ALSO BY SCOTT LASSER

Battle Creek
All I Could Get
The Year That Follows

A NOVEL

Scott Lasser

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For my mother
and in memory of
Fred M. Ginsberg

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What did I know, what did I know
Of love’s austere and lonely offices?

—ROBERT HAYDEN, Those Winter Sundays
Prologue
He heads toward Central Park, the sky still dark but activity picking up on the ground. To walk down a New York street as night tips to day is to understand the world on the move. By Lexington he pauses while a skinny kid tosses bundles of newspapers from the back of a delivery truck, its chassis on a tilt, two wheels parked on the sidewalk. At Fifth Avenue Kyle waits. When the traffic clears he jogs across, against the light, not stopping when he reaches the other side but running up the park’s entrance road as he does every workday, which, for him, is roughly two hundred and thirty days a year. The rest are weekends, national and bank holidays (on which the bond market is closed, thank God), and three or four weeks of vacation. He runs on these days, too, just a little later, when the sun is up. Movement keeps him sane.

He glides into the flow of joggers, bikers, Rollerbladers, walkers, pushers of baby strollers, and other fanatics who have come this early morning to enjoy the city’s approximation of nature. He misses the wide lawns and verdant trees of his youth, but to enjoy such green he’d have to buy a home in the country, and he doesn’t want to own anything that isn’t easily portable, without much effort of ownership. He rents his apartment, cars when he needs one, even drink glasses the one time he threw a cocktail party. He likes it this way, unencumbered and free.

At least for now.

He works his way north on the East Side, passing runners and walkers and even a few bikers—not as fast as he used to be but still not bad. He crosses Seventy-second Street, the back of the Met, skirts east of the reservoir, the birds audible now, a glowing ribbon of orange light visible above the buildings. He wanted to go in early today, but he wasn’t able to pull himself from bed till quarter to five, so now it looks as if he won’t get to work till seven, the normal time. He could cut his run short, but this is a sacrifice he’s not willing to make.

It is a day of planned meals. He has dinner with Cat. He and Caputo have a nine o’clock breakfast, and he’s taking a Columbia MBA to lunch. It’s the nature of his job always to be recruiting, a necessity in an industry that grinds up bodies like a war. Replacements are always needed. That he’s endured past forty is something of an anomaly, the sure sign of a survivor.

He runs, his mind still a riot from last week’s news. Siobhan has a baby boy, three months. The math is not difficult, the child conceived a year ago, about the time he and Siobhan split up. But a child? Would she keep that a secret? Could she? He still might not know anything had McHugh not mentioned it. It was exactly a week ago, the Tuesday after Labor Day. Kyle was talking on the phone to McHugh, setting up today’s breakfast, when he heard a shout go up in the background. He asked McHugh what was going on.

“Oh, nothing,” the man said. “One of my brokers just got back from maternity leave.”

“You let women work in that place?” Kyle said, his way of asking. A bond brokerage was a testosterone pit, just like Kyle’s trading floor, but without all the fancy educations. Only a couple of women worked for McHugh, all young enough to bear children.

“This one, anyway. Beautiful. Figured guys would use her just to have an excuse to talk to her. I should have known that sooner or later one would knock her up. Siobhan Boyle. You know her?”

“I’ve met her,” Kyle admitted. It seemed implausible that he hadn’t. In truth everyone knew Siobhan, and so they kept their affair quiet. It was the Wall Street way.

“Then you know what I’m talking about,” McHugh said.

“What did she have, a boy or girl?”

“A little Irish lad. Not that I know if the father is Irish. Neither does anyone else. Siobhan’s not saying.”

“Embarrassed?”

“I can only assume that she thinks so highly of the guy that she doesn’t want him around.”

Kyle hung up the phone and knew he had a son. It was possible another man was involved, but he thought it
unlikely, and a career in the financial markets had taught him not to bet on the unlikely outcome. There was no profit in it. A son. This was not part of the plan—at least not yet—and now he had to figure out what to do. He let a week go by, knowing that Cat would be in town. He wanted to hear what his sister had to say. This was, perhaps, the one area where she could help. Otherwise, it was Cat who usually needed the helping.

Last month, for the first time, Cat called and asked for money. Kyle wasn’t surprised. No job or man had ever suited her especially well. Cat has sold houses, insurance, and, lately, mortgages. Kyle can’t quite figure his sister out. On the one hand, he thinks she is too smart not to be doing better, especially in the boom years that have likely just passed. On the other, Kyle sees why she has trouble. It resides in a deficiency of self, a lack of confidence. Last evening, just before dinner, Kyle heard Cat on her cell phone all but apologize to a customer for asking him to buy. How this contrasts with what Kyle sees everyday, salesmen—and saleswomen—jamming bonds into the portfolios of sophisticated managers who should know better, billions of dollars’ worth, and all borne on a conspiratorial tone that is really nothing but bravado.

And so now Cat needs money. She’s supporting a son, with little help from the boy’s father, and apparently the brokering of mortgages is no gravy train. Cat lives where she and Kyle grew up, Detroit, and Kyle finds this a little sad, as though his sister can’t imagine or manage more. She wanted $5,000. Kyle sent her eleven, the maximum tax-free gift he could make. She called to thank him. Kyle was looking out his office window, down to the green fields of Stuyvesant High, where a couple of kids were messing around with a football in the August heat. Kyle was vaguely aware that she was thanking him. Then she asked, “But what are you doing?”

“Giving you money,” Kyle said. “Like you asked.”
“Only asked for five.”
“So?” Kyle said.
She took a deep breath. “I don’t know when I can pay you back.”
“It’s a gift.”
“No.”
“Yes,” Kyle said. “I owe it to you. I think I must owe you twenty years of birthday presents.”
“You did kinda just leave,” Cat said.
“I grew up. It’s what one does.”
“I didn’t leave,” she said.
“You left me in a tree once,” he responded, reminding her of the one time she’d really let him down. It was a low blow, but she had actually managed to make him feel guilty. He got an idea. “Look, why don’t you come out for a visit? September’s a great time of year. Whadda ya say?”

From the hesitation in Cat’s voice, Kyle knew it was the money, and so Kyle paid for everything, which was a $500 plane ticket and a car out to LaGuardia and back. She flew in last night, in the midst of torrential thunderstorms. Her flight was stranded on the tarmac for an hour, the lightning flashing like a bombardment. When Cat finally made it to baggage claim she seemed tired, and older than the two years she had on him. She was always the big sister, tall and knowing. She had looked out for him, cooked for him after their mother died, taught him how to dress and a thing or two about girls. Back then she’d had long, dark hair, but she wore it shorter now. Waiting by the baggage carousel as she came down the steps, Kyle could see that something was missing, a loss of light in those dark eyes that had always made her seem young and girlish.

Tonight they will go to dinner. This is the month their mother died, and they plan to eat and drink in her honor. It seems right that they do, though Kyle wonders now, as he approaches the southern end of the park, if they should just let it go. The time he’s been alive after his mother’s death is now ten years longer than what came before it, and what’s coming will push her memory back, perhaps beyond, a distant horizon. There’s no resolution with their mother, still no good way to deal with her. He has tried not to remember her final year, but it haunts him still. Kyle knew melancholy had set in her, he saw it every day, but she was his mother, he was a kid, and so he told himself that everything would be okay and that parents could take care of themselves. He’d seen her on the day she died, knew she was in some sort of trouble, and maybe he could have rescued her. But he didn’t. He was scared. When Cat finally acted, dragging him along, it was too late. Cat couldn’t save her, but Kyle has never forgotten that she
tried. He wishes he could get that day back, another chance to get it right. Archer, his mentor on the trading floor, retired now to Florida, always used to tell him that the important thing was to trade so that you can come back tomorrow. But what if you don’t?

Last night the car from LaGuardia dropped them at Kyle’s building. Cat left her bag inside his door and Kyle fetched two umbrellas from his front closet, where he had over a dozen, bought during various New York rainstorms when he’d been unprepared, or received at some golf outing in Westchester County or out on Long Island. Still, there was no avoiding the rain. It fell so hard the drops bounced off the pavement and soaked Kyle’s pants almost to the knee on a mere two-block walk down Third Avenue to the little pub where he likes to drink and have an appetizer on nights when he doesn’t have a dinner and doesn’t want to go home. He has two bedrooms—more than he needs—twenty-three floors above the street, but for him the city is really his living room, the place he likes to stretch out.

“So,” Cat said when they were ensconced at the bar, waiting for a table. “You like this place, huh?”

“It’s not bad. Cold beer, a full bar, good food, and a nice place to eat it. Warm in the winter, cool in the summer. What else could you want?” Kyle caught his reflection in the mirror behind the bar, and his sister’s. Well, she was older, yes, there were crow’s-feet about her eyes, the skin was perhaps a little loose on her neck, but she was still a good-looking woman, if a bit resigned. He wondered if she was like so many of the women he knew, wanting a man and always unhappy with what they found.

“No,” she said. “I mean New York. All the buildings and concrete.”

“I like the constant activity. I miss the trees, nature, seeing stars in the night sky. Birdsong. Remember how we’d get up in the morning when we were kids and hear the birds? You don’t get that here.”

“I remember the birds,” Cat said. “And I’m getting plenty of nature right now. My feet are soaked.”

“You’ll dry. You want a drink?”

“Just one.”

“I didn’t ask if you wanted two.”

“I allow myself one drink a day,” she said.

Kyle was surprised by this. He hadn’t known she had a problem, and said so.

“Oh, the drinking wasn’t really a problem, it just wasn’t a solution, either. I like the one-drink regimen. Gives me something to look forward to, both the drink and the stopping, the sense of control that comes from it. Discipline. That’s what I need, I think.”

“I drink as much as I like.”

“And you get up and run every morning at what? Five? Anything you decide to do, it gets done. For a while it used to piss me off. Now I admire it.”

“It’s just me,” Kyle said.

Cat raised her hand, then grabbed Kyle’s shoulder. “I know, little bro, I know. Look, I just gotta say, thanks for the money. I’m gonna pay you back.”

“I told you, I don’t want it back.”

“So what?” Cat said. “I want to pay it.”

Kyle waited till he finished his steak to break the news. “I think I’m a father,” he said, a ridiculous line if he’d ever heard one. Cat put down her fork and wiped her lips, leaving a pinkish smudge on the white napkin. She asked Kyle to repeat what he’d said. He explained.

“What’s her name?” Cat asked.

“Siobhan.”

“What kind of name is that?”

“Irish. Not so uncommon here.”

“Never met a Siobhan in Motown,” Cat said.
“Well, she’s from Babylon.”

“Babylon? Is that a joke?”

“It’s on the Island,” Kyle explained.

“You’ve called her?”

“Not yet.”

“You will,” Cat insisted.

“Yeah.”

“And you’re waiting for what?” Here was the old tone, prodding him and making fun at the same time. She cocked her head, as if literally trying to get her mind around the situation.

“Advice,” Kyle said.

“Tell me about her,” Cat said. “She’s, no doubt, an attractive woman.”

Kyle nodded, and felt the blood rush to his face. It was like being back in high school and having Cat check out his girls. He was too enamored of looks, she always said.

“I didn’t see her photo in the apartment, not that you gave me much of a chance to look around.”

“There are a few, in a drawer.”

“Nice,” Cat said.

Kyle thought of their mother, how when their father moved out she went through all her photos and cut him out. Even the wedding pictures got sliced in half. Kyle wondered what Siobhan had done with the pictures of him. Not in a drawer, he hoped. He thought of her small apartment in Brooklyn, and then of her. There was a lot to like about Siobhan. She didn’t have his education or his job, but she could match him for wit and smarts. Their affair had been a lot of fun, and very passionate. She had eyes somewhere between hazel and gray, and when she looked at him he had to catch himself, as if just by her stare she could throw him off balance. She wanted kids, wanted them with him, and told him so. That changed everything. Suddenly, she scared the hell out of him.

“You gonna talk to me?” Cat asked.

“I don’t know how to be a father,” Kyle said. “I always figured I’d be one, but never saw the hurry. Dad always used to say to wait till I’m forty. And I remember watching him fathering, dealing with us. I’m not so sure he was having a good time.”

“It’s not always fun being a parent,” Cat said. “I don’t think it’s supposed to be. But you could do better than I have.”

Yes, Kyle thought, Cat has made a mess, but she knows things, probably more than she realizes. How to change a diaper, what food to buy. Car seats, formula, strollers, day care, vitamins, vaccinations, pediatricians. Somewhere in that mess there had to be wisdom. Kyle looked at his sister. “You wanna give me any advice?”

Cat waited a moment, then leaned forward. “I can tell you that a child changes your life completely. You might as well call it a different life. I also know that very soon, with every breath that little boy takes, he’ll be wanting to know who his father is. I think you need to call this Siobhan woman and work something out.”

Kyle had come to this conclusion, but it was still good to hear it from his sister.

“Promise me you’ll call this woman,” Cat said. Something in her voice made Kyle sit up.

“I promise. What’s up with you?”

“I just need to know you’re really going to do it. Men often don’t follow through on things.”

“Consider it done. I’ll call her at work tomorrow.”

“Where does she work?”

“Right across the street from me, in the Trade Center.”

“Call her.”

Kyle watched as Cat sipped what was left of her wine, which she’d been carefully nursing the whole meal. He spied her hand on the glass, noticed that she was still biting her nails. She glanced to the side, her lips pursed. Something was eating at his sister, something other than money.

“Connor with his dad?” he asked, to break the silence.

“Yep. I keep telling myself it’s a good thing. I know it’s important that he spend time with his father, but I still see it as four days of learning bad habits.”
“How’s the little guy doing?”
“He’s good. Really good.”
“I want to come and visit him,” Kyle said.
“Listen to you.”
“I mean it. I’m going to make some changes.”

Showered and dressed, Kyle makes his way to the usual corner where he’ll catch a cab downtown with some of the other Wall Street stiffs. They’ll all read the Journal, a morning ritual Kyle has dispensed with. Having been on the trading floor the day before, he knows what’s going to be in the Journal. For a while he tried the Post or the Daily News, but felt everyone reading over his shoulder, so now he takes the Times, and he’s left alone.

What a glorious day, he thinks, looking up past the building tops to the sky, a rich and deep blue. He can feel the air on his face, the skin raw from having just shaved, the air for once not humid, but dry and refreshing. God, he thinks, I’ve got to start spending more time outside.

There were five glorious years for the stock market, but that is over now, and as a bond guy Kyle feels he’s in a pretty good place. Money is already flowing to bonds, the stock market feels weak, and early October, that season of intermittent panic, is only three weeks away. He decides to count the Octobers. Maybe he’ll do four more, hang around for the bonus paid in February—he’ll be forty-five by then—and call it a career. Go outside more, get serious about one girl at one time. Or, maybe, he’ll be with Siobhan. Have a son. Sleep six hours a night. Visit his father. All the stuff the markets don’t allow for.

In his office—"You ever gonna put anything on your walls?” Caputo asked him last week—he grabs a cup of coffee, checks the LIBOR fixings and the treasury market, then thinks about calling Siobhan. No, he should wait till the market closes and get her at five-thirty and see if she’ll have dinner with him tomorrow at the little Middle Eastern place she likes on Thirteenth. He can have Cat come by later to meet her. Instead, he calls Maclean in London. Maclean is American, an Annapolis grad, the kind of thing that would be important to Kyle’s father and, oddly, is to Kyle. There’s a connection, as if here is a man Kyle understands. They talk every day. A couple of times a year Maclean comes to the States and he and Kyle go out for drinks, but something is always off. Sitting next to Maclean isn’t the same as talking to him.

Maclean has a story of how one of their salesmen took out a NatWest portfolio manager, who got so drunk that the salesman, a rugby player, carried the manager into his flat, where the salesman couldn’t help but notice all the furniture had been removed save one ratty old chair, on which was a note from the manager’s wife, explaining why she’d left with the kids. “Infidelity, alcohol, absence,” says Maclean. “The trifecta.” The salesman left the manager passed out in the chair but took his keys, in order to return the next morning to help him shave, shower, and get to work. The salesman told Maclean, “The firm spent over two hundred quid on the bugger. The least he could do was go to work and sling a few bonds around.”

“He’ll go far,” Kyle says, meaning the salesman.
“If his liver holds out,” Maclean answers.
“Anything happening?”
“Naw. Nervous but quiet. Stocks trade like shit, you ask me.”

Such, Kyle thinks, is the nature of stocks. They make you nervous. Even two years ago, when they were rocketing upward during the five best years for stocks in the history of the universe, there’d been a feeling of unease. At least, Kyle had felt it. Companies that didn’t make money were naming professional football stadiums. Ah, he thinks, the madness of crowds. These nervous times suit him better. Never a rah-rah guy, Kyle dislikes rah-rah markets. He was always a better range trader than a momentum guy, making money in small bits, winning slowly, over the long haul.

Kyle feels Caputo before he hears him ask, “You ready?” It’s easy to feel Caputo, all that nervous energy and hyperalertness, a squirrel always looking for the hawk.

“It’s not even eight-thirty,” Kyle says.
“Let’s walk outside; it’s a beautiful day.”

An interesting comment from Caputo. It’s possible to reach the Trade Center without going out, but Kyle hates
the rabbit-warren passages and tunnels. He and Caputo walk out to Vesey, cross the West Side Highway, then climb
the steps that lead to the courtyard. There’s something different about Caputo here, with the sun shining on his black
curls, the light on his face. Kyle realizes he’s worked with Caputo for four years and has never seen him in natural
daylight.

“What do you think of these buildings?” Kyle asks.

“Big.”

“Fucking ugly, you ask me.”


This, Kyle thinks, might be an admirable quality, the ability only to think about money. It’s why Kyle has brought
Caputo along, to drill down to the money. They are meeting McHugh and his boss, who have an electronic trading
platform. Caputo’s idea is that the firm should get it for free in exchange for moving bonds through it, ignoring that
the business plan for the product must have included a charge for the service. “Let ’em charge the other guys,”
Caputo said in the strategy meeting. Kyle couldn’t argue. Besides, these Web guys seemed to like giving things
away.

Kyle wishes his job had more meaning for him, but at this point it’s only money, which he remembers liking more
when he had less of it. There must be something he could do that would feel important. Of course, nothing would
pay more, and if capitalism puts such a high price on what he does, he must be missing its import. He and Caputo
switch elevators and he thinks of Siobhan. Maybe after breakfast he’ll go back with McHugh and visit her floor,
maybe ask her to dinner. At the very least he’ll get a look at her. He always liked doing that.

Right here they should be passing her floor. There’s a slight shimmy in the elevator, or maybe he’s feeling his life
shift. He knows he shouldn’t wait any longer; he should make his move now. He could form a business with his
sister. Cat was once a star student, a tall, beautiful, popular girl. Kyle remembers how he quietly looked up to her
and envied her success. He’d like to do that again. Reconnect with his own flesh and blood. And go see about
Siobhan and that little boy.

In the end, he knows this: Cat is the one person he trusts.

It’s very quiet in the elevator, just a slight sway and whirr as they rise, and Kyle can feel Caputo, who abhors

Kyle looks at his watch, a Piaget, impossibly thin, like so many expensive things. “A quarter to,” he says. “Plenty
of time.”
I’m dead, Sam thinks. Simple as that.

For months they’d been warned of kamikaze attacks and, initially, nothing happened. Then one day he ran down from the bridge, heard the batteries open fire and the whine of an approaching plane. He saw it, recognized the charcoal silhouette against the milky sky. A Zero. It came in low, its wings toggling through the antiaircraft blasts till it veered and disappeared behind the starboard railing.

He wakes and looks about, at the bare walls of his bedroom, then grabs a fistful of sheet and takes a moment to get his bearings. A dream. The dream. The same damn dream these fifty-seven years, the memory burned so deep that most nights his mind can’t avoid it. Always he wakes terrified, but comforted, too. There’s the terror, but it’s the same terror.

Sam sits up, playing out the history, a memory now, a waking dream and just as real. He came to on a hospital ship. He learned that the Japanese pilot missed his destroyer but crashed into the sea close enough to shake the ship like a bath toy. Twelve men went overboard; five were rescued. Sam stayed on deck, but cracked two vertebrae. For eleven weeks he lay paralyzed. I’m dead, he thought again. Back home, in a VA hospital in Detroit, the doctors fused the two vertebrae together, and most of the rest. Six days after the operation, he regained feeling. In that moment, when he realized that the world would come back to him, he felt dizzy, weightless, not a person at all. Life now seemed a surprise, an unopened gift. Soon he could walk, but with limitations; his back was rigid as a two-by-four, his neck so stiff that he could only look straight ahead. For this the navy would send him a small monthly disability check. How odd, Sam thought. One moment you’re dead, the next you have income for life.

He will see the rabbi in two hours, so he shaves, a two-part process, first with the cream and blade, then, once his face has had a chance to dry, with the electric razor, which makes that odd hum when it finds a patch of whiskers he missed with the blade. He’s seen old men who shave themselves badly, leaving sloppy patches of gray stubble, signs of incompetence or—even worse—apathy. It’s the little things that matter now, the small acts of defiance that bring dignity in the face of all the deterioration. He has decided that if there’s any meaning to life, it’s to be found in the daily struggles.

Two squirrels are bickering outside his window, making a racket that could be mistaken for birds. Daily struggles. They know it, too.

He dresses in a dark suit, funereal as fits the occasion, and slips his dog tags into his pants pocket. He likes the feeling of them there, like loose change; if he ever drops over dead, they’ll know exactly who he is.

His son soon will have been dead for one year, and Sam wants to recognize this, as per the Jewish tradition. He has no others. That Kyle has been taken from him, that he simply disappeared—this is something that no father should endure. He understands now the look his own father gave him when Sam shipped off to war, and also why he looked away when Sam came back, paralyzed, weighing 126 pounds. The suffering of a child is horrible; of one’s own it is unthinkable. And so Sam has turned to his faith, though he doubts he has ever truly believed, even when he lay in that hospital bed and didn’t know if he would move again, or again almost fifty years later when they cut his chest open. Faith has always eluded him. The rituals of faith, though, may still prove useful.

He drives to the temple, navigating his Lincoln down the bright streets, at one point catching a glimpse of the denim-colored Pacific. Midweek there are but a few cars in the temple’s lot, just the old sedans and econo-boxes of those who work in religion—at least the Jewish religion. Inside, the air is still, the lighting dim. There are pictures on the wall of an old temple in Brooklyn, displaced here to California, like the Dodgers. Down the hall he sees light and heads for it.

The rabbi is a tall man with coarse black hair, thick dark eyebrows, glasses to match. Gauss. “Like the
mathematician,” Sam said on the phone, to which the rabbi replied, “Exactly.” Sam took it as a good sign. The real Gauss was perhaps the most brilliant man of his time, maybe of all time, and Sam respects anyone who has heard his name, unusual now in this era of good-looks idolatry and the worship of anyone who can shout into a microphone and call it music. Sam sits before Rabbi Gauss’s heavy wooden desk, looking at his bookshelves and photos. He is struck with the same thought he had the last time he met a rabbi: how is it that such a learned man can have faith? It’s a mystery to Sam, and yet here he is.

“So, Mr. Miller,” says Rabbi Gauss. “You want to recognize your son’s yahrzeit.”

“Exactly.”

“Have you been to our temple before?”

“No.”

“How long have you lived in Santa Barbara?”

“About fifteen years,” Sam says.

“Have you been to any temple, or, should I say, when was the last time?”

Sam thinks about this. “Nixon was president.”

The rabbi, bless him, is amused. “Nixon? So at least thirty years,” he says.

“My mother died back then, of heart failure. My father, too.” Sam’s eye catches a shaft of light coming in the window, dust dancing in its beam.

“So now you have lost a son, and you are back.”

“Guilty as charged, Rabbi. You know, I look at your books and think, I could love Judaism, were it not for the religion. I’ll be honest, I never feel less Jewish than when I’m in a temple. The Hebrew prayers, the responsive reading, even the idea of God. I struggle with it all. My father, who really only spoke Yiddish well, he used to take me to temple on Yom Kippur, when I was a boy, this was in the twenties, and when he’d had enough of the service, we’d go up the street to a coffee shop and have ham and cheese sandwiches. Ham and cheese: he thought this was one of the great things about America.”

It occurs to Sam that his story might be offensive to a rabbi. This one doesn’t look offended; there’s something to be said for the young. “The point is,” Sam says, “he still went to temple. He found something of value there.”

“Tell me about your son,” the rabbi says.

“A fascinating young man. Very smart and, what do they say nowadays, intense. He worked on Wall Street. On the morning of September eleventh he had a meeting in the north tower. He went in and was never heard from again.”

The rabbi takes off his glasses to rub his eyes, which are surprisingly blue.

“For a time I hoped against hope. There was no body. I sat no shivah, held no funeral, but after a time I had to face the truth.”

The rabbi nods, puts his glasses back on.

“Most of the people who are important to me are dead,” Sam says. “And soon, I will be, too. Till then I want to remember the dead. I wish I’d done it all along; it’s as close as I can get to bringing them back. And I want to bring my daughter out to teach her how to do this. I’ve taught her nothing about death, but her mother is dead, her brother is dead. Soon, her father will be dead, and she will be alone. This may be the one thing left I can teach her that will do her some good.”

“Young children’s mother?”

“Dead, in 1975.”

“She was Jewish?” asks the rabbi.

“No.”

“So your children are not really Jewish.”

“Do they have to be?”

“But not at all,” says Rabbi Gauss. “But you are. I will make you a deal. I will read your son’s name on the yahrzeit, a son who was not Jewish. You will attend High Holy Day services this year.”

“To feel less Jewish,” Sam says.

“Maybe you won’t.”
“You are a hopeful man, Rabbi.”
“Of course,” the rabbi says. “It’s my business.”

Sam drives home beneath the milky sky, happy with the outcome. He needs to call Cat, never an easy thing. If Sam were like everyone else, he’d have a cell phone, but he has resisted this convenience—if it is that. Always to be in contact seems more a curse than a blessing, and besides, the buttons on those phones are small and difficult to operate.

Every year things get a little more difficult, the indignities a little greater. He is eighty, with a replaced hip, a triple bypass, a system pumped so full of this and that medication that he can’t say anymore what they are all for, knows only that he’s still breathing. Sometimes he wants to stop people on the street and say, “I was a young man once, full of vim and vigor. I won a war, founded a family, made a small and unlikely fortune. I know things.” Of course, they’d think he was crazy.

Once home, settled into his reading chair—he has discovered large-print books, both a blessing and another indignity—he calls Cat. She answers on the first ring, and this makes him smile, to hear her voice, to picture her, his beautiful daughter.

“Making any money?” he asks.
“Not really,” she says, after a pause. They haven’t spoken for several months. Sam would call more if he didn’t always feel that he was bothering her.
“Why not?” he asks.
“I’m not much of a salesman, I think.”
“Maddening, isn’t it?” he says.
“What?”
“The salesmen always make the money. No geniuses, most of them. Goodman was like that. Not an exceptionally bright man, but he had the big house and the fleet of luxury cars and the vacations to Bermuda because he could put his arm around you and get you to buy something. He had that quality. For some reason, you never wanted to let him down.”
“Where is he now?” Cat asks.
“Dead.”
“How’s Connor?” Sam asks.
“He growing up. But he still draws me pictures to show me how much he loves me.”
Sam remembers that Cat did the same thing for him. She would leave those pictures on his dresser, where every night he would dump his keys and money clip when he came home from work. He wishes he’d kept those drawings, but he was never good at saving. He decides now to get to the point, and mentions that Kyle’s yahrzeit will soon be here. “I’d like you to come visit,” he says. “I know you don’t want to. I promise, it’s the last thing I will ever ask of you. Please. When someone dies, you’re supposed to mourn for the year that follows, then you light a candle for the dead, say his name at services, and move on.”
“You want me to come two thousand miles to light a candle and hear Kyle’s name read in a church?” she asks.
“A temple. In a temple. It’s a Jewish ritual.”
“I’ll handle the technicalities,” Sam says. “Can you bring Connor?”
“So, coming wasn’t the last thing you were going to ask.”
“Cat, I’m an old man. Can you bring him?”
A pause. “Michael is supposed to have Connor that weekend. I’ll have to work it out.”
“I’ll call that man,” Sam offers. He can’t say the name.
“You know,” Cat says, “Mom died in September.”
“She did, at the end of the month.” He remembers that day, how it changed things, how things spinning one way suddenly spun another.
“Can we do all this for her, too?” Cat asks.
Oy, Sam thinks, another trip to the Rabbi. “When the time comes,” he says.
“I’ll think about it,” she allows, which, right now, gives him reason for hope.
Cat settles into her office, kicks off her pumps, feels the cool of the carpet under her feet. It's not much of an office, just a cubicle, six-foot high partitions of gray felt, thumbtacked pictures of Connor, also a poster, courtesy of American Dream, Inc., about the joys of home ownership, and a photo of Cat and Kyle when they were teenagers, found in Kyle's drawer. Cat remembers this picture being taken by their mother with the Polaroid she used for her real estate listings. Cat logs on to her Dell, and then the New York Times Web site. She doesn't read the headlines, doesn't want to know the news; instead, she clicks on the link to “Portraits of Grief,” the compilation of little one-computer-page obits of those who died on September 11. Her brother’s appeared about two months ago—a reporter had called her and done a nice job—but it’s not her brother she’s after. It’s Siobhan.

Under her keyboard Cat keeps two photos of this woman, taken from Kyle’s drawer, the same drawer that contained the Polaroid. Cat’s idea is that Siobhan might also appear in “Portraits of Grief.” Cat knows almost nothing about her, only her first name, her likeness, that she worked in the towers, and that she might have been—or maybe even is—the mother of Kyle’s child.

Today there is grief for two maintenance men, an insurance salesman, a dishwasher, a bond trader, and a hair stylist who happened to be visiting her brother, the bond trader (like Kyle, in the wrong place at the wrong time), but no Siobhan.

Eleven months. For eleven months Cat has been trying to find the boy. Many times she’s wanted to give up, told herself that she doesn’t even know if the child is Kyle’s, that she may be searching for the son of someone else. Still, she can’t stop. Part of it is normal human curiosity, a simple desire to find a lost child, but part of it is personal, her own unfinished business.

Later, much later, after a day of calling prospects who don’t want to borrow, or those who do but can’t qualify, after searching again for Siobhan and then using the Internet to look for an old boyfriend, after six calls and messages left to Michael to make sure he will pick up Connor from day camp—as Michael requested, though he has done so in the past and then forgotten to show up—Sherri appears at the opening of Cat’s cubicle.

“Hey, Cat,” she says. “Snap out of it.” Sherri is a top producer, does a couple of loans a week, a young and single woman who has nevertheless befriended Cat, either unable to see Cat’s failings or wanting to feel good about herself because of them. She’s standing now by Cat’s desk in navy slacks and a laundered white blouse that looks too crisp for so late in the afternoon. Cat tries to remember if she was wearing the same blouse this morning. “You want to get a drink after work?” Sherri asks. “Like now?”

“Gonna work out.”

“I’m talking a drink here. I’ll buy.”

“You closed the whale,” Cat says.

Sherri smiles, bouncing a little on her toes. Cat wonders who came up with the idea that Asians are reserved. Sherri has been working on a loan so large that Cat can only guess at its size: five million. She’s heard conjecture in the office as high as twenty, but she doubts this. What property in suburban Detroit would require so much money?

“You’re buying dinner,” Cat says.

“I knew you’d come around.”

“After I work out.”

Cat works out every day now, either after work at her club when Michael has Connor, or in the early mornings, cell phone in her pocket as she runs laps around her apartment building, running up and sticking her head in the apartment every ten minutes to make sure the boy is still sleeping. Darkness, sleet, rain, the frigid predawn winter air of Michigan—nothing stops her.

She’s lost nine pounds since last September, and she likes how she feels, more like the girl she was, but this is just a fringe benefit of the regimen. What really matters is the discipline, the every-day-without-fail nature of the effort.
For the first time since college, she feels she might get control of her life.

She finds a parking space behind the restaurant, stands and stretches her arms above her head. It’s a warm and humid night, but cooling, a hint of autumn in the air as the light fades. Here, in this parking lot, in one of Detroit’s more prosperous suburbs, there are Mercedes and Volvos, BMWs and Acuras sprinkled among the Lincolns and Fords, Cadillacs and Chrysler 300s. How different from what Cat knew growing up, when it was almost a crime, certainly an act of apostasy, to drive a foreign nameplate. Her father, who worked for Ford, considered even a Chevrolet a foreign car. Cat spots Sherri’s sedan, a Lexus of deep gold, knows it by its vanity plate: RE-FL.

