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Up Too Late: A Novel Excerpt

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UP TOO LATE: A NOVEL EXCERPT

By

Peter Bayless

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of

The Graduate College at the University of Nebraska

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UP TOO LATE: A NOVEL EXCERPT

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University of Nebraska, 2011

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Tyler Sexton is a male in his mid-twenties whose life seems to have ground to a halt before it truly began. Despite the opportunities afforded him by a successful college education and an upper-middle-class family background, Tyler's life since the death of his father from heart disease has become one dominated by malaise, living alone and working a dead-end job as a grocery store customer-service manager, clinging to the family members he has left. Now, with his mother suffering from a debilitating fight with cancer and his sisters either starting their own families or withdrawing even further into episodes of emotional breakdown than he has. Into this crisis comes a figure from Tyler's high school years, an awkward acquaintance who never became a friend, but who's developed a life that seems to offer Tyler a way out—or at least the tools to fix his own.

Up Too Late is the as-of-this-writing working title of my main project, a novel-length manuscript that I began writing the first version of in the fall of 2009. The selected excerpt here represents the third iteration of my attempt to tell Tyler's story, coming after a restart at the end of the summer 2010 and revisions in the spring of 2011, and is accompanied by an introduction that goes into greater detail on the evolution of and influences on the piece.

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Introduction & Discussion

The larger project from which this thesis draws—a novel project which only recently acquired its working title, *Up Too Late*, after a very brief and undignified stint as *Diet Coke and Condoms*—first saw the light of day halfway through the Fall 2009 semester, roughly a year and a half ago. At that point, I only knew that I wanted to try writing a novel. At the time—as indeed they remain, to a slightly lesser extent, to this day—the humorous supernatural and fantasy fiction of such writers as Terry Pratchett and Charles Stross were among the strongest influences on my tastes as a reader and as a writer, and I originally conceived of a work in the vein of Pratchett's *Small Gods* or his collaboration with Neil Gaiman *Good Omens* (though I wouldn't actually read the latter until the following summer, I now see in it the sort of book I wanted to write). The novel would center around a young adult named Tyler Sexton, living and working on his own and financially unable to feasibly visit his mother while she languished in a protracted death of cancer in an assisted-living facility several hundred miles away. He would gradually become entangled with two enigmatic female figures, one of them, Melinda an apparent doppelganger to an old romantic attraction from high school, and the other a two-legged demonic she-goat who appeared as an attractive human woman to everybody but him. Eventually—with their philosophical and spiritual guidance—he would make his way back home to his mother and come to terms with her death.

Armed with this concept, I spent the rest of that semester, all of the next, and the better part of the summer of 2010 writing. Progress was slow and reviews from my workshops mixed, with several of my readers noting that my style often seemed

overwrought and that the pacing seemed too slow and inconsistent, with scenes awkwardly dwelling on minutiae for pages. It was professor Jonis Agee who finally, that summer, after reviewing what I'd written so far—barely a hundred pages or so even after three-quarters of a year, so bogged down had I become in my attempts to work through the premise—laid out for me the problems with what I was doing: I was, she wrote, using my characters as puppets, making them stand in place and "grind their daily lives very fine" rather than progressing or finding their way through the novel. She recommended I start anew, a piece of advice I was only too happy to take, as by that point my slow grinding forward had come to a virtual halt and I was already almost looking for an excuse to unchain the albatross from my neck.

In starting anew at the beginning of the 2010 fall semester, I briefly considered trying to come up with an entirely new story, but when I sat down to write a first, experimental scene, I ended up taking the essential elements of the character and predicament of Tyler and attempting to reuse them in a way that would avoid the pitfalls I had encountered the first time around. This incarnation of Tyler, I decided, would tell the story in first person and in present tense, a maneuver that I hoped would help keep him from again seeming to become an author's puppet or caricature. In my previous attempt I'd inserted the demoness as a separate viewpoint after reading Orhan Pamuk's use of several different rapidly shifting narrators in his *My Name is Red*; hardly a poor author to look to for inspiration, perhaps, but I was then (and still am now) perhaps unable to wisely integrate such rich inspiration into my own work. I therefore decided that, for simplicity's sake, Tyler's would also be the *only* viewpoint in this draft. He would live close to his ailing mother—in the same city, in fact—rather than several hundred miles

away; this geographical separation (never adequately justified in the first place) had left him without the allies and contacts he needed to be engaged as a human being rather than a quasi-solipsist. Finally, I recast the demoness and the mysterious woman as a single character, an androgynous-leaning young woman whose name was shortened from Melinda to Mel. There would be no more of the overt supernatural in the novel, though some of that flavor remained in the form of Mel as still a mischievous trickster and temptress with an interest in occult imagery and philosophy, right down to transforming the basement of her shared residence into a haunted house with a mock altar and gargoyles prefabricated out of concrete.

With all these changes in hand, I was able to proceed much more quickly and effectively through the production of this second draft. I finished a complete rough draft, of approximately 270 pages, in the beginning of the spring 2011 semester, and shortly thereafter I submitted it in its entirety to workshop. The general consensus seemed to echo the feedback I'd been getting from Professor Agee on a week-by-week basis during the fall. In brief, while much improved from my earlier efforts, the novel still suffered from spots of belabored or overwrought language, long stretches of dialogue (both internal and external), verbal sparring, and types of scenes that didn't lend themselves well to action and interest (at least a few readers remarked that my characters spent too much time driving places in their cars).

I'm now in the process of revising and/or rewriting with these and other criticisms in mind. In response to charges that there was too little reason for Tyler to be attracted to or put up with the character of Mel, who in this incarnation was originally a stranger who he encountered at a support-group meeting, I've gone back to casting her as an old

acquaintance from school, albeit one who's changed considerably since he last saw her. Throughout the various forms of this story and of these characters, I've had in mind that in some form or fashion, Mel was the sort of individual who would provide an "escape" or "alternative" to Tyler—not leading him to abandon his family, per se, but to renegotiate his relationship with them at a time when the passage of time, spiked by medical crisis, seems to be rendering the previously taken-for-granted status quo unsustainable. I hope that by making Mel more likeable and previously related to Tyler, I can both make his alliance with her more explicable and combat my tendency to write the longer stretches of expository prose that were accused of slowing the pacing of the novel down.

My thesis consists of a block of four chapters starting from the current beginning of the novel. All the scenes in it have already been gone over and revised from the "workshop draft," though the selection doesn't quite reach the first of the entirely new scenes I've written so far. It introduces most if not all of the key characters—Tyler, the narrator; his mother; Rachel and Sandy, his sisters; and of course Mel. The scenes in question were among the best-received even before revision, so I hope that in their current form, they will stand as good representatives of the writing I've produced and the progress I've made here at UNL.

Chapter 1

My mother's house—what I've only recently stopped thinking of as *my* house, even though I've had a *my apartment* for some years—is large, from the days when it housed five people, before that number was reduced abruptly to four and then, more kindly and gradually, to three, two, and one. Behind two of the three garage doors there are now only mazes of unused yard equipment and plastic children's toys faded by years in the sun. The front yard itself looks better-kept than ever, but even that's because the lawn care has passed out of the hands of the teenaged Tyler and into those of whichever company's logo is on the plastic tag that I find protruding from the grass line near the sidewalk today, warning passersby with small children and/or animals that the lawn has been sprayed and will be unadvisable to walk on for twenty-four hours. The date written in black marker on the tag is almost a week and a half ago; it must have been here the last time I came by, but I don't remember having noticed it. At any rate, after I have parked the Civic behind the Toyota minivan that's already in the driveway this morning, I walk over and tug the tag out of the ground before proceeding to the front door.

Inside, I follow the sounds of children's voices to the door of my mother's first-floor study, a room now dominated by a twin-sized bed whose position relative to the surrounding bookshelves and desk suggests its hasty placement in the middle of an established arrangement, with no heed to the principles of feng shui or to the accessibility of the documents in binders on the shelves behind it. The bed is, in fact, my childhood one, taken from storage and placed here for my mother to sleep on without needing to

climb the stairs. It was moved here weeks ago, and since that time we've finished moving the larger bed downstairs as well and setting it up in one of the larger back rooms, but this one hasn't found its way back upstairs or into storage. No surprise that more and more things are being left to lie wherever they are not too inconvenient: the upkeep of this house and its contents was already a heavy load on a widow and her intermittently present adult children before the latest round of troubles began.

Within the room, sitting on the bed or climbing between it and the floor as their stages of life dictate, are the sources of the giggles and chatter: a boy and girl respectively around three and four years old, and their father, a man who aside from his slightly thickset build serves as a near twin to me: black hair, brown eyes, just under six feet. We are both in that nebulous almost-thirty age of our lives, but his prospects are better than mine, which he seems to advertise by donning chinos and a crisp white polo shirt—tucked in—on a Saturday morning when I am in the twelve-year-old Offspring T-shirt I slept in and the jeans that spent the night on my bedroom chair.

As I approach, my sister's husband reaches an arm out to either side to sweep the children together in front of his knees and turn them by the shoulders until they are at least somewhat facing me. This earns an inward wince. Small children and I have an understanding, or at least they should: they don't attempt to interact with me and I won't smile in a horribly awkward fashion and mutter meaningless phrases in an attempt to get them to go away.

"Alex, Josie, look. Your Uncle Tyler is here."

"Hello, kids," I say, then quickly, before he can attempt to cajole them into greeting me individually or some other such nonsense, "Hello, Gus. Any idea where I can find the women?"

"They just went upstairs a few minutes ago, actually," says Gus, who gracefully abandons whatever plans he may have had to make his offspring perform but keeps them positioned between us like a shield. "Your mother said she wanted some more things brought downstairs. I think it's the sort of thing where finding the stuff and pulling it out is harder than bringing it down."

"Right. I'll just go up and say hello."

I find my sister and my mother in what used to be my parents' bedroom, now left empty by the conspicuous absence of its former queen-sized bed and the half-denuded state of the vanity table underneath the mirror. The prints of the bedposts are still visible in the pink carpeting, and make the room seem even emptier than it otherwise might. Mom's sitting in front of the closet, hunched over in a chair not native to the room; Rachel is on all fours pulling cardboard boxes and plastic bins out from under the hanging masses of blouses and dresses. I move up beside the chair and place a hand on my mother's shoulder, eliciting a sudden jump and an exclamation before she lifts her head and looks back at me.

"Tyler! Oh, you scared me," she chides. "You've been sneaking up on me your whole life. Can't you stop before I die?"

Despite the admonishment in her words, she smiles; the smile is as haggard as the rest of her face, but the eyes in that face are bright. I bend down and let her kiss me on

the cheek, then kiss her back, trying not to wonder if her fingers feel bonier on my shoulders than the last time we embraced. I fail at avoiding this contemplation, but am able to satisfy myself that the answer is no; she certainly does not look emaciated, merely exhausted. Rachel smiles an apologetic hello at me with her lifted head framed in hanging pants legs and skirts but doesn't get up to offer a hug of her own, even though we, brother and sister, aren't shy about such things anymore. We've grown out of our young-adult familial awkwardness, but she, I've noticed, has also grown out of having time between chores.

"I and Rachel have been trying to find the last box with the finances in it," my mother explains when we have made our greetings. "When you took the rest of them downstairs last week, there turned out to be one missing. I can't think where it could be."

I look at the boxes already pulled out of the closet and shoved aside into an irregular line along one side of the room, like makeshift barricade, as though someone expected miniature German tanks to start rolling across the border via this bedroom at any moment. Boxes filled with paperback books whose covers, like so many other aspects of my young life, evoke the then-recent 1970s. Boxes filled with rows of manila envelopes, each carefully labeled along their top edges in permanent marker with words now bereft of context and meaningless. Rachel is pulling another one out into the light; my mother bends forward to look at it, but I can already tell that if the contents produce a spark of recognition in her, it will not be the right one.

"No, that's from our trips in '98 and '99," the older woman says after a moment. She lowers her head further and presses the tips of her fingers to her forehead, just below

the scarf she wears. "God dammit. Why couldn't I have kept this stuff together any better?"

I have never felt adequate to the task of consoling or counseling my mother, but I try nonetheless: "Don't come down so hard on yourself, Mom. You do as well as anyone could. I've got an apartment that's a twelfth the size of this house and I lose stuff in it."

When she takes her fingers away from her face and looks to me again, her eyes are bright with tears, but she is smiling again, at least. Despite the smile, I'm still more deeply shaken than I hope I show. Swearing and taking the Lord's name in vain are all but fixtures of my mother's policy towards housekeeping frustrations; that it would drive her to tears suggests that something is deeply wrong, that some coping mechanism somewhere has suffered a failure. I hope the failure is temporary.

"Thank you, Tyler," she says quietly. "I suppose it will turn up one way or another. I don't think things actually vanish from the universe in this house." She shakes her head and sighs, fortunately seeming to be back to mere exasperation rather than despair. "We've turned the other bedroom, where the rest of them were, upside down. I don't think we're going to find it here, either, and I don't know where else to go looking." Another sigh, and she rubs her forehead again, this time with her knuckles and the back of her hand. "It's not even that important right now! I just want to make sure you have access to everything you'll need. And now, agh, I'm going to worry about it."

I avoid acknowledging the specifics of that statement. "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Oh, Tyler, I think you'd just get in the way up here. But there is something you can do to help, yes. Do you know where the Halloween decorations are in the basement?"

