching upon his private sanctum. But now there were multiple voices coming from that area, their interplay seeming to grow more frantic and combative. He approached cautiously but could distinguish only a muffled jumble:

"...how to deal..."

"...just think the best policy is..."

"...these people..."

"...need to lay low for..."

"...no need to bring more..."

"...not doing anything wrong, Jim..."

"...to just keep things at a..."

"...don't let on anything..."

"...I don't..."

"...give anybody anything to latch..."

"...not in charge here, Rosie..."

"...you, Tommy..."

“...see what's to hide...”

Bobby started shuffling away quietly from the edge of the carpeted room, hoping his ankles wouldn't crack as they so often did when he walked without shoes. He flinched briefly when Tommy's raspy voice suddenly boomed from behind him, echoing off the walls and marble floor.

“Hey, Bobby. Go do something for us. Go check and see if there's any cars outside in front of the gate.”

Bobby nodded quickly and walked back to the kitchen, where he again saw a police car just as it trailed up the street and disappeared from view behind the poolhouse. He didn't see Tommy in the foyer, so he steeled himself and walked to the white wooden doors opened outward and leading to Jimmy's office, knocking softly. The voices inside ceased, and Rosie came out, slightly red in the face, her hair a little loose and frazzled in her ponytail.

“Did you see anyone outside?” she asked quickly.

“Well, some police car was driving by the front, and I saw it drive back and forth earlier, too.”

“Okay,” she said. “Just. Go upstairs and tell the kids to just be quiet and not go outside or anything.”

“Why?”

“Just go tell them that. And tell them not to wake Grandma up.”

Jimmy and Tommy emerged from the office just as she turned to go back.

“Well, Rosie,” Jimmy said in his prim managerial tone. “We're just gonna let Grandma sleep and if the police come by again, we'll decide what to do then.”

“Jim, I just don't get it, there's nothing wrong here.”

“We're not going to talk about it anymore right now, all right?” He and Tommy headed toward the foyer before Rosie responded.

“What's up?” Bobby asked her.

“Just forget it.” She started whispering furiously. “Fuckin idiots. I don't wanna stay here much longer, you know. They don't even listen to me.”

“Why?”

“Doesn't matter. Look, I'm gonna go see if Grandma's awake. You wanna find something for her to eat?”

“Sure. But what's going on?”

“Fuckin Tony's trying to cause trouble,” she said in a low voice.

“How so?”

They began walking up the stairs, Rosie leaning on the rail as she labored up each step.

“He called the police, told em Tommy 'abducted' Grandma and she's being held here against her will.”

“How'd you find that out?” Bobby had to go one foot, two foot onto each step so as to stay back at his mother's pace.

“Well, he'd been threatening to do it over email.” She exhaled heavily, breath growing shorter.

“But why?”

“Well, 'cause he's her power of attorney, but when Tommy got her last week and brought her here, she signed it over to Tom.” She paused on the stairs to catch her breath.

“So then why don't they tell the cops that?”

“They wanna act like they don't know nothin, like they don't know why the cops are

driving by.” She peeked down through the stair railing's posts into the foyer, scanning for Tom and Jim. “Like, you know, we didn't do anything wrong.” She started slowly up the stairs again.

“Did they?”

“Well, Tony's such an angry little piss-ass. I'm sure he's using all his lawyer shit on them.” She stopped to inhale deeply. “Tryin to intimidate them, saying he'll sue and that they broke the law.”

“But they didn't, right?”

“I don't think so.” Another deep breath. They reached the top of the stairs. “As long as it seems like Grandma's under her own free will and thinks for herself.”

“Hmm,” Bobby said as they walked slowly toward Grandma's bedroom door. “Doesn't she wake up three times a night and ask where she is? And if you're gonna leave her?”

“She was, but she's been better lately.” She stopped and listened for Tommy and Jimmy.

“You know, mom,” he said. “We really need to think about how to help you lose some weight. You can't be having that hard of a time walking up stairs.”

“No, I'm just angry about it all, and I was trying to walk and talk at the same time.”

“Yeah, but—”

“Look, don't worry.” She reached for the door handle but turned back to him. “Listen, go downstairs and get some coffee. Jimmy made some earlier. Bring it up in a mug with a spoon. That'll help her wake up.”

Evidently, she had already been awake. When Bobby returned with the coffee in one of the cream coffee mugs Tommy'd gotten personalized with CARMICHAEL printed in dark green, Rosie was already helping Virginia walk out of her room, right arm holding Virginia's left. The older woman stooped and gingerly walked down the hall, following her ancient stainless steel

walking cane whose rubber handgrip and bottom stub were cracked and eaten away.

“It's all right, Bobby,” his mom said. “She doesn't need it. Put it in the kitchen. Or no, never mind, take it to the dining room in case she wants it later.”

The dining room was seldom used. A small chandelier hung above a simple wooden dining table and some arm chairs sat in the corner where Rosie took her mother if Virginia needed a brief break after lunch but didn't want to go all the way upstairs to take a nap. But when Bobby entered, the table was surrounded by chairs—two wooden chairs with plush burgundy cushions where two dark blue, many toyed, hefty police officers sat moving their hands in and out of various resting positions; two light pink cushioned arm chairs, one empty and one with Jimmy sitting in it, trying to hide his picking at his thumbnail skin; and some camel colored computer chairs, the third of which Tommy was now rolling into the room from Jimmy's office down the hall.

“Here, Bobby,” Jimmy said, motioning to one of the computer chairs. “You can give the coffee to me and have a seat. This is Officer Hammes and Officer Olson.”

Bobby smiled briefly at the police officers and sat down. The room was filled with silence. Soon it was interrupted by the methodical clacking rhythm of Virginia's slow, persistent trod down the hall's marble tile floor. But still no one spoke, the officers and Bobby and his uncles sitting, not making eye contact, all awaiting the arrival of the approaching figure. Like subjects waiting out the prolonged procession of a royal figure.

When she entered, she looked as timid and weak as ever. Her magenta blouse and light blue slacks hung loosely from her shriveled frame and her black rubber sneakers seemed too big, a bit clownish. When she sat down in the armchair next to Jimmy, she arranged herself and rested her cane against the side of the chair and looked around, suddenly coming to life.