Cat loves going to restaurants after exercising, her hair still damp underneath, the feeling of fatigue in her legs, yet with the muscles somehow refreshed. The bar is dark, its walls English racing green, dotted by small prints of successful racehorses, long-dead animals that won, say, the Irish Sweepstakes of 1913. There is the smell of meat and the tinkling din of a place where drinkers go. It is a bar for men, and for women like Sherri, who want to be successful in business.

Sherri sits at the end of the bar, beneath a flat-screen TV playing the Tiger game, chatting up two guys. Cat thinks they were both once handsome, especially the one to the left, with his wide, symmetrical face and high cheekbones, but years of drinking and smoking—that’s what he’s doing now—have softened him around the edges. Men are supposed to age better than women, but Cat supposes this depends on the man. They are silly creatures, men, in their own ways as driven by vanity as women, but with that odd flavor of male ego. Still, they can be appealing. Perhaps it is just their size. Michael is a big man. Even now, when she sees him, she sometimes forgets what she knows and for an instant finds herself attracted.

Sherri sees Cat, and motions her over. Cat wishes the men weren’t there, but she catches herself. She thinks of her friend Tonya’s rule: always make an effort. Always. Smile, stand up straight, shoulders back like a cadet, wear makeup, put your best foot forward. You never know, Tonya says. Cat thinks you often do know—and Tonya is no paragon of relationship health—but sometimes Cat suspects Tonya is right. She is a bit like the volleyball coach Cat had in junior high. Mr. Benson. A great coach, not that he could play the game himself.

Cat draws up the corners of her mouth into what she hopes is an impish smile, squeezes together her shoulder blades, and approaches the bar, eyes on Sherri. Everything about Sherri, her posture, the thin arm on the bar, suggests she is totally at home. Like Cat, she grew up a couple of miles from here, but her father is Japanese, retired now from one of the car companies.

Toyota, Cat thinks. Sherri’s mother is American. The story, according to Sherri, is that the father wanted to retire back in Japan, and so the mother sent him off; she now lives in Miami. Cat can feel the eyes of the men on her, and she is careful not to look at them, worried it might unnerve her.

“Catwoman!” Sherri shouts. No one calls her this. “You all buffed and puffed?”

“Can’t you tell?” Cat says.

Sherri introduces the men, Bruce and David. They are older than Cat thought, perhaps as old as Cat. David is the handsome one. Up close Cat can see that his hair, thick and dark, is flecked with gray. Bruce, who is balding, has cut it very short. Cat is impressed that Sherri knows their names, but then, Sherri knows everyone’s name. Never forgets one, and so her customers keep coming back. Cat wonders, Is it really that simple? Do we just want to be remembered?

Fifteen minutes later they are at the table, having left the men at the bar, which Sherri handled so deftly that Cat wonders if they’ve realized yet that Sherri isn’t coming back. Sherri collapses into her chair, makes a show of putting her napkin on her lap, and looks at Cat. “Ah, Cat. Life’s good, eh?”

“Sure,” Cat says, hearing in Sherri’s voice that life perhaps is not so good. This is the night of Sherri’s biggest deal, and only Cat is at the table. Of course, if the roles were reversed, it would still be a small crowd. Tonya. Maybe her friend Elise, whom she hasn’t seen in close to a year. Maybe Sherri. Maybe Cat wouldn’t even bother. She’d just go home, wish she could call her brother. God, she thinks, I need a different career.

“You know, Cat, you should be doing deals like this.”

“I should.”

“The thing is,” Sherri says, “now what do I do?”
“How ’bout another one?”
“What for?”
“The money?”
“It’s not about the money,” Sherri says.
“What is it about?”
“I have no idea.”

They order salmon, Sherri a bottle of white wine, an expensive one, Cat guesses, judging from the way the waiter nervously presents it. Cat decides that tonight she will allow herself a second drink, in Sherri’s honor. She remembers coming here with her father and Kyle the year her mother died, their old fallback. This was how the old man adapted, buying dinner in restaurants, hiring a woman, Carmen, to do the laundry and clean the house. He got Cat up in the morning—never an easy thing then—and made sure she was out the door with Kyle on time. It was the year Cat learned to cook, write a check, eat peas off a fork, all of it learned from her father. It took years, she realized, to understand what you got from your parents, and what you didn’t.

“Do you know,” Cat asks, “was your father in the war?”
“What war?”
“World War Two.”
“He was too young, I think,” Sherri says. “I had an uncle, my father’s brother, who died in it, I guess. Fighting on the wrong side, you know.”
“My father wants me to go visit him,” Cat says. She still hasn’t told him about Kyle’s son—if there even is one. She hasn’t told anyone.
“So go,” Sherri says.

Later, the waitress arrives with the salmon plates, sets them down, then pulls the wine from the ice bucket and adds it to both glasses. Cat takes in the smell of the fish, fragrant with lemon. Sherri opens her arms to acknowledge the spread, and this prompts Cat to raise her glass in a toast. “I still can’t believe you landed the whale. Here’s to you.”

They drink. “How’s Connor?” Sherri asks. It’s the foolproof question. No mother ever minds talking about her child.

“Good. You ever going to have one?”
“I need a man for that, right?”
“It’s one school of thought.”
“I want one, but not right now,” Sherri says. “I mean, I’m supposed to want one, right?”
Cat almost tells her about Siobhan and the boy, but she pulls back.
“What is it?” Sherri asks.
“I’m not sure I’m cut out for this business. I’m floundering. I should have gone to law school.”
“Law school? You gotta be kidding me.”
“No, I loved those constitutional law classes I took as an undergrad.”
“So, why didn’t you go?”
“Young and lazy and stupid. Then, older, wiser, and pregnant. And so now I’m in mortgages.”
“It’s just sales.”
“Exactly.”
“Sales,” Sherri says. “It’s seduction, you know. You gotta show desire and indifference at the same time. You want it, but you don’t need it. Stick with me. I could teach you to sell.”
“I might be a special case.”
“Ah, Catwoman, I’m sure you are.”
Sam walks, smelling the ocean, hearing its rhythm, the bay creamy white, covered in mist. He walks every day without fail. Never much of an athlete, he nevertheless cannot live without exercise. Mind and body, that’s the idea. He’s eighty. I have to keep moving, he thinks, or I’ll be dead.

He makes a cup of instant coffee after the walk. He could do better, but he needs only one cup. He dresses and heads into town for a doctor appointment. He’s been short of breath, and every once in a while he feels a little chest pain. It could be heartburn, not that he ever eats that much. Today they will fill him full of dye, and take a look. It’s amazing, really, what they can do, though he wonders if it’s all for the good. When he was young, old people got sick and died, at home, with their families. They didn’t fear being alone, or the indignity of a hospital.

The cardiologist’s name is Cunningham. He’s a nice enough man, though perhaps a little too smiley for Sam’s taste. Sam admits to a prejudice against overly cheerful people; he assumes they are idiots. He especially prefers dour professionals, but they are rare in California, and sometimes Sam wonders how this state handles all the feigned happiness. The tests take the better part of the morning, and then the nurse comes in and tells Sam to dress. Dr. Cunningham wants to see him in his office. This is a first. Usually there’s a chat while Sam sits shirtless on the examining room table. He didn’t know Cunningham had an office.

It’s a bright room, with bookshelves painted white and lined with medical tomes. Cunningham is a product of the California public university system—Irvine undergrad, Davis Medical School—but he comes well recommended and Sam is not inclined to travel to Minnesota or Cleveland just for reputation. Sam sits and soon Cunningham appears, a dark-haired man with crow’s-feet, although otherwise he looks as young as all the lawyers and policemen and rabbis and business-suited lunch-goers whom Sam notices when he ventures from his apartment. Judging from the Roman numeral date on Cunningham’s degree from Irvine, Sam figures he’s about forty.

“How you feeling, Sam?”

“Good.”

“But short of breath?”

“Doctor, at my age I’m thankful for any breath at all.”

“There are four arteries that carry blood to the heart. Two of yours are, for all practical purposes, clogged. The other two are mostly so. Sam, you need a bypass. Right away.”

“A bypass. Another one?” He’s had one, way back, at Henry Ford Hospital. Ford. The name meant something once.


“No.”

“Then we could do it today.”

“Cut my chest open?” says Sam.

“That’s how we get in there. It’s a serious operation, yes, but also quite common. You’re in fine health otherwise.”

“I’m old. Can’t you do something else? Put in one of those things?”

“A stent? No, not for you. Besides, you’ve got valve issues, too. You need the operation.”

“I’m too old.”

“Your age is not the risk that your arteries are. This surgery is indicated in patients your age with your health characteristics. I can guarantee you that if we do nothing, then you will die of some event—a heart attack, most likely—and that it won’t be that long from now.”

Well, Sam thinks, there it is. Damned either way. He says, “I won’t survive surgery.”

“You won’t survive if you don’t have it. This is truly a case of now or never.”

“Never, then.”
“Sam, you will die.”

“You, too,” Sam says, feeling comfort in the words. He wants to live, and so sets himself against the operation, against the heart doctor. This takes will; it is a great temptation to give your life to a doctor. He can reconsider once Cat and Connor are gone. Missing their visit is impossible.

“Yes, yes, all of us eventually,” Cunningham is saying. “My job is to push out that date. I can’t just let you walk out of my office, drive a car. Your condition is serious.”

“I’m not having surgery. I’d rather just get the days I’m going to get.”

“Today may be the last day you get,” says the doctor.

“Believe it or not, I actually considered that possibility this morning. I consider it every morning.”

“Sam—”

“In two weeks my daughter is coming to visit. My surviving child. And my grandson. My boy was killed on September eleventh. I want to be able to see my daughter and mourn the child who isn’t here. If you put me under the knife, I’ll likely still be in the hospital then, if I’m alive at all. Bedridden certainly. I’d rather risk it.”

Cunningham measures his words carefully. “Let’s say you get lucky, and you’re alive in two weeks. You see your daughter and grandson. Then will you have the surgery?”

“We’ll see.”

“Say yes, Sam.”

“Don’t get me wrong, Dr. Cunningham, I want to live. I survived World War Two, kamikazes buzzing all around. One hit my ship. It’s why I can’t move my head from side to side. I thought I died that day. I woke up and was paralyzed. I thought I died again. Now here we are. It’s almost fifty-seven years since I discovered that I’d get a life. Fifty-seven years. More than I probably deserve, I know, but all I’m asking for, right now, is two more weeks.”

“I don’t know that you’re going to get them.”

Sam correctly predicted that the doctor was going to say this. They have their procedures, their miracle cures, their technology, and they want to use all of it. But Sam won’t miss the yahrzeit. He cannot let Cat slide through his fingers one more time. He had plenty of chances, but the last was really after Ann died. He tried to teach her things, and he did, but he only let her so close. She made him nervous. She was a girl, almost a woman, his daughter, and he didn’t feel equipped. What does a man know, really, that can help a young girl? For over twenty years she drifted off. Clearly, this is his last chance with her.

“Sam?” the doctor says.

“No.”

“No what?” asks the doctor.

“No surgery. I’ll take my chances.”

“They’re lousy, your chances. Doomed.”

“So they are,” Sam says. He stands and heads for the door. He knows he’s being reckless, but there is no other way. He hurries out, before he changes his mind.
She can’t dream. She wakes, knows from the darkness it’s still quite early, not yet six, perhaps not yet five. Before Connor she dreamed, remembered long and detailed dreams of travels and adventures, of worlds happy enough that she woke hopeful. Even after her mother died, her dreams stayed bright. She’d wake and remember shopping trips with her mother that never happened in real life, her mother buying her shoes that made her feet look smaller, with a heel that lifted her almost to six feet, the height of men. In her dream her mother loved the shoes and Cat wore them out of the store, laughing, walking arm in arm with the woman, a wish fulfillment if there ever was one.

She lies in bed, moving her legs between the sheets, seeking the cool spots. She would like not to wake alone. She hasn’t seen Chris for three months. She met him last winter and they dated sporadically till the spring, when she slept with him, slept with him because he was young and cute, because he wanted her and she had desire of her own. After that, unlike everything her mother taught her in high school, she couldn’t get rid of him. She liked him, but at thirty-four he was childless, without a real career, still young and unformed. He couldn’t conceive of the responsibilities of parenthood, and when she realized she didn’t want him to meet Connor she knew he had to go. It fit her basic philosophy for the men she dated: namely, that if she could live without them, then she probably should.

She gets up and walks to the bathroom, her balance a little off, as it is every morning, as if she must wait for the world to right itself. She wraps herself in a robe and walks to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. The stove clock reads 6:14. Forty-five minutes to drink coffee and read the paper till she has to wake Connor and get him ready for his day. She logs on to the computer, searches again for Siobhan, and again she comes up empty. She has tried to access public records, but these yield no pictures and it is a spotty endeavor, something no doubt done better by the *Times*. She has also called two private investigators, but with just a first name and a photo, they made her no promises. And they were ridiculously expensive. So she decided to do it herself. She will, she realizes, look forever. It reminds her of being a kid, when she would always check the pay phones for returned change, back when there were pay phones, even though she never found so much as a penny. She knows looking for Siobhan is likely a lost cause, and yet she believes in it, too. Not everything has to make sense.

At seven she goes to Connor’s room and sits on the edge of his bed. He sleeps hot. She runs her hand lightly through his golden hair, which is matted and damp with sweat. She can feel the heat when her hand is an inch away. “Hey, my angel boy,” she says, now rubbing the worn powder blue cotton of his pajamas, “it’s time to get up.” He turns away, then back, his eyes open.

“Okay, Mommy,” he says, and he swings his bare feet out of the bed and onto the floor, stands, and looks back at her as though he’s been awake for hours. The perfect little man. “Let’s go,” he says.

“What am I?” she says. “Chopped liver?” This is her father’s line. Connor runs the three steps back to her and hugs her. Then she lets him go.

By the time she reaches the kitchen Connor is already sitting at the counter, his feet dangling off the stool, the television at the counter’s end tuned to Nickelodeon and an early-morning episode of *SpongeBob SquarePants*. There was a time when Cat would not have allowed this, but then her father reminded her that he’d let her watch television when she was young. “In the navy,” he said, “they taught me never to give an unnecessary order.” And so she relented. It was one of many things she has relented on. Not to use the microwave, for instance. She’d read somewhere it did no good, but this morning she cooks two pieces of bacon in it, then five frozen silver-dollar pancakes, Connor’s favorite, food he prefers over anything she can make from scratch. To get the pancakes he’d bargained away labor—he’d promised to make his bed—and Cat has to admit he does a good job of keeping up his end of the deal. Whenever Cat looks at his bedspearad, arranged into a childish approximation of order, she thinks that her philosophy of parenting really can be boiled down to one concept: bribery.

She sets the food in front of her son and he turns to it, then smiles at her.

“I love you so much, Mommy,” he says.

“I love you,” she says.

“No, really,” he says. “I love you so much.”

“I love you so much,” she repeats. He smiles at her, satisfied, and takes a bite of bacon. Remember this, she tells
herself. Remember when your boy looked at you and said he loved you. Remember it because otherwise you might let it slip, it was possible to forget anything, even love and dreams. She wonders where Kyle’s boy is right now, if someone is making him breakfast, and who it is.

She dresses Connor for day camp, that summer refuge for the children of single mothers and dual-income families, and then has him watch TV at the counter while she takes ten minutes to put on a little eyeliner and then some concealer to lighten the darkness that now never seems to leave the underside of her eyes. She thinks of Kyle and that time when Cat was eight or nine and she lured Kyle into a McIntosh tree in their backyard and left him there. Kyle was too scared to climb down. Cat thought this hilarious. She left him, went into the house, and turned on the TV. It was almost an hour before her mother appeared, face bright with fury, a smudge of red lipstick on her teeth.

“How could you?” she demanded. “How could you?”

Cat actually had no idea what she was talking about.

“He’s your brother!” she yelled.

Later that night Cat lay in her bed, dreading her mother’s visit, worried she wouldn’t come, or worse, that she would but that she wouldn’t care anymore. It was cruel to leave Kyle in the tree, Cat saw that now, and she didn’t understand how she could have done it. Why? she asked herself. Why did I?

But her mother came in as she always did. She asked Cat if she was ready for sleep. Cat lied, said she was. Her mother kissed her forehead, then turned out the light. Cat could still make her out in the darkness, and smell her, a combination of perfume and sweat and fatigue from a long day. She said, “Your father and I gave you Kyle, and gave you to him, so that you two would always have each other. So that your whole lives there’d be someone there for you. Him for you and you for him. Stick with him and you’ll never be alone.”

But she hadn’t stuck. If Kyle got the same speech, he hadn’t acted on it. They saw each other once or twice a year, and the years went by, and there came a point when Cat realized she didn’t really know Kyle, and that if she were going to, she’d have to make the effort. Because blood mattered. Their mother was right. Cat knew she was.

And so last year she’d flown to New York, on Kyle’s dime, yes, but the truth was that was the only way it was going to happen, what with her crappy production and all the things that Connor needed and Michael’s pathetic child support, which was often late, and the rent on her little apartment. Here she was, extolling home ownership, and she didn’t even own her own home. Kyle was a big deal now, escaped to New York for almost twenty years. He lived high above Third Avenue, in a neat two-bedroom that seemed rarely used, as if he were afraid to unpack. Kyle worked hard, apparently had a fair amount of money, and could do as he pleased when he wasn’t working, which was almost never. Cat remembers going out for drinks with Kyle the last night of his life and, after dropping the bomb about his son, Kyle said he was thinking of retiring by forty-five. Forty-five! Cat will be that next year, and she has nothing, and will have nothing, except what comes to her from Kyle, whenever the courts in New York get around to helping settle up the estate. An estate is not, however, a life, and for this to be settled she will go to California. She knows she must. See her father. Take her son. Make whatever connections are left to be made, while there is still time to make them. And she will find Kyle’s boy, because she needs to find him and because the boy needs to be found.
Sam drives, wondering if knowing that his arteries are clogged will make him live differently. It was foolish to go to the doctor; at Sam’s age it’s like reading the paper, nothing but bad news. A fused back and a fake hip, one bypass already—he’s had enough surgery for a lifetime.

A Conoco station presents itself, and he pulls in, a damn-the-torpedoes idea forming in his head. A great thing about gas stations nowadays is all the things you can buy at them, not that you can get a lick of service on your car. Beer and pop, pretzels and candy, milk and cereal, magazines and T-shirts, baseball caps, cigarettes. Well, maybe you could always buy cigarettes. He stops in a designated parking space—they actually expect people to come here and not buy gas—and hobbles inside. There’s a dark-skinned kid behind the counter, some strain, Sam thinks, of central Asian, one of those places where they hate us, or love us, you can never tell which.

“A pack of Marlboros,” Sam says.

The kid reaches to pull the pack from the rack above his head.

“Make it two,” Sam tells him. “And some matches.”

“Eight thirty-seven.”

“How much?” Sam asks.

The kid repeats it. Since when, Sam wonders, has a pack of cigarettes cost what a steak and a martini once did? He hands over a ten, Hamilton off center, the way they are making money now. He’s read that the government is doing this to foil counterfeiting operations in the Middle East. Everything is changing. Soon money won’t be green.

Outside he sits in his car, puts the windows down, then wrestles with the infernal cellophane till finally he is able to tear it off and tap out a cigarette, the old ritual coming back to him, its motions and rhythms instantly familiar, the movements part of an indelible memory. It is, he thinks, the little personal habits that get one through, as smoking was in the war. He believes he remembers his last cigarette. His destroyer was off Okinawa and came to the aid of a damaged ship, the Bidwell. A kamikaze had hit it and taken out the bridge. The Bidwell was still smoldering, afloat but listing, its future uncertain. The crews set up a system of ropes and pulleys, and then evacuated the injured men from the damaged ship. Men strapped in gurneys hung from ropes above the olive-colored water, the gurneys teetering as they were tugged across the gap. Sam stood at the railing with an enlisted man, Marsten, from Iowa. The injured men kept coming. Marsten asked if they were alive. Sam said they were. The dead were buried at sea. Marsten knew this, had to know it. He pulled out a pack of cigarettes, and offered one to Sam. They stood for a minute, smoking and watching.

“It’s something, sir, isn’t it?” Marsten asked.

“It certainly is.”

Sam was hurt right after that, and when he could move again he didn’t take smoking back up, and then came the surgeon general’s warning. It did not surprise him, this warning. One did not need a lot of common sense to figure out that putting smoke in your body was not a healthy thing. Still, he missed it, missed the ritual of procuring and lighting cigarettes, missed the taste on a cold morning or late on a summer evening. He missed the taste of it mixed with the air of the open ocean. Usually he remembered the war when he smelled cigarette smoke, and maybe this is why it held him so.

He smokes his cigarette and drives to Phyllis’s house. She’s kind and quite pretty for a woman her age (seventy-four, he thinks), and tolerant of his ways, his need for time alone. He has always had this need, but he also misses her and wants to see her. They spend the night together a few times a week, though sometimes less. It has been this way for roughly four years. She is a separate world to him; they go out occasionally, but usually stay in, sitting on her tan leather couch and talking, or watching a movie she has chosen, playing it from the little discs like the ones used nowadays for music. He is thankful for the companionship, both emotional and physical. She kids him about his desire, that he has any at all, and he is thankful for the simple joy of joking, and that she accepts him. I am a lucky man, he thinks, that I should still have this when so much else is lost.

“Sam!” she exclaims when she opens the door. She’s wearing jeans and a T-shirt, like the kids do, a trim woman,
still mindful of her appearance and posture, with blue eyes and long gray hair she lets down only in bed. She steps to
the side, her way of inviting him in.

“I smell tobacco,” she says.

“You got any coffee?” he asks, knowing she does.

In the kitchen he tells her about the doctor visit. He’s sure she’ll rebuke him, with her almost religious belief in
modern medicine and a desire she seems to have to nurse him, something he secretly enjoys. She’ll want him to cut
his chest open. He’s sure of it, but she surprises him.

“You’ve got this far without it,” she says. She puts her hand on his. He looks in her eyes and wishes it were fifty
years ago. She must have been something then. She might have saved him from a bad marriage, from a lifetime of
halting, distrustful relationships with women.

Behind her, he can see her garden. She lives in a house a couple of miles from the ocean, the sunlight now on the
many plants whose names he does not know, old acquaintances nonetheless. He wonders why he never learned the
names of plants. He should know everything by now.

“Sam?” she asks.

“Take me to bed,” he says.

She gives him a look. “What about your heart?”

He taps his chest. “I’m actually feeling pretty good today.”

“You can’t go dying on me. Literally.”

“What a way to go, huh?”

“Like Rockefeller,” she says. He appreciates that she remembers this now-ancient history. She stands and walks
off. He follows, perhaps not as eager as he was as a younger man, but just as hopeful. Odd, he thinks, given his
condition, but he doesn’t fight it. The windows in the bedroom are open, letting in the moist and fragrant air of the
garden. Look at this, he thinks to himself. What a bounty.

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It is the little details of dreams he remembers, and this is the same dream he’s had almost sixty years, the plane
coming at him, the little toggle of the wings among the black puffs of the antiaircraft ordnance, and then he’s awake,
just as it happened once. Back then he was looking at a white ceiling, with a single bulb encased in metal mesh.
There was a curtain. He tried to sit up and found he couldn’t move at all. Still, he felt motion, and it took him several
moments to realize he was at sea.

“What is it?” Phyllis asks.

Ah, he thinks. Here I am. “The war,” he says.

“It would be nice if you could dream about sometime else. Something nice.”

“Like you.”

“That would be a good start,” she says.

She is nestled against him, in the crook of his arm. Another man, he thinks, might take this for granted.

“You smell like cigarettes,” she says.

“I’ve decided to smoke.”

She raises herself up on an elbow, her long hair falling down, a silver waterfall. “Sam, for the love of God.”

“He doesn’t mind. At my age it’s hardly a vice.”

“You learn you need a bypass and your response is to take up smoking?”

“I like smoking. I used to do it. I’m just returning to my old ways.”

She shakes her head at him.

“In old age,” he says, “you give up things, one by one, till there’s little left to give. Smoking, it’s one thing I can
reclaim.”

“It will kill you.”

“Funny,” he says.
“You act as if you have nothing to live for.”

“I don’t think that,” he says. “I was just thinking that I’m a lucky man, having you. Earlier I thought how beautiful your garden is. I like smelling the ocean, and, on clear nights, studying the stars. I have a daughter and a grandson. All things worth living for.”

She shakes her head at him but has decided, it seems, not to respond.

“My daughter is coming to visit,” he tells her.

“Well, maybe this time I’ll get to meet her.”

He knows that tone, hears the accusation in it. He’s never let her meet his children. Early on he got used to keeping the lives of his children separate from the lives of his women, and he’s never let the two come together.

“Well?” he says. “You will. Why not?”

“Four years. We’ve been together four years, and you never let me meet your children. And now one of them is gone.”

“I guess I felt I was protecting them,” Sam says.

“From what?”

He thinks about this. He doesn’t know.

At his home he fixes himself a martini. He is here to shower and grab a change of clothing, then head back to Phyllis’s for dinner. So this is life, he thinks. Back when he worked, such a day would have seemed heaven, and it isn’t bad now. He opens the window of his living room, so that he can hear the ocean and blow smoke outside into the ocean air. A drink and a smoke. Unhealthy vices, perhaps, but he doesn’t want to deny himself. Asceticism, self-denial—these promise future rewards, which all seems a little silly. If he has a regret about his years, it’s that he didn’t enjoy them enough.

The phone rings, but he decides to let it go. Probably a solicitor. He knows he could put his number on a do-not-call list, but he doesn’t, interested in where the people are calling from, the progression from Iowa to Idaho to Ireland to India. He remembers cold mornings as a boy, when his father, who was born in the nineteenth century, would heat bricks in the wood stove in their house and then place them under the seats of the old Model T for the trip to Sam’s cousins, eighteen miles away. This trip took forty-five minutes, providing there was no snow. Now on a sunny afternoon he gets calls from strangers in Bangalore. All in a lifetime. He wishes he could tell his father.

His father never had to think about a bypass in his eighties. He died well short of that, and quickly, a heart attack. He hadn’t known it was coming, but, when it did, it happened very fast, without any waiting to die. This was outside a deli, before lunch. He dropped on the cement sidewalk, was dead by the time the policeman found him. He’d always told his son he came to America because he wanted to live in a place where the streets weren’t mud, and where a man could walk around without fear, and so maybe this was a victory.

Sam marvels at how America is his birthright, and yet fear has driven him. He remembers the first time his ship was fired on. He was on the bridge and issued the general quarters order. Sirens wailed. Men ran. Sam’s captain, Higginbotham, appeared and as Sam explained the situation, the antiaircraft guns opened up. Later Sam realized how scared he had been, but what had frightened him most was what Higginbotham and the other men on the bridge would think of him. He wanted to acquit himself well, feared the loss of respect more than death. He was foolish then, cavalier, young, and unwise. He fears death now. He fears he won’t survive the operation. Perhaps his condition will kill him, but at least the timing won’t be planned. It is better, he thinks, to know how you will die than when.
VI

Another morning and no Siobhan. There are limits to the Internet. For instance, her father is absent. Plenty of Sam Millers, but none is the right one. He’s too old, perhaps, for the Internet age.

It’s Saturday, and Cat will pick up Connor, keep him for the week. Michael said a lot of the right things when they split up, but he was always an indifferent father, and being out of his son’s home has apparently put a lot of the issues of fatherhood out of mind. In many ways she feels it is better this way. She can be there for Connor, and Connor still gets to know his father and spends time with him. For Connor there is no mystery of origin, no sense of being lost.

Michael lives in Birmingham, in a little two-bedroom apartment. Cat remembers the day he moved out of the house, before they sold it because things were always tight and they needed to split the little bit of money locked up in that home. Cat took Connor into Birmingham and soon Michael called her on her cell and said he was out. He was forty then, and it took him less than an hour to pack up his life and move on.

Except, of course, he couldn’t take Connor, seven now, light-haired like his father, and full of life. Cat wonders what the boy understands and decides it can’t be much, not if Cat understands so little herself. Cat thinks the boy knows that he loves his mother and father, which is wisdom, of course, and not always so easy.

Cat’s plan is to fetch Connor and drive right down Woodward to the Detroit Zoo. Why not? Connor loves the zoo. Michael’s apartment lies east of Woodward, in one of the old complexes built in the sixties, refurbished now but with a dated feeling apparent in the cheap brickwork, the crumbling cement of the sidewalks, and the window-mounted air-conditioning units moaning in the morning heat. Cat opens the screen and knocks on the inner door, its set loose, so that it clatters in the jamb.

“Mommy!” Connor shouts. He’s opened the door, excited to see her. Cat reaches down and in that moment when Connor moves full force into her arms, she thinks she understands how things are, that her love for her child is so profound as to require a new word altogether. The word love is inadequate. She once loved Michael, crazy and stupid as that was, but it wasn’t like this. Nothing, ever, could change this. She lifts Connor and hugs him, kisses him on his head, takes in that smell, of youth, of her own flesh and blood. “How’s my boy?” she asks.

“Good.” Connor sits on her arm, back cadet-straight, which allows him to get far enough away from her that they can look at each other.

“You plucked your eyebrows,” the boy says.

“I did. Do you like it?” she manages to ask. She finds his scrutiny, always detailed, unnerving.

Connor rubs his hand over Cat’s eyebrows, touching and smoothing them, rubbing out on one, then the other. “I like them,” he says.

Her arm is on fire with the strain of holding him, and she must put him down. It is then that Cat notices that Michael is there. He’s looking at her, probably wondering what he ever saw in her. She will never forget seeing for the first time. So maybe that’s the answer: looks. And that he pursued her, relentlessly. It was flattering that such a good-looking guy would want her, and then she got pregnant, just like her mother.

Michael wants to know what she’s planning to do, as if he ever has a plan.

“Well,” Cat says. “I thought we’d start with the zoo.”


There’s a bag by the door, packed with Connor’s teddy bear and several books that Cat sent with Connor and that she doubts they cracked open. Probably Michael lay around with Connor and watched television, that constant drone of ESPN, with its scores and updates crawling across the bottom of the screen like stock quotes, like the updates that all the channels used now, ever since the attacks last year, when the networks decided that after such a disaster, what people needed was even more news.

They leave the apartment. Cat hears the screen door slap and she lets out a deep breath. She puts her hands on Connor’s shoulder and thinks, ah, the weekend: two days to spend with my boy and, if I’m lucky, not worry about
Connor loves monkeys. At the chimp exhibit he would, Cat thinks, climb right into the cage, unmoved by the danger, willing to ignore what the scientists say is that very tiny difference in DNA. For most of the day he’s happy and giggling, laughing in the penguin house as the birds swim by the window, waving at the sad polar bear, reaching out to the sleeping lions. Cat is aware that she is always looking for signs of sadness in her son, a habit born of guilt, worried—with good reason, it seems to her—that the failures of her life might be visited on her son.

And what of Kyle’s little boy, somewhere in New York? Is he sad? Does he know to be? He’d be over a year old now, without a father, maybe without a mother, living with grandparents, perhaps. Cat has called the New York police looking for Siobhan. She’s sent e-mails, searched the Web, read “Portraits of Grief” every day since the Times put it out. It would seem that a woman would not be that hard to find, especially if you have her picture, but it hasn’t gone that way.

They eat lunch at a table with an umbrella, which offers relief from the sun but little from the heat, that humid inescapable heat of a southern Michigan summer. Connor is as interested in the food packaging—the cup with its colorful animal design, the paper boat that holds the fries—as he is in the food itself. Cat won’t mind getting back to the apartment, hanging out in some air-conditioning, maybe catching an old movie on television while Connor plays with the new cars Cat has bought him, a surprise waiting at home.

Connor notices another little boy at the table just over Cat’s right shoulder. Cat sees him watching the boy with a studied reverence, the way Connor watches chimps. Cat is often moved by Connor’s awareness of others, of the surprisingly small reservoir of self-interest he seems to have, unlike so many children his age. The new boy has a mop of brown hair, a few freckles, and hazel eyes. His father, Cat notices, is similarly colored, with high cheekbones and a fine jaw. A little thinner and he’d have the face of a clothes model, though right now he’s damp with sweat. He looks up and catches Cat’s eye.

“Cat?” he asks.
“Yes.”
“Cat Miller?”
“My whole life,” she says, the idea of whom she’s looking at coming to her just as he tells her.
“It’s me. Tommy. Tommy Swenson.”