I do. "You want me to bring them up?"

"Would you? You can stack them in the back living room. It's not like I'll be entertaining guests anytime soon anyway, and I'll feel better knowing they're where I can reach them easily."

Even if my mother puts up (or has put up) the Halloween decorations the moment she tastefully could, they'll still be sitting there boxed for almost a week. I start to mention this, but do not finish. I know why my mother wants the boxes to be sitting there, waiting for a Halloween to come. I want her to have the boxes there, too. I assure her that I will ferry them up in due course, and straighten up to begin making good on my assurances.

I stop and turn at the door as though something has just occurred to me, though it has been on my mind for some time. "One other thing. While I was here today, I was thinking I'd take some of the rocket stuff back with me. Not all of it, of course. Just to give me something to work on."

A cloud briefly passes across my mother's face, before she smiles and banishes it with artificial illumination. "Sure, take whatever you like. I haven't felt like doing much work on it myself, lately, but maybe knowing that you're doing something will help get me excited again, too."

"I hope so too," I say. Hopefully, indeed, but without conviction.

Gus has moved with the children to the kitchen table, where he sits with Josie standing up in his lap and Alex standing on a chair across the table from him, attempting to pacify them both with juice and cookies. It seems to have been working, but as soon as I pass through the room on my way towards the basement steps, Alex jumps down from his chair and headbutts me in the leg.

"Alex!" Gus sets his little girl aside on a vacant chair and steps over to take hold of his son by the shoulders. "Sorry about that. He's starting to get a little stir-crazy. It's why I had to get them out of the study."

"It's okay, he didn't hit me that hard." I rub the heel of my hand over my thigh and peer down at the future linebacker. "Have you thought about taking them outside? There are some old balls in the garage that are still good, I think, if you dust them off a little."

"Maybe." Gus's face seems to suggest that he is being polite about the chances of that happening. "I'm just not sure how long Rachel and your mother will be. We were going to take the kids out to lunch after we get done here."

"Oh." Again I move towards a doorway and hesitate once there. "Isn't it a little early to be letting them have cookies? It's not even noon yet."

Gus blinks up at me from where he's squatted, coaxing Alex back into his seat. "Yeah, maybe." I see *but you're not the one to tell me* in his look.

I walk down into the basement.

My mother's basement contains the more senior, more dust-caked, less well-lit relatives of the warrens of shelves and discarded junk that I briefly glimpsed through the garage door and windows: the basement of an entire family of packrats, all but one of

whom left the house one way or another and left the rat queen with their discarded collections. Like shed carapaces or cocoons, if rats had either of those things and if I was willing to mix my metaphors. *What do rats leave behind, anyway?* I think to myself. I decide that if my younger sister Sandy's middle school experiment in pet ownership was any indication, their most relevant preoccupation is that of chewing up newspaper and shitting in it. Fortunately, the brown of the cardboard boxes isn't quite the right hue to complete the metaphor.

The holiday decorations are right where I remember them; I am not made a liar by my memory. I walk along a narrow artificial corridor lit garishly from overhead by a single naked light bulb, reading the magic-markered labels on the ends of the big cardboard boxes—these, at least, are better-labeled than the ones driving my mother crazy upstairs—and looking for the ones appropriate to the upcoming season. Something in me would be more comfortable in less light, or at least a different quality of light: I feel like I'm in the catacombs of some European cathedral, tunnels filled with recesses holding boxed relics, and a part of my imagination argues that it ought to be lit by candles. Admittedly it's been a little while since I've been down here, but this is the first time I can ever recall it evoking such a reaction in me, and I have trouble claiming ownership of the sensation. I find the boxes labeled *Halloween*—three of them—and after lifting the flaps of one for confirmation in the form of black and orange crepe paper, I waste no time wrestling the first one off the shelf and carrying it back towards the stairs. I want to spend as brief a time as I can down here amongst the dead, even if these dead are of the sort that can be exhumed and reanimated for a month or two a year.

Rachel and Mom seem to have come back downstairs, because when I pass through the dining room on the way to the living room, box in hand, there is a strange woman in a kerchief and a velour jogging suit that has been bought far too recently to have seen any actual jogging. She is sitting at the table, reading the newspaper funnies, holding them up close to her face. It takes me a step to realize it is my mother, a step longer than it should. This isn't something that I've noticed for the first time today; since she started showing the signs of illness and treatment alike, there have been these moments when, if I'm looking for her, I recognize her, but when she stumbles unexpectedly into my path or I into hers there is a moment, now, when all I see is the perversely bright-colored scarves and clothing she has started wearing. It's as though I am participating in a psychological experiment: I can imagine someone with a clipboard duly noting my double take and the quick center-of-gravity shenanigans I pull to make absolutely sure that I don't spill plastic pumpkins and pipe-cleaner spiders all over the carpet.

"Oh, Tyler, be careful," she says. "Listen, I'm glad you're doing that so quickly, but after you drop that box off, can you take a moment and help Gus move the bed out of my office? He and Rachel need to be on their way soon, and I want that done today."

"Of course," I say, and continue walking. "Did you find the box you were looking for upstairs?"

Mom sighs and lays the open paper flat on the table and turns the page from the funnies to the advice columns. For a moment I wonder if her inability to find things has become a foregone conclusion that no longer genuinely perturbs her and that it is my asking that is a source of her mild annoyance.

"No," she says finally. "I'm starting to think I just misnumbered the boxes, or the numbers are old ones, and there really were only four. I guess if there's anything missing when we actually go through the papers, we'll have to look all over again."

I finish carrying the box into the deserted living room and set it down against the end of a couch, hiding the half-shredded upholstery that has gone unaddressed for the half-decade since this house was last home to a cat. On a whim, thinking of numbers and labels, I look more closely at the end of the box. This one's black *Halloween* label has been written on below an older, now half scribbled-out *Jocelyn's Books* with the circled numeral 13 alongside, both underneath the strip of yellowed packaging tape that runs up the box's sides and, sliced in two, across the lips of the top flaps.

"Speaking of boxes and labels," I say to my mom as I pass back through the dining room, gesturing vaguely the way I have come. "I think that box was one of the ones you used when you and Dad first moved here. It's labeled the same way as the rest of them I've seen."

"Really?" She doesn't look up at first; she has turned back to the funny pages and is peering closely over them again, this time with a pair of scissors ready in one hand to clip out any that strike her fancy. "Yes, I reused a lot of those. Didn't want to throw them out after we finished moving in."

I stand there for a few seconds before starting to move again, apparently long enough for her to take a second notice of my presence.

"Sure is something to think about still having those old boxes after all these years," she adds, laying the newspaper page down for a moment and peering up at me

from over her glasses. Something about her lined face looks faintly expectant, as though wondering if this secondary observation will satisfy whatever I'm on about.

"Yes," I say, then after a pause of my own, "Yes, it is."

Rachel is now the one in the kitchen with the two children, which I take, correctly, as a sign that I will find Gus waiting for me in the office. He's reading a home improvement magazine, which he puts back on the shelf when I come through the doorway.

"How's your house doing these days?" I ask him as I walk over to the bed and begin pulling the mattress off at one end, because the magazine's made me think of it and because it's something to say.

Gus moves to the other end of the bed frame and helps me turn the mattress up on its side. He looks mildly blank at having this question posed to him by his brother-in-law. "Pretty well, I guess. We've just finished painting the empty bedroom. I figure the kids'll be wanting their own room each in a couple of years, best to get it ready now."

"Mmmh. Did Mom tell you where she wanted this to go?"

"I think she said in the living room. Do you want to go first?"

Fortunately, there is no need to further strategize or exchange instructions; we've both done this before, with this very same bed, even. We wind our way out of the office, around the corner between one narrow hallway and the wider main one, and into the living room where we leave it temporarily propped up over the back of the couch at whose end I so carefully positioned the Halloween box moments ago. If my mother were on her feet to supervise us, she'd be admonishing us every time we brushed the mattress against the corner of a wall or the top of a door, even though the soft fabric does no

damage to the surfaces that I can see. The metal frame will be another matter; I'm considering telling Gus to go ahead and leave so that I can move it myself, by disassembling and reassembling it if necessary, but once we've dropped the mattress off he immediately starts back towards the office and I follow. I cast a glance at my mother through the doorway into the dining room as I go: she hasn't looked up.

"The two of you not going to have any more kids, then?" I ask. The silent few moments when we are each waiting for the other to get a good carrying grip on his end seems to invite a follow-up question.

"We haven't talked about it, but it seems like we have the perfect balance now. One boy, one girl, our first two tries—some luck, huh?" He grins and winks at me, as though he has just made a joke.

"Lucky," I agree.

We retrace our previous path with the bed frame. I cringe every time the brown metal clunks against the edge of a door or scrapes along a section of wallpaper, but when I turn my head to see where we've passed, I see no new marks that distinguish themselves from the general scars of age.

"Take care of your house and maybe you won't have to have your kids do this again in thirty years," I tell Gus.

He laughs. I feel a flash of annoyance on my face, and I also think, too late, that perhaps our exchange may have attracted the notice of my mother. But when we walk back into her view again, she is still at the table, unperturbed in her mild suffering. A few comic strips are missing from the page now, neatly cut out and laid aside by her right hand.

The bed and mattress, too, are soon laid away in their place, or at least in *a* place, on their sides behind the couch. It makes me think of an interment, something laid away with vague hopes of being raised again someday.

Rachel is coming through the front hall now with the children in tow, placing the keys to the van in her husband's palm and exchanging words with him about their plans for the afternoon. She is, I learn from standing within earshot, feeling more tired than she expected after talking with and helping our mother, and thinks she might rather go directly home and eat lunch there; he is of the opinion that the children deserve a lunch outing for waiting so patiently while their parents helped Grandma. All this I overhear despite not really intending to, wanting in fact to return to the basement for the last two boxes, but I'm trapped for the moment by the group who, despite being only two adults and two small children in a wide hallway, have managed to position themselves such that there seems no graceful way to maneuver by them. The children in question drift around inside the confines of a vaguely circular area, as though invisibly tethered. Perhaps they know they are on the verge of leaving and have no desire to prolong the process by trying to disperse into the rooms of Grandma's house.

"You kids be good now," I say to them, more as an experiment than anything else, leaning forward with my hands on bent knees to bring my face closer. They stare back, expressions utterly blank, not in the familiar way of adult ennui but with the more distant bewilderment of childhood.

"Okay, look, you just go ahead and take them out and get them strapped in," Rachel is saying when I finally straighten up in defeat, still the focal point of two pairs of disconcertingly intent young eyes. "You can drive, and drop me off at home, and then

take them wherever you want to, all right? Just give me a few minutes to make sure I've taken care of everything here with Mother."

Gus is beginning to look weary himself by this point in the conversation; I am not sure if it is my imagination, but his shirt seems more ill-fitting, more strained against the small paunch he's cultivating, than it did a few minutes ago. "Come on, kids," he sighs, but it takes the sound of the door opening to draw them away from me and get them moving outside.

I take the opportunity to walk down to the basement—turning down the front hall and circling around deeper in the house rather than walk through the room where my sister and mother are now talking—and fetch one of the two remaining Halloween boxes. When I get it back upstairs and into place beside the first, Rachel's standing in the open front door, looking through her purse as though fearing she's about to leave without something.

"Rachel," I say to her. "Wait."

Rachel looks up as though prepared to be exasperated, but as soon as she focuses her eyes on my face she relaxes her shoulders and offers up a genuine-seeming if ragged-edged smile. "Tyler." She looks down into her purse again, seems to give up, and draws the zipper shut. "I'm sorry I didn't get to really chat with you, but I didn't get enough sleep last night and had to come out here and help Mom and… you know how it is."

"Yeah," I say, not sure I do. "Well, it was good to see you anyway. Your, uh, tribe seems to be growing well."

She resituates the purse strap on her shoulder. “Well, one of us had to do it for Mom. It’s not that bad, though. Just… the days when it takes one straw to break the camel’s back, there are more straws to go around.”

“Yeah.” I make as if I am looking past her, out the door or windows in the direction of the car, even though where I am actually looking towards her van I can see nothing but curtains and bushes. “Well, they’re lucky, as kids go. I almost envy them, you know? They’ve got the best twenty years of their life ahead of them.”

Rachel chuckles tiredly, then her mouth wrinkles as she turns serious. “Have you talked to Sandy lately?”

“No, not since the last time we were all together at the hospital.” My brow furrows as I try to figure out if Rachel is getting at anything; it’s been some years since I thought of Sandy as having to be looked after. Finally I add, “Why?”

She shrugs. “No particular reason. It’s just that I haven’t seen or been able to talk to her since then, myself. I want to make sure she doesn’t isolate herself or anything. Don’t think she would, but you never know.”

I spend a moment longer frowning, but nod, seeing no reason not to take Rachel’s concern at face value. “Seems like a good idea,” I agree. “I’ll give her a call and let you know.” Then a tiny mental light blinks on and I frown again. “Wait, did you not see her on Wednesday night for the support group?”

The screen door opens behind Rachel with a creak. Gus is standing in the doorway. “Honey, Tyler’s car is behind us.”