“My, sure is pretty in here,” she said. “Isn't it? All those windows. And the sunlight. Oh, thank you Jesus for the sunshine.” She looked at the officers with wide eyes magnified by her thick, large eyeglasses. “That's what I always say,” she told them. “Thank you Jesus for the bee-youtiful sunshine.”

One of the cops, Bobby guessed Hammes, smiled politely and said, “So. You're the woman who's causing so much trouble.”

“Oh,” she said, pushing her glasses up her nose and sighing. She leaned back in her chair and shrugged. “So what did I do this time?” A slight smile was on her face.

“You just got a lot of people worked up,” the other officer, stouter and mustached, Olson, said.

“That's right,” Hammes said. “You're the center of a lot of attention, Mrs. Carmichael.”

“Well. First time in my life that that's happened, I reckon. As far as I can recall.”

Jimmy laughed a little too hard, trying to make eye contact with the police officers, who continued smiling politely.

“But really,” Virginia said. “Did I do something? I need to know. I might need to tell one of my sons to get my, my private jet ready.” She looked to Rosie and smiled. “I might need to leave the country!”

Bobby hadn't seen his grandmother this animated for a while. It was like she was her old self, the one who'd messed with him right back and called him Gary. The funny, pranky side of her. He was nervous and giddy inside to see her like this, especially in front of such ominous company.

She started again. “What, did someone say I was cheating on my word searches? 'Cause, it's true, I look at the answers in the back. But it's only when I think I've found everything, just to

double check. You know?"

"No, no—"

"I wouldn't call that cheating, would you?" She looked at the policemen earnestly.

The mustached one looked at the younger one, raised his eyebrows, and let out a chuckle. Rosie was looking surprised and amused at her mother. Even Bobby had a hard time knowing if she was kidding or not, she was doing such a good acting job.

"No, Mrs. Carmichael," Hammes said. "It's nothing like that. To tell you the truth, our puzzle crime unit is swamped at the moment."

Virginia settled back into the chair, pretending to be relieved.

"We just have some questions to ask you. *You* haven't done anything wrong, that's for sure."

Virginia glanced quickly to the right at Jimmy. "Well, I should hope not," she said. "Everyone has to check in the back of the book now and again."

"Mrs. Carmichael," the mustached one said. "Can you tell us where you're from?"

"Well, sure. Of course. My mama and daddy were from Saint Joe, so I was born there in 1926. But then when I was 20 I got married to my husband, John Carmichael. And we moved to Kansas City. So I've lived there most of my life."

"And how many children did you have?"

"16, I believe. Last time I checked, anyway.

"Ok, sounds good. Do—"

"Would you like me to name them for you?"

"Oh, that's—"

"I can still do it. Tommy Jimmy Marshall Charlie Johnny Marie Rita Pat Francis

Bernadette Frankie Peter Rosie Eddie Paul and Michael."

"Wow. That's quite impressive," Hammes said.

"Sure, thank you. You know, they called me The Producer."

Both officers released laughs. Bobby looked at his mom, smiled, and shook his head in disbelief. Jimmy smiled and surveyed everyone. Even Tommy smiled and looked down at his hands.

"All right. And—"

"Oh, but I did have one miscarriage."

"Oh no, that's fine. We were just seeing—"

"I just thought, you know. I wouldn't want to lie to you. I never liked liars."

"We understand."

"I mean. I had 12 boys, you know. And not one of them is in jail. I'd say I did pretty good, you know it?"

"Of course. We understand. We just want to ask, Mrs. Carmichael, can you tell us where you are now?"

"I'm sitting here, talking to you."

The officer laughed. "I know, but I meant where are you right now in the world. Which city, state."

"Oh, well, sure. I'm in Iowa, in Fairfield. I'm staying at my son Jimmy's place. Staying with him for a while, yes. And Rosie's here, and her kids."

"Ok. Thanks. And again, nothing bad is going to happen. We don't think you did anything, don't worry."

"Of course not."

“That's right. But can you tell us how you got here?”

“Jimmy and Tommy drove me up here from Kansas City. I was staying in a nursing home there. And I didn't like it. No sir. Would you like it?”

“I imagine not. My mom's been living with my sister. She doesn't want to go to a nursing home, either.”

“I believe it,” Josephine said, nodding intensely. “It's just not the way things should be, you know it?”

“Sure. But, well, we just need to ask you, since we got a complaint saying you'd been abducted?”

“Abducted?”

“Yeah, that you were, you know, taken from your home without wanting to be.”

“You mean like kidnapping?”

“Yes ma'am.”

“Well now. Do I look kidnapped to you?”

“No, ma'am, of course not. We just got a call and wanted to respond to it.”

“Well, no sir. I have not been abducted. Not that I know of, anyway.” She winked almost imperceptibly at the officers. “I like it here. Rosie's here, and she takes good care of me. And all her kids are here. I'm doing just fine.”

“We believe you, Mrs. Carmichael. We won't take up anymore of your time.”

“All right. Well, good to meet you,” she said, smiling.

“You too.” They stood up and Jimmy and Tommy quickly stood as well. They shook the officers' hands and led them down the hall toward the foyer.

Virginia looked at Bobby and said, “Gary, you got some coffee?”

“Oh,” he said. “Yeah.” He walked around to the other side of the table and handed her the mug, long forgotten. “It's probably too cold, though.”

“No, that's fine, that's fine,” she said. She gulped down the coffee using both hands to steady the mug. She held it to her lips, slightly bristly upper lip puckered, brittle thin teeth tapping lightly against the mug's rim. She finished it quickly and pushed the mug away, patting her white hair and sweeping it back out of her forehead. She rotated the saints bracelet around her left wrist as she stared down at the table.

“Mom, what do you want to do?” Rosie asked her. “Want some lunch?”

“Oh, you know, I think I'd like to go back upstairs and lie down,” Virginia said softly.

Rosie helped her up and led her off toward the stairs. Bobby remained sitting in the sunlit dining room. He was taken aback and amused, impressed and a little disturbed by the show he had witnessed. He stared at the huddled, stooped, cautious progress of his grandmother until that curious, astonishing matriarch's blue pants and black shoes had disappeared, slowly but surely, down the hall.