Tommy. She’d been thinking about him just this morning, her old boyfriend, the one she thinks of as getting away. She hasn’t seen him in over twenty years, but that she hasn’t recognized him, even when she was looking right at him, seems impossible. He’s changed, somehow. Her mind is turning thought over thought, memory over memory, images come to her of summer nights and the backseat of her car folded down and its hatchback tipped up, of holding him, of how she had no idea what she had. She wonders, then, if this is one of those moments, here at the zoo, that Tonya tells her to be ready for.

She looks for a wedding band and finds none. He catches her looking, raises an eyebrow, then holds out his hand, strong and masculine fingers, straight, big half moons on the nails. There is, she thinks, something quite intimate about looking at a man’s hands.

They talk, two divorced parents, it turns out. The boys are communicating also, in that little-boy way. They are looking at a toy, a car/rocketship that has both of them mesmerized with its mechanics and technology. The other boy, Tommy’s boy, perhaps older, points out features to Connor’s rapt attention. As Cat talks to Tommy his looks open up to her, and it is not what she remembers from long ago but what is here now, that jaw and his large arms, the brown hair maybe a little thinner now, the fine lines and exquisite wide shape of his mouth. He is, he says, a cardiologist.

“A heart expert,” she says.
“Hardly,” he replies.

She talks about herself, about her child and failed marriage, about her job. “I sell money,” she tells him, “but, believe me, I could be a lot better at it.” He’s thinking of refinancing his home, what with rates so low, and so they talk about this for a while, which is a relief, because on this topic she knows what to say. She also learns of his house in Birmingham, only a few miles from Michael’s apartment, but on a street that is a world away. She is
explaining, God knows why, the difference between LIBOR and one-year T-bill (Sherri taught her this) when he asks, “How’s your brother?”

And so she must explain. He is duly horrified; she admires how perfectly he expresses sympathy, perhaps something he’s had practice at, being a doctor. Expressing sympathy is something she’s never been able to do, even when she’s felt it. He puts his hand lightly on her bare forearm, and with that simple gesture, that light touch, she feels as she did at seventeen. Twenty-seven years disappear, like that.

“You have a brother,” she says, remembering Denny, the little boy who used to spy on them, wearing one of Tommy’s old football jerseys.

“A U.S. attorney, in Chicago. His specialty is bank robberies, but of course now they got him working on money laundering. It’s part of the whole antiterrorist beat.”

“How old is he now?”

Tommy must think about this. The answer is thirty-eight. Tommy’s mother lives in Arizona. His father died five years ago, of cancer. “It wasn’t good,” he says. “So now I’m the only one left in Detroit.”

“I’m still here,” Cat says.

“You were going to be a lawyer,” he remembers.

“It was an idea.”

“Can I see you again?”

“Of course you can,” she says, feeling a little flutter in her stomach. She looks down, at her knees sticking out from beneath her shorts, then at her sandals, noticing suddenly that the polish on her toenails is worn and chipped—How could I go out like this? she asks herself—and then looks up, so maybe he won’t notice. “But what are you asking?” She tucks her feet under the bench.

“I was thinking more like dinner than lunch.”

“I’d like that.” She hands him a business card from her purse. It has her cell phone on it, not that she gets many calls. She writes her home number on the back, then feels self-conscious about it. That third number seems a bit desperate.

“I’m in the phone book,” he offers.

The phone book. She’s been all over the Internet, and all this time all she had to do was look in the phone book. He was there, she thinks, and I never thought to look. She expected him to be far from Detroit, somewhere out in the prosperous part of the Republic. She did call his parents’ house, the old number, which she remembered by heart, adding the new suburban area code. That was when she and Michael finally split, but she’d gotten a different family altogether.

Tommy is standing, cleaning up the trash on the table. The boys are down on the ground, running his son’s toy on the cement. If Cat were a stranger, she’d assume they were brothers.

The good-bye is short. He holds out his hand, they shake, and she feels a little cheated. Still, watching him go, his son trailing behind, she knows what she needs to do. Raise her son. Get the man. Find the boy. Simple.

She and Connor go to the reptile house, as steamy inside as out, but there comes a time when you’ve looked at enough animals, fought off enough heat, and are more tired than you thought. So they drive north to Cat’s little apartment, which she has finally admitted is home.

Later, once she has put Connor to bed, she goes to the phone book, a worn copy she brought with her from the old house. And there Tommy is, living in the open, unusual for a doctor, on a street named Pilgrim, his name appearing one line below his dead father’s. She writes down the number, and the address, and then checks the Web one more time for Siobhan, but she’s still not there.
VII

He must tell her. Forty years is too long to keep a secret, not that it can’t be done. Normally, Sam feels no compulsion to spill out the truth, as so many do. Odd thing, human nature, with its dueling impulses to lie and disgorge. He wonders if Cat is really hurt in not knowing. There is no way for her to look for her lost father, who is truly lost, long dead, buried, if Sam remembers correctly, in a cemetery in Milford. Sam never met the man. Is it fair, really, even to call him a father? Sam raised the girl, provided for her, gave her a brother, and thus ran a long experiment in parental love. He found, as all adoptive parents must, that there is no difference in the love you feel for your children, blood or no blood. When she’s yours, then she is yours, and there’s nothing else to be done about it. Nothing else you should do.

Still, she turned away from him. He could never be sure why. He asked Kyle once, but the boy had no insight into the situation, other than to admit he knew it existed.

It is morning, so he walks toward the water, down the cement path dusted in sand, then struggles across the dry of the beach to the firm, wet part by the water. Another morning and not much to do, the tragedy of old age. He should travel more, he thinks, get another look at the world.

Still restless at midmorning, he drives into town and parks by the pier. He could park on the pier, but it makes him nervous navigating the narrows of that wooden structure with his big car. He knows he’s not what he was, that he can’t afford any accidents. The world has little use for old men with bad backs and clogged arteries. They might take his license away, which would be a kind of paralysis, the kind he faced in forty-five.

He walks onto the pier, among the other pedestrians. No one looks at him. The older you get, he thinks, the less people see you, or even want to see you. He moves past parked cars and restaurants, till he gets to the end, as close to the ocean as he can be. In truth, he has not been on the water in the last fifty-seven years, after almost three years of uninterrupted service. It’s the sharks. Late in 1944 his ship came to the aid of seamen in the water, men bobbing up and down like apples in a barrel, all of them screaming and thrashing, begging to be pulled out. They were fighting off sharks. Sam was in a rescue boat. The noise was deafening, like battle itself, with the screaming and thrashing in the water and the crew blasting pistols in desperate attempts to hold off the sharks. Sam worked beside his enlisted men, all of them as frantic as the sailors they pulled from the water, grown men who sobbed when they landed in the boat. One had his leg eaten away at the knee. As he screamed, blood pooled in the boat; soon he went into shock and bled to death before they got him back to the ship. Sam watched as men in the water were pulled under. He shot at sharks—it was the only time he personally shot at anything, the whole war—but it was no use, the sharks got what they got. After the war he could visit Japan—he even enjoyed it, enjoyed meeting the people—but he could not go in the water, or on it. This is as close as he will go, this wooden pier, in this peaceful bay, where he can look at the water, and smell it, and remember where he’s been.

A young man comes and stands next to him, white forearms resting on the railing. His hair is short, which could mean anything, the kids nowadays wear it every way imaginable, but Sam can see that he’s wearing a small chain around his neck, and there is something pressing against his T-shirt from the inside. Dog tags. Sam knows the look of dog tags. He’s looking out at the water, this kid, and it is that look more than anything else that tells Sam he is a soldier. “Excuse me, son,” Sam says. “Are you in the army?” The kid turns and faces Sam. He doesn’t stand at attention, but it’s close. “United States Marine Corps, sir.”

“You’ve been to war,” Sam says. “Afghanistan.” The kid rests his arms back on the railing, and soon he and Sam are again looking at the ocean, a bright glare on the scalloped water. “Yes, sir. How did you know?”

“I’ve been to war.”

The kid nods. “Which one?”
“The Second World War.”
“Were you army?”
“Navy. Three years on this very ocean.”

They stare at the water, and Sam assumes that’s all that will be said. To say you’ve been there—it’s all that’s needed. But then the kid speaks.

“You must be very proud,” he says.

“Very,” Sam says. It may be, Sam thinks, what I’m most proud of. When Truman sent him that letter, thanking him for his service, he framed it, and it’s still on his wall, the only award he’s ever displayed. He knows that everyone got one of those letters, even soldiers who never left the States, but that isn’t the point. That letter has meaning. There is no way to adequately thank someone who has been in combat. “You’re wearing your dog tags,” he says.

“Yes, sir. A reminder of the guys who are over there. Around here it would be easy, you know, to forget there’s a war on.”

Sam remembers getting his dog tags, two pieces of notched tin with his name and the letter H. H for Hebrew. Every government has its system of branding. He puts his hand in his pants pocket, fingers the tags. They got him through the war, and he goes nowhere without them, though he doesn’t wear them around his neck. He’d be self-conscious about that.

“Your family in Santa Barbara?” Sam asks.
“Carpenteria.”
“What are you doing here?”
“I like it here,” the marine says. “Where there’s money.”
“I know there’s a war on,” Sam tells him.
“I appreciate that,” the marine says. He’s thin, not the burly Hollywood version of a soldier but a slender kid, the skin drawn tight across his cheeks, veins and tendons visible in his neck when he turns his head. “I go back in five days. Do you know that Afghanistan is exactly on the other side of the globe?”
“I used to think that about the South Pacific.”
“Did you see action?” the marine asks.
“Yes. Broke my back, in fact. Off Okinawa.”
The kid turns to him. “Did anyone understand, when you got home?”
“How could they?”
“My best friend was killed by a mine. A Russian mine. It was probably older than he was. What was the point of that?”
“My son was killed on September eleventh. I thought what I did in the war should mean that my children would get more than forty-one years.”
“He was killed in the attacks?”
“Yes,” Sam says.
“You’re the first person I’ve met who lost someone that day,” the marine says.
Sam nods.
“We’ll get those bastards.”
“I hope so,” Sam says.

Standing next to this kid, Sam feels the urge to put his arm around the boy. He remembers when he first heard the news of the 9/11 attacks, early on that Tuesday morning. He knew then, as he knows now, that there would be war. He knew it because he knew his country. For all its technological and economic prowess, for all its art and culture and great universities, for all its odes to the best qualities of the Western enlightenment, America is at heart a warrior nation, much more Sparta than Athens. There will be hell to pay, and skinny kids like this one next to him will be sent to collect.

Sam looks down and sees a pair of dark eyes staring up at him. A seal. He reaches into his pocket and takes out his dog tags. He feels he’s being watched as he removes one of the tags from the chain, and hands it to the kid.

“Here, take this,” Sam says. “I want you to have it.”
“Why?”
“Because I went to war with this tag, and I came home. It got me through, and it’ll get you through. When it’s all over, you bring it back to me.”
“How do I find you?”
“I’m in the phone book,” Sam says.
Sunday afternoon, after a trip to the local park, they return to Cat’s building. It’s square and squat, a bulldog of a structure on the border between Bloomfield Hills and Birmingham, built in the early eighties when money was dear and developers were not inclined to waste exorbitant interest on aesthetic niceties like brick patterns or landscaping. Still, it has central air, and this provides a welcome refuge for Connor and Cat, who sprawl on the living-room carpet. Connor likes to wrestle and he is a boy, and so Cat obliges him, learning as she goes, about boys and herself and maybe something about men, the desire they have to prove themselves, something like the impulse in rams and elk and the other large animals that bang their heads together.

Soon they are rolling toy cars and trucks on the carpet, the vehicles a little gift because she loves him, and even with money so tight she wants to remind him. At the start of the car playing, Cat looks at her watch and then she vows not to look again, but after what she is sure has been an hour she sneaks a peek and finds that only twenty-odd minutes have passed. What’s wrong with me? she wonders. This is my son. She knows she loves Connor, knows it if she knows anything, and so shouldn’t playing cars with him be an enjoyable activity, as enjoyable as would lying on the couch right now, watching some movie from twenty years ago, interesting today for all its anthropological detail—the big collars, the huge feathered hair, the memory of her youth?

She gives it her best shot, mimicking his gurgling engine noises. The cars remind her of the drive home after 9/11. She’d spent a sleepless Tuesday night in Kyle’s apartment, not even bothering with the pretense of going to bed, but dozing now and again while watching CNN. The next day she went to the hospitals, a police station, tried to get to Kyle’s place of work, though she knew it was hopeless. He’d simply disappeared. She called Michael and talked to Connor after he’d gotten home from school—the day before they’d sent the kids home early—and she knew then, hearing her little boy’s voice, that she had to get home. She had to. Yes, she felt she was abandoning her brother, that she’d come all this way, traveled both the miles and time to get back to him, and, perhaps, through him, to herself. But Kyle was gone now, and Connor wasn’t. She needed to get to him.

The airports were closed, but eventually she found a rental car, picked it up Thursday afternoon, and headed west. She made it home in the wee hours of Friday morning. Along the way she passed numerous football fields across western Pennsylvania and Ohio, the lights shining on what must have been Thursday night junior varsity games. She wondered if Connor would play football, as Tommy had, as the boy’s father had, as Kyle hadn’t. She knew most mothers didn’t want their sons to play, that it was a dangerous game, but she hoped Connor would. It seemed a necessary thing that these games were played, that they were played on that one night, nine-thirteen, the Thursday after 9/11, if only so they could be glimpsed from the highway: glowing pools of normalcy.

On that drive home she was finally able to stop crying. She was cried out. She still hoped Kyle would be found, but she also knew better, and so she wished for what seemed possible, which was to get home, hold Connor in her arms, and never let him out of her sight.

Now she decides she’ll give the car game an hour, and she does. Then she reads to Connor Dr. Seuss’s *Yertle the Turtle*, her favorite. She makes Connor a snack—bits of salami, which he loves, and Triscuits—pours a glass of Merlot, then plops down on the couch, and flips through the channels while Connor eats on his knees at the coffee table. She happens on a preseason football game and thinks again of that drive, and of Tommy. He cared about preseason games. What was at stake, he once explained to her, was not the score but who would make the team. And so now, because of him, she takes a moment to watch. It’s the fourth quarter; the players are from the last rounds of the draft, or undrafted free agents, long shots to make their teams. But still Cat senses the intensity of it, the do-or-die nature of the struggles encased in a meaningless game. She wonders at being the mother of a boy, at how ill prepared she must be to teach Connor what he needs to know to be a man.

One of the interesting things about parenthood is how it can bring your own childhood back to you. Cat makes macaroni and cheese from a box, Kraft, and eats it with Connor. Macaroni and cheese? Till Connor it had been twenty-five years since Cat had eaten mac and cheese. Odd what an effective mnemonic device food is, how she can picture her mother plopping it into Kyle’s bowl and then Cat’s own, that world-weary, tired look on her mother’s
face. This was usually on nights when Cat’s father wasn’t home yet; her mother would eat leftovers or nothing at all. It is Sunday night, the end of the weekend. The phone rings, a rare thing.

“Hey,” says a voice. “It’s Tom—Tommy.”
She feels her breath catch. “You sound unsure.”
“No one calls me Tommy anymore.”
“What is it then, Tom?”
“You can call me Tommy. I like it. It makes me feel younger.”
“Well, then. What are you doing?”
“I’m calling to ask you on a date.”
His idea is tomorrow, but she shoots this down. A Tonya rule, for one thing: don’t be available on his first choice. Also, she’ll never find a sitter in time. They settle on Friday, five days hence. He offers to pick her up, but she says she’ll meet him at the restaurant. She doesn’t want him to see how she lives.

With arrangements made, there is a long silence. She almost thanks him for calling, for not leaving her to wonder if he would call, for the kindness of taking away that horrible uncertainty. But she stops herself.

“Is that a football game I hear?” he asks.
“It is,” she admits.
“You’re a fan now?”
“I have a son. I thought I should learn.”
“I’m really looking forward to seeing you, Cat.”
“It’ll be great,” she says, trying to sound nonchalant.
“Friday, then,” he says.
She hangs up the phone and has a feeling that is part memory and yet very much present: she again has Tommy to look forward to.

It is now after eight, the dishes and the pot are cleaned and put away, and she has to rouse Connor from the couch.


Connor says nothing, but Cat can see that he’s tired and not in the mood to move. Together, Cat and Connor collect his prized possessions—a Hot Wheels car, a blue jay feather found outside the apartment, a small rock with a skein of quartz traversing it, the giraffe key chain bought at the zoo, and Brownie, his bear—and head for his room. His favorite thing is to fall asleep in front of the television, now that he’s too big for Cat to pick up and carry to bed. It makes him feel older, he says, to wake up on the couch. Something he no doubt learned from his father.

She has him brush his teeth while she brushes his hair, and then they lie in bed together while she reads a story about a boy with a magic crayon, one of Connor’s old favorites. She reads and wonders what Tommy reads to his son, what lessons his little boy gets. In the middle of her reading she knows Connor is asleep, hears it in his breathing, and so she kisses him on his hot forehead and goes to call the boy’s father.

Michael answers on the second ring, the telltale sounds of a football game in the background. She tells him she wants to take Connor to California over the several days he would normally have the boy.

A whistle blows in the background. She says nothing, something she learned from Sherri. You want to sell something, you’ve got to know when to shut up. Ask for the order, then don’t talk. People will buy just to break the silence.

“Okay,” Michael says. “But he needs some shoes.”

Of course, she says, she will buy him shoes. She’s been meaning to do it anyway. Lord knows Michael never buys the kid anything to wear, save that one Aerosmith T-shirt she suspected he found on sale, the very shirt Connor wants to wear every day, unaware who Aerosmith is, unaware even of his longing to have his father close. Not even Michael can see this, only Cat, who sees it and feels it, and knows there is nothing to be done.

How did she end up with Michael? It is the mystery of her life, the men in it. She always liked boys, and then men, the company of them, the relative simplicity of their interactions that can pass for honesty, and sometimes is. She met Michael in a sports bar (of course) up on Square Lake Road, where she went with two girlfriends on a
Monday night precisely because it was a football night. One of the girlfriends, Rhonda, insisted it was the perfect night to meet guys, who would be there to watch the game and not to meet women. “There’s nothing worse than a guy trying too hard,” Rhonda said. “Plus, the odds will be good.” Sure enough, there were only a handful of women in the place, and at halftime there was a subtle shift in attention, Cat could feel it, and then suddenly she was playing pool with Michael.

Pool. Of all the ridiculous things. But she was weak then, susceptible as any woman to broad shoulders and a strong jaw and what started that night carried on for almost a year, when she decided that she could not spend the rest of her life with him, that the whole idea was ludicrous—he was a carpenter, had two years of college and little ambition—but before she could tell him she found she was pregnant. She was at work at the insurance agency, and she threw up in the plastic trash can that was under her desk. It was the third time that week, some stomach flu, she lied to herself. As long as no one saw her she could be willfully and effectively delusional, but on this morning Rhonda witnessed it, and said, “What are you, pregnant?”

There was briefly a moment of limb-loosening, gut-clenching, sweaty panic, but then she caught her breath, looked at Rhonda, and understood something like the truth. It was as if her whole life were aiming to this point, when it would happen just like this, repeating what had come before. It felt preordained, ever since that afternoon almost twenty years before when her mother sat her down and told her what was what.
Something in the female of the species requires more sleep, which Sam noticed once Kyle went off to college and it was suddenly no big deal to have a woman spend, say, the entirety of a Saturday night in his bed. This morning he rises before the sun, and stands barefoot on the cool stone of Phyllis’s garden walkway. He drinks two cups of coffee, reads the *Los Angeles Times*, and contemplates how he will tell Cat of her origins. Or what Sam knows of them. There are mysteries there.

When the sun is up, Phyllis wakes and makes herself a cup of coffee. He waits for her to take a sip, and then he tells her that Cat is not his biological daughter. “You’re kidding,” she says, her hair still down, her body wrapped in a silk robe of Asian origin. Not Japanese, Sam is fairly sure. “You’ve never told her?”

“No.”

“Why not?”

It’s the obvious question: Cat might well want to know something of her beginning. Sam and Ann had always had an understanding they would tell her when she was old enough; then she was old enough, and yet they didn’t tell her. Silence was easy. Then Ann died, and Kyle, and suddenly Cat doesn’t have a blood relation left on the planet, except for her little boy.

“Maybe it doesn’t matter,” says Sam.

“Only a man could say something like that.”

“We move on,” he says.

“In denial,” Phyllis adds.

“Look, I’m going to tell her.” He feels something in his chest. It could be anything.

“Maybe you should wait.”

“You’re not serious.”

“No,” she says. “I’m not.”

For years Sam studied his children for the differences of biology. With Cat it was always easy to see the influence of another man, physically taller, darker, though perhaps equally somber and quiet. Both of Sam’s children kept their own counsel and thus seemed mature beyond their years. Their size was the biggest difference. Once, when Cat was about fourteen, she and Kyle were in the kitchen. Sam walked in, and on a lark picked up Kyle, grabbing him by his bony ribs and hoisting him, a move that took some effort. Cat, quite unexpectedly, did the same thing to Sam. Now there was an experience, to be suddenly lifted off the ground by your fourteen-year-old daughter who weighed only twenty pounds less than you and was just as tall. Two things occurred to Sam. First, he was reminded that another man was involved; Sam could feel him reaching out, grabbing, reminding him of the secret history. Second, floating there above the tile floor of the kitchen, Sam realized that there had been some change in his authority, in his very essence as a father. Fathers are supposed to pick up their girls, not the other way around. It seemed a long time that he was up in the air. Ann happened by and said, in her sharp voice, “Catherine, put your father down.” And it was done.

Sam came to admire Cat’s size, her height and presence. Kyle, on the other hand, was built like a greyhound. The last year all three were together, Sam took Kyle to Saks to buy a suit for the fall sports banquet. Kyle had outgrown what he’d had; Sam remembered that old suit, a constricting garment Kyle wore to Ann’s funeral, the pants at his ankles, the short sport jacket sleeves, the exposed wrists. Sam thought, He’s really not a boy, anymore. Just as he thought, Cat’s a woman, almost. At Saks Sam discovered that Kyle wore a forty long. This was a size a man wore. There was a moment when Kyle and Cat stood together in front of the three-sided mirror, the reflections of them bouncing endlessly back into the glass. Sam told himself not to forget it, this still shot of his children together, young and strong. Anything could happen, and he had high hopes for them. They were his, equally, and soon they would be gone.
Phyllis believes in walking, and so after a couple of cups of coffee Sam is out in the Santa Barbara hills. He prefers strolling on the beach for its flatness and salty air, for the sky and the light reflected off the water. Phyllis is more concerned with her personal expenditure of energy. Here, on this dusty trail, Sam sweats. She wanted him to stay home, used his heart as the reason, and so he insisted on coming to prove to her he is fit, and to test the gods. She keeps stopping to wait for him, sometimes even retracing her steps, which is yet another special indignity. I fought a war, he thinks. I once stayed awake for two and a half days, and now I can’t keep up with some old lady.

“You need to go back,” she tells him. “So help me God, if you die out here …”

He’s resting by leaning against a tree, a hand on the textured bark. He’s too winded to speak.

“We’re going back,” she says.

He doesn’t protest. The way back is downhill, and surprisingly easy. He follows her, noting the herringbone pattern her small shoes leave in the dust. Ahead, he sees a bench. He says he needs to sit on it. His idea is to smoke a cigarette.

Sitting next to her, catching her in profile, he can almost see how she must have looked as a young woman. Something, he thinks. She must have been something. He is always thinking this, a constant kind of yearning.

“Aren’t you going to offer me one?” she asks, as he taps out a cigarette.

He reminds her she doesn’t smoke.

“What do I have to lose?” she asks.

“A few years, I suppose.”

It turns out she smoked once in her life. It made her feel a little naughty, she says, which she was otherwise not. After her first husband left her—this was in the sixties—she found she didn’t need the cigarettes to feel unconventional. “A man got me to quit,” she says. “I guess if I could quit for him, I could start for you.”

“I didn’t ask you to start,” he says.

“They say it’s important for couples to find things they can do together.”

“I want you to meet my daughter,” he tells her.

“Then I will.”

Through the trees across the trail he can make out a sliver of shining ocean.

“Stick with me,” she says.

I intend to, he thinks, but he doesn’t say it. He’s having a hard time catching his breath, and, for some reason, he’s embarrassed to speak.

Later, afraid to go home, he spends the night with her. Sixty years ago he learned to expect death at any second, and he believed he could face it with calmness and grace. He also remembers lying in the VA hospital and not worrying, just waiting to see what would happen. Now, though, he is afraid. I should have the operation, he thinks. He decides to call the doctor tomorrow and schedule it for September 16, the Monday after Cat leaves.
On Wednesday she e-mails Tonya. Cat hasn’t seen her for six weeks. Tonya lives in Farmington now, has three girls, a husband, a marketing job, and not enough time to get together. When they were teenagers they had nothing but time. Cat wouldn’t trade anything for what she has now—that is, Connor—but she misses those days, too, the simplicity of them, the hope. The friendship. Things haven’t turned out the way she and Tonya planned. Farmington isn’t Birmingham, or Bloomfield. Cat’s apartment isn’t like the old house. It’s as if everyone in her generation has taken a step back.

I have a date with Tommy Swenson, says the e-mail. Tonya calls within ten minutes. Then, on Friday, after Cat has dropped Connor at his father’s—it’s not Michael’s night, but he’s agreed to take his son—she returns to find Tonya waiting for her in the parking lot of her building.

“I couldn’t let you face this alone,” Tonya says.

“You’re planning on coming along? A chaperone?”

“God, no, but I’ll help you get ready.”

Tonya sits on the toilet lid in Cat’s small bathroom while Cat takes a bath. It is a great luxury to lie in a hot bath without having to worry about a small child in the house, to hear the light sloshing of water, to have someone you trust close by.

Tonya is worried about the wrinkles around her eyes. “You don’t have any,” she tells Cat, “but I’m starting to look like I’m eighty years old.” She wants to have her eyes “done.” When they were girls Cat wouldn’t have known what that meant, and now she counsels against it, tells Tonya that she looks fine, that she doesn’t want to end up like Lisa Knight, whom Cat just saw at Kroger: not a wrinkle on her face, but her actual eyes seemed recessed in her head, as if she were staring out through a mask.

“You look great to me,” Cat tells her, the truth, which is to say that she looks the same, same round eyes, same slightly upturned nose, same puckered lips and tiny chin. Tonya’s hair is blonder now—as a teenager it had brownish strands, especially in winter—but hair has always been the most mutable part of her appearance.

“Brian barely looks at me anymore. Familiarity breeds contempt, or something like that.”

“He’s a good guy.”

“Yeah, he’s getting the girls dinner while I’m here. I could hire someone to do that, right?”

Tonya is married to a faithful man who looks after their children, has a good job, does nothing to excess. Cat points this out. “That’s what every woman wants. It’s the dream.”

“Right,” says Tonya.

Out of the bath, Cat stands at the mirror wrapped in a towel, and puts on her face.

“So,” Tonya says, “you gonna tell me what he’s like?”

“Tommy?”

“He’s why I’m here, right?”

They are repeating, Cat realizes, a scene that’s happened dozens of times and a quarter century before: Cat getting ready for Tommy, Tonya coaching, involved and a little envious.

“He’s a man now, calmer, more sure of himself.”

“What’s he look like?” Tonya stands, grabs a lipstick off the sink, tries it on.

“Good,” Cat says. “Thicker, I guess—he’s put on a little weight. Still has most of his hair. He’s a cardiologist.”

“A doctor of the heart.”

“That’s what I said.”

Tonya studies her face. “This color is better for you.” She wipes her lips on a tissue, leaving a reddish smear the color of viscera. “Do you feel like you know him?”

Cat has to think about this. “Not really. Maybe.”
Ten minutes later Tonya is scolding her for her choice of panties and bra. “They don’t match.”

“So what?” Cat asks.

“And the bra’s too plain. What if you sleep with him?”

“I’m not going to sleep with him.”

“What if he wants to?”

“I’m not going to on a first date,” Cat says, a rule she has lived by, mostly.

“First date? You used to sleep with this guy all the time.”

“It’s a first date,” Cat says, but she changes to a bra with black lace. I’ll feel better this way, she tells herself, looking in the mirror. This is for me.

Tonya takes a seat at the end of the bed while Cat goes to her closet, a tiny thing just big enough to walk in. Here, then, are the decisions. She didn’t wake up early enough today, thus she ran a third of her normal time, hardly a run at all, and she’s feeling fat and bloated, and that rules out the jeans she wanted to wear, and the pair she tries makes her feel she’s stuffing herself into them the way a butcher stuffs pork into a sausage. So she tries a third pair—better, but still she can feel herself spilling out the top, and what if he puts his arm around her and feels the fat riding right there, atop her jeans?

“What are you doing in there?” calls Tonya.

Cat tries a skirt but can’t get it to sit right on her hips, then a dress, which is fine except that it makes her look like she’s trying too hard, and besides, it’s sleeveless and her arms aren’t really there, not like she’d like them to be, not like they were before she had Connor.

“Come out here,” Tonya yells.

Cat appears.

“Nice,” Tonya says.

“It looks like I’m trying too hard.”

“He’ll appreciate the effort.”

Cat hasn’t been this stressed about a date since Michael—there haven’t been many, a couple of losers and then Chris, the young guy is how she thinks of him, and now she’s going all the way back to her youth for a date and yet she is just not young, there’s no denying it, a lot of time has passed and extracted its fee.

“What is it?” Tonya asks.

“I was remembering when …”

“When what?”

“I taught Kyle how to kiss a girl.”

“Your brother?”

“I was trying to teach him to be subtle, but strong. What to do with his tongue. Not to be sloppy. There’s nothing grosser than that. No girl wants to feel she’d been through a car wash.”

“Did you have him kiss you?”

“I did.”

Tonya sits up.

“He was too nervous,” Cat says. “It wasn’t good. But he thanked me. He was fifteen.”

“Funny thing,” says Tonya. “I don’t remember him ever saying a word.”

“He hardly did.”

“What about Tommy? How does he kiss?”

“Like a champ,” Cat says.

“And the rest?”

Cat turns and goes back into the closet, settles on that third pair of jeans and a black T-shirt that has thick fabric (thin would show too much), and a linen blazer that dresses it all up.

“Better fix the mascara,” Tonya says. “I don’t know why you’re so nervous,” she adds as Cat makes her way to the bathroom. “I mean, you’ve already slept with this guy.”
They’ve been at the table for twenty minutes, her glass of wine already half-drunk, when Cat asks Tommy about his marriage, about who left whom.

“I think she left,” he says, “but I was really already gone, or dead, or whatever. It had been bad for years. I was forty, a doctor with a wife and a big house and a kid and four or five tons of Teutonic steel in a two-car garage, and I seemed like a cliché even to myself. I’m not going to stick up for her, but I don’t blame her, either.”

She’s finally finding she can relax; listening to this story of his failed marriage, looking at him, has that effect on her. He sips his wine and she thinks she can feel what he’s feeling, or felt: the pain of being in the wrong situation, unsure of how you got there and how to get out. It was perhaps a bit forward to ask about his marriage, but there are things she wants to know.

“I almost looked you up,” he says.

“Why didn’t you?”

“I heard you were married.”

The restaurant is dark and upscale, with walls of pastel fabric and piped-in jazz music. Kyle, she thinks, would know who’s playing. She looks at Tommy. He’s wearing a black button-down pressed shirt. It’s the pressing that matters, a sign that he made an effort. The thing she really likes, that she’s always liked about him, is that he looks right back at her. So many men have a hard time with that, looking in a woman’s eyes.

The waiter clears their plates, offers coffee, dessert, and Tommy cajoles her into sharing a piece of chocolate cake, saying after the waiter leaves, “I know you like chocolate,” though really it’s something he knew, he knows almost nothing now. Not that a taste for chocolate is something you lose, though what changes, what remains, she can’t say. She knew Tommy at seventeen, eighteen, and this puts her at ease. Most men wouldn’t want a woman to know their teenage selves, but he has confidence enough for that. He is still broad-shouldered, athletic in his movements. His eyes, she thinks, are lighter now, still expressive. As a boy he was almost beautiful, but he’s evolved into something more … She searches for the words, what she’ll tell Tonya. _Hearty. Masculine._ Cat can see a tiny bit of chest hair just above the top button of his shirt. He had very little in 1976. She is curious. Aroused, even.

“What?” he asks.

She shakes her head.

“You’re blushing,” he says.

“I don’t blush.” Even she knows this is a lie.

He laughs. “Uh-huh,” he says.

“You’re flirting with me.”

“Trying,” he says.