“Oh, yeah, sorry. I’ll move it in just a minute.” I wave him off and return my attention to Rachel, who had just begun to open her mouth and has adopted a mildly

pained expression at Gus's unexpected interruption. "Anyway, what were you going to say?" From the top right corners of my eyes, I can see Gus stepping away down the porch; the screen door bangs shut again.

Rachel sighs, closes her eyes and gives a brisk shake of her head, as though trying to dislodge a fly, before looking at me again. "I'm sorry. I didn't go this week."

"You didn't?" She shakes her head again. "Rachel. We agreed we were *all* going to try it." She is trying to look away, towards the room where our mother sits, except that Mom, somehow, is not there anymore. "I sat through two of the most boring hours I can remember, that I haven't been paid for, anyway, because we all agreed."

"Then don't go back." She turns her head and looks me in the eyes. "I didn't skip it to blow you off, Tyler, I did it because I was feeling at the end of my rope that night, Gus was going to be home late anyway so I would've had to get a sitter, and it was like the perfect storm in a week of bad weather."

Now it's I who look away, as so often happens. "All right. Sorry for getting short with you."

Rachel gives me a wan smile when I look back at her. "I know you didn't mean it, Tyler. Listen, I will go to a meeting sometime, I promise. And I'll help you get Sandy there, too. Right now I just want to go home and take a nap, though."

"Right." A moment's silence hangs between us like the foreboding weather to which she alluded. I break it by gesturing flaccidly past her shoulder. "Uh, I'll go move my car now."

"Great."

When the van is gone to wherever the vans of young mothers go—I have been to their neighborhood but cannot seem to currently think of it in other than vague and relative terms, like *something like this neighborhood twenty years ago*, and I'm not sure if that means anything other than through the eyes of the little children who once were me and now are them—and the Civic is back in the driveway, I find my mother sitting back at the kitchen table, looking over a new, untouched sheet of funnies. I'd assumed she was simply perusing that day's newspaper, but now I notice the stack of at least a week and a half's daily editions, maybe two or three, on the table next to her.

"Sorry you had to hear that," I tell her.

"I didn't any of what you were saying," she says without lifting her eyes. She is shearing a rectangular panel out of the page; with a *snip* as neat as a surgeon's she completes the cut and lifts the strip of off-white-and-black over to the pile. "I heard the water boiling for my tea and had to go to the kitchen."

"Oh." I feel a flash of guilt: "You could have asked me to take care of it."

She reproaches me with her eyes even as she smiles. "That's very sweet of you, Tyler, but I still can do most things for myself. I just need you kids' help with some things."

"Happy to do it for you, Mom. Which reminds me, I do still need to bring the last two boxes up." I start to walk onwards, but she reaches out and arrests me with a touch to the wrist.

"I do appreciate, I really do, all the help you're giving me now. You and Rachel and Sandy. Especially Rachel. Nothing against you, but the time she gives me is a lot more valuable to her, I think."

"Yeah." Mom hasn't moved her hand, so I stand stock-still.

"Listen." She squeezes my wrist as hard as a debilitated fifty-something-year-old can, which is still enough to get my attention. She is no longer smiling. "I don't want you and your sisters to fight with each other, Tyler. Not right now, and I really, *really* don't want you to later. I know everyone gets annoyed with everyone else, especially those we love. And I think you all are wise enough not to take it too far. But please, if things do seem like they're getting bad, think about what I said, okay, Tyler? You know we haven't gone to visit your aunt's family in years because of how they turned out; I don't want history to repeat itself."

I nod, thinking of the woman who chaired our family reunions until everyone else stopped coming to them. "I won't," I say dumbly. "I mean, it won't."

"I heard the two of you talking about Sandy." I can't tell if Mom does not realize she is implicating herself in a lie or if she just doesn't care. She's smiling again, so it doesn't matter. "That's good. *Good*, Tyler. I'm glad you're looking out for each other. Give Sandy a call when you get a chance. I'll give her a call too, now that I've thought of it, all right? We'll compare notes."

"All right," I say. Then, as though asking permission to consider the conversation over, I reiterate, "I still have to bring the last two Halloween boxes up from the basement."

Mom lets go of my wrist, and gives a little nod. "Yes, of course. Thank you for being so conscientious about it."

I don't see Mom again for a little while. Down in the basement I stand for two or three minutes in the incandescently lit aisle, wishing I could be certain of another decade

of carrying these boxes up, all in their proper order. Finally I bring the next of the Halloween boxes up the stairs, and when I do, Mom has left her comic strip scrapbooking on the table and gone elsewhere. I hear the sound of the shower in the downstairs bathtub, the one we never used because it was a flight of stairs and several rooms away from where any of us slept, running: mystery solved. I bring up the third box and place it next to the first two, all in a neat side-to-side line that has gradually escaped my original intention of placing them out of the way. But that intention was rather pointless in the first place and there seems no way around things now. I leave the living room with its new cardboard peninsula.

The garage—what part of it is not kept clear for the last car that calls it home, a 1989 four-door Buick Skylark—is the scrap yard to the basement's warehouse: at once less orderly and less alienatingly monolithic, lit by natural light through its windows but somehow all the drearier for the stale quality of that light after it has been filtered through dusty panes of glass and diffused through the empty space. Within a minute of entering I begin to experience a feeling of suffocation that at first is purely mental, a blockage of the channels of thoughts inside my head, but somehow becomes physical and starts to trap the air in my lungs as well. I press all the garage-door openers at once; the doors in their tracks, especially the two disused ones, make noises like a freight train coming quickly to a complete stop, but once they are open I can breathe again, even before the air has actually had time to circulate.

Across the street, my mother's next-door neighbor, who is not my next-door neighbor because he and his wife moved in only two years ago, has stopped in the middle of his front lawn at the phenomenon of all three of my mother's garage doors opening in

near-unison. He gives me the disapproving look of the newly-retired busybody; I give him my best shit-eating grin and jaunty wave, and, both apparently satisfied with the terms of the exchange, we go our separate ways: he to his backyard and I to the farthest-distant wall of the garage.

Here the high points are steel drums filled with scrap lumber, four lawn mowers (of which only one still runs), and shelves which hold cardboard and plastic utility containers of almost every description I can imagine, probably because these shelves and the nearby workbench have been since childhood the primary seeds for my imagination of what such containers tend to look like. On one shelf, low to the ground, are boxes filled not with nails, scraps or junk the same largely dull colors as the rest of the mélange, but brightly painted tubes and fins and crumpled sheets of plastic.

These last are what I have come looking for, but I don't pull them out yet, because of the feeling that when I do, it will be time to leave. Instead I turn across the oil-stained way and rummage through a different cluster of cardboard boxes, tall refrigerator or perhaps washing machine cartons that house what could tentatively be called sporting equipment, though no regulation league would recognize ninety percent of what I bring to light: every gimmicky little-kid variant on existing sports that groups of designers and advertising execs could come up with, not to mention new ones ill-advisedly constructed out of whole cloth; strange Velcro-covered balls and paddles and darts, or the UFO-like results of misguided attempts to lend some pizzazz to your average Frisbee. All the new toys for the youth of today—*today*, of course, being fifteen or more years ago, a fact I've given up on keeping myself from being reminded of.

"Jesus Christ," I say. It's not so much that I feel guilty about the money wasted in toy stores over the years; my smaller and more rational side knows well that whatever hundreds of dollars are represented here in foam rubber and plastic pale next to the tens of thousands gone into housing, clothing and education. But seeing this graveyard of small, cheap, brightly colored things that were supposed to bring happiness is soul-crushing, not in the fashion of true catastrophe but via two dozen tiny, incremental tragedies, like the dead squirrels we used to make Mom or Dad scrape off the street and bury in the backyard. Rachel and Sandy would cry every time it happened; I remember already feeling too old to cry, but I would still stand under the tree and solemnly stare at the turnings of the shovel as it excavated and then returned the dirt. I feel as though I am staring in a similar fashion now, even though it is my own hands that resume the digging when the moment is past.

Towards the bottom of one of the cartons, I come up with something different: a football. It's actually the second object I've found that people would call a football, but the first one was fluorescent pink on one side, lime green on the other, and spongy yellow in the many places where rats had nibbled away at it. This one is an honest brown and white and shows signs of having been inflated at some point in the past, even if it now sags in my hand like an enormous turd. I check for any sign of obvious leaks, but can find none.

"All right," I tell the listening shelves and boxes, as if to smooth over my earlier blasphemy by expressing mollification. "I can do something with this."

I am searching in still another place several feet away, behind several discarded bicycles whose pedals I have had to disentangle from each other's chains and spokes as a

prerequisite to moving them aside, when I hear a voice behind me. "Tyler, what on earth are you doing?"

I give a guilty start. The person standing there is my mother, dressed in her bathrobe and Crocs, headscarf replaced by a damp towel that she wears like the headdress of a sheik.

"Sorry if I startled you," she goes on, lowering her eyes in a gesture of diplomatic resignation. "I don't mind if you look around. But I thought you were just going to look at the rockets. And why on Earth did you open all the garage doors?"

"It was too stuffy in here," I say, sitting up and propping my left arm across the tops of my knees. "I wanted to air it out a little if I was going to be working in here."

"Well, I sort of wish you hadn't. I don't want all the neighbors to see what a mess it is in here."

I start getting to my feet. "I'm sorry, I'll close them."

"No, don't worry about it. It's too late now." She glances past me, calling attention back to the scene of dislodgement. "So what were you looking for?"

I am discombobulated enough that I have to look where she is looking, as though taking an open-book test, before I can formulate an answer. "Uh, something I could use to pump up a football. I was thinking of the bicycle pumps, but they have a different attachment, for tires. This needs something more like a needle. Do you know if we have anything like that?"

"A football?"

I pick up the object in question from where I laid it aside, on one of the posts of the workbench. "I found this in one of the old boxes. I was thinking if I could pump it

back up, Gus and their kids could have something to play with when they came over. I saw them just sitting around the house with him and eating junk food, and I thought, you know, maybe if there were a few things set up for them so it wasn't any extra work to go outside and play…"

Mom is looking at me with a small smile somewhere in between wistfulness and pity, as though I've done something that's all the more endearing for how far I've missed the mark. "Tyler, they're barely three, four years old. They're not going to play with a full-sized football."

I push my lips together. I realize that she's right, but I don't want to believe it for the same reason that it seemed so natural and unquestionable to try to restore the football in the first place, which is that the *idea* of the football is something the children need.

"It would be there for them when they get a little older," I say. That is the best way I can seem to put it, though, imagining it through her ears, I can already tell that nothing of my intention is going to come across.

She reinforces her smile, like an extra star added to a progress report. "I think you've got a great idea, though. I'll see about getting some light rubber balls or something the kids can play with when they're over here." She sighs and drops her arms at her sides, her smile turning asymmetrical as she purses one end of her lips: "I haven't been a very good grandmother to those children, have I?"

I step in front of her and take one of those hands, holding it to my chest in both of mine. "If it wasn't for you, they wouldn't have such a good mother. So I'd say you've been a fine grandmother for them. And you'll get the chance to be a better one."

She sighs and lids her eyes downwards again, then offers a small smile. "You did come out to get the rockets, didn't you?"

We—I—pull out the boxes she's reminded me of, the ones filled with brightly painted cardboard and balsa and plastic, and place them on the garage floor for a better look at their contents. Despite the similarity of the jumbled impressions they offer at an indirect glance, there is some organization here: the box on the far left of the triptych is a home for whole models, ready to be lifted and slid into the back seat or trunk of the Skylark; the rightmost box is by comparison a junkyard of cracked fins, crimped tubes, and missing parts. As entropy has overtaken the model rocket fleet of my childhood, I seem to have focused, without consciousness, on maintaining that which is left to me—without much adding to it; I have not built a new kit in half a decade—rather than investing in any sort of recovery work. Some of the forlorn shapes in the junk box, I know without cataloging them, have not flown since my father was their co-custodian.

"Were you thinking of just taking one of the boxes to work on, or do you want to take them all to your apartment and keep them there?" asks Mom when I've straightened from my task and we're are standing side by side, looking at them like movie detectives considering an opened morgue drawer.

I'd never imagined myself taking all these boxes away in the first place; I only thought of working on them in my spare time without needing to drive over here, not co-opting their stewardship entirely, even though it is only for me that Mom has immersed herself in the unfamiliar world of model rocketry, driven hundreds of miles with me to fallow fields in western Kansas. Now that she has offered me the possibility, however, there is no way I can take it. But there seems no way I can do what I was going to do

when I thought I could abscond with the box in private, either, which is to take the oldest, most ragged and broken-down rockets—Dad's—and somehow restore them to life. We can do things alone that we feel incapable of doing with someone watching, even things we are not ashamed of, but rather things that seem indescribably important and that performing for an audience would pose the impossibility of needing to describe.

I look to the side at Mom. She is standing with her hands together in front of her waist, one clasped over the back of the other, limply but with a *need* to their configuration rather than just a position of repose. I put my arm around her shoulders and squeeze, and imagine I can feel what she is feeling in her hands, the need for any containment, no matter how weak or strong, to keep things from flying apart.

"Maybe you should take the most broken ones," she says after I hug her like that. I cannot tell if she has simply taken this long to decide on that suggestion or if she was merely seeing whether I would say anything else. "I can probably find some time to check over and fix the ones that just got dinged up last year."