“Sometimes I think I might actually miss it,” Bobby said as he drove the Ford pickup he and Marshall had been given to drive around the city painting hydrants. They were driving west past the edge of the town to get some out-of-the-way hydrants beyond the auto mall on the Highway 34 as it crawled west toward Ottumwa and Nebraska and ultimately Colorado.

“Miss what,” Marshall said.

“This, here. It's weird.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. Like I'll remember days like this when it was so bright and open and blue and I didn't have any obligations, just had to get through the day, just waiting for that next thing to begin. No real responsibilities hanging over me. Anything I do just a bonus.”

“Yeah, that is weird.”

“I know. Because part of the time I do feel like there's all this stuff looming. Gotta figure out how to pay the electric bill, wonder if Rosie's gonna be able to pay me back, all this family crap. But then other times I just get very light and almost giddy and it all just rolls off and stuff opens up, I feel like there's still something ahead of me, like I'm not doomed.”

“Wish I had that feeling,” Marshall said.

“You will. High school's weird for a while. Everybody's clawing their way into a niche before it's too late. But you'll figure stuff out.”

“Yeah, but you didn't have to worry as much. No one expected anything of you.”

“People expect something of you?”

“Well, now they do.”

“How so?”

Marshall began speaking rapidly, enunciating poorly like Bobby did when he was

nervous. “Well, you know, now hat you're doing the college thing, going to a prestigious school and the scholarship and everything.”

“Who cares. You're smarter than me.”

“What do you mean?”

“You always got higher scores on the ITBS tests. Everybody loves what you do.”

“I guess. But that just feels like more pressure.”

Bobby knew what he meant, and he felt bad for his brother. He wanted desperately but did not know how to tell Marshall something that could convince him that high school didn't have to be that stressful. That *life* didn't. Most of the time, Bobby himself had a hard time remembering that. He pulled the truck over to the gravel shoulder and turned on the amber safety lights atop the truck's roof. They continued talking while they stomped out weeds next to the hydrant at the bottom of the ditch and scraped it clean and slapped paint on it.

“But when I do feel lighter,” Bobby continued after a long silence. “Like when I think things will be all right, it's always out of nowhere. Little things, like knowing the Lakers are gonna play that night. Or we got burritos in the oven for dinner or we got food stamps coming in a couple days and we aren't gonna run out of food this time. That stuff makes me feel all right, like hey, it always turns out all right. Always has. So why worry so much?”

“Hm,” was all Marshall said. Bobby could tell he didn't disagree but also didn't know what to reply.

“And then I start realizing there are things I'll miss. Stuff about how it feels here when I'm not worried or nervous. Just little insignificant moments and scenes. Like there's this abandoned foundation out past Hy Vee by the fairgrounds, across the highway from the baseball field where they have Babe Ruth games. One tree hanging over it, some rubble and sticks and

paint chips on the ground. It's peaceful and a little spooky at the same time. The wind is nice out that way cause it's so flat and kind of empty. I was driving past it the other day to get Anna at Tyler's, he lives on 34 past Fesler's, and I was driving the Cadillac and it's so smooth in that thing even though it's like a boat. I noticed it's kind of peaceful here. It's nice, in a quiet, strange way. Gives you space to wander, for your mind to meander and just stare out at the distance and be alone with yourself. And after a while it always feels good to be alone with myself."

"Why's that?"

"I don't know." They were back in the truck, driving slowly down the highway, looking out the windows in search of the next small red target. "Like I'll start thinking about things I've been wanting to think about and process more. Stuff I still remember so clearly but haven't really thought out, stuff that still gets me nervous or happy or sweet and sad. Like nostalgic memories. And I'll just play them in my head and turn em over and feel whatever I'm feeling, sad or a little lost or yearning for whatever's been past, thinking about how much time has past. The more I'm alone and just let my mind play out whatever comes up, I start remembering stuff really clearly. Like scary clear."

"Yeah me too. I get that sometimes."

"Yeah! It's wild. It just comes back and I can't believe any time has passed."

For a long time, they discussed their vivid memories as they absentmindedly cleaned and painted hydrants surrounded by roadside weeds. No matter how secretly judgmental, how subconsciously competitive, how reticently combative they'd been toward each other in the last few years, they'd always still connected when it came to any particular memory of their childhood or their family's history. They often had better memories of specific things than Rosie did. Marshall was the only other person Bobby'd ever met with a more vivid and deep memory

than his own.

After a while, they grew silent and Bobby drove them farther west down 34, farther than they needed to at this point. Neither of them said anything. They watched the sky spread out slowly in front of them, out and up forever, fucking forever, nothing out there but more, rolling through the slow tread of the truck on the highway, wind coming too loud and a little hot through the windows cracked just a little since the AC was broken. It was the same ratty, dumpy highway they'd ridden down too many times to count, so many trips back and forth to Kansas City playing Game Boys and hearing Springsteen and Dylan and Denver and Sting and Prine blare through the speakers to keep Rosie from submitting to highway hypnosis. They sat and watched silently, taking in this open, windy, eery land. It made you think about yourself and things you didn't think about often, remember things you forgot you remembered, getting lost out there in all that space. He pulled the truck over to the shoulder again even though there wasn't any hydrant in sight.

“Tell me what you remember,” he said without looking at Marshall.

“What?”

“You're the only person I've ever known with a memory that's better than mine. Let's put it to the test.”

“Are you saying you want to train me to win the memory competition?” Marshall smiled at him from under his nest of tangled, puffy brown hair. “I'm honored.”

“Forget any dumb memory championship. Just right here. We're gonna need something to do the rest of this summer. Can't just inhale paint fumes the whole time or we'll go nuts. What do you remember. We'll see who can go farther back.”

“I don't know. Let me think.” After thinking, Marshall responded, “Or wait, you go first.”

“All right.” He paused for a moment. He'd been thinking about the last time he'd been with Jessica before he'd broken up with her and how he'd told her he loved her even though he knew he didn't. But he waited for another memory to bubble up. Something a little less personal.