Later, after the cake and the coffee and the carefree way he pays the check, she walks with him down the streets of Birmingham. The air is soft and humid, warm.

“I should be going,” she says.

“Get another drink with me.”

“Sure, but not tonight.”

“Even for a middle-aged couple, it’s not that late,” he says.

“Don’t put it like that.”

They walk on in silence.

“At least let me walk you to your car,” he offers.

She wants this, but doesn’t. She drives a beat-up Ford Focus, and she doesn’t want him to see it, but she relents. It’s five blocks to her car.

“You could have just put it in the lot,” he says, not understanding that she wasn’t about to throw away the seven bucks.

With a block to go she can think only if he will kiss her. She wants him to. She can’t say she really remembers what it is like to kiss him, but she wants to know again. She feels maybe it could change everything, that kiss.

“Still driving Fords,” he says when they reach her car. “Like your old man. How is he, by the way?”

“Good, I guess.” Do men ask about your father and then try to kiss you? Apparently not. She unlocks her car and he opens the door for her. She takes a moment to stand very still, but he moves no closer, and so she ducks into the
car before she makes a complete fool of herself.

“Thank you, Cat,” he says, holding on to the door. “I had a great time.”

“I did, too,” she admits.

“That address in the phone book, is it correct?”

“Why, are you planning on stalking me?” “I might,” he says. “It’s correct,” she tells him.

“Thanks for being easy,” he says, smiling. Then he shuts the door. Easy? She doesn’t know what to think.

She sleeps till nine, an eternity for her, then lies in bed reading magazines before stumbling out to her kitchen for coffee. She sits at the computer and looks for Siobhan with no real expectation of finding her, and sure enough there are only strangers in today’s “Portraits of Grief,” five more, part of this endless parade of misfortune. She jogs, especially difficult and laborious on this morning, then showers, dresses in sweats, and calls Tonya.

“Did you sleep with him?” Tonya asks, as if she is expecting a yes answer.

“No.”

“Too bad.”

“Tonya.”

“An old boyfriend? It’s like a freebie, right? Anyway, how was the kiss?”

“He didn’t kiss me.”

“Oh.”

The disappointment in the air is heavy, the first sentiment of the day that they share.

Her buzzer rings, an odd thing at eleven in the morning on a Saturday. She tells Tonya she has to go. At the door is a delivery man with a dozen red roses. “It’s wonderful to have you back in my life,” reads the note. “I’ll call—T.”

The delivery man smiles, then leaves. She feels wobbly. He sent flowers, she thinks. She hadn’t known till this moment that this is exactly what she wanted him to do, to treat her as a new woman, one he wants to impress. She has to move to her couch, where she sits with the flowers, fragrant in her lap, while she wipes the tears from her eyes.

It’s a little after three—she’s just returned home with Connor—when Tommy calls. “I’d like to buy you another meal,” he says.

“I might let you.”

“How ’bout Monday?”

“I have Connor, and it’s a tough night for a sitter. Besides, isn’t there a preseason game on?”

He chuckles. “There is. When do you get him back, tomorrow?”

“I have him now.”

“And tomorrow?” Tommy asks.

Which is how the next day she drives to a ball field in Birmingham so that their boys can play baseball together. “Can he throw and catch?” Tommy asked of Connor, somehow knowing to address Cat’s fear that her son needs more male influence. The truth is that Connor can throw and catch, though not well; when it occurs to Michael to do so, he works with him.

She stands next to Tommy on a dusty infield of red dirt as he throws first to Jonathan, then to Connor. Next to the field is a Catholic church, its lot crowded with cars. From inside, she can hear singing.

“You want to go over there, it’s okay,” Tommy says. “I’ll pray right here.” He throws one to Connor. Cat realizes that his throws to Connor are easier, softer, than what he tosses to his son, who is older by twenty months, and at least twice the baseball player.

“Why would I want to go over there?” she says.

“To repent?”

“What makes you think I have anything to repent for?”
“I was hoping,” he says.

She feels her blood rise. She sees a rivulet of sweat descend the back of his neck. She is standing close enough that she thinks she can smell him, perhaps something she remembers.

He throws to Jonathan, who catches the ball and does a little step before throwing the ball back. She comments on it.

“That’s called a crow hop,” he says. “Helps you set your feet in the correct position.”

She’s forgotten that he played baseball, too. It never seemed as important as football. He’s instructing Connor now on how to throw, telling him to turn his body sideways, to push off his back foot. She turns herself, trying to mimic the footwork, this subtle male dance. It’s hot on the field, but perhaps she understands the game’s appeal, which seems very much wrapped up in being outside on a summer day. Watching Tommy with Connor is almost a surreal experience, her son with the man who should have been his father. That’s how she looks at it. It’s a leap, but the truth, she thinks. Tommy walks forward, stands next to Connor now, showing him the motion, and showing Jonathan, too, so Connor doesn’t feel self-conscious.

“All right,” he says, walking back to her. “Connor, let me have it.” Connor throws him the ball. “That’s it! Just like that, every time.”

He looks at her. “Nice outfit,” he says.

Oh God, she thinks. Black tights, untucked T-shirt, running shoes, small earrings, a little eyeliner, sunglasses. She has no idea what to wear to a baseball field.

“Relax,” he whispers. “I’m not kidding.”

Later, he takes them to White Castle for lunch, then Baskin-Robbins. He sits at a table with her while the boys, having finished their ice creams, roam the store with Jonathan in the lead, Connor following step by step behind the older boy.

“Lean forward,” Tommy tells her.

She does as she’s told, thinking he wants to say something that can’t be overheard, but instead he kisses her. It’s no peck, but the real thing, warm, passionate, totally surprising and cut short.

His alarm makes her look immediately for the boys. He says, “C’mon, they just went out the door.”

By the time she gets out there he’s got each of them under his arm, and is telling them that they can’t just leave a store and go out on a sidewalk by themselves. Knowing Connor is safe, she feels herself breathe, then thinks of that kiss, that she’d very much like to try it again, and take her time.
Monday afternoon Sam checks messages on his home phone machine and finds the voice of the New York lawyer, Josh Schwager, whom Sam has hired to untangle the mess of Kyle’s estate. Kyle had no will. Why would he? He was forty-one, had never been to war, had no wife, no children, and no plan to die.

Still, he’d been worth a lot of money, with his unfathomable salary and his disinclination to spend. It was last January that Sam flew to New York to meet with Schwager, who was Cat’s age, but seemed more substantial. Sitting in Schwager’s wood-paneled office, Sam tried to put his finger on it. The suit, the hair flecked with gray, the law books, even that he was a man all had something to with it, but Sam suspected something more: dealing with death. Estates were all Schwager handled. Sam asked about it.

“My father did this. Still does, a little. Also, my grandfather. It’s the family business,” Schwager said.

“My father was a jobber,” Sam said. “I didn’t follow. Also, he would have killed me if I had. Do you have a son?”

“Two daughters.” Schwager sat up in his chair at their mention. A siren reached them, eighteen floors above the city. Schwager said, “I can see Kyle was a fine man.”

“Can you?” Sam understood Schwager was pandering, but he didn’t mind.

“He was organized.”

“He didn’t have a will.”

“In the envelope you sent me I found a detailed plan of how he intended to save. The plan ended in 2005. I guess he planned to retire then.”

“And do what?” Sam asked.

Now Sam returns Schwager’s call. In past conversations Schwager has said he wants all the money to go to Cat and Connor, which Sam knows is smart from the tax angle—Sam doesn’t need it, he’s told this to Schwager, and anything that comes to Sam will likely soon get taxed again, with Sam’s estate—but Sam would like Cat to be older. She still seems a bit unformed. Am I imagining this? he wonders. Do I want to see her make it first, as her younger brother did? Sam distrusts inherited money, maybe because he never got any himself.

“Sam,” says the lawyer. “How are you?”

“I feel like a million bucks,” Sam says. He suspects that Schwager has come to like him.

“Not worth what it used to be,” Schwager says.

“For such insight I’m paying three hundred an hour?”

“Three and a quarter,” says Schwager. “But this call is off the clock. Bottom line, this is still a mess. I’m just letting you know. I told you I thought we’d have it wrapped up by the anniversary, and I was wrong.”

“So when?”

“God knows.”

“You called to tell me that?”

“And to say that we really ought to get something down on paper as to how you want it to go. The courts are backed up, as you can imagine, and if they have direction from the family, they’ll likely follow it.”

“Give half of it to Cat. She’s going to get it anyway. The other half, put in a trust for the little boy.”

“Connor,” says Schwager.

“Yes, Connor. I ask myself, when did we start naming our children Connor?”

“And the answer?” asks Schwager.

“When we started marrying shiksas. I was one of the first. That’s how I got a Kyle.”

“Always a pleasure, Sam.”

Sam says his good-bye, then dials Cunningham’s office and tells the doctor’s girl that he’d like to schedule the operation for Monday the sixteenth. Could the doctor arrange it?
“What operation is that?” she asks. She sounds about twelve.
“The bypass. It’s my second. It’s nothing to look forward to.”
“You’ve spoken to Dr. Cunningham about this?”
“No, I just thought I’d schedule it, felt like having a guy root around in my chest.”
“I, uh, don’t understand,” says the girl.
“Of course I’ve spoken to Dr. Cunningham.”

She puts him on hold and he gets an earful of a local radio station, something the station calls classic rock. Classic rock? What could that possibly mean? He hangs up. Cunningham will call him. In the meantime he decides to have a smoke, but when he finally fishes the pack from his jacket pocket, he finds that it’s empty. A minor inconvenience. He’s almost proud of himself that he smoked a whole pack. It’s not so bad wanting things. Desire. It’s what makes the world go round.
That morning she went to the barricades. She walked the whole way, past people, hordes of them, moving in the opposite direction, everything on the island flowing north, like a river in Maine. The subways were down, the PATH trains; thousands were walking, dazed, an army in retreat. To the south the smoke rose, a huge ash black column that turned white at the top, and tilted east. Otherwise, the sun was bright; it was a day almost without shadows. At the barricades—powder blue with yellow lettering—she found a row of newbie cops, still in their khaki academy uniforms, and a throng of people trying to go south. “I live there, damn it,” one guy kept saying, a big man with a shaved scalp, though Cat could make out a small headband of stubble—he was going bald and had obviously decided to get ahead of it—and hundreds of droplets of sweat.

“You can’t go,” said one of the cadets. “You can’t. Not now.”

There was a young woman trying to get to her boyfriend. “Please please please,” she said over and over, though no one listened. One cadet kept repeating, “None shall pass. None shall pass. None shall …” Both sides had their mantras.

She moved down the line. This was Fourteenth Street, miles away from the attack, and were it not for the barricade it might have been difficult to know something had gone awry. Kyle’s cell phone was going straight to voice mail. Someone finally picked up his office line, but the someone was in London, where the calls had been routed. Kyle’s building was evacuated, the woman said. As far as the woman knew, everyone was safe.

Maybe the air smelled funny. It was Cat’s first day in New York for a long time. Six years? Seven? Maybe the air here always smelled funny.

She moved west. By Seventh Avenue she found a real cop along the barricade. He was older, perhaps a teacher at the academy. She explained that her brother was missing. He didn’t answer his cell phone. She was worried. She could feel it physically, a panic clutching at her stomach.

“No one knows anything,” the cop said. “But you don’t want to go down there. Forget about the phone. There were cell antennas on the towers, so lotsa calls aren’t working. He’s gonna get outta there on foot. If I was you, I’d go back home and wait for him to walk through the door.”

She turned to leave, but a woman grabbed her. An older woman, perhaps fifty. And then Cat thought, Oh my God, I’ll soon be fifty. The woman held her arm. New Yorkers—strangers—never intentionally touched, but this woman had a firm grip on her bicep, had her stopped in her tracks.

“What is it?” Cat asked.

“Can you tell me, “the woman said, “how to get to Queens?”

Queens? The woman lived in Queens? Was it possible to go to work in the morning, and come home in the evening, and have no idea where you’d been?

Cat knew where Queens was. She knew because whenever she rode the subway she stood at the map and studied it so she wouldn’t make eye contact with anyone. Queens. Up and to the right. North and east. She whirled around.

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“Theaway,” she said, pointing.

The woman nodded and walked on. Thataway? Where did that come from? It was something Cat might have heard on a TV Western when she was a kid. But now she was facing uptown, and she, too, needed to walk north and east.

Along the way she came to a long line of people snaking around a courtyard of a building. She got in the line—pure instinct—and then asked the man in front of her what they were waiting for.

“To give blood,” he said. He was a stocky guy in a suit, a dime a dozen in New York. “They’re gonna need lots of blood.”

She wanted to help, but she couldn’t wait. She had to get back to Kyle’s, to see if he was there.

The first plane, they said on the news, hit at 8:46. By the time Cat got back to Kyle’s apartment it was almost three. That’s when she knew, but still she waited. Then it got dark, and she knew again. She sat in her brother’s pristine
living room, pulled out her cell phone, and called Michael, who was home with Connor. She called her father, the first time in almost a year.

“Give him time,” her father instructed. “It could take him a long time to get there.”

“Dad, it’s dark outside.”

He didn’t understand, insisted that Kyle didn’t work in the building, that he had to be okay. Here was a man who had been to war, and he believed this.

She hung up and rushed out of the building, down to Third Avenue, walked three blocks downtown when it occurred to her that there was hardly a car on the street, just a couple of slow-moving cabs. Except for a few dour-faced pedestrians, the sidewalk was empty. She stopped. She didn’t know what she was doing. She was standing by a bus stop and she put her hand on its shelter, to steady herself.

No. No, no, no. He was gone, he couldn’t be gone.

He was the person she was always supposed to have in her life. He was the other half of her; other than Connor, the only person on the planet connected to her by blood. He was what she had.

She didn’t realize she was sobbing, almost choking, till a policeman was holding her. “My brother,” she managed to say, “didn’t come home.”

The cop walked her back to Kyle’s. She was off-kilter, unsteady on her feet, as if they weren’t her feet at all. Still, by the time they got to Kyle’s building, she’d started to right herself. And then she knew what to do. She walked with purpose across the lobby, rode the elevator to Kyle’s apartment, and, once inside, she went to look for the drawer with the pictures.

Now, in the stillness of the wee hours, she lies awake, guessing at the time. Two? No, that would be bad, because she didn’t go to bed till eleven, didn’t fall asleep till well after that, having turned the clock face away from her so she couldn’t see it, so she couldn’t know just how little sleep she was going to get. No, she hopes it is five-thirty, time to get out of bed, moments before the alarm will buzz, after something like a full night’s sleep.

She glances at the corner of her blinds. It’s still dark outside, too dark. Night. She throws an arm over her eyes but it’s no use, she’s awake. She rolls over and checks the clock: 4:43. Close enough, and something of a relief. Out of bed, she stumbles to her living room, then over to the kitchen to make a cup of coffee. The linoleum is cool on her feet, waking her completely. Let it go, she tells herself. Let it go. Sleep can come tonight. There’s always time for sleep.

She would like to call Tommy, but of course it’s too early. Usually she suppresses the urge to call him, waits for him to call her, and he does, every couple of days. She knows it’s a bit early, but she’d like it to be every day. They’ve had two dates since he kissed her in the ice-cream parlor, two meals at restaurants, maybe four or five hours to peel back the layers of who he is. “The child is the father of the man,” goes the saying, and she thinks this might be right. He was a boy of such potential that merely being a well-regarded doctor, a saver of lives, is somehow a disappointment. Perhaps anything would be a disappointment. Even me, perhaps. But he does call, and they have plans for Friday night.

She’s ready to go get her run in before Connor wakes, but she decides to check the Times online. Usually, she waits till work, but it’s only a quarter after five; she has fifteen minutes before she has to hit the pavement and run circles around her building. Siobhan is there. It’s her, added now to the list of the dead. Cat’s photos are under her keyboard at work, but there is no doubt this is the woman. “Siobhan Boyle,” reads the first line, “was a woman in a hurry.” She’d grown up, as Kyle had said, in Babylon, Long Island, then attended SUNY Stony Brook. She’d worked in fashion before going to Wall Street and becoming a bond broker, one of the only women at her firm. And she had a young son.” ‘She was a unique person,’ her father, Gregory Boyle, said, ‘and she left us the gift of this little boy.’"

Holy shit, Cat thinks. Here it is.

•    •    •

The next morning she is on Northwest Airlines, sitting in row twenty-one of a twenty-four-row plane, her shoulder against the window, her legs at a slant away from it to get a little more room. She breezed through security, but only because the guards had their hands full with several large Arab families, the women’s hair covered by head scarves,
the men in dark, worn-out suits with open shirt collars. The other travelers looked nervous, but Cat wasn’t. She’d studied the security tapes of the 9/11 hijackers, who were neat and efficient and looked nothing like these frumpy Arabs. It is hardly surprising to see them at this airport. Cat had read that Detroit has the highest concentration of Arabs anywhere on the globe outside the Middle East. It makes little sense. That the north of Michigan is filled with Swedes and Finns has a geographical logic, but finding Arabs in Detroit is like finding Eskimos in Phoenix. Still, they are here.

On the plane, with more than fifteen minutes till takeoff, she calls Michael, then gets Connor on the phone to tell him good-bye. “I love you so much, Mommy,” he says, to which she replies, “I love you, Angel Boy.” After she hangs up she takes a deep breath. Everything is okay, she tells herself. I’ll see him tomorrow, maybe, or the next day. She calls Tommy and gets his voice mail, as she often does. He’d told her to call when she was leaving. “I’m still planning on Friday,” he said. “But, of course, don’t come back just for me.” She hangs up before the beep. At this point it’s probably better not to call so much.

She turns off the phone, slides it in her purse, and puts the purse under the seat in front of her. She pushes her shoes in next to it. She tries to get comfortable in the seat, then puts her head back and closes her eyes. She loves flying alone. You get two hours of peace, two hours when you don’t have to talk to anyone.

She walks off of Forty-third Street into the New York Times Building carrying her purse and dragging a suitcase with rollers, as if this were a hotel and she were checking in. The suitcase is small, the kind that fits in a plane’s overhead bin. She’s not staying long.

She is here for Laura McCann. This was the woman who interviewed her about Kyle. Cat called her yesterday—she had saved McCann’s direct number—and left a message. McCann called her back and left a message while Cat was in flight. Cat has flown seven hundred miles and right now all she needs is a phone number.

In the lobby she pulls out her cell phone and again calls McCann; luckily she answers. Cat explains that she’s looking for this lost boy, that she needs McCann’s help. “It’ll take no more than five minutes of your time,” Cat says. “I’m in your lobby. Could you come down? I’ll explain everything. Please, for this little boy.”

Cat waits, looking around the gray lobby, noticing its martial quality, the armed guards, the cameras, the barricades. Ever since the attacks everyone has gotten more careful. And then there was the anthrax scare. Cat tries to remember, did they ever catch the guy who did it? Did they ever find out why?

“Ms. Miller?”

Cat turns and looks down at a short, dark-eyed woman, basic dark slacks and light blouse, midlength hair that doesn’t look like it gets much attention. This, Cat thinks, is Laura McCann? On the phone, with her throaty, almost patrician accent, she sounded tall and worldly. This woman can’t even be thirty.

Cat shows her a copy of Siobhan’s “Portrait of Grief,” with Siobhan’s father’s name underlined. She says she’s looking for this man, and could the Times provide his phone number?

“Why don’t you look him up in the phone book?” asks the reporter.

“Yesterday I called thirty-four Gregory Boyles. Also G. Boyles. I tried Manhattan, Brooklyn, and Babylon, Long Island. Nothing.”

“What does this have to do with the little boy?”

Cat produces her brother’s page. “This is my brother, the one you wrote about. On September tenth he told me about Siobhan, that she had a child, and that he suspected he was the father. The next day he died and so did she. But the little boy is still out there.”

Laura McCann nods, thinking.

“There are privacy issues.”

“You found him,” Cat says.

“Wait here,” McCann says.

It’s half an hour before she returns. “Here,” she says.

She hands Cat a piece of printer paper, a copy of a page from a phone book. There’s a Gregory and Maryann Boyle underlined, with a phone number and an address in a place abbreviated to Yrktwn.

“Where’s nine-one-four?” Cat asks.

Cat nods, thinking a rental car is the next step.
“Do you have DNA?” the reporter asks. “From your brother? So you’ll know if the child is his.”
“Yes, his company found a coffee cup he left on his desk. The police took a DNA sample.”
“But how did they know that the cup was his?”
“He didn’t work in the Trade Center, he went there that morning for a meeting.”
“Jesus.”
“Thanks for the number,” Cat says.
“The rescue workers,” says Laura McCann. “Did they find … anything?”
“Nothing,” Cat says. “Nothing at all.”
He wakes in his reading chair, the light from the window soft, something out of the afternoon. He figures he’s been out for several hours. He has the odd feeling that he has been visiting Goodman. Goodman, who made him a partner when he didn’t have to—Sam would have left Ford for just a little more pay—who bought Sam gifts, who confided in him, who treated Sam as he might have treated a brother. Through it all Sam never trusted him. Sam was wary of Goodman’s glibness, of those easy sales skills, the wide smile. Only at the end did Sam realize he’d been wrong about Goodman. This was almost twenty years ago, when one day Goodman called Sam into his office and asked, “How much would you want to retire?”

“A million dollars,” said Sam. He’d given this number some thought. He’d reached threescore and one year, as they might have put it in the Bible. Three-quarters of a million would have done it, but he’d learned it never made sense to ask just for what you needed.

“What if I got you twice that?” Goodman asked. “Would you feel okay about leaving?”

“Is this some kind of a test?”

It wasn’t. Goodman had an offer for the business. From Ford, of all places. It was for three times what Sam thought the business was worth. That was Goodman. He should have felt triumphant, but he looked tired, almost withdrawn.

“Is something wrong?” Sam asked.

Goodman was sick. Cancer, he said. Probably he was dying. He didn’t want to work anymore. He wanted to move to Florida and try to reconnect with his sons. They were not, at the moment, talking to him, and he knew he was running out of time. Their mother had turned them against him, he said. Sam had known Goodman for ten years, and finally he got the story. His wife had fallen in love with someone else, and when that didn’t work out she moved to Florida with the boys. Goodman went often, but the boys were young, and after even a month apart he started to seem like a stranger, till one trip she refused to let him see them. She said it was disruptive, confusing for them. He was turned away twice more. He hired a lawyer. He wrote the boys letters, but after a year she sent them back unopened. That was the worst, Goodman said, getting those letters back, with all he’d put into them, and they weren’t even opened. Still, the boys were teenagers now and able to think for themselves. He had, he felt, one last chance. He would move down there and see what he could do. He thought it would change things if the boys knew he was dying.

He died seven months later. As far as Sam knew, the boys wouldn’t see him. He left them all his money anyway.
She drives her rental car up a road called the Taconic Parkway, one of those names that seems to suggest a certain grandeur, though in truth it’s a typical road in the east: narrow, with bumpy, uneven pavement, dotted with scablike patches of new asphalt. She is heading for Yorktown, as though to a lesson of her country’s origin. The British surrendered at York-town. Still, it couldn’t have been this Yorktown; it was the one in Virginia, she remembers. The British had a band; it played a song called “The World Turned Upside Down.”

Origins are, for her, a tricky business. She was quite old when she learned of her own, seventeen, already five foot nine, as tall as her father. She had Tommy then. He was tall and fair, his arms muscular and veined from football, his body covered in the finest veneer of golden hair. He was just her age, but seemed older to her. He knew where he wanted to go, and how to get there. He was kind to her, but exciting, too, good and bad at the same time. Sometimes when she thought about him, it made her dizzy. She could disappear out of her life altogether.

It was the first day of football, and so Tommy was busy. Cat slept late, then went to Tonya’s house, where they lay by the pool and worked on filling in the tan lines on their backs. The pool was a cotton-candy blue, and it would have been nice to jump in and cool off, but when Cat thought about dealing with her hair she decided just to lie on her stomach and bake. Mostly she and Tonya talked about whom Tonya should date. In a high school of fifteen hundred kids, there were surprisingly few suitable candidates. Cat went home feeling drained, lazy, and lethargic from the sun. She wanted to go to her room to hide in the coolness there and wait for Tommy to call. When she opened her front door she found her mother waiting for her. “I need to talk to you,” her mother said. Cat knew that tone. It wasn’t good.

Cat followed her to the living room, all white furniture and light carpet, a room never used except when company came over, a rare occurrence in the Miller household. Cat wondered about Kyle. He was usually around for living-room conversations. Their father, too.

A moment passed—it felt like a week—with Cat’s mother just looking at her. She’d been sleeping with Tommy for six months. She thought that word in her mind, sleeping, but it was an odd word to use, as it was hardly restful, and it almost never happened in a bed. Had she let something slip? Had he? What had her mother found out?

“Your father and I are splitting up,” her mother said.

Cat hadn’t expected this. They were fixed in her mind. Mother and Father. Mom and Dad. She felt something move inside of her, but she couldn’t name it. Uncertainty, maybe. What are you talking about? she wanted to say.

Her mother was crying, or almost crying. Her eyes filled with tears, and now and then one spilled out and rolled down her cheek. “I’m really sorry,” she said. “It’s your last year at home and I’m really sorry you have to deal with this. I never wanted it to—” She stopped talking, just like that. Cat felt there was something she should do, but she didn’t know what. She sat still, watching her mother.

“Where’s Dad?” Cat asked, finally.

“At work.”

This was normal.

“We’re going to tell you and Kyle tonight. He’s moving out. He’s got an apartment.” Cat felt almost as if she weren’t in the room, as if her mother were talking to someone else. “I had to tell you first,” her mother said.

“Why?” Cat asked.

“You’re my firstborn. I just had to.”

Cat waited for her to explain how two people who’d been together almost twenty years could suddenly stand it no longer, but apparently her mother had nothing more to say. Instead, she cried. Cat watched her shoulders shake, heard the breaths she took, awful sniffling sounds, like she was drowning. Cat reached out to her, but her mother put up her hand and then ran from the room. Cat stared for a moment at the spot on the couch where her mother sat, at the indentation still there, and then she left the white room for her own.

She lay on her bed, and stared at the framed poster across her room, a cartoon depiction of Yosemite with hundreds of little figures partaking in hiking and climbing, taking pictures and picnicking, all the activities of the
place. Her mother bought it for her on a family trip they took back in the sixties, and sometimes still mentioned that vacation, how magnificent the mountains were, how she loved the air. Cat couldn’t remember it, though she’d been staring at the poster for years.

There was a knocking at her door, and then the door opened. It was her mother, again, still teary-eyed, the skin under her eyes puffy and dark. She sat on the edge of Cat’s bed and Cat had a memory of this, that it had happened before, every night till she was twelve, when she told her mother she could put herself to bed.

“Are you using protection?” her mother asked.

At first she didn’t understand—protection from what?—and then she felt her bowel slacken. “Oh God, Mom.”

“It changes everything, when you have a child.” Her mother stared at her, and she felt nothing but dread. What did the woman know? Cat wondered. What?

“Like when I had you,” her mother said.

Cat took a breath, drew the air in through her nose quietly, so her mother wouldn’t notice. She didn’t want to talk about her origins. She didn’t want to talk about birth control. She just wanted to lie on her bed.

“I wasn’t married,” her mother said.

Cat sat up. Dad? she thought. Dad, the fastidious navy man? “Dad got you pregnant before you were married?”

“No Dad.”

“What does that mean, Mom?”

“I got pregnant. It wasn’t your father. A stranger, really.”

Not my father?

“He’s dead, this man. So now you know. He died when you were still quite young. A car accident. He was drinking. Did it to himself.”

“My father?”

“Your biological father.”

Cat glanced again at the Yosemite poster. Her throat felt swollen. It was almost impossible to speak. “I don’t remember him. What are you saying?”

“Of course you don’t remember him. You never knew him. He came and saw you once, but he was never involved in your life. Your father was, the father you know. He met you when you were less than a year old.”

“What about Kyle?”

“Your father and I had Kyle together.”

Things are one way, Cat thought, and then you find out they’re not. Everything was different, and the same. I’m still me, Cat told herself. She had to think it again: Still me.

“When he died—Tarver was his name—it no longer seemed an urgent thing to tell you,” her mother said. “It wasn’t like you could go and look him up. Your father and I talked about it from time to time. We meant to tell you.

“And so now you’re telling me?”

“I just think you should know,” her mother said. “I’m tired of secrets.” She put her hands up and rubbed her eyes, and Cat saw the wedding ring there, a diamond sticking out of it like a blossom. “You were so cute when you were a baby,” she said. “I had this black woman who looked after you three days a week, and Grandma did it the other two. I’d come home from work every day as soon as I could, and there you’d be. I’d sit you in my lap and bounce you, and you’d laugh. Bounce was one of your first words. We were okay together, you and me. And then your father came along. A war hero. Also, a handsome man. I was very taken with him, and he didn’t seem to mind that I already had a child. It was a miracle. You don’t know what it was like back then. That was a big deal. A really big deal. And he made me a promise, you see, and now he’s broken that promise.”

Cat found herself again looking at the Yosemite poster. She wished she could remember that trip. She wished she could just remember more. My father is not my father, she thought. Still, he was the only father she knew. She used to climb into his lap and he would call her Precious. If she wanted his attention, all she had to say was “Daddy,” and she would have it. Nothing else in the world came that easily. He let her do things her mother wouldn’t. When she was little he let her push the cart in the grocery store (this was on those rare Saturday mornings when he would go shopping because there was something he wanted that wasn’t in the house), or he allowed her to steer the car while sitting on his lap. He tried to teach her things. She knew the capital of Finland, for instance, because he had been
there. And then there was World War II. Older than the fathers of her friends, he’d fought in it, and he taught her the
names of places that meant something: Okinawa and Iwo Jima, Sicily and Normandy, Stalingrad and Moscow. Also
names like Auschwitz and Treblinka. These were things other girls, her friends, didn’t know. It was history at
school, but at home it was life. He treated her like a person, not a kid, and now he wasn’t what she thought at all.
How could he keep a secret like that? How could he dare, when there was somebody else?

“Mom, can you tell me about this guy, Carver?”

“Tarver. Tom Tarver.”

“What did he do? What was he?”

“He was a, you know, a blue-collar guy. A construction foreman. Lots of fun, and not very responsible. It was
silly of me, but I got you out of the deal. So I thank God for Tom Tarver.”

Her mother seemed calmer now. I’m a mistake, Cat thought. I’m a mistake my mother made. For the first time in
a long time, Cat felt she could talk to the woman.

“Am I like him at all?” Cat asked.

Her mother smiled. “Well, he was tall, and so are you, and you look a little like him, I think. He was a very
physical guy, actually, a presence. He liked to laugh.”

No one would say that about me, Cat thought.

“Do you know where he’s buried?” she asked.

Her mother sighed. “I do.”

Cat looked at her, asking without speaking.

“I’ll take you,” her mother promised.

She never did. She died two months later, from an overdose of Valium and gin, though neither Cat nor anyone
else was ever able to determine if it were intentional. For a long time Cat wanted to know, and then realized she
never would. Her mother and her biological father were lost and unknowable. And now Kyle is gone. But there’s his
boy, still out there, just a little farther up this road.
He wants to buy her jewelry. All the time he’s known her, he’s never bought her jewelry. He has worried she might take it the wrong way, as some kind of promise, but eighty-year-olds don’t need to worry about long-term commitments. “I would like to buy a necklace for my girlfriend,” he tells the salesgirl. She smiles at him. Young people, he has noticed, get a kick out of him saying that, as if old men are not supposed to have girlfriends, as if romance is supposed to end at some predetermined age. As if old people aren’t really alive. He sends her off with a price range that seems to make her happy, and she flits among the various shiny cases with something like purpose. She’s young and pretty, a girl who should be working on commission.

In fact, Sam probably shouldn’t have given her a price range at all, but not worrying about money is something he’s never really learned. He’s had all the money he’s needed for a quarter century. His portion of the proceeds from the sale of Goodman’s company came to Sam in the form of Ford stock certificates, important-looking pieces of paper that felt like cloth. It was 1982, a good time to get Ford stock. Any stock. Interest rates were as high on government bonds as they’d been since the Napoleonic Wars, the economy was a shambles, the Israelis were in Lebanon, the Europeans were marching by the millions against American nuclear weapons. This last item irked Sam, given all the Americans buried there, GIs who hadn’t gotten old enough to protest anything. Still, he was smiling. He had pictures to prove it, Polaroids of him holding up the certificates, taken in his living room. His girlfriend had the camera. Her name was either Katie or Kelly or Karmen or the Knish—Goodman’s nickname for her—a dark-haired beauty almost twenty years his junior. She didn’t remember World War II. It wasn’t going to work. Soon after the pictures were taken he got rid of her, and the stock, too. There were other women, and other stocks. His money doubled in less than five years. He decided it was time to sell. He knew little about the markets, but he figured he knew a thing or two about human nature. His PaineWebber broker, Larry Something, begged him to “stay the course.” Larry had been in the business ten years. This made him a veteran, not that he experienced 1974, or, for that matter, ’32.