I kiss her towel, then hastily help her readjust it when that simple gesture pushes it back a bit too far from her forehead. "If you want me to," I say, and afterwards ask, "Do you want me to do anything else before I go?" in hopes of expiating the cowardice I feel.

She tips her head against my shoulder, and shakes it there. With the towel framing her features, she looks older and more weathered still, as though my attention has been funneled inwards to the wrinkled skin and to the eyes that seem as gray and washed-out as her nonexistent hair would have been. "No, thank you, Tyler. I think I have my hands full already, but I'm sure next weekend I'll have more for you to do."

When we've said our goodbyes and she's gone back inside, I put two of the boxes back on the shelf and slide the third onto the back seat of the Civic without her watching. Since she isn't watching, I also toss the deflated football into the car, on the floor behind the front seat. Then I leave, but not before a poke in the thigh from the plastic lawn tag, still in my pocket, reminds me to throw it away; placing it in the garage's trash can is the last thing I do before closing the garage doors and sprinting out underneath one of them to the driveway, something we used to do for fun as kids.

Chapter 2

My mom's driveway seems like the trickiest portion of almost any journey that includes it, owing to the way the hill curves downwards and then meets the road at an angle that seems calculated to scrape the bumper of anything lower than a pickup truck. Once I'm safely past it and cruising towards more major roads, I take out my phone and dial Sandy's cell. It's several blocks later when I finally hang up. My younger sister isn't answering her phone, which probably means she's still in bed. The dashboard clock reads twelve-thirty, give or take. I drive faster; I don't have to alter my course because, as it so happens, I was already planning my way to Sandy's apartment.

Sandy's building is one of those long, low ones where all the apartments are accessed by exterior concrete walkways and stairs which overhanging roofs insincerely promise to shelter from the elements. It's a design that has never appealed to me,

evoking as it does the impression of perpetually dwelling in a motel, parking lot a mere dozen feet away from your window glass. I have trouble thinking of a more depressing place for a sometimes-troubled young woman to live without crossing the line into actual poverty, but today I move too quickly for its malaise to set in; I take the stairs two at a time and arrive breathless in front of Sandy's door.

I knock. A minute passes, and I knock again. I take out my phone and watch its display to keep track of the time, knocking a third time two minutes after the second; for a moment I think, insanely, of standing here and continuing to knock according to geometrically increasing lengths of time: next four minutes, then eight, sixteen and so on. A woman, another resident, comes out of her room and exchanges a civil smile as she walks past me to the stairwell; I wonder how long I can loiter outside a young single woman's door before someone calls the police. I knock again, but rather than use my phone to continue keeping track I open it and call Sandy again: still no answer to the rings, even though I can hear them faintly from inside the apartment when I press my thumb over the ear speaker.

Just as I am about to abandon the door and drive back to my mother's house—she has a key to Sandy's apartment, that as far as I know she has not needed to use in years—I hear the click of a deadbolt, and someone pulls the door open, revealing a dark interior. My sister's voice says, "Come in."

I do. The first thing I do is reacquaint myself with where the light switch for the front room is, and turn it on. Then I offer my assessment of the human figure I can now see clearly. "Jesus. You look like hell."

Sandy gives an apologetic smile, like the little girl she seems to be. She's wearing grey sweatshirt and sweatpants, barefooted; her dirty blonde hair is now, actually, *dirty*, and pushed into uneven shocks around her head like a disheveled halo. Paradoxically, in light of the quasi-nocturnal environment she seems to be living in, the round face it frames is still the summer's healthy tan color, but the eyes are half-ringed by a less salutary-looking darkness.

"Sorry I wasn't answering your calls," she says after a silence, arms now crossed tight across her chest. "My phone was on the desk and I didn't feel like getting out of bed at first."

"I was at Mom's house just now. So was Rachel. We're both worried about you. Why were you still in bed after noon?"

"Up too late on the computer last night," she says, and unfolds one arm from the other so she can cover a yawn so large that it seems to scrunch up the top two-thirds of her face. "Didn't mean to make you worried, big brother."

"I don't mind being worried, I just want to make sure everything's all right." I let out a breath, relenting at last, glad she no longer seems as though she's trying to ward me away with those arms. "Well, anyway, I suppose everyone's entitled to sleep in on the occasional Saturday. Did you go to the support group on Wednesday by yourself?"

For a moment her bottom lip quivers and crawls upwards, as though she's about to cry, but a sort of tentative bravado pushes up as though from underneath her skin, flattening her mouth back out and forestalling emotional reaction for the moment.

"Rachel was supposed to pick me up and take me there, but she didn't call. I figured it was off."

"Yes. She told me she was too busy. Are you sure she didn't call you?" I try to think back to Rachel's words to me: nothing that I can recall about unanswered calls, just a general lack of communication.

Sandy lowers her head, eyes closed, and presses her fingers to her forehead, then straightens briskly back up and refolds her arms. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I frown for a moment, then glare and lift both hands, palm-up, in a mocking shrug. "What's that supposed to mean? Come on, Sandy, you just ignored two of my phone calls. Now, did Rachel call you or didn't she?"

"I… missed a few calls during the week." She looks away again, arms still crossed. "I didn't check to see who all of them were from."

"And you didn't go to the meeting by yourself? You have a car."

She delays answering. Suspicion seizes me, and I stalk into the kitchen and open the refrigerator: nearly bare except for condiments, diet soda, and Chinese food boxes. I return to the living area and confront Sandy, who has remained still the entire time, not even following me.

"Have you left the house at *all* this week?"

A shake of the head.

"Not even to go to work? Oh, *Sandy*, tell me you didn't quit your job now."

"I didn't quit." Her voice is clear and distinct, but without much to prop it up, like thin ice. "I… couldn't get up to go in on Tuesday. Or on Wednesday."

"Or on Thursday?" It's a reasonable assumption, but something inside me flashes *danger*, warns me that I am saying things in the wrong voice.

"When I called in on Thursday, my boss told me that if I missed another day, not to bother coming back unless I gave her a medical reason."

"And you missed another day." I take a breath and try to think of how to avoid sounding judgmental. "It sounds like you had a medical reason. Why didn't you give your old psychiatrist a call?"

She shrugs. Her eyes seem to be fixated on something in the region of my kneecaps. "It's been two years since I went to see him. I'd feel too strange talking to him again."

"And you don't feel strange doing—this?"

"It doesn't feel good. But I can't do anything else. Oh, Tyler, why won't you leave me alone? It's bad enough without you and Rachel making things worse."

I have just enough common sense left, primed by the earlier warning, to avoid exploding at her. Instead I hug her tightly, not stopping even when her elbow digs into my solar plexus. She does not uncross her arms to hug me back, hence the elbow, but I feel her lean into me and relax, letting my closeness keep that barrier propped painfully up between us.

After a quarter of a minute I disengage from the one-sided hug and point back towards the kitchen. "I'll make us some coffee. Coffee? You want some coffee?"

"Yeah."

Sandy walks past me into the kitchen and slouches in a chair, arms still across her front. I pass her in turn and plug in the coffee maker, fill it with water, unseal the box of coffee bags and place one of them in the hopper to start brewing. At least the coffee

maker and pot don't seem to be a mess, although that may not be a good sign if it simply means she hasn't been using them.

When the machine is gurgling cheerily, I walk back to the tiny kitchen table and pull out the chair opposite hers, taking my time sitting down with my elbows propped on the tabletop, clasping my palms together with fingers laced, then opening them towards her.

"All right," I say. "Let's start over. You seemed all right at the hospital on Monday. What happened after that?"

Where she once was looking at my kneecaps, Sandy now stares at the base of the refrigerator door. "I was all right when we said goodbye, I guess," she says. "I got all the way home, ate dinner, and thought I'd get to bed early, since I had to be up for work. And once the lights were out, I—I just had everything come crashing back, and I cried myself to sleep. I just laid there in the dark, and all I could think about was that soon there was going to be a hole in the world where Mom used to be." She fixes me with wet eyes, blue eyes that are a pale gray in this light. "Did you ever think about death at night, Tyler? When we were kids?"

What the hell am I supposed to say to that? "I think we all did," I say, opening my hands a bit wider, as though holding a bowl. "All kids do, probably. At least the ones who are sensitive enough."

"Did you ever start crying so loudly that you woke Mom up and she had to come in to calm you down?"

"I can't say that I recall doing that, no."

"I did. She came in and turned on my light and asked me what was the matter, and I told her the truth, that I was thinking about how sad I was going to be when she died. How that got into my head I'll never know. Maybe it was just after Grandpa died. That would have been around '93, so it sounds right. Do you know what she told me? She said that yes, I would be sad when it happened, but it wouldn't be for many years yet and so I shouldn't worry about it." Her face starts to crimp shut around her eyes, cheek muscles rising. "And now it's going to happen. All those years that I tried to be happy are over. Have you done that ever in your life, Tyler? Realized something when you were a kid, and then spent fifteen years with it coming back until finally it comes back for good?"

"No." It feels like an admission of selfishness: that my own childhood night terrors of mortality were concerned only with the potential loss of my own existence. "But Sandy, that isn't happening yet. Mom is still living at home, she's being treated, she's *not* about to drop dead."

"Oh, *fuck you*, Tyler." She shows me her teeth, straightening up in the chair and twisting around to face me. "You're just trying to get me to push it back further, what, another month? Another three? Five? Does it fucking *look* like that's done me any good so far?"

"Whoa." I turn my hands outwards, palms towards her: not to ward her off, I feel instinctually, but to cushion her psychic impact with me, like rubber bumpers. I imagine it works, for after a few moments she subsides and once again sags in her chair, but then I'm left wondering if that spark of motive power, however violent, was wasted; if I can get her going again.

"It was what that bitch said that set me off." Her eyes look completely dry now. "That, and the two of you thought it was such a good idea."

"That bitch? What was a good idea?" I'm still dissipating the absorbed energy of the outburst, too busy shedding chaotic thoughts to make sense of important ones.

"You know who I mean. The bitch at the hospital that we talked to on Monday. And the group she wanted us to join. She wanted us to join a group about getting ready for Mom to die."

"That's not what it's necessarily about," I protest. "It's called the Illness, the Loss and Illness support group."

"Don't tell me that. Why didn't they tell us to go there in June, then? They don't send you there for people who're going to get better. Tyler, I've already done this a hundred times. I want to stop doing it, I want to do it for the last time. I wish you had come to tell me she was dead."

My teeth press together; I feel the scrape of the chair's legs on the floor through them as I push back and get up. Behind me the coffee maker has been silent for a minute or so, and I look through the cupboards for an appropriate cup, but can find none even after opening every single door.

"Where do you keep your coffee mugs?" I ask Sandy quietly when I have exhausted my search.

With my retreat, she has leaned forward and buried her face into the tabletop, unfolding her arms and throwing them out in front of her like a shipwrecked sailor clinging to a plank in the ocean. Her massed hair shifts as her voice says muffledly, "Drawer below the silverware."

I find the drawer, where the mugs are laid on their sides, on towels. "Do you want one?" I ask her in the same tone of voice. When she says nothing, I finish pouring only my own and then stand at the counter drinking it with both hands, the seat of my pants propped against the lip of the countertop.

"I'm not going to let you just stay here and die," I finally tell her. "I can't lie to Mom, and when she asks me if I'm taking care of you and if you're all right, I have to be able to tell her yes, or it *will* kill her. And even if you don't give a shit about her anymore, I do."

This is the trigger for another explosion, this time nonverbal, as Sandy throws her chair back and walks quickly to the bedroom, hands sweeping her hair forward on either side to prevent me from seeing her face. I watch her go and then stare into, and continue sipping from, my coffee.

She returns before I am quite finished. Her arms are at her sides, hands in loose fists, and she shows me her face, even if she will not meet my eyes.

"You didn't have to say that," she says.

"Didn't I?"

"You *know* I love Mom. She can't deal with seeing me right now any more than I can deal with seeing her. Trying to push us all together won't make things any happier." She slumps against the refrigerator, shoulder pressed to the textured white plastic, her head too, canted over as far as it will go. "Look. If you need me to do something to help you and Rachel, let me know, and I'll do it. Even—even if I have to go see her while I'm doing it. But don't, *don't* make me do it just because. Okay? Please."

"All right," I say. She's come back to me; I am prepared to be magnanimous. "First thing you can do to help is call on Monday morning and try to get your job back. I don't care if it's not likely to do any good, you're going to call. Second thing, which you're actually going to do first, is to take a shower and get dressed. You're coming with me."

Sandy's head and body rock backwards, except where her shoulder seems anchored against the refrigerator. "To Mom's house?"

"No, just with me in my car. We're going to go out; I have a couple of errands I want to run and I'll buy you a late lunch somewhere. Mostly I just want you to get some fresh air and sunlight and start living like a person again. Then when Mom asks me I can tell her that everything's okay."

She looks up at me, with only one eye since her hair has fallen in front of the other one, then rolls her face against the door and back again before speaking. "And what if she wants to see me?"

"Then I'll tell you she wants to see you, and you can do what you want. You're not a little girl anymore, I'm not going to drag you anywhere kicking and screaming. To be blunt, past a certain point I can't take things anymore, either."

Sandy appears to think about this. Finally she pushes off from the refrigerator and stands up, backhanding the hair out of one side of her face before nodding at me. "All right," she says wearily. "I'll go shower and get some clothes on. You going to wait on the couch or something?"