“I remember the first time Jim left,” he said. “Or at least the first time they told us about it. I remember they'd had some argument in the kitchen and she'd said something about getting separated. It was in Kansas City, obviously. It was summer and the linoleum in the kitchen was creamy white like it always was and the windows were open. Rosie was doing something at the sink and I remember it getting quiet at the end and Jim maybe said something like 'Okay, if that's what you want.' The next thing I remember is being in their closet, the one where I put all my things when we shared it later when I was in fifth grade, that big walk-in closet by their bathroom. I was on his left; he was facing the closet wall and crouched on his knees. I think he was wearing a red t-shirt, probably one of those Hanes shirts she used to get us in every color. He was putting his clothes into one of those huge black plastic trash bags. I must have asked him what was happening because he said 'Your mom and I are separating.' It was a big word to me then. I hadn't heard it before in any other context so it sounded foreign and mythical, like the name of a country or some weird company. Separated. I must have been five or six. It was very early.

“When I looked up at him, which I rarely did, looked at him in the face, there were tears in his eyes. He wasn't sobbing or making any noise, just very reserved and quiet tears that stayed in his eyes and didn't drop. I think I remember his skin that was always so tan and leathery and his big black eyebrows. He looked sad, actually sad. It felt so weird because I'd never seen him express much of anything, but especially not sadness. I think he got up pretty quickly and was done and then left the room, I can't ever remember anything else. But I'm always confused a little

by that memory. I never would have thought he'd be sad to leave us. He always had all the power, he's the one who cheated on her. Why would he care? It always made me feel like he did love her or at least loved some part of her or a memory of her or felt a little bad about what had happened, but then it was over and he didn't say anything and was just in his own world. He could have been acting. The tears weren't that strong. Maybe he could make himself cry. You know how she always said he was a professional con. But what did he have to prove to me? He didn't give a shit about what I thought. Which was why it feels like it was real. I didn't think it was an act. That's what was so surprising, I guess. That's the only time I ever saw any strong emotion from him."

"Uh huh. Yeah I guess I never saw him get emotional. But I don't remember him as much as you might. Cause I would've been only about three or four when they first split up, I think."

"Yeah."

"It's weird hearing that stuff from you. Stuff about him. Cause I only ever got it from her, you know? All those stories. I always wondered if they were real or if she exaggerated. Like she always just acts like she was the victim and he was so bad and blames everything on him. So sometimes I wonder if she made anything up or lied about stuff just because that's how she saw things or wanted us to sympathize with her and not him. Cause I know she does that. Like she'll stretch the truth when she's telling a story or focus just on her side of it to get you to agree with her."

"But why would she need to lie?"

"I just mean she wasn't always so nice or innocent. Like I have so many memories of her being mean to Cath or to me. Like I'll never forget how when I was in fifth grade I knew I had sort of oddly shaped legs, the muscles were always so big but not defined so my legs looked blockish and kind of fat, like I had cankles. I was going to Alex Harwood's birthday party and I

was going to wear some cargo shorts. Probably yours, as always. And she told me, 'Marshall, you have got to change. You do not have nice legs, you just do not look good in shorts. You have to wear pants.' Which made me feel even more self-conscious. But she always acts like she did her best when I know she did lots of things badly. Like she was just a bad parent in a lot of ways."

"But she knows that. Don't you think she'd admit that?"

"Maybe to you. But not to me." Marshall's voice rose a bit, as it did when he was arguing or stretched. "She never admits she's wrong to me."

"Well. How should I put this. I might say you're both cut from the same stubborn cloth."

"Easy for you to say. She never threw a book at you did she?"

"What? Oh."

Bobby started remembering what Marshall was talking about. Only a year and a half ago they'd gotten in a loud argument in the dining room after a long day of cleaning and organizing and Rosie was still trying to get Marshall and Cath to do things but Marshall wanted to go to bed and was ignoring her so she threw a book to or at him depending on who was telling it and Marshall threw it back at her and later they got in a fight again and Marshall tried to punch her but Bobby got in front of him and so he told Bobby You aren't my fucking dad and he hit Bobby instead, his fist closed but the contact made with the meat of his palm and close fingers, a little half-hearted slap-punch like he didn't really want to commit but part of him did. And then Marshall ran off and didn't come back that night and never apologized for it, and for a long time Bobby hadn't talked to him except to say he wasn't going to try to be his dad anymore and if he didn't want to apologize for hitting him then they didn't need to talk. And Marshall had never apologized but Bobby had always had a hard time staying mad at anyone, mainly because he was too scared and hated confrontations, so eventually the situation had thawed.

“Anyway,” he said. “Guess we better get going.”

“Yeah,” Marshall said, looking at the clock. “Almost 3:30. Quittin time, as they say.”

Bobby laughed a little, but his stomach felt empty. He knew Marshall knew what he was thinking about, and he knew Marshall knew he knew what Marshall was thinking about, but neither one said anything else. He wanted to tell him he was worried about him, about how thin he was and how stressed he often seemed. He thought of his mom talking about Jimmy and Tommy never talking about anything and just avoiding everything. It felt bad, like he shouldn't keep being silent about stuff, but he just didn't know how to say it, where to even start. He was afraid Marshall would want to start arguing again and wouldn't it be easier to avoid all that drama and not be constantly fighting like them. He could try to address it and fix it, but then he was like Jimmy being a control freak older brother. Or he could say it wasn't his problem and liberate himself from the yoke of that responsibility. From the burden he constantly felt. But then he was like his older sister, who'd left the second she could and left everyone to fend for themselves, leaving no illusion she looked out for herself alone. There had to be something else, some other option. He didn't know what. He didn't know much, but he knew he wouldn't end up like them.

A timer went off on the microwave that was almost never used, Jimmy and Tommy having long ago accepted the microwaves – cancer dogma that had also spooked Rosie out of ever buying one.

“All right, Grandma,” Bobby said. “We can stop soaking your foot now, if you want.”

“Oh we can? That would be great. Thank you Bobby.” She still focused on her word search as he stooped to dry off her foot on a raggedy old bath towel and pulled a flabby sock over her veiny, swollen toes and loosely tied her black rubber Walmart shoe. He rinsed the filmy water and epsom salt grit down the bathroom shower's drain.

Returning to the kitchen, he looked out at the clear sky stretching beyond the front yard and asked, “Grandma, are you gonna want anything for lunch here in a bit?”

“Well, I suppose so, yes. I'll have whatever everyone else is having. I'm not picky.”