Sam tried to explain his thinking to Larry. “Precisely because everyone loves it: that’s why I want out. I have more money than I ever thought I’d have, more than I need. I’d like to keep it that way.”

In October, after the crash, Sam bought back in with the money he’d raised from the sales, and he knew money would never be a problem. A navy buddy called him out of the blue and told him that the captain from their ship, Higginbotham, had died. Kramer, the buddy, lived in California and invited Sam for a visit. When Sam smelled the ocean, he felt something inside him move. Longing and fear all at once, the conditions he knew best. He stared at the water and thought, This is where I ought to be.

Back at home Sam hears a knock. He can count on one hand the number of times in a year he gets a knock on his door. Usually it is some stripe of soul saver, Jehovah’s Witness or Mormon, the kind of Bible-thumpers who tend to inflame the ire of other Christians. Go figure. Most of his life he closed the door in their faces, but lately he’s listened, then asked, “Are we not all children of God? And does this God really care more what we believe than how we act?” He cares about both, is always the answer. “Then I’ll leave the believing to you,” Sam answers, and gently closes the door.

Today, though, it’s Phyllis, with a look on her face that is close to terror.

“What is it?” he asks.

“I thought you were dead,” she says and moves into him, almost knocking him down. In her embrace he can feel how much she cares for him, that he is not merely a convenience, someone to keep her company, but something more. She is not the type of woman (as most are, he thinks) to keep him just to have someone around.

“I called four times.”

“Three,” he says.

“I left three messages.”
“I fell asleep.”
“I thought you were dead,” she says again. She is wiping tears from her eyes. He is moved. He walks to the bureau, fetches the felt-covered, bowwrapped box that contains pearls hanging from a gold chain, and gives it to her.
“Oh my God, it’s beautiful.” Smiling at him all the while, she tries it on. “Beautiful, Sam.”
“What if I told you,” he says, “that I thought we should live together?”
“I think you should tell me you love me first.”

When was the last time he told a woman he loved her? He can’t remember. It has always gotten him in trouble. Always. What the hell, he thinks, I’m eighty.
“I love you,” he says.
“Say it like you mean it.”
“I love you.”
“Kiss me, then.”
He obeys.
“I would tell you it’s about time,” she says.
There is, she thinks, not much town to Yorktown, just some strip malls and fast-food joints and gas stations with large convenience-store operations. At least the sky has cleared slightly, letting in the late summer sun and showing off the large trees that have survived the path of commerce. She takes it all in while following the MapQuest printout, which the Hertz guy gave her with some reluctance, as if York-town had secrets best kept from outsiders.

She finds herself in a neighborhood of modest homes, simple two-story rectangular boxes and ranch houses, the type of neighborhood her father used to drive her and Kyle through when they were kids so they could look for gold stars. “There,” her father would say. “The people who live in that house lost a son in the war.” Cat would picture a dark home with tearful older people moving about in silence. One day they saw two homes with two stars, four dead, unknown sons. Her father said, “When I fought, everyone went. Now it’s just kids from this neighborhood. The ones who have less sacrifice more. Remember that.” And she has.

She finds the address and parks in front of a modest ranch house, an Oldsmobile with New York plates in the driveway, a large oak towering over the front yard, a yellow ribbon tied around it, just like the old song. Actually, the ribbon appears to be plastic, like police tape. Who is in the military? Cat wonders. She glances up to the top of the tree and sees there a light wisp of rust, the first hint of fall. The hedges are clipped, the lawn thin but cut. A bit sad, she thinks, but a house and a yard. More than I have. She feels for her phone. Perhaps she should call. Her visit will shake them up. No, she decides, best to ring the doorbell. It’s harder to turn someone away who is standing before you, in the flesh. She checks her face and adds some lipstick, a little color to her cheeks, but not too much, then takes a deep breath. She gets out of the car and stands, waiting for her legs to steady.

Her heels clack on the cement of the front walk, and then a large animal—a groundhog, she thinks—runs in front of her, pursued by a dog. No, she realizes, it’s a coyote, its coat thick and lustrous, glowing in the afternoon sun. The groundhog turns right and runs behind the house; the coyote closes. She stares at the empty space they left, waiting for the sound of the groundhog’s demise, but nothing comes.

“Mrs. Boyle?” Cat asks when a women opens the door. The woman has dark hair and lined eyes, a quilted upper lip, but she’s still younger than Cat expected.

“Yes.”

“My name is Catherine Miller. I’m here about Siobhan and her little boy.”

“Are you with the government?” Mrs. Boyle has stepped back almost behind the door, holding it as if it were a shield.

“No, it’s about my brother. I’m fairly certain he’s the boy’s father.”

“How do you know that?” she asks, letting the door open slightly.

“Almost a year ago my brother learned Siobhan had a boy. He thought he was probably the father.”

“So, where is he?”

“He died on September eleventh.”

Mrs. Boyle considers this. Cat lifts her hand, feels the urge to bite a fingernail, but stops herself by holding both hands behind her back. She has no idea what Mrs.

Boyle will do next, can’t guess if she will be invited in or turned away. “Come in,” Mrs. Boyle says at last, as if she’s still making up her mind. Slowly, she opens the door and steps back, giving Cat a glimpse down a dark hallway.

In the living room, Cat sees the boy. He’s standing in a large playpen, one little fist grabbing on to the top of the railing before he lets go and wobbles, hands free, to the other side. He lets out a squeal of glee. “He just learned to walk a couple of days ago,” said Mrs. Boyle. “A late bloomer, and a bit unsteady. Have a seat.”

Cat sits. The boy looks over and smiles at her. He’s towheaded, with big crimson cheeks and a handful of little
teeth. “He’s beautiful,” Cat says.

“Yes,” says Mrs. Boyle. “Everyone says so. I’m going to call my husband.”

Mrs. Boyle heads off to the kitchen to call, close enough to keep the boy in her sight through the open door. Cat hears a few words, but she can’t make them out. Not with the boy staring at her, not with her inability to take her eyes off him. He seems to know this. He performs for her, walking this way and that, lifting his arms, giggling, then looking back at her and giggling more. Not a care in the world, Cat thinks. Not one.

Mr. Boyle arrives after fifteen minutes or so, during which time Cat sat on the couch and stared at the boy, who continued to walk back and forth, like a little soldier on sentry duty. Mrs. Boyle waited nearby, said nothing, a thin woman who gave off the impression that perhaps she forgot to eat. Cat finds her unnerving and is relieved when Mr. Boyle appears, a tall man, with close-cropped hair, no jacket but a shirt and tie. A shirt and tie, but nothing like Kyle wore, or her father. Short sleeves, for one thing, and a collar a size too big. Mr. Boyle walks over and Cat stands and shakes his hand. Then he takes a seat on the coach, rests his forearms on his thighs, exhales with some effort, as if it’s already been a very long day, and says, “Tell me, exactly, what do you want?”

I want, Cat thinks, to take your grandson back to Michigan to live with me. “Do you know who the boy’s father is?” she asks. It suddenly feels very hot.

“You think it was your brother.”

Mrs. Boyle has retreated to the door by the kitchen, where she stands quietly, not really in the room at all.

“I do,” Cat says. “I’m fairly certain.”

“Why?”

“Because he thought so.”

“Because he thought so,” Boyle repeats.

“You didn’t know my brother.”

“He had all the answers.”

“Men don’t own up to paternity when they’re not the father,” Cat says. She is, she realizes, sweating. She feels a droplet run down her ribs.

“You’d think a guy like that, one who would own up to fatherhood, my daughter might want to introduce him to her parents,” says Boyle. He has thinning hair, rust-colored like the upper leaves of the oak outside. From her work she knows his lot. A good man, she imagines, but with weak finances, meager options, one who has to pay up for credit. Not unlike herself.

“I can’t explain why your daughter did what she did,” Cat says. “But I can guess. You’re a woman of a certain age, you want a child, then you get pregnant, probably by accident, and you think, I don’t know if this will happen again. I don’t know if this will ever happen again, but I have this chance to have a child right now, and so maybe the father’s not perfect, maybe you don’t want the father around at all, but you have this life inside you, and once you have that you’re not going to give it up. It’s going to define you, and you don’t think that one day you’ll go to work and won’t come home.”

“What do you want, Mrs. Miller?”

No missus, she thinks. She never changed her name, never wanted to. She remembers thinking, I’m a Miller, always will be. Of course, it should have told her something, right then, about Michael.

“I want to know that my brother is your grandson’s father. There’s DNA. We can know.”

Boyle considers this.

“It will give your grandson a father,” she says. “Even if that father is dead, the boy will want to know who his father was. He’ll just want to know.”

Again, Boyle says nothing.

“Are you planning on raising him yourselves?” Cat asks.

“For now. We don’t yet have it all worked out. Siobhan has a sister.”

“Where is she?”

“She’s in the military. Navy. Abroad, right now.”
Cat looks at Mrs. Boyle, who’s looking away. She sees that Mrs. Boyle knows why she came, and Cat understands that she’s been right all along: she needs to adopt the boy. She suspects even the Boyles know it.

“I have an eight-year-old son,” she says.

“Your brother, was he Kyle?” Boyle asks.

She feels a jolt at the mention of his name.

“Why, yes, he was. Did you meet him?”

“Siobhan mentioned him once. We knew he existed. My wife and I will need to talk,” he says.

He stands, and Cat follows, relieved to be able to move. She says, “I’ll be honest, I don’t know how DNA tests are done. I’ll find out and then I’ll let you know what to do.”

Boyle nods. He’s not pushing her out of the house, but she feels he’d like to. She takes a step toward the foyer, but stops. “May I?” she asks, nodding at the little boy. “May I hold him?”

Silence. Even the boy stops playing in his pen.

“Let’s wait on that, honey,” says Mrs. Boyle.

“We’ll talk,” Boyle adds.

“What do you call him?” Cat asks.

“Ian. His name is Ian.”

“Ian,” Cat says. She walks out into the bright afternoon thinking it over and over: Ian, Ian, Ian.
Maybe we’re starting over each day, Sam thinks. Even now. He has decided to keep his place, though he will move, no question about that. He doesn’t want to have to pack up all his stuff, and, besides, it’s a little easier to relax on a boat when you know there’s a life raft. He thinks of the navy, of the rolling green water near the Philippines and the sky off San Diego, of the mountains rising out of New Zealand, and then, his mood darkening, of the control room of a submarine he trained on in the early spring of 42. He hated submarines—no life rafts—but a sonar instructor had noticed his ear and so for a couple of weeks he feared he might spend the war underwater. One day they were training in the waters off the coast of California, only a couple of hundred feet below the surface. The sonar picked something up, something a few miles east of them. The sonar man didn’t think it was a ship. Neither did Sam, who’d trained on the machine about two weeks. He could tell from the return ping, which was too soft and fuzzy. The captain, though, insisted it was an enemy sub. A discussion ensued. The chain of command was clear, so they torpedoed the blip, but found no evidence of a sub. It was a whale, coming to the surface for a bit of air.

It is, Sam thinks, no small thing to kill an animal, any animal, but that whale was something else altogether; causing its death was a special kind of hubris, a basic injustice against nature, and the nature of things. He thinks back to the captain, who was probably only thirty-two or -three, as unsure in life as any man, charged with responsibility that was beyond him. Sam wonders if he survived the war. In any case, he’d likely be dead now. Then he was blond and skinny with blotchy skin and a face that did not display a seriousness of purpose. Still, he tried. Hood was his name. Back on shore Sam went to the Officers’ Club for a drink, a new pleasure of rank and adulthood. There, for the first time, he met Higginbotham, a large man (he’d played football at the academy), imposing at the bar, with his special mix of posture and bulk. There was one seat, and it happened to be next to Higginbotham. Sam took it.

“Where you from, son?” Higginbotham asked, his soft drawl exotic, almost foreign. In college Sam knew guys from Ohio and Wisconsin, one from Pennsylvania. The navy was a whole different story.

Sam told him.

“Dee-troit,” said the officer. “Your daddy make cars?”

“No, sir.”

“No.”

“I thought everyone in Detroit makes cars.”

“Or tanks,” Sam said.

Higginbotham chuckled and Sam thought it would end there, but Higginbotham really did want to know what Sam’s father did for a living, and so Sam told him: he bought and sold junk. Sam explained that his father was an immigrant, and that things were not easy for him, that he’d come here poor and he still spoke with an accent. Sam did not mention that the accent was Yiddish. No sense bringing that up.

“He sent you to college, though, didn’t he?” Higginbotham asked.

“He did.”

Higginbotham put a hand on Sam’s shoulder and motioned to the bartender with his other. Then he looked down at Sam’s beer, which was barely touched. “You ever had a martini, son?”

“No, sir.”

“We’re going to toast your daddy, then. Since he made sure you got educated. And, since he obviously never taught you, I’m going to teach you how to drink.”

“Learn from the master,” said a voice down the bar. Higginbotham raised his empty glass in a mock salute, then turned back to Sam.

“Now tell me, which tub are you on?”

Sam told him.

Sam’s transfer came through the following afternoon. Even then he recognized it as a blessing, a gift from God.

• • •

Sam wakes from a short nap, twenty minutes in his reading chair, he guesses. How can he explain to Phyllis the joy he feels just waking up? With death so close, it’s like the war. If he woke at sea and it wasn’t a general quarters alarm—sometimes it was—then he felt he’d been granted a new life. He wanted to survive. He did what was required of him; often he did more. He understood that luck was the main component of the formula that resulted in life or death, but he wanted to move the odds. Higginbotham wanted this, too.

One day late in the war, though of course he had no idea it was so, Sam found Higginbotham in the officers’ mess, drinking from a flask. “This is the last whiskey,” Higginbotham said. “After this we’ll need to hit a decent port to restock.” He paused, then asked Sam, “You got any?”

“No, sir.” It had never occurred to Sam to buy alcohol unless he was going to consume it on the spot.

“What do you have?” Higginbotham asked.

“Chocolate,” said Sam.

“Well, let’s have it.”

Sam’s parents had sent the box, Saunders Chocolates, individual pieces set nicely into pleated pieces of paper. Except that it had taken three months for the box to find him in the Pacific, during which time the chocolate and fillings and paper had melted into a single block. Sam set the box on the table, gave it a hit with the heel of his hand, and then took off the cover. “Help yourself,” he told his commanding officer.

Higginbotham took a piece, paper and all. So did Sam. “I’ve always liked the taste of chocolate with scotch,” Higginbotham said, while he sniffed the empty flask.

“Not gin?” Sam said.

“God, no, not with chocolate. Besides, I don’t bring gin on board.”

“What do you have?” Higginbotham asked.

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As if reading Sam’s mind, Higginbotham spoke. “I think I could do this forever, if it were not for one thing.”

“You, sir?”

“Do what forever, sir?”

“Stay at sea. At war.”

“And what is the one thing?”

“Women. We go too long without them. Not that there aren’t advantages to that, but it’s not natural.”

“Women. We go too long without them. Not that there aren’t advantages to that, but it’s not natural.”

“You’ll see. When the shooting stops, all sorts of other things start to get important. The cut of a suit, who’s going to make what presentation. Money, Christ, always money. Out here, who cares? You have scotch, or chocolate, and you’re a king.”

“Except we have no women, and people are shooting at us,” Sam said.

“They’re supposed to shoot at us. It’s why we’re here. Someday you’ll see, this isn’t so bad. Everyone wants to go home, I guarantee you. But they may not like it when they get there. Home is not an easy thing for a man. Especially if you’ve been out here.”

“You prefer the ocean.”

“I even prefer the navy. They’re going to kick me out, but not till this war is over. Right now, they need the bodies.” Sam had heard stories, rumors of some transgression that stymied Higginbotham’s career. It involved a woman. There had to be truth to it. An academy graduate, in the greatest war of all time—he should have been someplace better.
“You think we will win?” Sam asked. A dangerous question, as it implied another outcome was possible, which in turn implied doubt.

“Of course. Always have. Why should this time be any different? Look at the Japs. They’ve started to send their boys on suicide missions. That’s always a sign of the end. They can’t win, so they glorify dying. The outcome is not the question. The question is: what comes after the outcome? That I don’t know. You, though, should stay in the navy.”

“Why me?” Sam asked.

“Because you’ll always have something to do. You may escape boredom. And you’ll go far.”

“And what about women?” Sam asked.

“Find a good one, the right one for you. Not an easy thing, so you’ll have to spend some time at it. That’s time well spent. Even if you decide she’s the wrong woman, it’s time well spent.”

“Are you married, sir?”

“I was, but that’s a complicated story.” Higginbotham raised his empty flask for a toast—to what he didn’t say.
She sits at the gate at LaGuardia, the space confined and gray, almost deserted. Two rows away, in a phalanx of connected chairs, a man is trying to type on a laptop he has balanced on his knees. Three seats down there’s a priest reading a *Daily News*. Otherwise, there don’t seem to be many takers for Detroit, or anywhere else. Even a year after the attacks, people aren’t flying, and the airlines are desperate. She’d gotten a hardship deal on her ticket when she pleaded to an airline manager that she needed to get to New York to make funeral arrangements for her brother. The family, she said, had finally decided that the body would not show up. “He died on September eleventh,” she murmured. That’s all you have to say now, and people show respect.

Her phone comes alight, a 212 number. The cop. Ludvenko. She left him a message to tell him that she’d found Siobhan, and that she needed the sample of her brother’s DNA that the police department had. He seemed to like her; he always called back.

“I’m sorry,” he says now. “I mean, I’m glad you got answers, that you found her, but I’m sorry she’s deceased.”

Deceased, Cat thinks. Ended.

“Anyway,” Ludvenko says, “There’s a lab near the boy, in White Plains. They can do the DNA test. We don’t do it, not if it’s not really police business. But you give me the go-ahead, I’ll get your brother’s sample up there. They’ll have some paperwork for you.”

“You have my go-ahead,” she says. She writes down the lab’s name, its phone number, another 914.

“You have seen the kid?” the cop asks.

“Yes, I have.”

“So, whaddya think? Is it your brother’s?”

“I don’t know.”

“Aw, c’mon. You don’t know by looking at him?”

“I think he is,” Cat allows.

“We get these stories all the time now. The kids whose fathers died before they were born. Lotta women pregnant on nine-eleven, I guess. My wife, even. I got two little ones now. But I’m still here. If some-thing’d happened to me that day, then, I mean, I can’t imagine.”

The priest closes his paper; she turns toward him, drawn by the sound. He catches her eye, offers the paper.


“My pleasure,” he says. She envies him. He seems so relaxed, so sure. It must be the faith, knowing, if not the answers, then that you’re close to them. Her mother was Catholic, not that Cat received any religious instruction. Her mother’s funeral was Catholic, organized by her grandparents. She remembers sitting with Kyle and watching it all, the foreignness of it, the service long and boring and somehow wonderful. People had been doing this for almost two thousand years, she thought. Here was a time-tested way to deal with death. If you believed, then maybe it was easier. Like the hijackers. They believed and went willingly to their deaths. Amazing.

She calls Tommy. She decides this is okay: she’s the one with the news. It’s a little after seven-thirty, and she finds him at home. “Big plans tonight?” she asks.

“Yeah, Tuesday’s always a big night for me. You?”

“I’m flying back.”

“That was fast.”

“I found him,” she says. “Kyle’s boy. I found him.”

“Wow. Tell me about it.”

“He’s with the mother’s parents. I asked them to do a DNA test. That’s about the extent of it.”
“Give me the name of the lab.” He tells her to name him as her doctor when she signs the privacy forms. “That way, I can call up there and push them on the results. I mean, my office can. And they can release the results to me. It’ll save you a lot of hassle.”

“Great,” she says, grateful to have help, not to have to do everything for herself.

“You need a ride from the airport?” he asks.

“I got my car there.”

“No doubt eating Cheetos for dinner and falling asleep on the couch.”

“Sounds like a good night. Jon’s with his mom.”

“You never talk about her.”

“Well, if you can’t say something nice …”

He was always clever. She remembers this. Clever. Also nice, but not nice. She always felt, as she feels now, a little off balance with him, and she likes the feeling.

“Cat?”

“Yeah?”

“Come to my house tonight.”

She wants to, very much. Not that she would have admitted it so blatantly, even to herself, until right now.

“When you were a kid,” she asks, “did your parents take you to church?”

“Oh God,” he says. “Is that a no?”

Somehow, in the plane, she feels closer to Kyle. His meeting was at the top of the building; he must have fallen out of the sky. Did he know it was the end? What would he have regretted? That he never knew his son? Or perhaps he couldn’t understand that yet. Even when she was pregnant, Cat couldn’t guess at the love she would feel for Connor. Yes, she loved him, but not like she loved him when he was born and she could hold him in her arms and feel his weight, the heft of him and the responsibility that was now hers. She knew then that her life would never be the same, that she had to protect this child at all costs, from everything and everyone. She felt this even with regard to Michael, and now she wonders about Siobhan. Did she really understand Kyle? Did she worry he wasn’t a good enough man? Or did she just want the little boy all to herself? Perhaps she thought she was the only person who could love Ian enough. Cat had felt that about Connor. She asks herself, Do I really want that responsibility with this little boy? With Ian? Do I really have a choice?

Off the plane, walking down the narrow corridors of Metro, she slows to look at two soldiers. They’re dressed in green camo, M16s strapped over their shoulders and pointed at the ground. M16s. Wasn’t there enough of that just a little to the east, in Detroit’s inner city? The striking thing here, though, isn’t the uniforms or the guns, but the faces of the soldiers, so young and smooth and pink. My God, she thinks, they’re babies. Fifteen? Sixteen? Connor is halfway to that age. No, these boys must be older. They must be, but they don’t look it.

She comes down the stairs to the cramped baggage area still thinking about the soldiers. She has checked nothing, but this is the only way out. She looks up and there’s Tommy, standing by the baggage carousel, watching her. She feels maybe he’s been watching for some time.

“What are you doing here?” she asks. “I told you I had my car.”

“I didn’t want you to drive alone.”

“Afraid I might change my mind?”

“It never occurred to me,” he says, smiling.

He is alive to her, taller than she remembers, bigger, with the bulk men get that, lucky for them, makes them attractive, more real and substantial. He’s wearing a plain black T-shirt; the hair on his arms, she notices, is darker than it once was, and there’s more of it. He takes her bag, wheels it himself, opens the door for her—this terminal is so old and run down that the doors aren’t even automatic—and follows her to her car. She’s left it in the expensive short-term lot for the first time in her life.
The air is warm and humid, a comfort, the air of home.

“You want me to drive?” he asks.

“Where’s your car?”

“I took a cab here, so I could ride with you.”

He pays for parking, drives them out to 94, where once a plane went down, and then up the Southfield Expressway. “You going to talk to me?” he asks.

She tells him about the trip, the stop at the Times and the drive out to Yorktown, about the Boyles and little Ian in his playpen. And at the same time she’s thinking what it will be like to undress Tommy Swenson, to put her body against his. Will the years melt away? The truth is her memory of sex with him, the physical part of it, is not nearly as strong as what she remembers emotionally, the intensity of what she felt for him, which she thought then was love. She thinks it now, too. Then she loved the idea of herself as a woman, which was exciting and real, devoid, she thought, of artifice. Alone with Tommy she felt free to be herself, which was the same as being free; she felt it partly because she trusted him and partly because she didn’t know yet not to be trustful.

She glances at him, and wants it all back. She’s excited for the physical nature of what’s to come, and curious, too. Her whole life she’s only slept with one man at a time, and she’s never doubled back. Don’t make too much of it, she tells herself. Just let it happen and see where you end up.

Large trees line Pilgrim Street and have grown together over the expanse of the road, a long canopy of foliage. Even at night she can see they’re magnificent trees. She asks what they are. “Elms,” he says. “Aren’t elms diseased?” “Not on this street.”

He pulls her Ford in behind his Cadillac, the backside of the sedan wide and substantial, with two chrome exhaust pipes. “Driving American?” she says.

“Started that right after the divorce. Besides, all doctors seem to drive Beemers now, or Lexuses. You see, that car makes me a rebel. Pathetic, right?”

“Hardly.”

“And it’s a nod to my hometown. I hate what’s happened to Detroit. The name Detroit once meant something good and powerful. That car’s my way of putting my finger in the dyke. I don’t care if it’s hopeless.”

He leads her to the side door. She can see nothing, is aware only of the one breath he takes that is deeper than the rest. This reminds her of sneaking around when they were kids. Her stomach is turning over, excited, and then she hears the lock turn. She grabs his arm.

“What?” he asks.

She kisses him. Knowing that there will be more than kissing, it is like a first kiss, new and tempestuous. “Take me to bed,” she tells him. “Right away.”

He guides her through the dark house by pulling on her hand till she is in a large, shadowy bedroom with a king-size sleigh bed onto which she finds herself quickly thrown, reminded of his size and strength, which always surprised her but which she liked, which she likes now as he falls atop her, kissing her, rubbing his hand over her body, then unbuttoning her blouse. He can’t do this fast enough for her, and so she helps him, first with the buttons and then out of his clothes, a well of desire coming up in her that she forgot she even had. Later, lying with her head against his damp chest, she feels almost embarrassed by this, by her desire, her neediness. She has learned to do things—expects to do things—for herself. And now there’s this man, both old and new.

“You’re gonna sigh like that, the least you could do is tell me why. Talk to me,” he says.

“You’re always saying that.”

“You’re never talking. What are you thinking?”

“That was …” She searches for the adjective. “Lovely.”

“Lovely? That was great,” he says. “I’m hoping to try it again, very soon.”

“You’re ambitious.”

“Always have been.”

“I remember,” she says.

“But tempered now, as I’m older.”
We’re both older, she thinks, both tempered. When was the last time she lay in his arms? 1976. Twenty-six years. They couldn’t possibly be the same people they were in ’76, and yet she still feels the attraction. There seems no way around it.

She feels him running his left hand along the crook of her hip, a light touch, but without caution. When it comes to touching like this, it is a fine balance between brute force and tentativeness, but he traverses the line just right. A confident man, thus an appealing man. He puts his right index finger under her chin, turns her head up to his and suddenly she is kissing him, dizzy at first with all that has happened today, and then happy for this time, when she can forget about it all.
He thinks of Kyle, as he has every morning for almost a year. It is always the first thing he thinks of after the dream, and always it takes him a moment to realize that Kyle is dead, that there is nothing more he can do for the boy, that there is no way to protect him. He remembers how when Cat and Kyle were little they’d sneak into the bedroom and crawl on all fours to Sam’s side of the bed, then poke him and giggle till he woke up. It was a great joy to have someone, anyone, who wanted you to wake up. If it happened to be your children, then you were blessed.

He puts his hand on his chest, to see if he can feel his heart beating. He can’t, though it must be; he’s cognizant, alive. Still, it would be nice to get that extra tactile confirmation. He realizes that Phyllis is asleep beside him, and then that he is in her bedroom and it is morning. This he can tell from the light. Not that he can see much. Most days he can make out things in the distance, but without his glasses the world up close is a total mystery.

Phyllis, he remembers, wants to play golf today. He’s never much liked the game, and he’s never been good at it, but he was also a salesman, so he played. It’s been twenty years at least. Phyllis has reserved a cart. “You don’t have to play,” she told him, “if you don’t want to. But you have to ride along.”

Eighty years old, he thinks, and still taking orders.

It turns out that he does have to play, after a fashion. It’s a bright day but still overcast, with humidity that’s making his hip hurt. Every once in a while there’s a little tug in his chest, as though someone were pulling a string out of him. He’d be happy just to sit and watch her play, but now that she’s got him out here, she wants him to play along. At first he stands and takes swings at the ball, but then, too winded to continue, he sits and takes the occasional swipe from the cart, a geriatric version of polo. He’s bad enough that eventually she just picks up his ball.

“I think it’s time,” she says, “that you tell me how your wife died.”

“Haven’t I?”

“You have, twice, and I’m still not sure I understand.”

“I’m not sure I understand it myself.”

He again recounts for her how Ann kicked him out when she discovered that he kept a separate apartment. He didn’t want to leave her because of the children—Cat was in her last year of high school, Kyle had a couple of years left—and the apartment was his way to deal with his home life. He never slept with his wife; she wouldn’t allow it. He literally bedded down each night in a royal blue mummy sleeping bag on the floor of their bedroom. He slept well like that. He had girlfriends, women who, like him, had families and responsibilities and certain human needs and weaknesses. “It seems a lifetime ago,” he tells Phyllis, and it does, more remote, even, than the war. “It’s as though I’m talking about someone else.”

“Go on,” she says.

“It was August. Cat’s last school year was about to start. I begged Ann just to let things be, but she couldn’t. About two months later I got a call from Cat. Ann was dead. She’d taken Valium and drunk gin. Gin! That was my drink. She didn’t drink when I met her, and I taught her. I taught her about martinis, how to enjoy one. It wasn’t a bad thing to know. Martinis saved my life, but that’s a different story. Anyway, she did herself in, but we never found out if she meant to. She didn’t leave a note. Cat and Kyle found her. They went into her bedroom after she didn’t surface for the whole day. Kyle, I think, never got over it. Hardly said a word the whole time he was in high school. He was quiet, though, in any case.”

They’re at Phyllis’s ball. She gets out, takes her swing, sits back in the cart and starts to drive. Sam likes the cart, the whirr of its electric motor.

“This is the part I don’t understand,” Phyllis says. “Did she want to kill herself?”

“No, I don’t think so. But she knew better. It was as if she didn’t care what happened. Probably went to bed thinking, ‘Maybe I’ll wake up, maybe I won’t.’”
“Like you go to bed.”
“I know I’m going to wake up,” Sam says. “God is not going to let me die before Cat and Connor get here.”
“I thought you don’t believe in God.” “I don’t,” he says.
She wakes in a large, bright bedroom, lying in a bed beneath a down duvet. She hears the soft hum of air-conditioning. It takes her a moment to realize that she’s in Tommy’s bedroom. The blinds are drawn but they’re not blackouts. Here is a man who doesn’t sleep late.

She hasn’t slept so well in years. She lies still for a moment to let her head clear, running yesterday and last night through her mind, the little boy, the two flights, Tommy. Quite a day, and with sex. It has been months, and, of course, decades.

She looks at the blinds and tries to guess at the time, arriving at seven-thirty. Maybe eight. There’s a clock on the nightstand on Tommy’s side of the bed, and so she moves over to look at it, feeling a little decadent, sleeping so late, crawling naked in a man’s bed. Oh, my God, she thinks. It’s ten to ten.

She reaches to the floor for her cell phone—she never lets it out of her sight unless she’s with Connor—and calls Tonya at work.

“Guess where I am?” she asks.
“No.”
“Now I’m interested.”
“In his bed.”
“Well, well. How was it?”
“I just woke up,” Cat says. “What else do I need to say?”
“Oh God, when I think about my morning, I’d love to be able to make a call like this.”
“You’re married,” Cat points out.
“Don’t I know it. Where is he now?”
“At work, I guess.”
“Well,” Tonya says, “Go find the note he left you, then call me back and tell me what it says.”

She hangs up and finds the robe Tommy placed for her at the end of the bed. She puts it on, goes to the bathroom (no note), and walks out to his kitchen, expecting to find the note. Instead he’s sitting at his glass breakfast table in a T-shirt and boxers, typing at a laptop. He looks up and smiles at her. She wonders if this is the guy, if this was always the guy.

“Hey,” he says.
“Hey, yourself. I’ve got to get to work.”
“Why?” he asks.
“Why? What do you mean, why?”
“You’re in sales, right? No time clock.”
“That’s right.”
“So, if anybody asks, or you’re worried about your image, you say you spent the morning with a rich prospect. Me.”
“So, you’re rich.”
“Well, it’s not all about money. And right now your prospect would like you to sit down and have a cup of coffee with him, and then he’d like to take you back to bed.”
“Don’t think that will get you a better rate,” she says.
“I get nothing for the effort?”
She has to take a breath, change gears. “Don’t you have to work?”
“It’s mostly a paperwork morning for me, which I’ve been doing for the last three hours. I canceled my afternoon
appointments. Please, sit."
She does what she’s told.

You know,” she tells him, “we’re basically strangers.” She’s snuggled up against his warm body, still a little light-headed, probably from not eating since early yesterday. The last twelve hours remind her how much she likes sex. Working and mothering and living alone, it’s easy to forget.