"Yeah." I tip my head forward and hold up a hand to interrupt when she starts to move. "Just one more thing. Let me see your arms."

She stares up at me, head tilting to a low enough angle that she is looking from under her brows, as though inquiring, without asking aloud, if I'm really dredging this up. Finally, apparently deciding that locking horns anew over this point will only incur further brotherly protective scrutiny, she rolls the sleeves of her sweatshirt up to her elbows and holds them out to me, palms down, wrists limp. I turn on the ceiling light in the kitchen proper and scrutinize the skin of her forearms, then push her sleeves the rest of the way up to her shoulders to look at her biceps, an indignity she submits to with no more than a put-upon sigh and twist of her eyes.

When I find no fresh wounds, only the almost-invisible spider web of scars years old, I step back. "All right. Go ahead."

Sandy lingers in front of me, feet still as she pulls her sleeves back down. "Thank you."

I smile with my lips together and nod. "For anything in particular?"

"For caring. And for not making me go to that group after all. I was afraid you would keep trying to do that."

"Nah, I went myself. It was a crock of shit. You and Rachel both get to profit from my naïveté." I am grateful for the excuse to give Sandy a fuller grin. "Go on, get in the shower. I'm going to give Rachel a call, let her know you're all right. Anything you want me not to tell her?"

She takes one more moment in the doorway to think about that. "No. Just make her promise not to tell anyone else."

I point my phone at her and mimic firing a ray gun. "Got it."

When I've called Rachel and given her the mixed news, as well as apologizing (cheerfully declined) for not remembering she was taking a nap, I walk around the apartment opening blinds and windows. In the end I perform my minimalist makeover on every room except the bathroom. I leave Sandy's bedroom for last, and enter it only after weighing the cons and pros thoroughly: most private, yes, but also most likely to be in desperate need of the antidepressant properties of sunlight, especially if she really has spent the bulk of the last four days in there. Finally I make a beeline through the room to the window and quickly raise the blinds, pausing only long enough to check any possibility of unwanted eyes peering in (none, as far as I can tell, unless she has a balcony-hopping neighbor) and jog back out again with the new shaft of sunlight illuminating my back. That makes an end to the good works I feel I can do for at least another ten or fifteen minutes, so I pour myself a second cup of coffee and turn on the television to distract myself from the question that my consciousness threatens to contemplate: whether this patch on the crisis will hold or whether I will find the thin ice in Sandy's voice splintering under my feet.

Ten or fifteen minutes is optimistic. It's closer to twenty—not including the time already passed—when, without looking up, I hear her making a dash for the bedroom. Another ten and she comes back out, fully attired in blue jeans and a T-shirt from a local animal shelter, hair clean and brushed if not, precisely speaking, under control.

"You went in my bedroom," she informs me mildly.

"I did," I say, turning off ESPN and putting down the remote control. "Somebody had to, so I took the bullet. Don't worry, I didn't look at anything except the view out your window."

"Good. I'd hate to think you'd noticed the cookie boxes in the trash can." She holds out her arms in a here-I-am gesture, letting my imagination provide the fanfare. "Ta-da. Ready to leave the house."

"Truly, wonders will never cease," I say as I walk to the door and hold it open for her with a flourish. With our sardonic exchange we have each, I imagine, reinforced in the other faith in a return to familiar rituals and procedures.

As we turn into the stairwell, walking side-by-side with careful attention on my part to not draw ahead or slip away, Sandy speaks up again. "How's Rachel doing?"

"Rachel? Oh, she's doing just fine, just fine." I purse my lips and raise my eyebrows, bob my shoulders fractionally. "Complains about being a little tired, overworked, you know. Anything in particular you wanted to know about?"

"What's got her so tired? *She* doesn't have a job."

"Nah, she's just a young mother of two with a home-improvement obsession on the side," I say dryly. I want to add the joke that she was the one who ended up with both of those things from Mom, but I choke it—as well as the question of what Sandy and I ended up inheriting, and from whom—in my throat.

"I'd say that she got what she deserved for bringing more crotch-droppings into the world, but I guess it's a good thing one of us three decided to." Sandy waits on the other side of my car while I fish in my pocket for the key. "So where are we going today, bro?"

"You get to pick," I say as I open the doors and we both slide inside. "Dick's or Hobby Heaven."

"Dick's?" Sandy sits back in her seat and looks at me with one eyebrow askew. "As in the sporting goods place? Those don't sound like very fun choices."

"Leave the house on your own and you can be in charge of trip planning. For right now we go where I need to go anyway." I slide the key into the ignition, but hold off on turning it. "Well? What'll it be?"

"All right," she says after a moment. "Dick's, then. I could use some new workout clothes, now that I think about it." She creases her lips at me in a fraternally mocking smirk. "Since I'm going to be leaving the house again and all."

"You got it." Still I do not turn the key, but sit there looking at her, eyes flicking with deliberate lack of subtlety from waist to shoulder.

"What?"

I gesture along her torso with a flick of my forefinger. "Seatbelt."

Sandy cocks her head to one side and looks at me with her tongue playing along her teeth. But the brief standoff ends with her reaching behind her shoulder for the seatbelt and making it click into its receptacle, and I answer at last with the rumble of the motor.

Chapter 3

The nearest Dick's location is twenty minutes back in the direction I came, just on the other side of my mother's house. But this time I drive west several blocks and take the highway north, lest familiar streets remind Sandy of unpleasant matters. I worry that she'll offer a comment on my route, even though it is not much longer than taking the

surface streets, but verbal silence reigns in the car once we have started moving and lasts until I slide into a parking space outside the superstore.

The ease of location applies, I learn, only to the store's adobe-colored brick exterior. Once within, I quickly realize that unless one is looking for certain prominent sections—shoes, golf equipment, or a turn on the two-story rock-climbing wall—directing oneself is a confusing task. In theory, large banners with pictorial representations of each department are there to aid in orienteering. In practice, if the signs aren't obscured by each other or by a support column, someone has inevitably suspended a plastic canoe, hang glider, or some other such idiot thing from the ceiling to impede vision. But after walking a short distance from the entrance, I think I spot what I'm looking for: in the absence of a windsurfing display that was occluding it from our previous viewing angle is a banner bearing something that is recognizable, despite the best efforts of the artist, as a high school quarterback.

"I think I see it," I say.

"Great." Sandy folds her arms and angles her head in the opposite direction. "Mind if I go ahead and wander over to the clothing section? You can come find me there when you're done, or at the register if I'm already there."

The question takes a few seconds to think about, which I can tell is already far too long. Letting her go off by herself, even across the store, seems palpably the wrong thing to do. But there's no scenario in which I can imagine any good coming of my trying to get an adult woman to tag along behind me at every moment like a child. There's a limit to the ways in which I can be her handler.

"All right," I say, hastily, both to catch up with reality and to prevent my tongue from stumbling over the words. Already I can see where those few seconds have pulled at her face, and I want to apologize for the awkwardness, or to at least pull it up into the light like I did her bedroom, but I need to turn away, interrupt the moment, lest things get worse.

I end up staring at a row of football accessories and replaying the conversation, such as it was, in my head, unable to stop imagining a future in which it is the last conversation I ever have with my little sister. I'm still doing this a few minutes later when a floor employee materializes a few feet to my left and asks if I need help, which makes me wonder how much I actually look like I need it, and in which direction that influences his decision to ask. I know that if I could master the art of talking only to the sort of customers who will say "No, thank you" or "Just browsing," my own job would be vastly more bearable.

"Just looking for a football pump," I say. By this, of course, I mean *no*, only with a few extra syllables thrown in to convey the illusion of social engagement.

Damnably, the man steps closer and reaches out a hand to start pulling packages off the hangers, three feet more or less directly in front of my face. "Well, there's the Franklin kit here. This is what I use. It'll last you a long time and it's got some things that'll come in handy, even if you don't think you'll need them right now."

"I'll take this one," I interrupt, grabbing at what looks like the cheapest specimen of packaging, a simple plastic bag with a cardboard label stapled over the end.

"Okay." Still holding his armload of now-redundant merchandise, the worker blinks twice. "Anything else I can help you with today, sir?"

"Don't think so. Thanks for your help." I toss him a half-hearted salute with the plastic-draped barrel of the pump and leave him to kill some more time restocking the shelves.

For me, it is time to find Sandy, even if I have to wait another thirty minutes while she tries on clothes. I steal a glance at the price tag once I am clear: about four bucks. I am safe. Jubilant and impatient, I avoid the broad tile thoroughfares and cut across the carpeted section of men's apparel, a maze of brightly colored tops and shorts on shiny metal armatures, sale signs, mirrors and open-topped fitting rooms. No matter which way I turn my feet, my eyes look straight across to the other side of the store, hoping to catch a reassuring glimpse of Sandy in her normalcy; I weave my way around a great circular rack of athletic shorts, like a roundabout in a road, and collide with the slender shoulders of a teenaged boy in the peak of his physical awkwardness. Before I can avert my own older, more world-weathered brand of awkwardness, I've knocked the owner of those shoulders into the rack; he's dropped an article of clothing or two and I've let the football pump slip out of my fingers and join the pile, more out of surprise than anything of the impact.

"Oh, Christ, I'm sorry. Wasn't watching where I was going." I pause, crouch, push one side of the endless circle of shorts away to help him get clear and offer him my other hand to get up. "Didn't see you down there on the floor."

The boy takes my hand in a smooth-skinned but firm grip. White teeth flash above a well-defined but equally baby-bottom-smooth jawline. "Silly me. I suppose I need to make myself more eye-catching, then?"

My first thought is that no, there's certainly nothing this guy needs to do in that department, just avoid being under the line of sight of folks with too much on their minds and not enough pairs of eyes to watch every latitude at once. My second thought is that I'm no longer quite sure this is a guy. The voice is wrong, even for an adolescent with skin that looks like he bathes in his mother's milk rather than just drinking it. The face isn't quite as much help as I'd assumed at first glance; neither is the hair, which is a downy platinum blonde buzzed short and dusted with pink; and as soon as it occurs to me to try thinking of the victim of my clumsiness as a woman, the shape of the chest easily becomes that of very small breasts compressed by a size-too-small wifebeater, instead of pectorals to match the whipcord biceps that the top's sleevelessness shows off on either side. I look as quickly and un-obviously as possible for a bra, but don't see any signs.

"Do you need any help?" I ask when he or she draws booted feet under knees to sit lotus-style on the bluish-grey carpeting instead of taking my offer of help up. "I'm really sorry, but I'm in a hurry to find someone."

"Your name's Tyler, right? Tyler Saxton?"

I stare. "Sexton. Do I know you?"

"Probably not. You were a couple of years ahead of me at North, and I don't think anyone back then knew me very well, anyway. But it's still cool to see an old face. I'm Mel. I still went by Melanie back then." She squeezes my hand, which she still hasn't let go of.

I have a vague recollection of a girl with slightly longer hair, short for a girl but not military short, and brown. A girl whose jeans were blue and of a regular cut instead of black, baggy, and festooned with enough extraneous rings and chains to supply a

BDSM convention. A girl who sat alone most of the time, though it seemed we often ended up sitting alone together when the library or cafeteria were too short on tables for us each to have one to ourselves. A girl who certainly never looked at me in a way that made me feel like she was a vampire planning to cheerfully sink her teeth into my neck.

I look back over the tops of the clothing racks. Sandy's still nowhere in sight. "Look," I say. "It's nice to see you again, but I really do need to keep moving. Do you want a hand up, or not?

"All right, then, if you're in such a hurry." Mel smiles sweetly and then gets her boots back under her. Her pants jangle continuously as she first stands up with my help, then brushes them off, and finally bends down to retrieve the dropped articles of clothing. She picks up the football pump with the rest, looks it over with amusement, and then offers it back to me. "You dropped this."

I take it, feeling more ridiculous than usual. "Thanks."

When I start walking, Mel comes up from behind and slips in alongside me, carrying her selections over her left arm and elbowing me gently in the ribs with the right. "So can I talk to you as long as I don't try to keep you from your power walk?"

"Sure," I say.

"Where is it that you're zipping off to?"

I nod straight ahead of us, pointing with my forehead at the women's section. "Women's clothes. I'm supposed to meet my sister there."

"Oh, well, that's perfect. I was heading there next anyway, I think. And I want to meet your sister now, too. You will introduce me, won't you?"

This sets off a mild alarm in my head. “I would have thought you’d already know each other,” I say, even though that’s not specifically what causes the alarm. “I think you were in the same year together.”

“I saw her around, of course. I don’t think she knew my name, though. She probably wouldn’t recognize me anyway. You didn’t, and I caught you looking at me more times than she ever did.”

I stop walking. Mel draws to a stop as well and looks questioningly at me.

“Look,” I say. “I kind of don’t want to tell you this, but I think it’ll be worse if I don’t. Our family is having some problems right now. Illness. Sandy’s been taking it pretty hard and having some problems of her own. And her track record with people from the old school, friends and boyfriends, hasn’t been the greatest. So just… keep that in mind when I introduce you to her, all right?”

Mel winces. “All right,” she says. “Anything in particular you want me to do or not do?”

It seems like a reasonable enough question, but I don’t have a good answer. If I did, I’d be less worried myself.