He opened the fridge and stared, trying to think of something other than sandwiches or salads. What else did people eat? “That's true, Grandma,” he said. “You're not picky. I bet you never were picky, were you.”

“I suppose not. Yes. I suppose I wasn't, that's right.”

“I'd say you never tried to be too pushy, yeah? You never tried just to get whatever you wanted.”

“Well, sure. Yes. I believe it.”

“And do you think that was a good thing?”

“How do you mean?”

“I mean do you think that's good advice to follow, or if that's a good way to live. Like do you regret that.”

She looked at him blankly for a second, then stared out the window. When she spoke she

was as timid and hesitant as before. “Sometimes I think you need to take what God gives you and be happy with it. You know it? Because you just never know in life. You just never know.” She shook her head as she said this, as if to drive the point home.

“You never know, you know?” Bobby said, smiling.

“That's right,” she said and turned back to her word search.

Rosie came in the side door by the kitchen as he was preparing two salads for himself and Virginia at the counter.

“Hi mom. How's she doing, Bobby?”

“Seems good. Soaked her foot for a while.”

“How's it look?”

“I don't know, still swollen. But it always looks swollen.”

“I know. That's because it is. I keep telling Jimmy we need to take her to the doctor but he doesn't want to.”

“Why's that?”

“Oh, I'll tell...sh, wait, I think I hear him coming,” she whispered.

Sure enough, Jimmy sauntered into the kitchen, gave everybody a smile, said “Virginia, how we feelin today,” snatched a bag of Lays, sat down in the seat Bobby had been using, and munched away.

“Well, I'm all right,” she said. “Just working on this new word search book Rosie got me at the store. It's holiday themed.”

“Ah, well that's nice.”

“Jim, I don't know,” Rosie said. “I'm a little worried about her foot.”

“Well what's wrong with the foot today?”

“It's just the same old thing. We keep soaking it and it stays all swollen. And it's a little purple, especially around this big toe.”

“Well, what, she just got an ingrown toenail? It's no big deal, surely.”

“I don't know what it is, but it's not getting better.”

Jimmy continued chomping on chips and said “Hmm.”

“Jim, you know, I really don't get it. I don't get what the big deal is with taking her to a doctor. It's like you're not even listening when I bring it up. And Tommy's just the same way, but he's like ten times worse.”

“Why, what's Tom doing?”

“He's just a jerk! He's just a bully—”

“Now let's not get too loud, we don't want to get Grandma too worked up.”

“No, Jim,” she said, even if she lowered her voice. “You don't understand. That guy's like havin a warden walking around all day, trying to find something to yell at you about.” She deepened her voice to imitate Tommy's gruff imperative statements. “'Don't go taking mom out in that big van of yours.' 'Don't keep taking her up and down those stairs.' 'Why's mom eating the same foods every other day, you gotta feed her better.'”

“Well, he just wants to make sure Grandma's all right.”

“Jim, if he really cared about those things, he'd do something. He'd offer to let me take his Lexus or your Escalade when I need to take her out. He'd help me by buying some other groceries while I'm with her all day. I mean, and he doesn't want her to go up and down the stairs all the time, but what else am I supposed to do. This house is so big, there's no other option.”

“Now look, I'll talk to him—”

“You can't talk to him, Jim, that's my point, he's a fucking tyrant. And he comes in telling

Bobby not to use the dishwasher so much, when all he's trying to do is help me out by making sure the kitchen's clean. And he's teasin us the other day about how Bobby makes the same food for us all the time, burritos or rice and tofu or rice and lentils. But does he want to do anything to help out? No. He just wants to order people around and bully them and make himself feel like he's in charge of shit."

"Well, if that's the case, then he'll need to change."

"But this stuff won't change, Jim." She was in full argument mode now, arms demonstrative and eyebrows furrowed and cheeks flushed bright. "What do you expect to happen? It's a full-time job taking care of her, and I'm willing to do it, but nobody's helping me out. All you do is expect me to take care of things and Tommy walks around terrorizing us and I don't have any time to pay attention to my kids and I get no time to myself. Bobby is the only one trying to help me most of the time even though he works 8 hours a day during the week, and Tommy's gonna pick on him? Like he's washing the dishes too much? It's just a manipulative game."

"I understand you're upset."

"Bullshit you do, Jim. All right? You don't even want to take mom to the doctor when it's obvious there's something wrong with her foot. And why do you think her foot isn't getting better? Think it has anything to do with her living in this enormous house and having to walk up all those stairs three or four times?"

"I told you why. Tony told Dr. Greiner—"

"I don't give a shit, you're gonna let Tony tell the doctor he could sue him if he takes care of your mom? And even if he did, like it wouldn't be worth it to get her foot checked out? I don't know what is wrong with you."

“But Greiner said—“

“Who cares if he's scared? Just find another doctor.”

The front door closed and everyone seemed to lean back for a second, Rosie looking away and Virginia returning quietly to her crossword puzzle and Jimmy sitting back in his chair, rummaging through the fractured remains of chips. Bobby turned to the sink to rinse off green peppers. When Tommy entered the kitchen, he carried a white plastic bag holding styrofoam takeout containers and seemed more upbeat than usual.

“What are you guys doing,” he asked to no one in particular. “Got Ching Dow lunch.” He put the two containers, clearly for him and Jimmy alone, on the counter and the two started poking at it with silverware.

Bobby absorbed himself in the task of cutting green peppers so as to avoid eye contact with anyone. Eventually Rosie broke the silence.

“Yeah, so, Tom, we were talking about mom's foot before you came in, and it's just getting worse, so I really think we oughtta take her to the doctor.”

“Thought we talked about that,” he said out of the side of a mouth full of rice and chicken.

“Can't do it. Tony's getting all, whatever they say, liturgous.”

“Litigious,” Bobby said.

“Yeah, what I meant to say.”

“Well I really don't think that's a good idea, and you need to know that. I don't think Tony's gonna sue anyone, I think it's all just a bunch of hot air, but I think you're both so scared and just single-minded that you just don't want to end up in a lawsuit or even go out of the house to do anything unless the coast is totally clear. We're not doing anything wrong, at least based on what you told me, so who cares about Rita and Tony callin the cops? They're gonna call the cops,

that's what they do. That's all Rita knows how to do. We need to just forget about that and do what's best for mom."