“We’re strangers with one big difference,” he says.
“What?”
“I trust you.”
“You trust me,” she says.
“Yes, I trust you. I don’t know you, but also I do. I know you in a way that I never could if I just met you yesterday. That, and the trust, is incredibly appealing. I find myself very attracted to you, in case you can’t tell.”
“I can tell,” she admits.
“Still. I always was. You’ve stayed in great shape, by the way.”
“That’s recent.”
“Really.”
“Since nine-eleven. I decided I wanted more control of things. My body seemed like a good place to start.”
He nods, and she wonders if he truly understands. He is looking directly into her eyes, and for now that is enough.

Later, she watches him watch her as she returns from the bathroom. She feels admired, and is amazed by it.

“What?” he asks.
“Do you think you could give me a tour of your house? This is really the only room where you’ve let me spend any time.”

She puts on the robe and follows him around. There’s the dining room she noticed off the kitchen, a den with a couch and a large television, plus two bathrooms other than the master and two more bedrooms, one of which he’s converted to an office, and the other for his son. It is here she lingers, familiar with the little-boy nature of it, the toy vehicles and sports posters of men she does not recognize, the books about dinosaurs and the solar system.

“What is it?” he asks.
“He’s not exactly missing. He’s at his mother’s.”
“Who was she?” Cat realizes she doesn’t even know the woman’s name.
“She’s still alive.”
“Who is she?”
“Laurie is her name. She’s a nurse. A bad idea for a doctor, I know, but with all the training there’s a long time when the only women you ever see are nurses, or other doctors.”

“Or patients.”
“Well, yes, except that young cardiologists don’t usually treat people who are age appropriate; often they’re not even women. And if a younger woman does ever need my help, she has bigger problems than needing a date.”

At lunch she has a wonderful feeling of well-being. She’s free on a workday, eating in a restaurant. It seems there’s a whole world out here she’s lost touch with, if she ever touched it at all. She checks her watch: over three hours till she has to pick up Connor.

“When can I see you again?” he asks.
“Not for a little while.”
“Why not?”
“I’ve got to go to California,” she tells him. “As you know.”
“I forgot.”
He seems genuinely disappointed by her departure. She looks across at him. “Doctor, I have several hours till I have to be anywhere. Would you like to take me home?” she asks, knowing full well that he does.
Phyllis drives. Sam sits in her old Toyota sedan, newspapers on the floor by his feet, along with an empty paper coffee cup and what looks like a lipstick tube. He doesn’t understand how a woman who keeps her house as tidy as officers’ quarters can let her car come to this. He wanted to drive his Lincoln, but she doesn’t want him on the road, and says his car is too big for her. So here he is, old news beneath his feet, an empty paper coffee cup bumping at his ankles.

At Cunningham’s office he checks in, and then she comes with him to the examining room. Soon he is sitting on the table, looking down at the folds of his chest and the patches of gray hair. He glances at her and finds her looking at him. He thinks that the way women forgive and forbear is an essential element on the planet, like water.

Cunningham comes into the room, sees Phyllis, and introduces himself before Sam has a chance to do it. “Sam,” he says. “These next days, they’re a risk.”

“Don’t worry, Doc. I’m gonna make it.”

Cunningham pats and pokes him for a while. “You can get dressed,” he says, “but you need this operation. You need it now. We’ve got papers for you to sign, saying you understand the risks here.”

“I understand.”

“Could you convince him to change his mind?” Cunningham says to Phyllis.

“No,” she says, wonderfully succinct.

Sam waits to dress till Cunningham has left and he can catch his breath. “Did I ever tell you the story of the dinghy?” he asks Phyllis.

She shakes her head. “Tell me.”

“Summer of ’44. I had about another three weeks or so till I’d break my back, but of course I didn’t know that then. We came upon on the dinghy. Three Japs in it. We steamed over and one of them jumped out and started to swim away. Now understand, this was the middle of the Pacific. You jump into the water you’re not swimming anywhere but to the bottom of the ocean. It was amazing that a man would do that, but this one did.

“We pulled the other two on board. One was more or less unconscious. We took him to sick bay and he was still on the ship when we got hit, but he made it. The other one, too. A stocky fellow, dehydrated as hell, with those painful-looking cracks in his lips. He had body hair, too. A lot for a Jap. But, anyway, he was basically okay, and he had some English, so the captain asked him why he didn’t swim away, like his comrade.

“I remember, I leaned in. I wanted to hear his answer, ’cause the Japs were big on death. Big on killing themselves. I saw this at Iwo Jima; we could see them jumping to their deaths, rather than be captured. And, of course, there were the kamikazes.

“So this little stocky guy, he says he didn’t swim away because he’s got a girl in Nagasaki, and he wants to live for her. Well, it wasn’t long till we took care of Nagasaki. But I’ve often thought about that guy, because that girl, she saved him. Probably she never knew it, but she saved his life.”

Phyllis looks at him. It’s an odd look.

“What?” he asks.

“So, are you the one in the dinghy,” she asks, “or the one swimming away?”
The night her mother died, she slept at Tommy’s; his parents were out of town. She told her mother she was spending the night at Tonya’s, even went there and hung around till ten, just in case her mother called. She didn’t.

The next morning, a Saturday, Tommy left early for football and took his little brother with him. She tried to go back to sleep, but she couldn’t, alone in that strange, empty house. She drove to Tonya’s and called home from there. Kyle answered.

“Hey,” he said.
“Let me talk to Mom.”
“She’s still sleeping.”
“Okay, tell her I’m hanging out at Tonya’s this morning. I’ll be back later.”
“Can you take me to practice?” Kyle asked. She had a Pinto, given to her by her father. He said she should drive Kyle whenever he needed to be driven.

“When is it?”
“Forty-five minutes.”
“No.”
“You’re supposed to.”
“Ride your bike,” she told him. “It’s not far to school.”
“I don’t like to get tired before I get there.”
“Kyle, you run, like, ten miles at these practices. What’s another couple on a bike?”
“Mom said—”
“So wake her up,” Cat replied.

She drove Tonya to Denny’s, where they sat in a booth and lingered over breakfast. Finally, Cat went home. She pulled up under the oak, the Pinto’s wheels crunching the acorns as she rolled to a stop. Inside, it was quiet. She checked the garage. Kyle’s bike was gone, but her mother’s car was still there. Amazing, Cat thought. Her mother never slept this late. Still, she was tired herself, and so she went to her room and took a nap, dozing off thinking of Tommy, of how warm it was to sleep next to him, of how what it would be like to do that every night, like an adult.

She woke a little before three. She found Kyle out in the kitchen, drinking milk from the carton. He was almost as tall as she was now, sinewy and lean.

“Where’s Mom?” she asked.
He managed to shrug without taking his lips from the carton.
“It’s ten to three.”
He just looked at her.
“Did you see her today?”
“No.”
“When was the last time?”
“Last night,” he said. “I went out with Mark. She was kinda getting ready for bed.”
“What time?”
“Early.”
“She seem okay?” Cat asked.

His look was answer enough. She knew then that her mother was in real trouble. Later she would tell Kyle not to feel guilty, that he was just a kid, that he couldn’t have known, but she would have known.

She went to the bedroom, Kyle following. She didn’t bother to knock on the door but went right in. Her mother
lay in bed, curled up, fetal position, beneath the blankets.

“Call nine-one-one,” she told Kyle before she even touched her mother. Her idea was to give her mother mouth-to-mouth, to try to keep her breathing until the ambulance came. But when Cat touched her, and turned her onto her back and felt the stiffness of the body, and saw the yellowish purple on her mother’s face, Cat knew it was too late. She reached over and opened the blinds. The light spilled in. She noticed the bottle of gin on the nightstand, and the pills.

“Aw, Mom,” she said. “Mom.” It’s so … stupid, she thought. Stupid, stupid, stupid. She sat on the edge of the bed and felt the tears on her cheek, but then she turned to Kyle and took the phone from him. He’d dialed the emergency number, but he was frozen, unable to speak.

Catherine?” says the voice. It’s Saturday morning. Her first thought of panic is Connor, but he’s right here in front of her, with all of his toy cars and trucks running north and south on the floor, a little Lodge Expressway in her living room. So, it must be her father.

“This is she,” she says, just as her mother taught her.

“This is Greg Boyle.”

It’s been less than a week since she was in his living room. She hopes he’s taken Ian’s DNA to the lab. She’s signed the papers so Tommy can get the results, and she prepaid for the test by giving them a credit card number over the phone.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Boyle?”

“You can call me Greg.”

“Okay, you can call me Cat.”

“And I’d like to come see you.”

“Sure,” she says.

“Right now.”

She doesn’t quite understand, which he gathers from her silence.

“I’m at the airport, in Detroit. I’ve rented a car. I need directions.”

She has then another feeling of panic; things are moving quickly. She doesn’t want him to see where she lives. The smallness of it, the cheap kitchen cabinets and countertops, the yellowing paint, the two small bedrooms. “Ian will sleep where?” she can hear him saying. “In the living room?” There is so much she hasn’t worked out. A child comes into the world, you must know where he will sleep, who will look after him. Who will love him. You don’t back it up on the fly.

She gives Boyle the directions. Saturday morning there won’t be much traffic. Even on a trip that he’s never made before, it won’t take him more than forty-five minutes. She needs to shower, wash her hair, put on some makeup. And she needs to clean up the place.

When he rings the bell close to an hour later, she is almost ready. She’s cleaned herself up, and the apartment, and she’s baking cinnamon buns, Connor’s favorite, the premade kind stored in the freezer. The older she gets the more she avoids cooking, but with a child and little money she really doesn’t have a choice. And Connor, little man that he is, is ruled by his stomach.

“Who’s coming over?” he asked when she started making them.

“A man. His name is Mr. Boyle.”

“What does he want?” Connor asked.

A good question.

“He wants to talk with me. It’s adult stuff. You can watch cartoons in my bedroom.” This was the ultimate luxury for Connor, and yet another bribe.

Now Boyle enters. He’s wearing a blue Windbreaker Cat sometimes sees on older men and union workers, dying breeds both, and often the same people. It’s still summer and likely to reach the mideighties today. He shakes her hand and she suggests he take a seat on the couch. He collapses into it, sinking deeply into the ancient cushions, an
arm over the rest. He seems exhausted, or just relieved to have arrived at his destination.

“My wife doesn’t know I’m here,” he says.

Cat has, a time or two, met with men whose wives didn’t know where they were. It was never a good idea.

“I told her I was going into the city for work. I work a lot of Saturdays. People need water every day of the week. Now, if those crazies ever really wanted to get us, well, they’d go after the water.”

He stops talking, perhaps realizing he hasn’t given Cat a chance to speak.

“Something to drink?” she asks, then gasps. Hadn’t he just been talking about poisoned water?

“Well, a glass of … water.” He smiles. “Yes, water would be nice.”

She hurries to the kitchen, relieved to be able to move.

“My wife,” he says, louder, so she can hear him from the kitchen, ten feet away, “thinks I’m in the city. But I caught a plane out of Westchester, the little airport there. They have a flight that comes right here. I fly back this afternoon.”

She hands him a glass. It’s got a bluish tint, so cheap it might as well be plastic.

“Please,” he says. “Sit with me.”

She sits.

“I want to tell you about Ian. There’s a lot you don’t know.”

“Okay,” Cat says. “I’d like to know.”

“You can imagine our shock when Siobhan told us she was pregnant, that there was no father, or that she didn’t want a father. That she was going to do this on her own. I knew your brother’s name, so I assumed he was the father, but Siobhan said no, there was no father. It was very difficult on Mrs. Boyle and me. Were you given a religious upbringing, Ms. Miller?”

“Cat.”

“Cat, were you?”

“No.”

“Your parents are?”

“My mother was Catholic. She died a long time ago. My father is Jewish.”

He shifts in his seat, takes his arm off the rest. Well, he seems to be saying.

“We’re Catholic. We raised both of our daughters in the church. Mrs. Boyle and I were very conscientious.”

“Yes,” Cat says.

“My wife, she can ignore things. I knew my daughters weren’t living the life of, well, their mother. Still, I expected more. My younger girl, Tara, she got pregnant, had an abortion. This I found out afterward. I begged her not to tell her mother. But she did. She told her because she knew it would hurt. You think you can forgive your children anything, but that one was tough for me—not the commission of sin, but the intentional cruelty, the willful violation of the fifth commandment. Then she went off and joined the navy. Not that she told us. One of our neighbors has a boy in the service, and he told his parents he’d seen Tara. She doesn’t speak to us.”

“But, the yellow ribbon?”

“Yes, I put that up. Because, still, I want her to come home. I’ll always want her to come home. Her mother, of course, believes it will happen.”

Cat understands, knows that mothers hope against hope, and believe what they will believe.

“You see, the little boy, Ian, he can’t live with his aunt. It’s just not possible. I’ve got a couple of brothers, but they’re older than I am. Same with Mrs. Boyle’s sister and brothers.”

“Mr. Boyle, I’d be happy to take Ian.” She feels elated saying this; she’d feared he’d fight her. Now it’s as if she’s doing him a favor. “He’s—”

“We’ll see about that. It’s why I’ve come.” He leans forward, his movements slow as he reaches for the water. Cat wonders if he’s not older than she thought.

“I have cancer,” he says. “In the pancreas. It is, truly, a death sentence. The leaves are about to turn, and it’s likely I’ve seen my last spring. This saddens me. I’ve lost two daughters. Tell me, are you close with your father?”

“I suppose,” she lies.
“You see him often.”
“No, not exactly. He lives in California. We talk on the phone.”
“You ought to go see him.”
“I am, for a week. It’s the one-year anniversary of Kyle’s death. And Siobhan’s, of course.”
“My wife, she doesn’t know I have cancer. She thinks I go to the doctor, take the pills for a stomach issue. I just don’t know how to tell her, not with Ian there. She loves that little boy. I know we’re too old to see it through, would be even if I were healthy, and she can’t do it alone. She knows this, but she can do it for one more day, and so she hangs on. But we’re out of time. She’s waiting for me to tell her what we’re going to do.”

“Which is?” Cat asks.

He looks around the apartment as if he’s just opened his eyes and is trying to figure out where he is. Cat is forced to glance with him, at the shabbiness of her home, the cheap couch and chair, the old Matisse print (saved, unbelievably, from her college apartment), a wall that is completely bare.

“Can you give me a tour of your home?” he asks.

This takes a couple minutes: a brief stop in Connor’s disaster of a bedroom, with clothes and toys strewn across the floor even though she’d just picked it up, then to her bedroom where Connor lies belly-down on the bed, giggling at the TV.

“Connor, please say hello to Mr. Boyle.”

Nothing.

“Connor!”

He looks as if to say, Why are you yelling? He says his hello, and goes back to the show. Cat and Boyle return to the living room.

Boyle sits back on the couch and looks at her. She wants to say something but realizes she’s selling herself. So she thinks of Sherri, of how Sheri would tell her not to speak.

“Where would Ian sleep?” he asks.

“I’ll get a bigger place, so he can have his own room.”

“Do you have the money for that?”

Not yet, she thinks. “My brother had money. It’s still tied up in probate, but it’s coming. And the settlement. That alone would be enough. My father is handling it. He says it shouldn’t be long now.”

“Does your father know about Ian?”

“Not yet.”

“Why haven’t you told him?”

“I guess I’m waiting to see if it’s real. He’s an old man, my father. I don’t want to tell him he has a new grandson, then tell him he doesn’t.”

“We’ll need to move quickly,” Boyle says. “Ian won’t remember these days. He’s still young enough that it would be easy to change his caregivers. If you want it.”

“I want it,” she says.

“You are sure? You can’t change your mind, once you’ve taken him.”

“I’ve never been so sure of anything in my life.”

“Okay, then. I should get back to the airport. I need to talk to my wife.”

“Yes,” Cat says.

“May I ask you something?” he says.

The tone sets her on edge, but she nods yes.

“Is there a man in your life? The boy’s father?”

“Not the boy’s father. A better man. I’ve known him for thirty years, so I feel confident saying that.”

“And I’ve known you for less than a week. And I think I’m going to let you raise my grandson. Here’s the thing, Catherine Miller. For me, these are desperate times. I have to trust you. I don’t see where I have a choice, but I want to feel that I can. I want to believe that things will turn out all right.”

“They will,” she assures him. “I know they will.”
“I think about my lost daughters every morning, and then about what am I going to do for the little boy. There is never an answer, but now you’ve presented yourself. I have to go on faith, really.”

“The lab,” Cat asks. “Have you …”

“No, I see no need. If Ian were Tara’s child, then yes, I’d have been there already. But I know my daughters. I know Siobhan. She was different. Very, very loyal. If she was with your brother, then that’s who she was with.”

“You don’t want to be sure?”

“I am sure,” he says.

She asks herself if she is sure and realizes her doubt springs from her own fear of getting exactly what she’s asked for. She needs to banish these thoughts. She’s wanted Kyle’s child, and now that she can have him, she’s questioning it. No, she tells herself, she must do better. The boys demand it.
Sam wakes gasping for breath, a memory of the planes coming at him, always the planes, the deafening blasts of the guns over the roar of the ship’s engines and those of the planes, the smell of the saltwater and smoke and something else. Fear, probably. He survived, which was all that mattered then, to survive and thus receive the blessing of long life, now lived. Always the blessings are better granted than lived.

He rolls to one side, swings his legs out, gets his feet to the floor. Transferring, they call this, the simple act of being able to get out of bed. And into it. It had been his first test after the back operation, the nurse coming in one morning and saying, “Okay, Mister. Today is the day you’re going to get out of bed.” She all but shoved him to his feet. Sam felt embarrassed wearing that silly robe, but he let that go and struggled with her till there he was, standing, his feet registering the coldness of the floor, his legs slightly wobbly, his whole body shaking, in part from being so weak but mostly from the whole idea of it, that he could stand on his own two feet. For the first time he could see out his hospital room window, not just Detroit’s permanently gray sky but at the street below, and at the swirling snow flurries dancing on the breeze. Snow. He hadn’t seen snow in years. He liked snow, the cleanliness of it, its purity.

He stands now and looks at the darkness of his window and knows where he is. He misses snow. This isn’t really the time for snow, though, even back in Michigan. Here it is not the time or the place. There is always a time with the place. He thinks, I will wake several more mornings in this bed, and then I will go back to the hospital. Another bypass, another roll of the dice. They crank open your chest. He doesn’t want to do it, but he doesn’t want to give in, not yet.

He sits back down on the bed to catch his breath. So it was when they taught him how to walk at the VA hospital. It had been so long since he’d been out of bed that even standing was an exhausting trial, two steps a marathon, but soon they had him out in the hallway, walking, leaning on a cane, the hallway a river of war waste, men with missing arms, legs, blind men, burned men, one with part of his jaw shot off, another with no nose. Sam walked, tried to stand tall, thinking, I am intact; someday I will walk out of here and claim my life.

And so, he thinks, what have I claimed? A family—broken, yes, but a family still—two children and now a grandson who is a Miller, not actually a blood relation but a Miller, which was really just a made-up name, chosen by his father because he thought it sounded more American than Bodenmach—he was right about that—and he wanted to be a new man in a new land, something different completely. And so now he has a great-grandson named Connor, a goyish name if there ever was one, and that it has turned out like this seems okay. Fitting. The boy is still a Miller.

Sam wonders what would have become of Kyle. Oddly, for how rarely he and Kyle talked, the boy had taken a lot of Sam’s advice—namely, to take his time with women. There was plenty of time, Sam always said. Forty was a perfectly good age to start a family. On the last visit Kyle mentioned that he was open to the idea of a family, now that he was over forty, but there was no one on the horizon. “And Cat has a child, so the pressure’s off, right? You have a grandson.”

“There would be no pressure if I didn’t,” Sam said.

“Mom would want me to be married, I think.”

“Mom would want you to be happy.” Sam decided long ago that he had no idea what Ann wanted, but he didn’t doubt that this was true.

“I’m not unhappy,” Kyle said.

Not unhappy. Sam thought about this. Kyle never had to go to war, had a good job, plenty of money, excellent health. Sam wanted nothing more for him than happiness, which should have been the outcome of the mix of all these other ingredients.

“You’re still young,” Sam told him.
Her father moved back into the house the day she found her mother, back into her room the day after. Cat waited, wanting him to call her aside and level with her, to tell her the truth about who she was and what he’d done. Two months ago everything was fine. Then her parents split, she found out she had a different father, and her mother died. It required an explanation. And he did call her aside to the kitchen while Kyle was at cross-country practice. He’ll tell me, she thought. He’ll tell me right now.

“You’re the woman of the house now,” he told her. “Life has to go on. You graduate this year. You still planning on applying to Michigan?”

“College, Dad? I sent off the application last week.”

“Good. Great years, college, Ann Arbor. I wish I could get them back. What I want to say is, I can’t change what’s happened, but I can make the future better. I’m going to hire a woman to cook and clean. We’ll all pitch in. It won’t all fall to you.”

Cat thought, You’re telling me you’re going to hire someone to do what Mom did, that I don’t have to be a maid? What about you and me, how you came into my life?

“Did …,” he started to ask, then stopped. He looked to his right, toward the bedroom. He wanted to know about his wife’s death. “Did she say anything to you?”

Oh, yeah, she thought, Mom said a lot. But Cat answered, “No, nothing. Nothing at all.”

For Cat, one of the charms of Detroit Metro Airport’s old terminal—it’s only charm, really—is the display of automobiles, cars parked right in the terminal, as though it were a showroom. Ford has an Escape parked near the entrance, and Cat stops with Connor to look at the sticker, thinking, If only I made a little more, I could buy something like this—financing it, of course, but it would be mine and I could take trips in the winter, get Connor up north into ski country. It’s a nice illusion, just as the cars themselves, shiny and new and seemingly accessible, suggest a Detroit that is still dominant and strong.

She remembers when her father’s company sold out to Ford. She was two years out of college, and he had her over to dinner to show her the stock certificates. He was quite proud of them, as if they denoted his worth as an engineer or businessman. Kyle was away at school; it was just the two of them. He grilled steaks, covering them first, as was his way, in peanut oil and pepper. She stood next to him at the grill, sipping the martini he’d made her, the odd smell of it going right to her head.

“I’ll be all right now,” he told her.

“How’s that, Dad?”

“It’ll be all right. This is enough money.”

“How do you know?” It had never occurred to her that there wasn’t enough.

He smiled and flipped the meat as the flames jumped. “You can only eat one steak a day. We always think we need a little bit more. It isn’t usually the case.”

“I have nothing,” Cat said.

He turned to look at her. “What do you want?” he asked.

“I’m thinking maybe I will study law.”

“You’ve mentioned it. A profession is good. Would have made your grandfather happy.”

“It’s not about the money,” she said. “I figure, if I gotta go to work every day, I might as well love it.”

“That’s wise, but difficult. And law can be so dry you want to shoot yourself. I’ve dealt with some lawyers in my day.”

“Can you get behind me on this?”
"I’m behind," he said. "You get into law school, I’ll pay."

"You make it sound easy." She would spend the next year studying on and off for the LSAT but never take the test.

"Lots of things are easy if you don’t have to worry about money."

That was him in a nutshell, she thought. He could talk about money, business, and, God knew, the Second World War, and it was all easy. When it was hard—say, telling your daughter she’s adopted—then he couldn’t say a word. And yet once she knew, it was all she ever wanted from him, that one little unprompted admission.

She wonders if he can admit it even now, then wonders again why she’s even considering this, wonders why she still sometimes thinks he will change.

The security line is at a standstill. A year after 9/11 Cat still feels a bit of paranoia at security. It probably doesn’t help that there are seven partially veiled women in front of her speaking a language that is likely Arabic, or that the X-ray reader is an older man with glasses as thick as bulletproof glass. Eventually Cat sends Connor through the metal detector, then passes through herself. Neither sets it off, but Cat is pulled over for additional screening.

The guard asks her to spread her arms, freezing her in a crucifix stance, palms up, while the metal-detector wand is run over the outline of her body. Then they search her carry-on, and find only snacks and drinks for Connor, plus a *Glamour* and *Us Weekly*, bought impulsively at an airport newsstand.

"What did you do wrong?" Connor asks.

"Nothing."

"Then why did they give you a time-out?"

One of the joys of motherhood, she thinks then, is to be awed by your child’s innocence. It is, of course, a mother’s duty to educate—one might say eradicate—that innocence, and perhaps this is the tragedy of parenting.

"They wanted to make sure I wasn’t carrying anything bad on the plane," she explains.

"Like what?"

"Like a knife."

"Why can’t you take a knife? I like knives."

Cat explains that there are people who might use knives to hurt people on planes, so they must check everyone because the people who run the planes don’t know who’s good and who’s bad. Cat watches Connor take all this in. They are walking down the narrow hallway, one wall opaque glass block, the modern look from the 1950s.

"Did anyone ever do that? Hurt people with knives, on a plane?" Connor asks.

"On September eleventh they did," says Cat.

"What’s that?" asks her son.

Cat stops. People walk around them as though they were stones in a river. "On September eleventh, last year, men hijacked four planes. Two of them flew into the World Trade Center, where Uncle Kyle was. That’s how Uncle Kyle died. It’s why we’re going now to see Grampa. To mourn Uncle Kyle."

"Why did they want to kill Uncle Kyle?"

Cat reaches down and picks her son up, no easy feat anymore, big as he’s gotten. "They just wanted to kill Americans," Cat says. "And Uncle Kyle was in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"But why?" asks the boy. "Why did they want to kill?"

Cat shrugs. "They just did. There are a lot of reasons, and no reasons."

"I feel bad for Uncle Kyle."

"Me, too," says Cat. The weight is too much, and so she sets Connor down. He’s getting older now, and she realizes these are the conversations she is likely to get with her son—about the length of time she can hold him in her arms.
He wakes disoriented, unable to see—old age seems to require a certain amount of personal idling before the body can be put into gear—aware only of the plane, the toggling wings, remnants of the dream. Okay, he tells himself, I’m okay. It’s Kyle who’s not okay. The plane got Kyle.

“What is it?” says Phyllis. He’s in her bed; he turns his head and can almost make her out.

“Is it morning?” he asks.

She turns away to look at the clock. “If you’re a farmer,” she says.

“Ah, good.”

“What, that you’re alive? Tell me, did you ever sleep, for, say, eight hours? Like a normal person?”

“Rarely. But sleep’s overrated. Especially those long sleeps. Fifteen minutes here, twenty there, a few hours at night, and that can get you through.”

“Hmm,” she says, as she always says when she thinks what he’s just said is totally ridiculous but doesn’t want to talk about it. “Today’s the day,” she adds, changing the subject to the arrival of Cat and Connor at threethirty this afternoon, on a connection through Denver. They will stay at Sam’s place, as will Sam. This has already been decided, but the issue of Sam and Phyllis’s cohabitation hasn’t been discussed, and it’s eating at him. He doesn’t want to tell Cat.

“What not?” Phyllis wants to know.

“It’s just one more thing to deal with. And, if I don’t tell her, it’s a secret. I like secrets. I used to have a lot of them. Now I’ve got none left.”

“If you don’t count the one whopper. Your daughter, I think, might be interested in her biological father.”

Sam allows that she might. “Can you just keep the thing about us quiet?” he says. “Do you mind?”

“I don’t know if I mind. It’s like you’re embarrassed by me.”

“Hardly. It’s just that I know how young people think. They think romance ends at whatever age they can’t quite imagine for themselves.”

“So why not disabuse your daughter of that notion?”

“Maybe because I like being smarter than her?”

“Smarter?”

“Wiser,” Sam says. “At least that.”

He wishes Kyle had had a son. There’s no logic to it, he just wishes it were so. He desires this because he wants his blood to be passed on, wants it to live on in the species the way it has for so many other men. Lesser men, even. It’s ego, he knows, but whoever decided ego was a bad thing? He remembers now a woman he got pregnant, and how afterward Goodman told him he should get a vasectomy, what was he thinking, he had two children, children who loved him, he didn’t need any more. Still, Sam couldn’t do it, couldn’t stand the idea that he’d be shooting blanks. He had high hopes for Kyle, that through him the blood and the name would live on. Not that the name meant much. His father had jettisoned the old name, and that was that, end of story. Just as he would never tell Sam about the village where he grew up, or anything of his early years, which, Sam gathered, were particularly tough.

“Why do you want to talk about that?” the old man always said. And so now Sam realizes that he’s a little like his father, reluctant to tell his child where she’s come from.

After much cajoling, he is able to persuade Phyllis to drive his Lincoln to the airport, a compromise between letting him drive and her driving her filthy matchbox. Just as well, he thinks. Driving is getting to be a bother. He’s excited to see his daughter and grandson, and sitting in the passenger seat allows him to concentrate on that.

“Put your seat belt on,” she tells him.
“Are you a bad driver?” he asks.
“No, but lots of others are.”
“I’ll risk it.”
“What is with you?” she asks.
When you’re young, with so much ahead of you, they send you to get shot at; when there’s almost nothing left, they want you to wear a seat belt.
“I’m tired of playing along,” he says. “Let an old man ride without his seat belt, for Chrissake.”
“The light won’t stop blinking. On the dash.”
“Ignore it.”
“You’re getting more difficult, Sam. I thought seeing your daughter would put you in a good mood.”
“Who says I’m not in a good mood?”
In the airport they stand at the large window and watch the small jet as it taxis toward the terminal. Sam feels relief that the plane has made it. A kamikaze almost killed him, and Kyle died on 9/11—this family hasn’t done so well with planes. As he waits he stands at attention and puts his hand to his heart, trying to feel its beat.
About half the people are off the plane when he sees Cat emerge and then notices Connor walking in front of her, making his way down the stairs to the tarmac, his blond head bobbing with each step.
“There they are,” he says.
“The tall woman there?” Phyllis asks.
“That’s her.”
“The little boy is adorable.”
It’s startling to watch Connor walk toward the terminal. He looks exactly as Kyle did at that age, the fair hair, the smile, the bounce in his gait. Sam wonders if Cat sees this, how her son looks just like her brother.
When Connor enters the terminal he immediately sees Sam and takes off running till he jumps into Sam’s arms. Sam feels himself driven backward, reeling both from the welcome—he worried that Connor wouldn’t recognize him, or even remember him—and the weight of the boy. Phyllis is behind him, holding him up.
“Hi, Grampa,” Connor says.
“Hello, there. Look at how big you’ve grown.”
“I’m eight now.”
“That’s quite an age.”
“Who’s that?” the boy asks.
“That’s Phyllis. She’s a friend of mine.”
“Hi,” Connor says. He extends his hand, and Phyllis shakes it.
“You’re raising him well,” Sam tells Cat. Sam gets a close look at his daughter. She is, he knows, in her mid-forties, but to him she looks remarkably young. Still, the time has made certain things plain: Tarver’s cheekbones, for instance, his dark eyes. Like a jealous lover, Sam is always looking for these signs, for the influence of the other.
“Learned from you. Hi, Daddy.”
She hugs him. With his arms around her, he doesn’t want to let her go. Not quite yet. “Thank you,” he whispers in her ear. “Thank you for coming. It means a lot to me.”
“It means a lot to me, too. Now, are you going to introduce me to your friend?”
So, her father has a woman, an attractive one at that. He looks frail, more stooped than the last time she saw him, which was early in the year, when he stopped in Detroit on his way back from New York. They went to the DIA to look at the Rivera murals, that brilliant depiction of the intricate play of man and machine. “I miss this,” he said. “I miss being part of it. Detroit was something once.” Remembering that day now she is also reminded of Tommy, of how he has the same wistfulness for what Detroit has been.

She needs to tell her father about Ian. Or maybe she shouldn’t. Maybe she should keep it a secret, the way he has kept secrets. There would be an odd justice to that, but she doubts she can do it. It would burden her more than him, and she wants to let it go. Let it all go. Withholding is exhausting; it takes the energy of youth.

She decides it is perhaps better to wait till after the ceremony. She’ll tell him then. Give him a few more days to come clean, and then, one way or the other, she’ll leave the old man on a hopeful note. She’s ready to move on.

She can hear Connor talking to his grandfather in the kitchen, but she can’t make out the words. Every once in a while there’s a pause, probably when her father is answering. Funny, she thinks, how boys are drawn to men, even men they barely know. She dials Tommy and gets him on his cell. “Hello, beautiful,” he answers. “How come you’re single?” she asks. The idea just occurred to her. How could a gorgeous, forty-four-year-old doctor not have women lined up at his door? “I’m not,” he answers.

“Not what?”
“Not single.”