“Not really,” I say. “Just… don’t tease her or play games with her.” I summon a joking grin onto my face. “Save that for me, okay?”

“Oh, well, now that sounds almost like an invitation.” She responds with another of those bright grins of her own, this one serious. It scares mine away.

Thankfully, neither of us needs to find Sandy by stumbling headlong over her. I see her from fifty feet away, standing at full height with her blonde mane blooming above the display racks, as soon as we have cleared the cluster of columns in the center of the

store. I raise my arm to wave high in the air, like a receiver signaling for a fair catch, and she looks my way and smiles.

"Find what you needed?" she asks as we finish approaching.

I hold the football pump up in front of me, label towards her. "You?"

"Working on it." Sandy has a number of gym and track clothes laid out on the glass top of a display rack in front of her, and is sorting through them. "You might be waiting a while. Who's your friend?"

I step a bit further to the side so I can look at both females, or suspected females, at once. "Mel, this is Sandy, my sister. Sandy, this is Mel. She went to North with us. I don't know if you remember her."

"I'm sorry, I don't. But it's good to meet you, Mel." Sandy makes eye contact and smiles at the other girl over the merchandise but doesn't pause to offer a handshake. One or both of them would have to close the distance between to make that handshake possible, anyway, and when neither leaps to do it, Sandy just finishes gathering the clothes she's laid out, then smiles at me. "I'm going try the rest of these on, then I'll probably be ready to go."

"Is that all?" I say.

Her smile turns just saccharine enough to convey sarcasm. "By all means, don't wait around if you can think of anything else to do."

When she has gone in the direction of the women's fitting rooms, I turn to Mel. "Sorry about that. She's usually a bit nicer."

Mel grins. "Why are you sorry? You were worried she'd like me too much, remember. Maybe she has better taste in friends than you thought."

My brow knits just above my nose and my cheeks flush. “I didn’t say anything like that.”

“You meant it, though. Don’t try to lie. I’m much better at it than you are.” With a shrug of the shoulder, she shifts her own, smaller burden of fabric on her arm. “Or maybe she just doesn’t have any time for a male while she’s shopping, even her brother.”

“That’s a pretty stereotypical view of female behavior, isn’t it?”

“Sure is. Good thing I’m here. Dispeller of stereotypes, or propagator of less common ones, at your service.” She nudges me further out into the sea of womenswear. “Come on, I could use your help.”

I end up standing next to a rack of running shorts, the little things that only descend a handful of inches past the groin and are slit open anywhere from a quarter to half of the way up the outside of the leg. Mel leafs through the offerings while I try not to imagine too vividly what she would look like in them. Since the only pants I have seen her wearing in the past decade are ones that wouldn’t seem out-of-place in a dystopian sci-fi film, there is a lot to imagine. I try to distract myself by taking a closer look at the tops she brought with her from the men’s department. This proves counterproductive when they prove to be sleeveless gym shirts of the loose, armholes-down-to-the-waist variety, some of them open in the back as well but for the thin strip of fabric that runs up between the shoulderblades to the collar.

“Are these for you?” I ask.

Her head snaps upwards and she looks at my hands, as though she needs to make sure I am indicating the shirts she picked out. "Those? Yeah. Who else would they be for?"

"They seem like they'd be pretty revealing."

This time she chuckles without looking up. "Oh, I don't know. I've seen plenty of girls wear them with sports bras underneath." She pulls out one of the pairs of shorts to look more closely at it, and apparently what she sees annoys her, because when she swings it back into place she shoves it on its way with more force than usual.

Because of the way she said that, *Are you going to?* is on the tip of my tongue. I suspect it is what she wants me to say aloud, to prove what I am thinking. I refuse to give her the satisfaction; I grunt in agreement and look over my shoulder to see if, miraculously, Sandy is emerging yet. No such luck.

After half a minute or so, Mel's eyes flick up to me in the millisecond interval when she shoves another rejected pair of shorts on its way along the rack. "Go ahead," she says after her eyes return. "Keep talking."

I consider not saying anything, feigning incomprehension, or just making another simian noise, but I've already lost; I can't conversationally maneuver around someone who doesn't give a shit about calling me out.

"It's funny that we ended up running into each other again," I say.

From under the baby-duck fuzz of Mel's hair there comes a giggle. "It is, isn't it?" Again she lifts her eyes just over the rim of the display, doing her best Kilroy Was Here impression at me. "Do you know that for two years after you left I thought about finding out how to send you a letter somehow? A real letter. I'm sure E-mail would

have been easier, not that I did that either, but I had it in my head that I was going to sit down and write you out a letter."

"So why didn't you?"

The hangers go clink-clink. "I didn't have the balls back then."

"And you have them now?"

"I still don't own any, alas, but I've gotten better at getting my hands on some when I need them." Clink. "Anyway, I'm sure if I'd written you a letter, you'd have gone 'who the fuck is this chick?' Just like you did when you fell for me—excuse me, fell over me—just now."

I rest one elbow on the top of the display and lean against it, which pushes that shoulder up, and I shrug the other one to match. "I don't think I would have," I say.

"Bull-shiiiiiit. You are *such* a liar." Abruptly she pulls one pair of shorts all the way off the rack and straightens up in the same motion, holding it out to my face at full arms' length like one of Rachel's kids showing off a new page of crayon scribbles. "Maybe you can tell the truth long enough to give me some fashion advice. What do you think?"

I look. The pair she's chosen is white with bright red edging and stripes. Tiny, like the rest, but not slit as far up as some. I look at the tops she picked out: the colors match, though the tops are more uniformly red.

"You'd look like a boy wearing all that," I tell her. Mel's gender seems like a leaf on a fence rail, waiting for a breeze to come along and decide which direction to blow it off. And of course, to extend the metaphor, that probably depends on which side of the fence it comes from in the first place.

"That's the idea, silly."

"I guessed," I sigh.

Mel reaches out across the glass display top and sweeps the rest of the clothing into a bundle in her arms. "The trouble," she says as she starts walking towards the fitting rooms, and I move to catch up with her because I know that if she notices I am not walking along and listening to her she will simply stop and look at me until I do, "is that the women's tops don't look like the boys', even if they look like they're the same style. You get them on and you can tell the difference in the mirror. So I went over to the men's section and tried some of their things on, right, and then the tops looked right but the shorts were all wrong. Didn't sit quite right. So I was just putting back the shorts when you came along, and now we're going to try mixing and matching."

"We're?" We have stopped in front of the fitting rooms, mercifully a different cluster than the one Sandy entered, and after trying the handle of one and finding it unlatched Mel is holding it open with an expectant look on her face. I put up my hands. "You want me to go in with you? You're joking with me."

"Nope." She jerks her head towards the doorway. "I need an expert opinion. I don't have one, so you'll have to do. Get in."

I look all around, trying to see if the eyes of anyone are on us. The store is busier than I realized in my earlier tunnel vision, but thankfully this section is all but deserted; the majority of the Saturday afternoon crowd seems to be centered in the shoe section on the second floor and on the stairways and escalators leading to and from it. I lower my hands and enter the booth.

Mel enters behind me and works the sliding latch-bolt into place with its *clack*. She drops the bundle of new clothes on the bench, a two-foot-by-one-foot slat that cantilevers from the wall at one end of the tiny room, and slouches into a sitting position atop them to start unlacing her boots, which she does with one foot at a time drawn all the way up, heel on the edge of the bench, the other thigh thrust out at an obtuse angle, defiantly baring the stainless-steel-armored crotch of her pants.

"You *are* serious," I say. Half question, half implicit acknowledgement that standing there and staring without a word would feel creepy, and trying to avert my eyes as though I were in a public elevator not much better.

"Never shared a dressing room with a girl before?" She is at least keeping her voice down, though I am under no illusions of our privacy if anyone is within a few feet of the walls.

"Not unless you count my mother or sisters."

"Ooooh." She turns her head up and gives me an evil-spirit smile that gleams in the lighting, even as she wrenches the unlaced boot off an otherwise bare foot and sets it down, then switches legs. "You'll get to check something off now, then."

"You say that like there's a list."

"There is. Got it on my computer at home. PDF. I can run a copy off for you if you like."

I watch in silence as she pulls her other boot off. I am starting to feel that my initial impression of crampedness has been deceptive, that there is in fact sufficient space within the walls of the fitting room, plenty of space between us as she stands up, turns her back to me and begins to pull her top off over her head. Or perhaps it is just our

smallness: the room is small, but we are smaller. I am no mountain of a man, just under six feet and working my way between a hundred and fifty and a hundred and seventy pounds; Mel is several inches shorter and dangerously slender. If she were complete a woman in my mind, I'd call her petite, but because she is Mel, the word that comes to mind is a pixie or a sprite.

I realize now that I came inside to avoid making a scene, because there was a moment I could slip inside without anyone noticing and that this was better than forcing Mel to wait me out, as I suspect she certainly would have done, until someone did notice; I also submitted to her for the chance to look at her under a magnifying glass and see if she struck me in the same fashion all the way down. When the shirt comes off her back, in the moment when her head is hidden and her gazelle-like arms are fully extended over her shoulders, exposing tufts of untamed pit hair—brown, coarse and wiry, the antithesis of what she has on her head—I see things I'd turn the magnifying glass on. A pair of moles below one shoulder and just to the left of the spine, one large one and a small one clinging to it, like a binary star. Both are almost perfectly circular; I remember vaguely, I think, that this is a good sign, means they are healthy. On the shoulderblades themselves, two raised ridges that shine pinkly in the strange light like mother-of-pearl.

"How did you do those?" I say. Perhaps the possibility that they are from an operation of some sort should occur to me, but it doesn't; Sandy's forearms, faded with not enough years, are too fresh in my memory.

Mel pauses with her shirt lowered in front of her, still on her forearms and wrists. The downward traverse of her arms has brought her shoulders forward and drawn the

skin tight on the curve of her back, creating the impression that she is presenting those scars to me. She does not ask what I am talking about. "A friend did it for me."

"Did you ask him to?"

"Her." She finishes shedding her shirt and begins to loosen her belt, which is as overwrought as the rest of her pants; thick and studded all the way around with metal rivets shaped like flattened pyramids, it looks like something you would use to hold the saddle on a warhorse, not keep your pants up. "We talked about it."

I do not say anything else while Mel finishes removing her pants. Underneath it all, she wears simple charcoal-grey boy-shorts; I noticed many moments ago that she did not wear a bra after all, but this seemed neither surprising nor important.

"Close your eyes," she says.

"What?"

"I need to be able to move around. Close your eyes."

I close them, as if by momentum; all I have to do is decide not to keep them open, and the same force that nudged me inside the room presses them shut. Now the room is no longer as close around me; as I stand there with my arms at my sides, not touching any of the walls or the doors, not even, barely, the one at my back, it seems as though the chamber has opened up into infinite space. A memory plays itself back: ten-year-old Tyler wondering how it feels to be a blind man getting out of a bathtub and deciding to seek empirical data via the expedient of closing his eyes the next time he did so himself. That time the dimensions of the room reasserted themselves via a stepstool in the perfect spot for stumbling over and a countertop waiting to split my lip open. I wonder what would catch me if I lost my balance now; I wonder if experimentation is still a terrible

idea. I can hear Mel moving, but she never touches me. She must still be in front of me; there is no way that she, and for some reason I mentally add *not even she*, could slither around me in this confined space that holds the illusion of boundlessness, could wriggle her way into the inch I imagine between my shoulders and the wall.

"Okay. You can open your eyes now."

I look. Everything seems a bright gray when I open my eyes, except for the shiny, arterial red of what Mel is wearing, the red stripes of the shorts and the solid red of the jersey that hangs shapelessly from her shoulders as though it were still on its hanger, armholes down to where the base of her ribs must be. I look at her and then, with a vaguely nauseous grunt, I step forward, pushing her aside; I do this because she is standing in the end of the room with the tiny bench emerging from the wall, and all of a sudden I need to sit down, and why I take the option that involves physical contact, rather than just folding at the knees where I stand and sliding my shoulders down the wall into a crouch, I do not know.

She is still standing, now standing *over me*, and reaching out to take my shoulder. "Tyler. Are you all right?"

"I think so," I say, and follow it by swallowing hard. "I just started to feel, uh, dizzy there. Give me a minute."

"I'm sorry."

I nod. Her apology is like the slap of a stone hitting water: dully felt and leaving no real trace after a few moments. I don't feel like telling her that it is at least the third time in a day, the second time in half an hour, that I have experienced this brief sense of agnosia, the horrifying inability to recognize someone.

"Why are you doing this?" I say finally. It's woefully nonspecific and I must not have intended to say it aloud without further editing, because I almost immediately feel a sort of apathetic embarrassment.

Mel responds by turning and lowering the seat of her shorts towards the tiny lip of bench that my hip does not cover. I push away, ostensibly to let her have more room to perch on, but it is not her convenience I am worried about so much as avoiding the intimacy that seems inevitable. My shoulder hits the short wall before I have gone far enough, but I try to tuck myself a bit further, squirming while one of the hard plastic mirror mounts digs into my upper arm through my shirt. Despite everything she ends up with her hip and shoulder pressed against mine, though at least she draws her leg to the front of her jersey rather than resting it against my thigh length-for-length.