"Look, Rosie, you've said what you think, and you know what we think, and you just gotta accept that you can't run the show. We're gonna make the decisions, and if you're unhappy then you just need to do, you know, what you wanna do."

"But Jim, it's not possible for me to do what I want to do. What I want is to take care of my mom while she's alive. I'm in your house. I have no money. You have all the power. What else can I do?"

"Is it about money, Rosie? I told you we can start paying you since Tom's got power of attorney."

"No, it doesn't have to do with money, Jim. I'm not gonna take money for taking care of my mom. That's not something I should need to get paid to do."

"But why not? It's only fair. You need all the help you can get."

She put her hands flat together in front of her face, leaning forward on the table and looking out the window. "It's just the principle, Jim. Why would anyone ask for money for taking care of their own mother? It's just not right. And I'm definitely not gonna ask for it when the money's gonna be coming out of her own savings account."

"Well, what if I paid you?"

"That's not the point. The point is I'm not gonna ask for money to take care of my mother, and I'm not okay with you trying to use her savings to pay for her care. That's messed up, and you know it. I don't even know if you're spending it on other things. But I wouldn't be surprised if you are. And that's just sick, if you wanna know what I think."

"All right, well, if that's all you have to say, I guess we should just drop it for now."

“Yeah, whatever you say, Jim. Mom, are you hungry?”

“Oh, sure,” Virginia said. She acted as thought she hadn't heard anything alarming or combative. “I'll have whatever everyone's having.”

Tommy and Jimmy took their takeout containers and moseyed out of the room. Bobby quickly finished the salads and ate them in silence with Virginia as his mother continued staring out the windows, red cheeks becoming paler but still resembling her magenta t-shirt.

When the time came to leave, it came swiftly and suddenly, a quick order from Rosie in the hall one Saturday morning, days after the argument over taking Virginia to the doctor. Bobby quickly corralled the kids and they carried the small reserves of clothes they'd brought and the vacuum Rosie had brought to replace Jimmy's “wimpy” one and food they'd transplanted from their own house while they were, essentially, living at Jimmy's. For half an hour they ferried things out to the van from the side door off the kitchen, a hushed ant line of rushed exodus from the mansion, their stay seemingly over as abruptly as it had started. After Rosie had dropped the kids and the stuff off back at their house, which now felt empty and stale and foreign after having camped out at Jimmy's for two weeks, she and Bobby drove back to Jimmy's to collect any forgotten items and tell Virginia they were leaving.

When they told her, all Virginia could say was, “Well when are you coming back?” and “Why can't you stay?” and “Who's going to take care of me now?”

To which Rosie said gently, rhetorically inching toward the door, “We'll come back, don't worry. We just can't all stay here right now and have all three of us trying to make the decisions. I don't know. Jimmy's going to try to hire someone to be with you, but Tommy will be here until then. So he'll be able to help you out.”

Virginia only replied, “Tommy? Tommy's gonna stay with me?”

“Yeah mom,” Rosie said. “Don't worry.

Virginia sighed sharply and turned away.

When Bobby and Rosie walked back out to the van and drove out of the driveway, Virginia was still at her seat at the kitchen table, looking down at a word search, but her pen lay flat on the table. Jimmy sat facing her, fingers picking at calluses around his thumbnail. He was looking down at a dirt-filled flower pot next to the path leading up to the kitchen's side door, a

pot whose flowers, if it had ever held any, had long since withered and were unlikely to return.

Though it felt much longer, their stay at Jimmy's spanned only a couple weeks. With Rosie having finally admitted she had no control over what happened to her mother and would remain powerless unless someone other than Tommy had her power of attorney, they now set about trying to accomplish the one thing Rosie had wanted the most for at least five years, if not since they moved to Fairfield and been shocked by its smallness upon first driving through its underwhelming streets: moving to California. Bobby and Marshall awoke Monday through Friday at 7 am. Each put on heavy motley jeans stained with paint, wolfed down cereal, grabbed a gallon jug of purified water. Together they rushed to get to the water department in time not only for their official clock-in time of 7:30 but also for the more crucial start of the morning half hour round of Four-Point Pitch. The game, evidently, was as much a part of the job as attending to a water main break or a residential shutoff.

Some mornings, Rosie was still deep in hibernation and they had to skip breakfast and walk briskly the fifteen minutes to the water department offices at the reservoir. But most mornings Rosie was up with them, often with oatmeal ready for breakfast, and the three of them would pile into the Cadillac and ride its smooth, effortless floating down hushed bare streets, too early to do any talking, senses still waking up, eyes a little puffy and skin soft and undisturbed, staring out, the open windows admitting light breezes and coquettish intimations of rain, blankly regarding the blank streets and bare lawns and silent houses, feeling like this was the ungodly hour, few cars on the road (it was summer, so school, the main source of morning traffic, was out of the picture. The shy streets at this hour unknown, inhuman, unalive. Fairfield a ghost town, evacuated and flushed out. Yet there was dew on the sunflecked grass, expectant morning biding its time, the world still asleep and not yet roused to the heat and frenzy and everydayness of itself, a time just to enjoy the temporary cool and glide through.

When the boys returned home around 4:15 each day, sometimes getting picked up by Rosie but more often getting dropped off by a willing compassionate soul at the water department, they asked her what she'd gotten done that day and whether she'd found a house on the internet using Bobby's new laptop. Throughout June she repeatedly found exciting nice houses in Ventura and Camarillo and Los Gatos and San Jose. These were the places that, according to her research, had the best public schools in California. There were many landlords willing and excited to rent to a family with such a high-achieving group of kids and a very polite, clearly hard-working mother whose government housing assistance (Section 8 being its colloquial name) provided guaranteed regular monthly income regardless of Rosie and Co.'s job status.