Panic. It hits her so quickly she runs from the suitcase she’d been unpacking and toward the bathroom, hand over her mouth.

“I have you,” she hears him say.

She sees herself in the mirror, a wreck, but relieved.

“That’s the right thing to say,” she says.

“It is true?” he asks.

“You tell me.”

“I would like to have you,” he says. “Right now, in fact.”

“I’m forty-four years old.”

“I know how old you are, Cat. You’re my age. It’s easy to remember.”

“I have an eight-year-old son, and I’m about to adopt a toddler. I don’t make much money. You could have any woman you want. Some young thing. What do you want with me?”

A long silence.

“I’ve had young things,” he says. “It was fun for a while, and then it got boring. Girls who couldn’t remember Watergate, or even the Iran hostages. I want someone I can talk to. You.”

“You sure?” she asks. She can’t help herself. Why is it so difficult simply to accept good fortune?

“I’m sure I want to see you again, give it a go, see what happens.”

“Okay.” *Give it a go?* It’s the perfect noncommittal line, but still something.

“How’s your dad?” he asks.

“Old.”

“Tell him I say hi. See if he remembers me.”

“He will.”

“You told him about the boy?”
“Not yet.”
“It’s incredible. Incredible that he exists, and that you found him. You’re gonna make your dad very happy.”
“Well, he could use it, I think.”

They go out for dinner, then return to Sam’s apartment. In the living room she watches as her father shows a 40 mm shell casing to Connor. For the last fifty-odd years that shell has served as a token ashtray; she doesn’t remember her father ever letting anyone smoke in the house. Over time the shell filled with matchbooks from various restaurants, some even from hotels in the far reaches of the automobile universe: Frankfurt, Seoul, Osaka. That shell is a totem from her girlhood; it was a symbol of the wider world. She makes a mental note to save it for Connor.

She goes to the kitchen to make coffee, which she knows she shouldn’t drink, but will anyway. Her father is a coffee man, the type who drinks it before bed. Better she drink coffee than more alcohol; she wants to stick to her regimen. This last year of discipline has, she thinks, shown results.

“Let me help you,” says Phyllis.

Cat turns slightly and sees a wrinkled, manicured hand on the Formica counter. She looks into Phyllis’s eyes, blue and clear.

“I think I’ve got it,” Cat says.
“It’s good that you came. Your father really wanted it.”

Cat silently counts out the spoonfuls of coffee as she dumps them in the filter. She says, “I should visit more. I know. But it’s never really easy.”
“But important.”

“How did you meet him?” Cat asks. She moves to the sink for water, then looks back to see Phyllis smile, and in that smile Cat knows that this woman loves her father. It’s Cat’s little test. Ask a woman how she met her man, and if she lights up, then you know it’s not just an arrangement.

“He tried to help me load groceries into my car, at Vons. He’s a gentleman. Stubborn at times, but always a gentleman.”

“And he asked you out?”
“He did,” she says.

It’s odd for Cat to talk to this woman. She’s known that her father had girlfriends, but she has never met one. “I thought I was probably through with men,” Phyllis says, “and then one appeared.”

Cat hears the coffeemaker start to hiss and cough. Through with men? She can’t imagine what that really means.

“Your little boy is very cute,” Phyllis says. “I hope you’re cherishing these years.”

“Do you have children?”
“Two sons, middle-aged men now.”
“Do they visit?”
“Not enough.”

Cat reaches for the coffee cups. She asks Phyllis if she’d like some.
“Oh God, no. I’ll be up all night.”
“My dad drinks it all the time.”
“He’s up all night, anyway.”

Cat smiles. So, they spend the night together.

“Listen,” Phyllis says. “Anything you need to say to your father, say it this trip.”
“Why? Is something wrong?”
“He’s an old man,” Phyllis says. “He won’t last forever.”
XXVII

He lies awake, wishing Phyllis were beside him, just in case. In case something happens. It’s funny the control children have over you, even long after they are children. Though Cat is a grown woman, a mother, he can’t bring himself to go to Phyllis’s and return in the morning. He just can’t.

Perhaps a little scotch would help him settle down, so he rises, puts on his blue robe, and walks out to the living room to find Cat sitting in his reading chair. “It’s almost three in the morning,” he says.

“I’m often up at this time, if you adjust for the time zones,” she says.

“Coffee?”

“Sounds great. Might as well keep going. I’ll make it.”

He follows her into the kitchen. She’s a tall, trim woman—too tall, really, to be his. He wonders if she suspects this, if he’ll ever find a way to tell her the truth.

She’s working the coffeemaker when she speaks to him, facing away so that he can just barely hear. “Look, there’s something important I need to tell you.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I was going to wait till I had everything worked out, but maybe you should know now.”

“What is it?”

“It’s about Kyle. It turns out …” She turns to face him. “He had a son.”

Sam sits at the kitchen table. He knows he should be shocked, but he isn’t. It makes sense; there’s a justice to it. If you want something badly enough, you just might get it. Not often, but sometimes.
XXVIII

She watches his chest, the jerky breathing, as if he can’t even seem to get enough air. She meant to wait, but couldn’t. Secrets are difficult for her. She tells him the full story, of her dinner with Kyle and her search, and how she finally found the boy, which seemed like a long shot until it happened, when it seemed inevitable. Like so much in life, good and bad.

It’s still dark outside, not yet four, the day’s darkest and quietest hour. She tells him that she believes she will get the child, that she will raise him as her own. All she needs is money, and he promises her that.

He is moved, and she can guess the reason. The boy is his blood; some part of Kyle is still alive. For Cat, this child is a connection to her lost brother, someone she must protect. She wonders how she will tell Ian that she did not really carry him in her womb, that the woman who did is dead, that his father is dead, that he will never know his true parents. It is a delicate thing, and thankfully years off.

They go back to the living room while the coffee brews. Her father sits in his reading chair, and so Cat takes a place on the couch, from where she can make out the lights on the oil rigs, a twinkling on the water.

“He had a son,” her father says.

“Yes.”

“But he didn’t know.”

“He wasn’t sure.”

“He would have been a good father,” her father says.

“He was good at everything.”

“I was proud of him, but I never really told him,” he says. Then he adds, “When can I meet the little boy?”

“When I get him, I guess. His grandparents, they want assurances.”

“Such as?”

“That he’ll be well looked after, and that I’ll take him to New York to visit.”

“Of course you will.”

“They’re concerned about his religious training.”

“What are they?”

“Catholic,” she says.

“Oy. You want me to talk to them?”

“No. I want you to tell me about Phyllis.”

“What’s to know?”

“Well, for starters, Dad, are you in love with her?”

He hesitates.

“You can tell me,” she says. “Whatever the answer, you can tell me. All these years I’ve never met one of your girlfriends. Not one. Why not? Why did you keep them hidden?”

“It was easier, I thought.”

“Keeping secrets?”

“Sometimes,” he says. “Yes.”

“Why didn’t you just tell me the truth?” Here, she wants to say, here’s your opening. Tell me. Tell me where I came from.

“The truth is, it’s not always so easy.”

Just tell me.

“You see,” he says, “your instinct with children is to protect them. And so I thought I was protecting you, and
your brother, protecting the idea of parents, and the memory of your mother.”

He can’t do it. She can see it. He just can’t.

“I understood about you and Mom,” she says.

“What did you understand?”

“I understood that you weren’t in love. Later, I understood what that meant, being trapped. Because of your
children. How you always feel guilty.”

He sighs. “That’s about right.”

“I’ve met someone,” she tells him. “So you know.”

“Who?”

“Remember Tommy Swenson?”

“The football player?”

“Now he’s a doctor.”

“Well, good for him. Is he the someone?”

“Yes. We met at the zoo. He has a little boy a little older than Connor.”

“My advice, honey, is don’t get caught up in the practical details.”

“What do you mean?”

“He has a son, he has a hamster, it’s not what counts. It’s how you feel about him. And he about you.”

“Which should be?”

“Passionate.”

“Passionate,” she repeats.

“Like you can’t live without him. Also, you should like him, who he is, right now. Because he’ll never be anyone
else. Take your mother and me, for example. There were some convenient things, but in the end she liked what I was
—war vet, gainfully employed—and not who I was.”

“And you?” Cat asks.

“I gave up. Forgive me.”

“I have.”

“Really?” he asks.

“Yes,” she says, realizing that, finally, she can. He is who he is. He’ll never be, as he says, anyone else.

“I often felt I wasn’t up to snuff. Especially after your mother asked me to leave the house. Then she died. I didn’t
think a father could be as close to a child as a mother, and you lost your mother, and so I could never quite measure
up.”

He is breathing heavily now, almost panting, and it takes him time to speak.

“It’s what I felt,” he says. “I wish I’d been more forceful about your ex-husband.”

“You made your feelings plain.” She remembers when she introduced him to Michael, how he fumed. After a
time, he wouldn’t even look at Michael and did his best not to speak to Michael directly. When Cat caught her
father’s eye, she could feel his disgust. He never said much, but she knew how he felt, and this made her turn away.
That he was right didn’t matter. She wanted the baby and was willing not to be too picky about the father. Sam knew
declined.

“You don’t blame me, do you? Anymore?” he asks.

“You were right,” she says.

“Sometimes that’s what’s hardest to forgive.”

“I know,” she says.

“I’d known enough men by then to know when one wasn’t good enough for my daughter.”

“So, Dad, you never answered me: are you in love with Phyllis?”

“Yes.”

“How do you know?”

“Can’t live without her. I care more about her happiness than my own. I don’t like being apart from her.”
“So why don’t you two live together?” Cat asks.
“We’ve talked about it.”
“Will she have you?”
He smiles. “She says she might.”
“Then you better take her up on it, Dad.” She is excited for him. A romance, at this time in his life. She should be so lucky.
“When can I see the little boy?” he asks again.
“As soon as I get him. I don’t want to pressure them.”
“I’m feeling the pressure of time,” he says.
“Phyllis made me think maybe you’re sick.”
“I’m eighty,” he tells her. “Eighty is a sickness unto itself. I’ve been lucky beyond any reason, and I’d like to see that little boy. Just lay eyes on him. Pushing my luck, I know, but I’ve never found any reason not to.”
He should tell her, right now, in the wee hours, but he can’t bring himself to do it. It is so awkward. Besides, he is her father, the man who raised her and supported her and taught her what it is to be a serious person in this world. This, he thinks, is the problem with the modern world: not enough serious people. When he was a young man, a man like George Marshall meant something. His was a life that inspired. John Foster Dulles was a bit thick and a blowhard, but they named an airport after him. Today Brad Pitt would more likely get an airport than would a secretary of state. Sam thinks of George Kennan. What ever happened to his kind? Now, there was a man, purely American, Midwestern (the same thing, really), sophisticated yet resolute, generous yet austere, fierce and implacable. The country no longer seems to produce his kind.

Cat should have been a diplomat. She has the brains and the advantage of being an attractive woman, which is totally disarming. And she is tough, as fierce as any man. He wonders whatever happened to her plans. He’d believed once that she would go to law school. Mortgages? It’s not a serious thing. Still, she has to make a buck. She has Connor, and now, it appears, Kyle’s son. Kyle’s son. The phrase rings in his head, its meaning almost unknowable, but something close to the completion of his life, that final brick put into place. It’s almost enough to make him believe in a higher power. Almost.

“Dad?”

He turns to her.

“You’re smiling,” she says. “If you’ve got a good joke, please share it.”

“No.”

“Ever?”

“Never,” she says. “You taught me that.”

“I’m going to have a cigarette.”

“Dad, you don’t smoke.”

“Now I do.”

She is incredulous.

“I like it,” he says, “and at my age it’s hardly a vice. It’s not as if it will kill me. I didn’t smoke for fifty-seven years. That was deprivation enough. Abstinence at my age is just silly.”

“But you don’t want me to smoke.”

“I’d kill you,” he says.

“Hypocritical?”

“Not at all. Contradictions are the one constant in life.”

“You used to make guests smoke outside the house, even in winter.”

“Still would. Step outside with me. Grab a sweatshirt; it’ll be cold.”

“Connor—”

“Won’t wake up. It’s four in the morning.”

Outside he can hear the surf rustle at the shore. There’s a small stone wall along part of the walkway that leads to the ocean, and here they sit, he with his cigarette, she with her cup of coffee. It’s too early for birds, or even cars. There’s only the sound of the water and his breathing. Another morning, he thinks. I get another morning.

“Tell me again about this ceremony?” she asks.

“The ceremony celebrates the start of the Sabbath. Toward the end they read the names of the dead, those who died this week and have loved ones in the congregation. It’s a way of remembering.”

“It’s not as though you’d forget Kyle.”
“No, but it’s to honor him, too. And as the years go on, it’s a reminder to remember. A prayer is recited, the Kaddish, to honor the dead. Ancient rituals.”

“We never did this when I was growing up.”

“I couldn’t bring myself to,” he tells her, remembering how when he was younger it was easier to let things go.

“And now?”

“Now I’m an old man, and I feel the need to do it. And I want to teach you, so that someday, if you need it, then you’ll have it. I hope you never need it for a child, but if you said Kaddish for me one day, I would appreciate that.”

“I thought you don’t believe.”

“I don’t.”

“So, if you don’t believe …”

He thinks about this. The old rituals matter; he knows they do.

“If I don’t believe, why do I do it? I may be wrong,” he tells her. “And if I’m not, I still don’t want to forgotten.”

“You won’t be,” she promises.

He decides he will tell her. He will tell her about her biological father after the service. He’ll wait till that’s out of the way.

“Someday we are all forgotten,” he says. “But till then, we should recite the prayers for the dead.”

“You’ll need to teach me that prayer,” she says.
Connor plays with the planes he got from United, little toy 767s circling the living room to his swishing sound effects. He moves the planes around the little city he’s built in the corner of the living room, most of it made from the large Lego pieces given to him by Phyllis, who does seem to know something about boys. It’s only nine in the morning. Cat thinks she will take Connor to the water when it warms up a bit more. The water here is freezing, and Connor can barely swim, so maybe they will build sand castles and thus pass the time till tonight, when they have the ceremony for Kyle and then can fly home to their regular lives.

Cat heads to the kitchen for more coffee, where she finds her father looking out the window. Never a big man, he looks smaller now, more hunched. Really, he’s just tipped forward—his back can’t bend—with his bony shoulder blades sticking out. “Dad,” she says. “Can you stand up straighter?”

“Aren’t I straight?”

“Not so much.”

Cat stares at her father’s back, at the shoulder blades almost dorsal, the old man tipping, slowly, she realizes, toward the grave.

“There, how’s that?” her father asks.

The same.

“Better,” she says. “You feel okay?”

“I guess. Getting old sucks. Isn’t that what the kids say?”

“I’m no kid, Dad.”

“To me, you are.”

She lets a moment pass. “I think you’ve given Connor a whole new view of the Japanese.” Earlier, she’d heard him talk about shooting at them. Japs, he’d called them.

“Maybe someday he’ll remember this morning. It will be something that he knew a World War Two vet. Like meeting a Civil War vet, when I was a kid.”

“Did you ever meet one?”

“I knew someone who did.”

It has only been lately that she’s really felt the passage of time, and she’s feeling it now, learning that her father is old enough to have known a veteran of the Civil War. Not her great-grandfather or even her grandfather. Her father. She is no longer young. She thinks of the black dress she will wear tonight, simple and elegant, the hem just at the knee. How much longer, she wonders, will I be able to wear that dress? How much longer will I want to? How much longer till I’m hunched over, halfway to the floor, unaware of how everything has tilted?

“Hey, Mom!” Connor calls from the other room. “Come quick!”

Cat runs into the living room, wondering what disaster she might discover, only to find Connor standing by his Lego building. In the building’s upper reaches he’s wedged one of the United planes, nose in, just the tail section sticking out. Connor, his eyes wide with delight, stands proudly beside his creation, a tiny hand on the building to hold it steady.
XXXI

They stand in Sam’s living room, Cat and Connor, Phyllis and Sam, match at the ready. Symbols, Sam thinks, this is all about symbols, the candle, the flame, the burning out of the light. There is no way to deal with death, less even to deal with the death of a child, and so we have symbols. He strikes the match, hears the tearing sound of it, then the silence as he lights the wick. Sam looks at Connor, who seems transfixed by the flame. He’s wearing a dark suit with a tie, a little man next to his mother. Connor, with his fair hair, looks as Kyle did at that age, though Sam is the only person left alive who remembers it.

Sam says, “We do this to remember Kyle, as we will every year, to remember the dead. In this way, his memory lives on, in us.” He takes a breath.

“Amen,” says Phyllis.

“We should really get going to the temple,” says Sam, and soon they’re on their way, the four of them in Sam’s Lincoln. Phyllis drives, Sam is in the front. Cat and Connor sit in the back, total silence in the car, nothing but the sound of the tires on the pavement, the faint grind of the engine. Here’s what I wanted, Sam thinks, all I wanted. It strikes him how simple it is, how modest are his desires. Perhaps this is aging. When he was a young man he’d wanted so much. First, to survive the war; then to walk again; then wealth and, if not fame or reputation, to be a man who mattered, someone who was noticed. None of that matters now. How could it after the death of a child? When his children were young the fear of losing them was like a low-grade ache, a minor pain always there. So many horrible things happened to children. When they got older, he often found himself believing that fate might treat them well. Certainly he’d taught them to fend for themselves. But Kyle’s death, this could not be foreseen. Even when he’d learned about the planes he hadn’t worried. He knew Kyle worked across the street; Sam had been there once, to that cavernous floor, the rows and rows of desks and computers, the men—they were mostly men—fit into it as were the men in the Rivera factory murals at the Detroit Institute of Arts. This was where Kyle was, Sam knew, and when Kyle could, he’d call to say he was all right. But the call the next day came from the firm, from a man who called himself a managing director, whatever that was, an odd name descriptive of nothing, and the news was not good. From that moment on, Sam wanted his children with him, together, and with each other. That it was no longer possible made him still want Cat, especially on this day, which, it turns out, isn’t really even the right day. He was supposed to use the Hebrew calendar, but the plane reservations were set and Rabbi Gauss made an exception, saying wearily that this was yet one more alteration that the Reform movement could stomach for this one day, for this one family, for this one year, even if it meant giving in to the Romans and their calendar. Did you see the irony of it? Gauss asked, even if the Romans had made a calendar more logical and thus easier for counting time. The issue here wasn’t logic, said the rabbi. It was mourning the dead, the tradition of it, and in this realm logic held little truck. But yes, bring your daughter and grandson, and I will read the name of your son, and you, as part of the deal, will attend services on the High Holy Days.

And so they arrive at the temple, Sam and the three people closest to him, none of the three related to him by blood, really, or even Jews. He feels something tug in his chest and he pauses a moment, while Phyllis cuts the engine, to see what it is. Nothing, apparently. He shifts to look at Phyllis. He can’t turn enough to see Cat and Connor. “Ready?” he asks.

Inside they take seats with the other congregants. Sam has the same feeling he always gets in a temple, a surprise, the thought being, Wow, look at all these Jews. Most are old, though perhaps not as old as he. Here then, is what you might do on a Friday night, if you have nowhere to go. He would feel silly coming here for companionship, but at the same time he wishes he could belong. After the navy he never felt he belonged to anything, except maybe to the country and its endless economic struggles.

The service drones on, the rabbi motioning for them to stand and sit, the reasons behind why some prayers require standing and others don’t a mystery, the whole service a bit puzzling to him. This is his tribe, but he doesn’t really know its customs. He watches Connor, the boy’s earnestness, his mimicking of his mother, who has told the boy about his uncle. Connor is to listen for Kyle’s name. Sam has engineered all this and feels glad for it, though he can’t say exactly why.

Finally, the Kaddish is announced, the congregation rises, and the Aramaic prayer is recited. The words come to
Sam; he finds that after all these years he still knows them. *Yit'gadal v'yit'kadash, sh’mei rabah* … Sam remembers when his own father took him to temple to say Kaddish for Sam’s grandfather, who had died in what was then Russia and was now something else, Ukraine, or perhaps Belarus, and there, too, they likely still said the prayer for the dead, which in truth said nothing about the dead but only of the all-powerfulness of God, this in a place that had all but been wiped clean of Jews by the Nazis.

The names are read, a dozen or so, with Kyle’s in the middle.

“There it is!” shouts Connor, so loud that everyone turns, or so it seems to Sam. He turns to Phyllis and she is looking at him, something close to a smile on the edge of her lips. She grabs his hand. Cat is standing with her arm around Connor, patting his shoulder. Nothing, he knows, will bring Kyle back, but this, it would seem, is as good as it will get.
Cat listens to Connor sleep in the bed next to her, the boy’s breathing languorous yet strong, insistent. They’ve done it. They’ve come to California and said the prayer for Kyle, visited with Cat’s father, met his girlfriend—had Cat not come, would she have known her father had one?—and now they will wake and spend the morning by the water, then fly home, where life will go on, without her brother.

And so now her father is going to live with a woman, the first time since Cat’s mother. Is this mortality finally raising its head in the old man, her father acknowledging that he doesn’t want to die alone?

Cat finds Tommy’s number in her cell phone and calls. There are five rings before he answers. It’s Friday night, after one in the morning where he is, and she wakes him, apologizes. “No,” he says. “I wanted to hear from you.” He coughs, clears his throat. “How was it?” he asks.

What can she say? That it was fine, that they stood and sat among the old Jewish people in California, paying reverence to an unknown God, often in a language they could not understand, but that when she heard her brother’s name, she felt something inside, something rip, which was, she supposed, the feeling of loss? It was also the feeling of sorrow, of anger, an acknowledgment that nothing could be done, that nothing could be made right, that it simply was what it was, is what it is, that justice and fair play and the sense that things will work out in the end because we want them to are not how the world works, that waiting for such outcomes, really for any outcome at all, is like waiting to win the Lotto. “And maybe,” she adds, “that’s all right.”

“It has to be,” Tommy says.
“I realized I don’t know what I’m doing with my life,” she says.
“You’re making a living.”
“Barely.”
“You’re raising your son.”
“I could do better.”
“Then do better. Nothing is stopping you.”
“I should spend more time with the people who are important to me.”

He says nothing.
“You’re one of those people,” she says.
“Are you asking me on another date?”
“Yes. That’s exactly what I’m doing.”
“Then I accept,” he says.
“Well, then. There it is.”
“When are you coming home?” he asks.
“Tomorrow. We get in kinda late.”
“And Sunday?”
“What about Sunday?” she asks.
“How’s brunch sound? If you were serious about that date.”
“Dead serious.”
“Noon, then?” he asks. “I’ll pick you up?” “Perfect.”
“I look forward to it, Cat.”

They say good-bye and Cat snaps shut her phone with something like hope.

She decides to go back to the living room to look at the candle—it’s designed to burn for twenty-four hours—and
perhaps allow herself a second drink on this special day, when she can watch the flame and think of her brother. The living room is dark but for the flame and the smell of tobacco. She flips on the light on her way to the liquor cabinet and sees her father, hunched in his chair, with a martini in one hand and a cigarette in the other. The old man looks up, squinting in the light. “Care to join me?” he asks.

She flips the light off and sits on the couch. Outside the window glow the lights that brighten the path to the beach. Cat looks over at her father, whom she can just make out in the darkness. There is the faint glow of the cigarette.

Slowly at first but with growing momentum, the man leans forward then stands up, shoulders hunched and knees bent but on his feet nonetheless. “I’ll fix you a drink,” he says. Cat watches him shuffle to the cabinet, then turn on the light. She squints but notices the high set of her father’s pants on his hips, so that his torso is made short. She remembers her father’s look from long ago, say, 1970, when her father was no more cool than he is right now. He was never cool, and, apparently, he never cared. Which, after a time, is a form of coolness itself.

The drink is one of her father’s martinis, made with gin, crushed ice, a dash of vermouth, and a chunk of lemon peel, the mixture’s aroma heady and strong, a memory from childhood.

With the light back off they are then left with only the candle, its flame flickering, the window to the ocean almost a mirror, but with sight lines through to other lights, distant, the oil rigs on the water. Cat can barely hear the sound of the surf. When her father speaks, it’s as if his voice is everywhere in the room. “Connor is quite a little boy. He’s very bright, I think.”

We all want smart children, Cat thinks. “You’re doing a fine job with him,” her father says.

It takes a moment in the darkness for Cat to process this, that her father has passed judgment on her mothering, and found it good. She thanks him.

“I promised Connor I would take him for a walk on the beach in the morning,” Sam says. “We’re going to collect shells for his trip back to Michigan.”

“I don’t really know what I’m doing,” Cat says. “I mean about Connor. I just try to help him.”

“None of us knows what to do, but we do it. You try to prepare your children for the world you know even as you know everything will change. I might have done better with you, with Kyle, but I had no idea how, till you were grown.”

“You did fine,” Cat says.

Cat hears him try to shift in his chair. “I tried to teach you things. When you have a child, you don’t know anything. Then a day goes by, and another, and you teach the child things, to walk or talk, how to shake hands or tie a pair of shoes. You get up in the night when the child is sick, stick by them when they are in trouble, deal with the failures that mean everything to them and nothing to you, or just the opposite, and it’s just like that every day, and over time you realize what love is.”

A long silence. Cat thinks of her little failures as a daughter, like the time she took a dollar from the kitchen counter. Her mother had left it there and she asked about it, and Cat said she knew nothing about it. Kyle knew she had it, but didn’t say anything, either.

“I want you to know that I loved you and Kyle the same,” her father says.

It’s as if he knows something of my mind, Cat thinks. “As I love you now,” the old man goes on. “And you should tell your little boy that you love him. He knows it, but he should hear it from you anyway.”

“Tell him.”

“Tell him more.”

Cat promises that she will. Then, she thinks, I must tell my father that I love him. She breathes deeply, then speaks. “I love you, Dad.” The words don’t come out easily, but once they do they settle well, like truth. This, then, is why I’ve come all this way, Cat thinks: to say these words, this one time. To let it go.

Her father looks as if he might cry.

“I’m going to have another operation,” he says.

“For what?”

“A bypass. Things are blocked up again, I guess.”
“Can you tell?” Cat asks.
“I think.”
“When? When is the operation?”
“Monday.”
“Monday? I’ll stay,” she says.
“Don’t be silly. Phyllis will look after me. I think she’s looking forward to it.”
“It’s a serious operation.”
“At my age, all operations are serious,” Sam says. “But I want you to go home and go on with your life. That’s what this has been about, moving on. Kyle is gone, and we’re not. So we go on.”

Cat is relieved. She really doesn’t want to stay. She could fly Connor home to Michael and then come back to sit by the hospital bed, but she’d rather not. Not yet. And she’d like to see Tommy on Sunday. The distance has made this clear.

“This candle,” his father says. “You could light one of these for me, when the time comes.”
“I will, Dad.”
“Promise.”
“Of course.”
“Not of course. The years go by and things slide. I know this. I let it slide with my own parents.”
“I won’t,” Cat says. Okay, she tells herself, once a year I can light a candle, a little thing, but a promise kept. No little thing at all, that.
He watches Cat head back to bed, then walks outside to take a look at the water. To the east there is a faint glow, a suggestion of morning. He remembers once during the war looking east at this time of day when a single plane appeared. This was just after the battle for the Leyte Gulf, when kamikazes first appeared. Sam was on the bridge and saw the plane. It was flying very low, so that radar had only just picked it up. The alarms were sounded. In the old calculus, you could shoot a plane down or not, perhaps its bombs would miss you, perhaps there’d be shooting and blood-thumping terror but no death. Not anymore. They had to destroy the plane, or die. The pilot, Sam thought, was very skilled, staying low to the water, maneuvering to offer the gunners little to hit, and this was odd, not at all what they’d been led to believe about these suicide pilots. Then, inexplicably, the plane pulled up and away, till it was reported there was a torpedo in the water. Sam hadn’t seen it fall, but it was coming straight for them. By this time Higginbotham was there. He was yelling, giving orders to start repairing damage that had not yet occurred. Then he stopped and quietly said, “Hold on, boys.”

A second passed, then another, and another, with only the rumble of the engines and the pitch of the waves, the radar beeping, fainter and fainter at the retreating plane. The seconds kept coming. Sam heard someone breathe, then he took a breath himself. He understood. Somehow the torpedo had missed. It must have gone beneath them, set for a battleship when they were but a destroyer low on fuel, sitting high in the water.

Higginbotham laughed.
“Well, gentlemen,” he said at last. “We get another day.”
XXXIV

She lies in bed, half-awake. The idea is to catch an hour or two of sleep before Connor wakes and they start to make arrangements to go home. But sleep won’t come.

She thinks of a winter’s night before the family broke up, when her father took her to play tennis. This was in a tennis bubble, a huge pressurized structure where devotees played during the Michigan winter. She was hardly a devotee, but back then her father believed in tennis—a sport, he said, that you could play all your life, though in the end neither of them did.

They were checking out when Cat found a crumpled-up fifty-dollar bill on the bluish carpet. She showed it to her father. He made her leave her name and number at the counter, instructing her to say that she’d found something of value by the front desk. If no one called in a month, he said, she could keep it.

A man called the next night, said he’d lost fifty dollars, a crumpled-up bill that must have fallen from his pocket, and he came right to the house to get it. He was an older man, like her dad. She went outside to the dark, frigid driveway to hand him the bill. He took it, thanked her, and drove away.

She found her father in the living room, having a drink and watching the evening news.

“Did he give you a reward?” he asked.

“No.”

“Too bad.”

“Why couldn’t I just keep it?” she asked.

“It wasn’t yours.”

“But I found it.”

“A sense of justice is worth more than money,” he said. He nodded at the TV. A peace deal had been reached in Paris. All the American soldiers were coming home from Vietnam. The cease-fire would take place at a predetermined time, a couple of days hence. “Think of the boys who will die between now and then, and for what? Imagine how, if you were a soldier, you’d be trying to make it for just those two days.”

“Shouldn’t he have given me a reward?” Cat asked. “For being honest?”

Her father turned to her, always an elaborate movement, what with his back so stiff. “I would have,” he said, “but doing what you did has to be satisfaction enough.”

“You could give me the reward,” Cat suggested.

“I didn’t lose any money.” He smiled at her. Even then she understood he was making a point. Now she understands it, too. There won’t be a confession, though maybe he’s given her enough.
He thinks of Kyle’s little boy, a toddler still. How long, Sam wonders, will I have to live for him to remember me? Five years? Six? I might get that. I might get five or six years and then, when the little boy is a man, fifty, say, in the year 2051, he can tell his son that he knew his grandfather, a man who fought in the Second World War.

There are two days till the operation, but Sam is considering tonight, after Cat and Connor have gone, when he will spend the night with Phyllis, the whole night in her bed, and the next night, too. It comforts him, this thought: If I don’t survive the operation I’ll never know it—it could be worse, much worse—but I will still have had those two nights, two nights with a woman who loves me.

Connor wakes just before seven. The sun is now up, lighting the water. Connor wears pajamas with Indy 500 cars racing across them. He rubs sleep from one eye, then the other. “Hi, Grampa,” he says.

“It looks like a beautiful day to go find some shells,” Sam tells him. The boy stands on his tiptoes to look out the window. “Breakfast?” Sam asks.

Sam has, over the last few days, picked up on the routine. He sets Connor at the kitchen table, fills a bowl of multicolored cereal Cat has bought, pours in milk, turns on the TV, set now not to CNN but to something called Nickelodeon, where there is a show taking place underwater, the hero apparently a synthetic sponge of the type you would find under your sink. His best friend, his Tonto, is some sort of blob with a deficient IQ. Connor laughs and Sam finds himself moved by this, this laughter of the innocent, the sound of simple human joy.

“You’re hired.” This is Cat, standing at the edge of the kitchen in her jogging clothes, a T-shirt and black tights, as women wear now. She carries her shoes in her hand. She comes in, kisses her son on top of his head, then looks out the window over the sink. “Clear today, huh?”

“Beautiful,” Sam agrees.

“Good morning, big boy,” Cat says to her son, who ignores her. Cat finds the remote and shuts off the television. Connor looks up, almost in shock. “Good morning,” Cat says again.

“Good morning, Mom.”

The TV goes back on. Good for Cat, Sam thinks. She has demanded courtesy. This is an indulgent age for children. It warms Sam to know Cat has her limits.

The three of them go outside together. Cat breaks off to go on her run down the beach, leaving Sam to stroll with Connor, looking for shells. The receding tide has left a rich bounty, and Connor starts loading his bucket with every shell he finds, sometimes scooping them up by the handful.

“Look,” Sam says. “You can’t take every shell with you. Why not go slow, select only the best?”

“I like this one,” Connor says, holding up a standard-issue shell, the name of which Sam will likely never know.