"Do I distress you?" she asks when she is in place. Her arms are wrapped around her shin and her head leaned forward, nose against that knee; when she talks, her lips seem to kiss her skin.

I sigh. "Right now things that *don't* distress me are a much shorter list. It isn't anything personal."

She turns her head so she can look up at me, cheek on the knee now, rocking back and forth like a bobblehead toy in slow motion. When I meet her eyes I cannot help but also see into her jersey, see the bare side of her breast, such as it is. Only the fact that it has sagged ever so slightly keeps it from seeming masculine, or at least unfeminine—as though it and she are both showing contrition for somehow being not quite the right thing.

"Are *you* feeling all right?" I continue when several seconds have passed without her saying anything.

She unfolds her leg and stands up. For a minute her back is to me, her ass at the level of my eyes, but instead of looking at it I feel my gaze pulled up her spine, to where the narrow back of her top is framed by those two precisely placed scars. Then she turns around and the moment of symmetry is over.

"Yeah," she says. "Yeah, I guess I'm all right." She looks at me: "Do you think I've made a fool of myself?"

I stare. "I thought I was the one making a fool of myself."

This seems to have been the right thing to say. At least, it gets a laugh of relief. "Nah. I think I just had a bad read on you. I thought you'd react differently."

"Other than by getting nauseous and having to sit down, you mean?"

She looks steadily down into my eyes, the corners of her lips now twitching with amusement. For a moment those lips seem like the most kissable pair I've ever seen, and I wonder how I could have ever mistaken them for a boy's.

"Yeah," she says. "Something other than that."

I sigh. "Maybe another time I would've," I say honestly. "But right I don't know if I can be anyone's friend right now, or—whatever it is that you want me to be."

Mel nods. "Okay," she says. "Fair enough."

I wait a while to see if she'll say something else, or move. Finally I gather myself and stand up, looking at her for the signs of a person, a woman, crying or trying not to cry: things you pick up on when you are me, growing up in my house. But I come up with a blank.

"Can I get to the door?" I say finally. I am trying to avoid having to press her aside so I can exit.

Her face twitches and her eyes refocus on mine. "Sure," she says. "But can I get your number?"

I look at her.

"Just in case you feel more up to being someone's friend another time," she says. "Or in case you need a friend. Or your sister does."

"Hold off on Sandy, go easy on her," I say, but my head nods while I do it. I palm my pants pockets for a pen. "Got anything to write it down with?"

She does: the back of a fast-food receipt that already has several circular geometric designs drawn on it in ballpoint. I jot down my digits in a patch of white space and hand it back to her. She doesn't let me by until she's written her own number at the other end of the strip and torn it in the middle, tucking the appropriate piece into my palm. I crumple it and shove it hastily into my pocket.

"All right," she says, finally standing aside. "Good luck with everything."

I open the door a crack, which I hope isn't far enough for anyone to look in and see Mel the teenaged boy sharing a fitting room with a dirty old man, dirty twenty-six-year-old Tyler. "Take care," I say. "Sorry."

She nods.

I push the door open farther, just enough to squeeze out of like an exceptionally furtive escape artist, and nudge it shut behind me; the lightweight wood banging against the doorframe sounds like a thunderclap in my ears. I turn away and hurry, as much as

possible while trying desperately to look like I am not hurrying, over to the other bank of fitting rooms, the ones I remember seeing Sandy go into.

Sandy has not come out yet, or she has already come out and gone to wait for me by the cash registers, but I know that the second possibility cannot be true; I know better than to trust the perception that I spent an hour rather than a few minutes in the room with Mel. Since I am not certain I remember which door Sandy went into, there is no possibility of knocking to let her know I am here and waiting, and loitering like the creepy old man I am starting to feel like is not an option either.

I end up heading for the checkout myself, where at least all I will probably be suspected of is plotting to make off with a portion of the impressive selection of gum, candy, and beef jerky. After a few minutes of perusing these offerings, dreading that at any moment Mel will come out of the back of the store, it dawns on me—and I confirm by patting myself down and checking both hands and under both arms—that there is no longer a football pump anywhere on my person. I return to the display of football accessories, hoping against hope that the store employee from before will not be hovering around the area. He is not, and I snatch the replacement item and escape undetected, mentally adding one to the tally of things that have gone right today.

When I return to the front, Sandy is waiting for me. "Where'd your friend go?" she asks.

"I left her in the back," I say. I gesture to Sandy's empty arms. "Where's the stuff you were going to get?"

She smiles lopsidedly, looking sheepish: an expression I prefer to her episodes of petulance, at least. "Eh, I really liked some of them and all, but I decided I probably

shouldn't go spending money right now. I'll make myself get another job first, maybe." She flashes that smile at me, bubbling over with her desire for a metaphorical pat on the head: "Don't you think that sounds like a good idea?"

In truth it does, and I am thankful enough for any instance of Sandy exerting her own corrective influence on herself that I would be happy to give her, if not a pat on the head, one on the back. Grown woman or no. But I feel even more ridiculous paying for a four-dollar football pump with a debit card, with Sandy hovering purchase-less at my back as I go through the ritual of signing my name on the touch screen and the cashier asks me, without any detectible trace of irony, if I would like a bag for that. I say no, and with my cheapskate-model athletic equipment wrapped in only one layer of plastic and my baby sister in tow, I finally make my escape to the parking lot.

Chapter 4

I wait until we're sitting at the light, turn signal blinking merrily away on my dashboard, to ask Sandy where she wants to eat. Being in a moving car, or at least a car in a traffic lane, always makes more things seem possible, reassures me that—no matter how bad things seem now—in a minute or two I'll be a few blocks away, and then maybe I can take a second look. I feel able to continue my afternoon now.

Sandy considers this, eyes fixed on the glove compartment, longer and more solemnly than seems natural. But in a moment inspiration breaks through and animates her face again. "I know, let's go to Winstead's! I haven't been there in years."

"Winstead's?" I say. Winstead's, with its miniature art-deco skyscraper of a sign, is the sort of place you automatically take note of even if you don't eat there. "I never knew you liked eating at Winstead's."

She shrugs. "It tastes good, and I think it's neat. 'Sides, I haven't been there in years. That's why we should go." She turns her head and looks at me, apprehensive again. "Unless you don't want to."

"Oh, no, it doesn't matter to me." Aware that this is not the most confidence-inspiring reply, I make an effort smile brightly at her. "That's actually a really neat idea. I haven't been there in, jeez, must be eight years myself."

But when we step through the doors and into a booth, something about the restaurant does not sit right with me, no matter how comfortable my literal seat is. The sixty-five-year-old kitsch is something I distinctly remember as seeming harmlessly charming at worst on my last visit with an aunt and uncle—*the childless ones, not the ones with the platoon of brats, who are probably being brats in college now and oh God, what's happening?*—but today it seems desperate, desperate for its clumsy attempt at a time warp to be accepted.

"Something bothering you?" Sandy says over the top of her menu.

"Just thinking about how old this place is." I can't tell her the terms in which I'm thinking it, that this place—or at least the restaurant chain of which the particular location is an artifact—far antedates Mom and Dad. Which is not correct in the strictest sense, since its 1940s birth preceded theirs by less than a decade, but in my mind my mother and father will always be creatures of the 1970s and 80s, when they were young and I, if I was alive, was a hell of a lot younger.

When they were only a little bit older than you are now. Goddamn it. I am grateful when the waitress comes to take our orders, grateful because it means Sandy will no longer be half hidden behind her menu and I can talk to her again.

Doing my best to make it sound like an upbeat rhetorical question, I ask, "Are you feeling any better now?"

She winds some of her woolly blonde hair around the forefinger of her right hand. "Yeah."

"What are you going to do next?"

Her eyes twitch to mine and her hand freezes, hair pulled tight around the digit like a Chinese finger trap. My mental *danger* indicator flashes on again, but after that moment of possible crisis, Sandy wriggles her finger free and brushes the hair back over her shoulder.

"I don't know," she says. Tosses the words out, really, like she tossed her hair back. "Go and try to get my job back, right? Isn't that what you said?"

"That's what I said. That's established. What else are you going to do?"

Instead of answering, she lifts her eyes to look at something over my shoulder; I turn my head and see the waitress approaching. We put on our smiles until she has put down the milkshake between us—one big glass, two straws—and moved off. The détente continues a little while longer as we each bend our heads forward in unison and sample the frosty concoction.

"Mmm," Sandy offers as she collects a dribble of chocolate from her chin with a fingertip and then sucks it clean. I have no idea how you get dribbles drinking from a straw, but she seems to have managed it. "'s good."

"Better than McDonald's," I agree.

She leans forward and grasps the straw between her lips again. The image of Mel sipping from a straw invades my mind and I have to look away for several seconds, disguising it as a look out the window at the variety of cars passing by on the parkway. When I look back, she is swallowing and making fanning motions at her lips with her fingertips.

"Sorry," she says sheepishly after collecting herself. She puts her hand in her lap, under the table. "It just feels like it's been days since I had anything that really tasted good."

I nod. "Well, you can have as much of it as you want," I say. I reach out and push the base of the old-fashioned glass closer to her side of the table. "This is your treat, after all."

"Oh, no. There's plenty for both of us, I'm sure. It's supposed to be for something like four or five people, isn't it?" She pushes it back into its place in the center of the neutral zone. "Besides, I'm sure I *would* drink the entire thing by myself. I'm coming off a week of crappy food, remember. And that would just be a disaster."

"Right," I say, and grin. "Don't worry, I'll save you from yourself."

Sandy laughs, for which I am profoundly grateful, since what I said made me wince inwardly a moment after speaking. Still smiling, she reaches across the table and takes my hand. "You always were so good at that."

"I wasn't always."

The smile collapses, but her face remains soft, forehead and temples unworried. She gradually starts nodding and then gives my hand a squeeze. "All right. Let's talk about something else."

"All right. All right." I sit back in my side of the booth, pulling my hand away once I am sure she doesn't want it anymore and placing it along the back of my seat. "Like what?"

She takes another drag of the milkshake while she thinks, her eyes rolled skywards. "How about… why you decided to go out today and buy a football pump?"

I sigh. It turns into a chuckle. "I'd say it's a long story, but really, it's the exact opposite. Seems longer than it is because of how much damn trouble it's been… anyway, the gist of it is that I thought Rachel and Gus's kids—you've seen them recently, right?"

Sandy stirs the straw through the chocolate-covered mass. "Um, within the last month."

"Right. I thought they should have something to do besides run around indoors drinking juice and getting chubby. So I went and dug an old football out of—dug it out—but the air ran out of it somewhere in the last ten years. And there you are."

Sandy shows me that she inherited her proud-of-Tyler's-quixotic-impulses expression from Mom: eyes crinkled, half-sad smile. "Aww, that's sweet. But aren't those kids a little bit, well, little to play with a football?"

"You know, that's exactly what—what Rachel said about it," I say. I glance at Sandy's eyes: she doesn't seem to catch my verbal stumble. "I guess I figured it out, too. But once I had that football out, it was like I had to try and pump it up." Casting about

for a word, I come up with the one they use to describe the equivalent operation on dolls, steam locomotives, and even model rockets. "Restore it."

She returns my glance, my word choice—I imagine it is just my word choice—earning an odd narrowing of her eyes. Then she reaches out her hand again and places it where mine was on the table a minute ago. What else can I do? I take mine off the seat back and place it together with hers again, on top, this time.

"I'm glad you feel that way," she says. "And, listen, Tyler. When you get that football fixed up, give me a call. I'll help you throw it around a little, okay?"

I gesture with my shoulder towards the parking lot. "It's in the car right now. Pump, too. We could go to the park after we're done eating."

Sandy stares for a moment, mouth half open, then smiles shamefacedly and places her other hand on top of mine in turn, sandwiching it between hers. "Ehh. Not today, actually," she reneges. "I need to do some cleaning, I think, and then have a good night's sleep. But anytime after that, okay?"

"Okay."

It's easy to take her at her word, genuinely so, not because my confidence in her promise is unshakeable by any means but because it is easier not to worry about it so far in advance.

I grin, and decide to tease a little: "I don't suppose I can get you to come fly rockets with me sometime, too?"

She looks at the ceiling again and wrinkles her nose in mock distaste, no doubt remembering years of me and Dad returning from far-off corn fields with dusty shoes and

farmer's tans, the line between bronze and white cut off at mid-bicep as neatly as if by the masking tape we used to paint the rockets themselves. "Don't press your luck."

The food arrives then, hamburgers and French fries for both of us, food I always associate with mediocrity no matter how well or expensively it is prepared. But I have to admit these *are* good. Partially for that reason, but chiefly for Sandy's sake, I eat with as close to genuine enthusiasm as I can.

"Anything else I can do for you today?" I say when we pull up outside Sandy's building again. I have brought the Civic right up to the curb, the concrete peninsula that juts out between rows of parking spaces and from which the crosswalk projects across the street, as though I assume I will simply be dropping her off. To turn into one of those parking spaces, absent an invitation, would feel too pressuring; I want Sandy to feel a relative sense of freedom now so that I can see what she will do with it.

She purses her lips—"Mmm…"—then shakes her head in its mane of dishwater-blonde. "Nah. I think I'll be fine."

I have my doubts that she will be fine, simply because I have my doubts that any of us are fine, but semantic subtleties aside, I am happy and even comfortable taking her at her word. "Give me a call anytime you need to," I call out as she pulls the door lever and starts to climb out. "My phone's always on. Call me anytime you want, even if you think it's silly, all right?"