The bureaucratic complications, however, remained unmoved. Without having given her landlord, Greg, 30 days' notice, the local Section 8 office could not send her paperwork to counties (Santa Clara, Ventura) absorbing Section 8 tenants. But until her paperwork had been sent, she could not realistically begin negotiating with California landlords about moving in, since the houses were in high demand and she would need to be able to move in within 7-10 days. But even if she were ready to move in within 7-10 days, almost all counties in California except San Diego (which Rosie called “retirement country”) required Section 8 tenants to be present at a meeting to verify their and their children's existence. Which meant that once she had given Greg 30 days' notice and Santa Clara and Ventura had received her paperwork, it was already June 12th, which gave her 18 days to find a house and, 7-10 days after that, to be in California and ready to move in. Which itself required either flying (far more costly than driving) or driving out there with the kids packed into the van with as much stuff as possible in the van and anything else to be...brought by a U-Haul? Stored and shipped to them later? Driven there by a friend a couple

weeks later? The logistical problems made it tempting to take only what they absolutely needed and start fresh, even if that meant giving away plenty of usable, valuable, meaningful possessions. And even if such a set of circumstances fell into place, the problem of what to do with 10 years' worth of accumulated toys and puzzles and books and clothes and kitchen supplies and bedding and holiday decorations and schoolwork and childhood memory items loomed as an otherworldly storm of chaos.

After a few weeks of futility and maddening hurry to find a house, Rosie asked Greg to give her another 30 days to move. On the phone, he agreed quickly and dispassionately, as though it meant nothing. But a few days later he showed up at the deck door unannounced and met with Rosie at the dining room table and told her he wanted to sell the house, it was just too much to keep going through this every summer, thinking she'd move and trying to find another renter before getting a defeated call from Rosie and launching into another year of extending their lease before it came time for Rosie to try to move again. Rosie took it in stride, saying she understood. It was all a little extreme, she admitted that, and she was set to move this time, so he should go ahead and try to find a buyer, it was a great house, and thanks for understanding.

After Greg left, she seemed more determined than ever to move, and she began making plans for a yard sale to relieve themselves of most of their possessions while still getting some money for them. With Bobby and Marshall working 40 hours a week, Cath working at the animal shelter, Anna working part time at the public library, and Philip requiring constant shuttling to and from Babe Ruth baseball practice and games and then All-Stars practice and games and tournaments, the only person available to help Rosie during the day was Benny, who despite his interest in moving to California usually found himself eating Charleston Chews and playing Super Mario Sunshine and reading in his room most of the time. By the time the rest of

the kids got home, they were tired and hungry and found it hard to muster interest in anything beyond showering and relaxing. For a while, Rosie shouldered the task herself, making little price tags and organizing the mountain of clutter in the front entryway room so that it could be easily arranged in the front yard and working as much as her schedule allowed. She avoided asking the kids for much. It was, of course, their money that would be funding much of the move, what with more and more of her own student loans going toward paying for the back Alliant bill and the baseball gloves and new shoes for the kids and long overdue shorts for herself and the numerous other necessities that sprang up.

Like Friday afternoon turning seemingly instantaneously into Sunday night, July 1st soon became July 14th, then 17th, then 21st. The yard sale still waited to happen. Most of their stuff was ready and organized, Rosie's methodical work had paid off, but she was fixated on holding the sale on a Saturday. They kept missing Saturdays due to baseball games or staying up too late on Friday and sleeping in and, if it was already 2 PM by the time everyone had awoken and eaten and was ready to help, it seemed hard to justify going to the work of attempting the herculean task that day instead of just waiting one more week until the next Saturday. Even if they had managed to have the sale, Rosie's luck finding eligible and desirable houses in California had dried up, though this was largely due to her constant commitment to preparing for the sale. That, as she kept telling the kids, was “the only thing I'm worrying about right now, I'm not getting rid of all this shit and not getting any money for it, that would just be stupid.” It was impossible for her to look at a room full of board games and puzzles, coloring books and Spacemakers full of colored pencils, crayons, markers, Sharpies, pencil sharpeners, index cards, watercolor sets, paintbrushes, and pencils and pens, the product of 10 years' worth of new school supply lists every August, of wrapping paper and uninflated giant party balloons, of used books and blank

cds, Little League trophies and toy castles and toy cars and inflatable plastic chairs and playing cards and Playmobile and Polly Pockets and American Girl dolls and Nerf guns and Beanie Babies and basketballs and baseballs and footballs and friendship bracelet sets and toy weaving looms and just leave it behind, simply load it in the van and dump it at the local thrift store where they'd gotten most of it in the first place.

The 25th came. It was the final Saturday before they would need to be gone, no questions asked—Greg had allegedly found a buyer and needed them out of the house August 1. Rosie had everyone up at 9 AM and they spent the day asking Rosie whether a passerby could give them a dollar for this, 50 cents for that. They eventually unloaded not only a sizable chunk of the glut but also found a buyer for their dining room table (only $700 for what had been a $2000 table) and the water trough they'd used as a swimming pool when the kids were little in Kansas City ($20 for what had cost $50). That night, the sky glowed lilac pink and peach as they carried the refuse to the van to haul off and deposit at the front door of the thrift store. For a moment, Bobby thought maybe, now, at the last second but with just enough time to spare, they might find a house and drive off into another brilliant sunset in just a few days to a new life, the one they'd deserved and that would finally come to fruition.

Those crunch-time days, though, slipped by with barely a flutter, consumed by post-sale fatigue and the paralysis of facing such a decisive moment. So on July 31st, while the kids finished the final days of their jobs and Philip had no baseball commitments, Rosie, Philip, and Benny quickly gathered only the most essential things—clothes, valuables, necessary personal documents, toiletries—and when the kids came home, Rosie told them to get anything else they absolutely needed and put in the van. The next day, they rented some storage units out on the west end of town in between the Dexter laundry and Falco aluminum factories and put their beds

and their non-urgent belongings in a shed. They spent the day at the public library using successive hours on the computers by entering each kid's card number until their seven hours were up and Rosie, despite dozens of phone calls to various homeowners listed on the Section 8 site, had been unable to seal a deal on any of them.

That night they slept under a cloudy sky outside, mattresses lying over the uneven gravel outside their storage unit, the sky dark and starless and the air filled with the synthetic industrial smell that emanated from the factories every day and drove down property values all around the northwest corner of town. When they awoke early in the morning to a thunderous clanging coming from the Dexter factory, it was gray and humid and they had hardly slept due to the smell. They stopped at McDonald's and brushed their teeth and washed their faces in the bathroom. They returned to the library but stayed for only a couple hours before Rosie drove them back to the storage unit to discuss the next move.