“That’s a nice one,” he says. “Put it in the bucket.”

A moment later the boy stands again. “And this one.” And so it goes, the boy making his choices and Sam praising them. Sam wonders at the adult idea that children don’t really know what they want. At any given moment, they know exactly.

The day warms, the sun sliding higher in the sky, its rays more direct. The boy is in a rhythm now, finding shells, often running to the water to rinse away the sand, after which he makes a careful examination, then runs back and places the shell in the bucket, which has become too heavy for him to move. Sam is reminded of a trip he took with Ann and the children in the sixties, when Kyle was about this age, a drive over to Holland, Michigan, where they visited the fake Dutch village and stayed mostly at the beach, the Great Lake rolling up the sand with more force than this ocean bay usually musters. Cat and Kyle were always playing some game, and Sam sat on a towel next to
Ann, who wanted only to lie in the sun. He watched his children. He could watch them for hours, for days, never tiring of it, the bigger and older Cat, the fair Kyle, running, building sand castles, endless activity, always happy. It was a tricky thing for Sam to sit on a beach with a fused spine, but he managed it with a sideways lean, an elbow always digging into the sand, needing always to be moved. Every once in a while the kids would call to him, and he would examine the little treasure they had found or help with their construction project. These were, he thinks, the spoils of war, the basic blessing, then and now.

He looks up and doesn’t see Connor. He starts toward the water, searching, scanning the beach. He feels almost as if he’s drowning; he can’t seem to get enough air into his lungs. He’s lost the boy, lost him. He moves as well as he can to the water—would he have gone in the water?—but it is too difficult, and he sits in the sand, tries to breathe, his chest tight, very tight, till he thinks, This is it, this is the heart attack Cunningham warned me about. Then, miraculously, he gets a breath, feels the life-giving air course through his body like an electric current, and he is okay. Alive. Moreover, Connor has found him.

“Grampa,” he says. “Come help.”

When your spine is fused, it’s no little thing to get off the ground. Sam moves to all fours, then stands, finding himself dizzy, light-headed. Connor moves on. Sam collects himself, then walks across the wet, hard sand and lifts the bucket. It’s heavy. “This is quite a take you’ve got. We might need to do a bit of quality control before you pack this up for the trip home.”

“What’s that?”

“Quality control? I’m sure you’ve never heard of Deming, right? The Japs give an award named for him. Quality control, it’s the way you make sure whatever it is you’re making is how you want it. Of good quality.”

“So, Grampa?”

“Yes.”

“Tell me again about Mom? How she also had a different father once? Like, besides you?”

Sam sets down the bucket, which he needs to do anyway, heavy as it is. “What?”

“Yeah, like she had a different father, or something?”

Sam feels something shift inside him. Another tug at the heart. He reaches up and touches his chest with his right hand, like a man making a pledge. “Your mom told you this?” he asks.

“My dad.”

All these years Sam wasn’t keeping a secret at all. Cat was.

“Well, yes, that’s how it was. Your grandmother, whom you never knew, she already had Cat and so we all became a family. And so your mother became my daughter, and I raised her. And then she had you, and so she’s raising you.”

The boy looks at him, understanding, or not, his own origins. “But you’re still my grampa.”

“Yes, of course. Always. I am.”

“Good,” the boy says.

Sam smiles. The boy has spoken. “Shall we go back?” Sam asks.

They start up the beach, a slow trudge when they hit the dry sand. Sam is right handed, but he has trouble with that shoulder, and it’s the right hip that’s bad, and so he carries the bucket with his left hand. After a few steps he feels a tweak. The bucket is heavy, and he sets it down.

“I need to rest,” he says.

“We just started,” says the boy.

Sam grabs the bucket, intending to walk on, but something is changing. Slowly at first, then suddenly, the pain in his arm tugs, as if the bucket weighs four hundred pounds. Then it feels as if someone is standing on his chest. It seems that he’s watching—or really feeling—from afar. He drops to his knees; he can feel them in the sand. My heart, he thinks, but it is almost an afterthought, because other thoughts are coming to him now, like the time long ago when he actually flew down to Florida with Goodman because Goodman wanted to see his boys and promised Sam a free vacation, and so Sam and Goodman flew on People Express, that crazy airline that ran its planes like city buses, with every plane traveling to or from Newark, and Kyle came out to the airport—these were the days when anyone could go through security—because they had a three-hour layover, which was enough time to get together and have dinner in the terminal. Except that the first plane was delayed, then delayed again, so that when Sam did get to Newark there was only time to walk through that overly crowded terminal, bodies crammed together like a
crowd exiting a game at Tiger Stadium, till they got to the plane to Florida and boarded.

Kyle was standing at the gate when Sam and Goodman disembarked from Detroit, and he walked with them, wearing a suit—he’d come straight from work—tall and young and looking exactly as you’d want the future to look. Sam was proud, almost overcome with pride, but he kept it to himself, knew of Goodman’s troubles, and didn’t want to add emphasis to the obvious differences in their situations, though when Sam and Goodman took their seats on the plane, seats they practically had to wrestle for, Sam noticed that Goodman’s eyes were damp, as if he’d been crying, though of course he tried to hide it. Sam wanted to put an arm around Goodman. Goodman had made him, and for reasons Sam would never understand.

Sam wanted to put his arm around Goodman and tell him it would be okay, though of course he knew it wouldn’t be, knew that though Goodman was a good man, a successful man, one who’d risked limb and life for his country, he would never have the one thing he wanted: his sons. He wouldn’t; wouldn’t ever walk beside a tall kid in a business suit and hear him say, “Hey, Dad. How’s it going? I guess dinner is going to have to wait.” He’d never hear in that voice the man he’d made, how easily he’d grown and learned to handle life, the way it unfolded, uncertain and unknowable. He would never stand in a hospital and hold a tiny infant and look at the true wonder of it, how everything was there already in miniature, even the tiny fingers with their tiny, tiny nails, the delicate lines about the knuckles, that little hand already able to grab, in its first hour, the hand of the son of your child. Goodman would never feel his daughter put her hand on his shoulder and say, “Well, Dad, there you go,” as if the infant were a gift, which of course it was. He would never know, as Sam knows now, that his blood will live on, in the child of his child, and that child’s child, on and on through the ages, a man’s one real way to immortality. And now the pain has grown and grown and is at the same time receding, as if he were not there at all, though Sam is, he is here, completely here, wanting more.

For a second his eyes almost focus and he sees the boy, slight, fair, and it takes him a second to realize who it is, really he’s not sure with the glare, but the boy moves and in that movement he sees Kyle, his young Kyle, too young, but Sam needs help and starts to speak. He can’t, not yet, but then finally he pushes up some air and gets out the words, grunting and gasping. “Kyle!” he yells at the boy. “Go! Get your mother!”
The boys are giggling. She can hear them in the living room, the giggles and peals of laughter at an old Warner Bros. cartoon, Bugs Bunny, perhaps older than Cat herself.

She goes back to the papers drawn up for the boy. The court has granted her motherhood. Guardianship, they call it. Mrs. Boyle will be here soon with Ian. It is Mrs. Boyle’s plan to stay a week and then head back. Cat has been holding her breath. She has been back and forth to New York four times. The legal impediments were many, and a lawyer made a small fortune handling the adoption of this orphan. Legally, everything is in order, but Cat senses Mrs. Boyle’s reluctance. Her anger. Cat worries that were Mr. Boyle not so ill, confined to a bed in a hospice, the adoption might not be happening. Mr. Boyle set the timing of this handoff, insisting that it happen now while he could still effect it, worried, perhaps, that later his wife might back out. Cat worries that she still might, papers be damned. She has the boy, and she doesn’t really want to give him up. Possession, they say, is nine-tenths of the law. Still, Mrs. Boyle claims she will hand Ian over after she stays a week, to help with the boy’s transition. Then she will leave, back to New York, three days before Christmas, to be with her dying husband.

The phone rings. It’s Tommy.

“I’ve got them. We’re already on ninety-four.” Out the window she notices the first twisting flurries of snow floating out of the gray Michigan sky.

“Great,” she says. “See you soon.”

She almost can’t breathe. She is so close. Ian is so close. She thinks of Tommy and Ian and Mrs. Boyle driving on I-94, of how the planes float down over the road like giant birds, of how once a Northwest flight couldn’t get off the ground and crashed in the median. Everyone was killed except for one little girl. Cecilia, Cat remembers that was her name, a little girl who somehow survived the crash and the flames, a little phoenix—saved, it was guessed, because she was protected in her mother’s arms. Cat wonders who that woman was, that forgotten, perfect mother.

Connor has sneaked into the kitchen, and surprises her now by tugging at her hand. She jumps.

“You scared me.”

“Sorry, Mommy.”

“What is it?”

They hear Jonathan laughing in the other room.

“Are we really going to stay here?” Connor asks.

“Do you want to?”

“Oh, yes. This place is awesome. I don’t want to leave.”

“Well, then,” she says.

“Tommy won’t kick us out?”

“No, of course not. We live here now.”

He nods, trying, she supposes, to believe it. Then he turns, and slowly walks out of the kitchen. “Are you sure?” is what Tommy asked. He didn’t want her to move in just because it was convenient. He would help her get a place big enough for the extra boy if she didn’t want to move in with him. But if she was sure, he said, then she should make the move. It was the last chance they were going to get, he said. The last chance to get it right.

It’s been five weeks. Connor has changed schools. With the re-fi boom, her income has doubled. The settlement money came in, and a chunk from her father’s estate. She is now the mother of two, and soon three. And she has allowed herself to be in love. She intends to be happy.

Mrs. Boyle comes through the door first, wearing a wool overcoat and a paisley scarf over her hair. Tommy walks behind her with Ian in his arms. Ian, in turn, holds a worn, well-loved stuffed animal, an orange tiger.
“How was the flight?” Cat asks.
“Fine. But there is no food anymore. And the seats are very small. People haven’t shrunk. The man in the seat
next to me was certainly not small.”

Several sentences in a row. Cat has never heard this from him.
Tommy smiles. “We’re all sardines in the can, now. Let me show you to your room,” he tells her.
“Thank you, Thomas,” she says.
“Hello, Ian,” Cat says.

The boy sticks his face into Tommy’s shoulder and covers one eye with the tiger, a shy move of hide-and-seek.
He’s still a towheaded little thing.
“Oh, say hello, Ian,” says his grandmother.

“What do you say we hand you over,” Tommy whispers to Ian. “She’s got very strong arms.”

And so Cat comes to hold him. And when she feels him, feels the weight in her arms, she knows he is hers. This,
she thinks, is right. And she thinks of her father, wonders if once, four-odd decades ago, he had held her, if it all
could be explained by the simple act of touch.

By the time he goes to bed, Connor has the sniffles, probably from Ian, who came with a cold. Jonathan, too, has
picked it up. At least the evening has come to an end. Earlier, the bigger boys spent a few minutes entertaining the
little boy, and then all three settled back into Looney Tunes. There was a pizza dinner, and a long, slow conversation
with Mrs. Boyle. She seemed slowed by all that had happen: the loss of her daughter and the impending loss of her
husband, the effective loss of her other daughter, and now her grandson.

“Eventually you could move here,” Tommy said. “To be close to Ian.”
Tommy is like that. A funny man. Guarded, and then he’ll invite you to live in the neighborhood—or to bring
your whole family, newly pieced together, to live in his house.

“I don’t know a soul here,” said Mrs. Boyle.

Tommy let it go. But it made Cat love him that much more, that he would even offer. She wouldn’t have and then
later would wish that she had.

Now, at last, they are alone together. She has finally gotten comfortable with the idea of walking from the
bathroom to the bed without a robe or towel. She slides in beside Tommy, kisses him, then rolls to her side.

“Come back here,” he says.
“What?”
She feels his hand on her. It’s cold, but she doesn’t flinch.
“I want to take all three boys to a buddy of mine. Tomorrow. Jonathan’s pediatrician.”

“Why?”
“’Cause Ian’s making everyone sick. Might as well do something about it now.”

“Sure,” she says.
“And I want to propose something.”
“I like what you’re proposing,” she tells him. She’s backed into him, and his free hand is cupping her breast with
just the right amount of pressure, as she’s taught him. She’s taught him plenty in the last three months. Sex has
become a part of her life again in a way that makes her wonder how it ever wasn’t.

“We should have another,” he says.

“Another what?”

“Child.”
She rolls to face him, looks him in the eye. No one has ever said anything like this to her.
“I’m forty-four.”
“Cat, I know exactly how old you are,” he says. “I mention this now because I’m suggesting we not waste time.”
She feels hot, with her eyes welling up. She touches her eye and feels the tears spill out.
“It’s our chance,” he tells her. “I know we have three children now, but I want one with you. One who’s wholly yours and mine.”

She’s almost sobbing. He’s doing this. She puts her foot on his, feels its warmth. “There’s no going back,” she tells him.

“You’re right,” he says. “We’re burning the boats.”

Jonathan and Connor race cars around the waiting room, while Cat sits with Tommy, Ian on her knee. Mrs. Boyle claimed fatigue and is supposed to be resting back at the house. Cat wonders if she’s rifling through drawers, looking for evidence of God knows what. “Again,” Ian says, meaning he wants Cat to bounce him to “This Is the Way the Ladies Ride.” She has done this at least a dozen times today alone. She’s even taught him the word again.

She bounces and watches Jonathan and her boy. No, she tells herself, they’re both my boys. I must do what my father did and take him in completely. He’s dark and taller than Connor, with a few freckles on his nose and a smile that never fails to lighten her mood. And he and Connor have taken to each other like brothers, Jonathan always leading, Connor close behind.

“Again?” Ian says.

“You should teach him something else,” Tommy says.

She hands him the child, who sneezes in transit. “You try it,” she tells him.

He starts bouncing the boy and turning him side to side to the tune of “Twist and Shout.” She remembers that Tommy always liked that song. And now Ian will, too.

After two verses, the nurse appears at the door and motions to Tommy.

“Okay, boys,” Cat says. She stands and Connor runs over and grabs her legs, locking his hands behind her knees.

“I love you so much, Mommy,” he says.

“And I love you, my Angel Boy.”

She looks up, and finds herself gazing into Ian’s eyes. Tommy has thrown him over his shoulder.

“Mommy?” the little boy asks.

She finds herself frozen. Couldn’t speak if she wanted.

“Mommy?” the little boy asks.

“Better tell him yes,” Tommy says.

Tommy’s friend Keith comes in, another youngish, good-looking doctor. Where, Cat wonders, have these men been all my life? Dr. Keith looks in all the kids’ throats, then jots down a few notes.

“I’m gonna take throat cultures to see if it’s strep, which I’m sure it is,” he explains to Cat.

“Okay,” she says.

The doctor sticks a swab down each of the kids’ throats. Ian protests, but Tommy quickly calms him. He’s good with young children, this man. It’s almost too much to ask for.

“I’ll let you know the results,” he says to Tommy.

On the drive home a thought comes to her, and so she asks Tommy. “Couldn’t you have written these prescriptions?”

“I’m just a cardiologist. It’s good to go to an expert.”

“For sore throats?”

He shrugs.

Cat works intermittently the next week; so close to Christmas there’s little activity in the mortgage world, just a refi or two, with no one moving. Mostly she stays home with the boys and Mrs. Boyle. With Ian. It’s as if she’s trying out for Mrs. Boyle, trying to show what a good mother she is. She feels scrutinized every time she plays with the
little boy, or reads him a story, or prepares him a meal, changes a diaper. Not that Mrs. Boyle says anything, but Cat can feel her. Something makes Cat want Mrs. Boyle’s approval. Mostly she wants Mrs. Boyle to go, with the boy left behind. She wants the deal to be closed.

It is the morning of her last full day before Mrs. Boyle makes any comment at all. She is in the kitchen with Cat, who is wrestling with a newly kid-proofed drawer, when she says, “Ian will be happy here.”

Cat looks at her, this aged, thin woman.

“Siobhan would have liked you,” the woman adds.

Cat doesn’t know what to say. For almost a year she thought about Siobhan almost every day, and then hardly at all. Would Siobhan, the real mother of this child—whatever real means—have wanted anything for Ian that Cat doesn’t? Doesn’t she want him to be loved and happy, to be well clothed and looked after and protected and educated and … There was no limit, really, to what you might want for your child.

It is not quite six, and Cat stands at the bathroom mirror, her bathroom mirror the five weeks since she and Connor moved here. Mrs. Boyle is in the kitchen with Ian, and Cat has come here to collect herself and check her face. She is reminded of something her mother once told her, when Cat was fourteen or fifteen. Cat had started to wear makeup, and her mother had accepted this, unlike Tonya’s parents, who were against the whole idea—especially Tonya’s father, who no doubt saw makeup as a signal of something sexual, a loss of innocence no father wants to contemplate for his daughter. Cat’s father deferred to her mother, whose main point was that while some makeup was necessary, less was more. “My mother taught me,” her mother said, “that the most important thing for a woman is her face.”

“Why?” Cat had asked, sure of her looks then, unable to fathom that they might fade.

Now she adds eyeliner and some color to her cheeks. She is looking, she feels, a little tired. She places her hand under her jaw, squeezes the skin on both sides, then pulls it back, hoping to see something close to her former self, but really she looks silly, a woman in a wind tunnel.

Yet Tommy wants a baby. Every time she thinks of this she has to steady herself. That she would have a child who isn’t a mistake, a planned child, is beyond her experience. It’s out of character, she thinks. Still, she has found Tommy, and reason to hope.

Out in the kitchen Ian sits on the floor, playing with the plastic cars Tommy has bought him. Mrs. Boyle is at the glass breakfast table, just sitting.

“Are you okay?” Cat asks.

“I’m okay,” she says.

Cat sits across from her.

“But I have nothing left.”

“Sure you do,” says Cat.

“Soon, no husband, no children, only a grandchild a thousand miles away. You did this.”

“I did it?” Cat says.

“You found us. We were okay. But you found us. You made everything change. Now you have everything I had then—children, a husband—and I am alone.”

Cat feels almost as if this isn’t happening. Does this woman really feel this way, that I stole her life? Will she change her mind about the boy?

“You yourself just said that it’s right,” Cat says.

“For you.”

“For Ian,” Cat says.

“Yes, yes,” she says, in what seems like disgust. “Let me take him back. I want to take him back.”

“You made a deal,” Cat tells her, thinking, I knew it. I knew it.

“Let me take him back. He’s just a little boy. When he’s older, and it’s harder for me, then I’ll bring him back.
He’s what I have now, and I can still care for him. Let him go.”

There is a long, long silence, with just the sounds of the TV from the other room—Connor and Jonathan are watching—and Ian running his cars on the kitchen tiles. She knows there is truth in what the woman is saying, but Cat has come too far to give in. Always she has acquiesced, but not this time. This time she will bring it all together.

“No,” Cat says. “No. He’s staying here. It’s all decided. The papers are filed. He stays.”

Mrs. Boyle’s lips are quivering. Extra lines appear on her brow. “Just for a little while longer,” she says. “Let him go.”

“We can’t do that.”

“You can do what you want,” says Mrs. Boyle.

“Ian must stay. He must.”

“Please,” Mrs. Boyle says.

“I’m sorry.”

“You!” she shouts. “Have you no pity? You have so much, and yet you want everything!”

Connor and Jonathan come running into the kitchen. Mrs. Boyle holds her head in her hands, perhaps to hide her tears.

“What’s wrong, Mom?” Connor asks.

“Just adult stuff,” she says. She motions them out of the room. “Nothing you need to worry about.”
2003
The boat is a beautiful thing, an intricate structure of wires and rolled up sails and coffee-colored wood, all of it operated by two brothers with a whale-watching venture, their excuse to be out on the water. Phyllis found them, the only such operation to use a sailboat. Cat made the actual arrangements and let one of the brothers know their purpose.

“Well,” the guy said, “that’ll be a first for us, but hey, it’s fine. Glad to help.”

“And if we saw a whale,” Cat added, “that would be okay, too.”

“You bet it would,” he said.

Tommy carries the case on board, its brown faux-leather color just right for the boat. Cat has lifted it and was surprised by its size and weight; her father was not a big man. This is what is left. Tommy sets the case on the deck. Connor is there, and Jonathan, and Ian, his hand gripped firmly in hers. She places Ian between her knees, straps life jackets on the boys, and then one for herself. The older of the boat brothers—at least he looks older—runs through the safety issues, which mostly involve staying on the boat and all the ways one might not. It is a sunny and warm day, with a breeze off the water. Cat thinks this is exactly how her father would have wanted it. Last night they’d heard his name read at the temple, and Kyle’s; father and son dead in the same week of the year. And they were there, Cat and Tommy and Connor and Jonathan and Ian and Phyllis, not a Jew among them, remembering the dead according to traditions they’ve never known.

That morning there’d been a call at her father’s house, a low, deadpan voice asking for Samuel Miller.

“He’s not home,” Cat said, thinking it a phone solicitor. Her father refused to put his name on the do-not-call lists, said he was thankful every time the damn thing rang.

“Could you take a message?” asked the voice, surprising her.

“Who is this?”

“Lieutenant Richard Dandona, United States Marine Corps, ma’am. I’m trying to return something to Lieutenant Miller.”

“Lieutenant?” she asked.

The soldier was at the apartment in less than an hour, an angular, thin kid, young like the ones you saw now in airports, a stubble of what may have been blond hair across his scalp. She invited him in, had him sit in the living room, with the bigger boys watching the television and Ian with them, laughing on their cue. Tommy was out in Santa Barbara trying to find bagels because she had asked, because that’s what her father would have been doing.

“Is …?” he tried to ask.

“My father died,” she explained. “A year ago.”

He put his head down, then he reached into his pocket and pulled out a little tin tag. He held it out to her. It had her father’s name on it.

“It’s a dog tag,” said the soldier. “Your father, he gave it to me to take to Afghanistan. He wanted me to bring it back to him. He said it got him through his war, and that it would get me through mine.”

There was, she realized, a part of the world that held only men, where maybe they did things for one another that were hard to explain. Her father always insisted he didn’t believe in God. How could he believe in a piece of metal?

“So, you’re leaving the military,” she said.

“No.”

“What next, then?”

“I’m shipping out to Iraq, October one.”

She looked at the tag. There was her father’s name, a long number, his blood type—O—and the letter H. She
wondered for a moment what the H meant: some military code, no doubt. She handed the tag back to the soldier.

“You take it,” she told him. She gave him a business card. “You keep it safe. And when it’s all over, you bring it back to me.”

They are quite far out in the bay when it occurs to Cat that she’s never before been on the ocean, any ocean, not once in her forty-five years. More surprising, when she thinks about it, is that she doesn’t know if her father had, either, not in the years of Cat’s life. Of course, hardly a day went by when her father didn’t bring up the navy, and yet he never did return to the ocean.

She feels the roll and pitch of the sea as they break free of the bay and sail into open water. Cat finds herself staring at the boys, making sure they’re secure, watching them watch the water. The air is different here, wind that has blown across the ocean from far away. It’s wonderful air, salty, fresh, all at the same time. Cat understands how some men—the brothers running the boat—might devote their lives to it. But not Cat. It isn’t in her blood; she feels the basic foreignness of it.

She watches Ian watch the water, his first day on the ocean, too. He is finally at home. It’s been a long year to get him to this point. The night his grandmother left, she kissed him good-bye, hugged him, cried over him, and yet he didn’t seem to understand that she was leaving, didn’t grasp it till Cat tried to put him to bed and he couldn’t find his grandmother. He ran about the house, Cat following, till finally he stopped and wailed. “Nana!” he called. “Nana! Nana!” There was no consoling him. He refused milk, bouncing on Cat’s knee, her hugs, kisses. She made sure he had his tiger. Tommy tried to calm him, to no avail. Cat took the little boy back. He was making sporadic gurgling sounds; she worried he would choke himself, but finally he stopped crying and went limp in her arms. She saw his chest rise and realized he’d fallen asleep.

She tucked him in his bed, fearful of waking him. Later, she woke and went to check on him, but his bed was empty. She searched the room, then the house. She woke Tommy, panicked. “It’s five degrees outside,” she cried. “He could be frozen to death.”

Tommy got up, pulled on a pair of boxers, and lumbered to Ian’s room. He walked to the front door, the garage door, the back door.

“He’s in the house,” Tommy said.

“How do you know?”

“He’s eighteen months old. He can’t reach these knobs, let alone unlock the dead bolts. He’s in the house.”

She went to the drier, the washer, but they were empty. She checked the lower kitchen cupboards, opened the trash can, checked under the couch by the TV.

“Hey,” Tommy whispered. He had a flashlight. “I found him.”

He led her to Connor and Jonathan’s room, had her get down on her hands and knees between the two beds. He shone the light under Jonathan’s bed, and there was the little boy, curled up and fast asleep, hugging his toy animal.

Cat felt weak. She dropped to her knees, then rolled to her back. “Oh God,” she said. She felt as if everything was draining out of her. She started to cry, but Tommy helped her up and guided her out of the room.

“We can’t just leave him under there,” she said.

“I’ll go back and cover him up.”

“But—”

“He doesn’t want to be alone. That’s the perfect spot for him.”

The next night Tommy moved Ian’s bed into the boys’ room, wedged it against a wall after moving a dresser out, and had all the boys go to bed at the same time. In this way, they’ve all been able to get through the night.

We’re going to bring her around now,” says the younger of the brothers. “You can go aft. Get some breeze at your back.” Cat gets the boys to hold on to her, Jonathan grabbing her hand and Connor grabbing his. Tommy takes Phyllis, and they all move to the back of the boat. Cat hands Ian off to Tommy, tells the boys to hold on to the railing, and goes back to fetch the ashes. She struggles with the case, sets it down, and opens it, then opens the thick plastic bag inside the case and grabs a handful of the coarse ashes dotted with white fragments, cups her other hand atop the full hand so that the ashes don’t immediately blow away. She looks at everyone, then uncups the hand and
the ashes take flight, floating over the water, then descending onto it. She and Tommy help the boys toss the ashes, even Ian, then Phyllis, and finally Tommy partakes. Most of the ashes are still in the bag and so Cat lifts it from the case, balances the bag for a moment on the railing, then raises the bag, releasing its contents, the ashes flittering in the wind, almost shining. She lifts the bag higher and shakes, harder now, letting it all go.
XXXVIII

Do you have any secrets?” she asks. “Anything you’re keeping from me? Anything I should know? If there is, tell me now.”

They are lying in her father’s bed. Tomorrow the estate sale people will cart everything away, and there is just this one night left in California. She is nestled against Tommy, her body loose and relaxed from love-making. As far as she knows, she is not pregnant, but they’ve been steadily, enthusiastically trying for months. Never has she enjoyed sex as she enjoys it now. Never has it had this kind of meaning, even done in her father’s bed.

“I have one secret,” he admits. “How ’bout you?”

“I have one, too,” she says.

“You first.”

She argues, but he prevails. The divulging of all secrets is her idea, he says, and she must first walk the walk. So she tells him that her father, the one whose bed they are sleeping in, who raised her, whose ashes today they spread on the waters, was not really her father.

“No, there was a different man, long dead, unknown and unknowable to her, a man her mother had a fling with, and this is how she, Cat, came into being, a product not of love or planning but of lust and a woman’s desire to have a good time.

“And a man’s,” Tommy says. “That’s how most of us came into being, two people with desire, wanting to have a good time. It’s random, I know, but not necessarily a bad thing. Hopeful, even.”

“Okay,” she says. “Hopeful.” She has told him, only the second person ever. Michael was the first, a poor choice on her part.

“I need to ask you something,” he says.

“So ask?”

“Did your mother kill herself? I figured that would be your secret.”

She explains that she doesn’t know but thinks it unlikely. It wasn’t as if her mother ate all the pills, or drank the whole bottle of gin. But she must have known there was danger, and so it was a reckless act by a woman who was not reckless, which makes Cat wonder if the combination of gin and Valium was indeed calculated, done so well to hide the true intent, and on and on it goes, the logic turning back onto itself, because it is unknowable, this thing.

“So,” she says. “What’s your secret?”

“It’s about Ian. Ironic, in light of your secret.”

Oh God, she thinks. “Tell me.”

“I’m not sure how to say it, Cat.”

“Tell me. Just tell me what it is.”

“He’s not Kyle’s.”

“What do you mean?”

“He’s not Kyle’s child. Your brother isn’t, wasn’t, the boy’s father.”

“I don’t get it,” she says, and she doesn’t. Who else would the father be? Kyle’s name is on the birth certificate—she saw to that—and she and Tommy have adopted the boy, an orphan of the greatest modern attack on American soil.

But Tommy was curious, Tommy the scientist, who knew where Kyle’s DNA was stored, who was the doctor to whom results could be released. And so the first week Ian arrived, he had his friend prepare a sample from Ian under the guise of a throat culture, and he sent it to White Plains. The results were unequivocal, Tommy says. He had them double-check it. There was another man.

“She slept with someone else?” Cat herself felt betrayed.
“She must have.”
“I can’t believe it.”
“On the rebound, she was. Happens all the time.”
“You’ve known for how long?” Cat asks.
“I didn’t know how to tell you.”
“When were you going to?” she asks.
“When I figured out how. And then you asked.”
“You went behind my back.”
“It wasn’t like that, Cat. I wanted to know, and I figured you’d want to know, too. It was supposed to be a gift. I was going to say, ‘Hey, I checked, and this kid is really your brother’s.’ It just didn’t turn out that way.”
She rolls away from him, gets out of bed, throws on her robe.
“Where are you going?” he wants to know.
“I can’t just lie there with you, not right now.”
She heads for the living room. There’s still a bottle of gin there. Tommy shows up as she’s filling a glass to three fingers.
“What are you doing?” he asks.
“Drinking. I can’t just … just lie in bed with you. It’s like you betrayed me.”
“Betrayed you? I’m helping you. Let’s not forget, you’re asking me to raise this child, too. I have a right to know who he is.”
“You make it sound like I was trying to trick you.”
“I just wanted to know the truth,” he says.
“But don’t you see, now Ian is not really … Here’s the thing: we tricked that poor old woman into giving up her grandson to strangers. Now that we know this, we should probably give him back. It’s not right to keep him.”
“That’s crazy. We’ve saved him. You saved him, Cat, and even Mrs. Boyle knows it. So, we are not going to tell her anything.”
But this, she thinks, is not how it’s supposed to be. I’m supposed to be raising Kyle’s son. Kyle’s. It’s how she thinks of Ian, as Kyle’s. Ian is about love and family and continuity, a Miller—that’s his name now, Ian Miller—a part of a small and unlikely family. She is supposed to be carrying on the family, extending it. Ian is hers, and yet he is the child of strangers. And Kyle? Kyle is gone, completely gone.
Tommy walks to her father’s reading chair and sits. “It makes it all the more miraculous,” he says.
“I don’t follow.”
“This little boy has come to us, almost out of the ashes, if you will. And now he’s ours. It’s totally improbable that you went looking for a child, and you found one.”
“Not the one I was looking for,” she says.
“Perhaps. In any case, this one needed to be found.”
She sips the gin and realizes that she doesn’t want it.
“I got you into this,” she says.
“I volunteered. I’m not complaining.”
“I’m not sure I’m going to get pregnant,” she tells him.
“You don’t know.”
“But what if I can’t?” she asks.
“Then we won’t have a child together.”
“But you want it,” she says.
“Don’t you?”
She turns from the bar. She can just make him out, sitting in the shadows. Of course she wants it. “Yes, yes,” she tells him. “But—”
“So we’ll see. By my age I know I won’t get something just ’cause I want it. And, one way or another, our cup already runneth over. Come back to bed.”
She wakes, the dream still fresh in her mind. For the first time in years she has remembered a dream. Kyle came to her. Now she looks around, half expecting him to be in the room. “I know what you did,” he said in the dream. They were in the old backyard, among the McIntosh trees, but adults. It was fall, fragrant with the smell of decaying apples. “See it through,” he said. She opened her mouth to speak, sure that the right words would come out and wanting to know what they would be. Then she woke. See it through. That was Kyle all the way. He had endurance; he never gave up on anything. She mentioned this to him once, and he said, “Well, you only fail when you stop.”

She needs the bathroom, and this gets her out of bed, but she goes first to the boys’ room. She kisses Jonathan and Connor on the head, Jonathan cool and Connor hot and sweaty. She turns back to Ian, kneels to the floor, where he’s sleeping in her father’s old blue sleeping bag, his little arm wrapped around his tiger. She leans in close to his mouth, to hear the steady little puffs of breath, to smell the sweetness of him. “You’re here now,” she finally whispers. “You’re here now, and you’re mine. That’s all there is to it. You will always be mine.”
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