“We need to face it, I'm not finding a house in California,” she said in the driver's seat, the windows up and the car running so that the AC stayed on. “At least not in the next day or two.”

“So why don't we just find another house in Fairfield,” Marshall asked. “How hard could that be? At least a crappy one, just for a month until there's a better one somewhere.”

“I don't want to turn back,” she said. “Not at this point. We're so close, it just makes sense to try it. If we don't do it now, we never will.”

“That's probably true,” he said. “Is it really worth it, though? I mean, if it's this stressful?”

“Yeah let's just try it,” Anna said softly. “I don't want to stay here.”

“Might as well,” Philip said.

“Got this far, I guess,” Cath said.

“Bobby, what do you think,” Rosie asked.

“I don't know. I mean, yeah, if we've gotten this far, you should try to go to California.” He knew how risky it was, and if he said what he felt most strongly, he'd say just play it safe, it wouldn't be worth the trauma of getting stranded out there just to avoid Fairfield. After all, he'd made it out, and so could they, and they could always try again next year, embarrassing though it was to consider.

“Yeah,” she said. “I mean, if it works, it'll all be worth it.”

“But what would we do until you found a house there?” Marshall asked.

“Well, I didn't want to tell you guys, and I still don't know if we should do it. But I have a key to Grandma's house.”

“Her old one? Or her condo?” Marshall said.

“Her old house, the one we used to go to in the summers.”

“But isn't she selling it?” Bobby asked.

“They're trying, but for now they haven't found anyone.”

“So it's just empty.”

“Yep.”

“And you're thinking we could stay there?”

“Well, for a little, yeah.”

“But isn't that illegal?”

“Well, sort of, maybe. Depends what Tommy and Jimmy would do if they found out. But her neighbors know us, and if we're quiet and don't damage anything, no one will know.”

“Let's do it, then!” Bobby said.

“Yeah?”

“What else are we gonna do?”

“I'm not sleeping here another night, so we better be going there.” Rosie started the van.

“All right. Guess we're doin it.”

“This is crazy.”

They made the same trip they'd made over thirty times in the past ten years, the four hour drive west through Ottumwa and south at Osceola, through the flat green fields past the Iowa-Missouri border, and down I-35 into Liberty and into Kansas City to the house Rosie had grown up in and they'd spent summers cleaning and organizing and emptying as Grandma prepared to sell it upon moving to her condo out near Westport. But Kansas City proved as fruitless, and even more chaotic, than Fairfield had been. It was even harder to get to a library and assemble a temporary supply of food and remain discreet. By the middle of August, Rosie had one house lined up, but she backed out at the last minute because the house was shared with the landlord and she reasoned it would be better to find their own house in Fairfield than to live under some unknown person's thumb in Oxnard. The kids responded to this latest setback with rolled eyes and disbelieving cries. They became even less cooperative than they'd been in the past, having resigned to returning to Fairfield one way or another. The start of school was only a week away. Bobby's motivation, too, had waned. After a few days of working defiantly to find another house, Rosie gave up and began calling realty offices in Fairfield. She found a small three-bedroom on Adams, only blocks from their old house. Bobby had booked his flight to Philadelphia out of Kansas City once they'd arrived at the beginning of the month, but they had to move into the Fairfield house within three days or the landlord said he'd rent it to another inquiring family. So they made the same trip again back to Fairfield. When they arrived, they crowded into the new house, which was humid and had low ceilings and only one full bathroom. Their old house

seemed a distant, unimaginable luxury.

On the day of his flight Rosie and Bobby got into the Cadillac at 6 in the morning, trying to get to Kansas City by 10 for a flight at 11:30. The kids had said they'd get up in the morning but none of them were awake at 6. He decided that letting them sleep was the best going-away present he could give them, considering. As he and his mother drove down Highway 34, he sat silent in the front seat. Fairfield's main strip flew by him. He tried to remember every detail as he left, every shop and restaurant and tree he'd looked at so many times without seeing. He thought about his grandmother and what would happen to her. He would feel no surprise if Rosie told him within a month that she'd started going back to Jimmy's to visit her. And he would feel no surprise when he came back in the winter to find this town, this weird nothing town in the middle of nowhere, the same as it was now and the same as he'd always known it, and his family the same weird family not doing what it should or going where it wanted. But it was the same thing he'd known, the same thing he'd lived and, in a certain dull way he was only beginning to be able to entertain, love, this place and this family and this life that held everything, for better and worse. The home of so many of his memories. For better and worse. Simply where he was, there and then. And wherever and whatever he would be in the future. There were so many things he could worry about. So many mistake from the summer and his whole life he could regret. So many disappointments he could stew over. So much he could hold onto and not let go.

As the car descended the hill by Fesler's and went over the next hill and into the west, beyond the place and people he did not know how to leave, he let go. Miraculously, he relaxed. No insight had been reached. In fact, it all seemed as incomprehensible as ever. But for once, he felt all right with that. He felt the world slide by him outside the car window, and he felt like now he could let everything else slide, too. All his worry, all those crises, all those ruts out of which

he'd been so sure he and his family would never rise. It was kind of funny. 18 years full of so much worry. About everything. It suddenly felt so distant. Just let it slide.

"Is there something on your mind?" his mother asked.

"You know what, no." He felt dumbly relaxed, open.

"Come on. What are you thinking?"

He smiled a bit and shrugged. "I don't know."

To let go and see where you end up. It had all been so crazy and complex. It had all started with this complexity he could never explain, and that would never go away. But he was still here. Following his nose. Bumbling about. Not dead. All he could ask for. Alive, here, now. Each moment a blessing. To realize that, at each moment of his life. To be ok with not knowing, not having the past or the future. Each time new, but not exempt from past or future. Refocused, moving between the two, always releasing, opening up. And not afraid of that past returning or of worries about the future rising up. That's all he could ask for. Each moment a chance to respond to that distension, and to keep responding. Bouncing back, that's all there is. Letting go and being here, wherever here is. Wherever he was, here, now.

"Ok. Well, what *were* you thinking?" his mother asked as they drove west through silent land, sky behind them growing lighter, dull glow rising, the world as quiet as a secret.

"I forget."