"I will."

"Especially if you think it's silly. I can use more silly!"

She acknowledges the sentiment with a smile and presses the door shut with a *thud.* I sit back and watch, hands on the wheel, as she climbs the stairs to the second level and walks along the balcony to her door. She doesn't look back at me, a fact for which I feel both confused and grateful.

I drive home by the most direct route, not thinking of making any other errands on the way. It's only when I pull into my parking space and glance in the back seat that I remember not only the football and its new accessory, but the box of sick rockets that has been nestled just out of sight behind the back of my seat. "Dammit," I say aloud, and slip the key back into the ignition, turning it far enough to make the dashboard instruments light up so I can look at the time. Not quite four o'clock yet; I'm pretty sure the hobby store's Saturday hours will last for a while yet… but it's a good twenty minutes away in favorable traffic, on the other side of Winstead's and Sandy's apartment and, hell, pretty much everywhere I've been today. I say a more internal *fuck it*, put the rest of my junk on top of the cardboard mélange inside the box, and balance it on an arm while I lock up the car and mount the stairs to my door.

Inside, I flip on the lights and put the box down on my kitchen table, then press play on the answering machine and listen while I tear the packaging off the football pump and search for the hole on the deflated football that matches up with the tiny pin protruding from the barrel of the pump. Manipulating the piston with care lest the cheap plastic handle make good on its palpable threat to snap off, I breathe life into the ball, watching as it spreads out and rights itself, then slowly rises, like a loaf of homemade bread rising at fast-forward speeds.

After all the mental strain my restoration project has directly or indirectly exacted, this part of the process is anticlimactic; by the time the one and only message in memory—a call from Rachel, time-stamped just after I left the house six and a half hours ago, reminding me that I need to come over to Mom's house while she and Gus are still there—has finished playing, I am turning the newly buoyant leather ovoid over in my hands, squeezing it to see if I can hear or feel any escaping air. When I test it by throwing a fumble-fingered pass at the seat of my living-room couch, it hits the back of the couch instead, caroms off in an awkward direction, and ends up bouncing down my entry hall, but the sounds it makes are perfect: success. I leave it where it has fallen, because one of the pleasures of owning a football is finding it underfoot, ready to be tossed somewhere else.

Chapter 5

The next morning I'm awoken by the sound of a phone ringing. After a moment I realize it's the cell phone charging on my nightstand rather than my landline, which means it's less likely to be Rachel or my boss. It also means I can answer it by reaching out an arm, which makes less annoying the knowledge that, with the clouds of potential

medical emergency hanging closer to the ground than usual, I can no longer really afford to let it ring its little electronic heart out. I extend my hand, locate the phone by touch, and press it—still trailing its charging cord—to the side of my head. "Who's it?" I mumble.

The voice on the other end of the phone has swung much too far to the cheery end of the spectrum. "Hello, Tyler! I didn't wake you up, did I? I'm sorry, I thought you'd be up by now.

I roll my head on the pillow and look blearily over at the rectangular green digits next to where I just plucked up the phone. Ten-thirty. "Not your fault," I tell Sandy, lying back and stretching my legs under the sheets. "I told you to call. I'm glad you did. What's the news?"

"Patty said I can have my job back! But I have to go in right away and cover this afternoon. That's why I called you, to let you know in case you were going to ask me to do anything today. Well, to tell you the good news, but also that."

"Sandy, that's great news! Don't worry about me, just go in and kick some ass. Or, uh, however you put it in the cosmetics selling business." I sit up and swing my legs off the bed, then rub the fingers of my left hand over my jaw, feeling my stubble and my smile alike. "I'm just going to spend my day off working on some things, I think."

"All right."

"All right," I agree. "And, uh… thanks."

"Thanks for what?"

She sounds innocent enough that I can't tell if she's honestly curious or just fishing for praise, but the answer is the same in any case. "Thanks for making me

proud." *And for not being Mom or her doctor calling from the emergency room or something*, I add silently—another of the things I can no longer safely joke with Sandy about. "I'll let you get going. Keep calling me anytime." I pause. "Love you, Sandy."

"Love you too, big brother. Bye."

After I close my phone, the bed is still enticing enough that I take advantage of the nature of Sunday mornings to slip my legs back under the covers and lie down. But Sandy's call is followed by that mildly torturous state in which the tiredness of having woken up approximately an hour before time is not quite enough to drag one's head back below the waves of sleep. No matter how comfortably I try to rest my head on the pillow, I cannot overcome this surface tension. Finally I stop trying, heave myself back upright and onto my feet, and this time maintain the momentum towards the kitchen.

The box of rockets greets me, still sitting on the kitchen table where I left it, undisturbed for reason of my having found other, largely television- and leftover food-centered, places to be and things to do for the rest of the previous night. I avoid looking at it at first, the way an acne-ridden teenager avoids looking at himself in the mirror, because the sight of it demands to know why I failed to begin unpacking it, assessing it, doing *anything* with it the previous night. To that I have no answer; I can remember what I did instead—eating leftovers in front of the television while football gave way to news gave way to *Saturday Night Live*—but that gets me no closer to recalling the reasons for my lack of effort. And knowing my motives seems critical because, as I am quick to remind myself, the box lay untouched and gathering dust in my mother's garage for at least two or three months. If it similarly lies unused here, then I've done nothing except take something away from my mother, an act that I am already inwardly afraid has hurt

her, no matter how much she might strive to pretend otherwise. Looting her house before she is gone.

I was probably just tired and didn't want to think anymore last night, I say. *It's not like I didn't fix enough things, important and silly both, yesterday. I'll get to this soon, too*. To which my guilt fires back: *Prove it*.

So I begin picking through the wreckage during, not after, my bowl of Corn Pops: my own version of the Sunday morning paper. Rockets with fins broken in half or clean off get set aside until I can dig to the bottom of the box and see if the missing parts are rattling around loose; those for which I can find nothing to be reattached have to wait until I can make the trip to the hobby store and buy sheet balsa to trace out and cut replacements from. When I have laid down my spoon I take up an X-Acto knife and begin trimming away ragged, ruined pieces.

The model-builder's equivalent of chemo hair loss, I think as I look at the rockets denuded of their broken parts, a thought that makes me laugh to myself at first and then want to cry. But it is amazing what a case of transformation the process of excision brings over my perception: though no more flightworthy, I am awestruck by the sudden impression of *health* I receive from them, as though new parts might grow out of their wounds at any moment. I think on this for a moment too long and again risk crying.

The rockets whose chief injuries consist of crimped or smashed body tubes are a welcome change. Some of them I can fix right on the spot, by pulling and straightening them out like a physician setting a broken leg, then dribbling super glue onto the damaged area, letting the thin liquid wick into the porous material and turn it hard. Others I will have to use the approach of amputation and replacement with, cutting off

the damaged portions of their length, but the results of these operations are less distressing to me than the ones missing fins: merely truncated, not asymmetrical; it's still possible to pretend that nothing's really missing, or that what is left is still something that makes sense unto itself.

Finally I am, for now, done. I look at the clock and see that approximately two hours have passed. This is not a surprise in itself; I have kept note of the time and periodically gotten up to refill the water glass I keep beside me on the table. What is a surprise is how lonely I now feel. Whatever frustrations they may have held, the past thirty-six hours have spoiled me. I want to talk with someone about what I am doing, no, I want someone to come along and *ask* me what I am doing, knock on the door and ask me why I have a football lying in the hall for guests to trip over and break their necks. Sandy seemed willing to be a part of my life, but she's at work now, where I wanted her to be. Rachel's got her own husband and child; she doesn't have time for her younger brother who's playing with the same toys and balls he did fifteen or twenty years ago. Mom would smile and express interest, but driving back over to her house so soon would seem desperate; even calling her is something I am uncomfortable with if I am honest with myself that there would be no other reason than to fish for attention. And Mel is… well… Mel. I'm not even sure why my brain includes her in the list. Perhaps because of all the people I've meaningfully interacted with, for better or for worse, in the past week, she seems like the one I'd be least surprised to hear knock on my door right at this moment. A little bit unnerved, maybe, but not surprised.

I stand up. Flakes of paint and wood and dusty residues of indeterminate composition flutter to the floor at my feet, joining an uneven film of similar substances

from previous risings. Finding a smaller box lying around under the countertop—one that carried some books I ordered online almost ten years ago, Christmas gifts—I sweep all the cut-off parts into it, the sheets of wood with ragged, splintered edges peeking rosily from under paint, the cardboard tubes that now resemble rumpled socks, the parachutes with holes melted in them or shroud lines missing. I put the box back under the counter, knowing that the chances are good I will superstitiously keep these fragments for years despite their utter uselessness as anything but mementos of miniature catastrophes. Then I go back to my bedroom, get dressed in something besides my T-shirt and boxer shorts, and finally walk out to my car.

The shop known as Hobby Heaven is located in a strip mall, sandwiched uncomfortably between a travel agency and a Mexican restaurant of what appear to be dubious merits; I have never been inside either. I've been inside Hobby Heaven often enough, however, that the proprietor knows me by name, and I know his: John Baumann. Most of the time this makes our interactions with each other slightly warmer, but today I feel as though I'd give a lot for an anonymous retail experience. I might feel as though I'm craving someone to ask me about my recreational pursuits, but that person would need to be someone I could hold a non-awkward conversation with. I don't seem to have a choice in the matter, however: as soon as I enter, walking between the two passably executed model railroad display layouts that I've never, in my years of coming here, witnessed in operation or even being occupied by any actual trains, John greets me.

"Hello, Tyler," he says. "Bout time I saw one of you around here again. How is your mother doing?"

"Hello, John," I say. "She's…" I don't want to make John feel as though he has to exchange any more words with me than usual. "She's been ill, but she's holding up well."

A group of men clustered around the exposed mechanism of a radio-controlled car at the other end of the island-style counter look up at the sound of our exchange, but go back to their business. John's brow crinkles polite concern. He is wrinkled, liver-spotted, and has a head with only a fringe of white hair around the base of his skull. The effect created is that of someone who would have retired ten or more years ago from most industries, but because he happens to be working in a certain field—as a Wal-Mart greeter, say, or in this case the owner of a hobby store—he continues soldiering on.

"I'm real sorry to hear that." He turns on his stool to look at me as I move past; I slow my walk to a pace just slow enough to permit civility while communicating that I do not intend to stay and chat: a stately andante beat of footsteps. "Have you been out to shoot your rockets lately?"

"Not for a little while. I'm hoping we can make it to one of the launches this year."

"You should try doing it on your own sometime. When I first tried out those Estes rockets, when my boys were little, back in the seventies, we didn't have any of those clubs to join. It was just them and a few of their friends, and we'd take our own little launch pad out to the football field."

"Yeah," I say. "That's how I did it when I was a little kid, too." I walk down the aisle, out of sight of the cash register.

In the model-rocket aisle, things are new. The territory of the rocket kits I remember has shrunk, with several feet of shelf space now given over to preassembled, ready-to-fly rockets in clamshell plastic packaging. A dozen or so kits of the much-assembly-required sort still exist, loose tubing and wood and plastic in their long polyethylene bags, but the printed cardboard inserts in the fronts of those bags have few among them that I recognize. That much is not entirely unexpected—the manufacturer's fleets shift every year, a fact I understood when I was eight years old with a father bringing home catalogs for me on his way home from work—but I still feel as though I have been absent for the departure of friends. Fortunately, the thing that differentiates John's store from your average toy shop or crafts store with a rocket section is still true: the selection of spare parts. I pick out the tube sections and couplers I need, then make a trip to the model airplane section for a sheet of balsa wood. A colorful display of spray paint cans holds my interest for several moments until I remember that Mom's workbench still houses a good supply of leftover paint and that I ought to check there first, so I return to John with my intended purchases.

"No motors today?" he asks me as he surveys the load as a whole before beginning to take pieces one-by-one and peer at them individually, arthritic fingers punching out numbers on what I cannot help but think of, despite its digital display and the electronic beeps it makes, as an old-style cash register.

I shake my head. "Still got some. Besides, they're awfully expensive these days. I don't want to stock up more than I need to." In truth, the rocket motors *are* something that I—we—buy at mainstream stores, which are more prone to having sales or offering

coupons than is Hobby Heaven, when we remember. It has been quite some time since I remembered.

"Can't blame you for that."

Even the items with a manufacturer's bar code get their price manually entered into the register by John. From behind him, something mechanical fills the air with a thin whirring, insect-like, as the model-car crowd starts testing something or other. It's still intermittently going when John finally stops and peers at the ancient screen, holding his glasses a quarter-inch away from his face, and says, "Nineteen forty-two. I'll put these in a bag for you."

"Sure," I say, though it wasn't a question. I take out my debit card and stand holding it out while John carefully peels off and opens up a plastic bag to slip my purchases into with the same exactitude as he rang them up. The long, shiny cardboard tubes poke comically out of the top of the bag when he hands it to me and takes my card for swiping, a transaction that, at least, he accomplishes without recourse to thirty-year-old technology.

"There you go," he says when I've signed the statement and he's given me my copy. "Give your mother my best."

"I will," I assure him.

Receipt in the bag and credit card back in my wallet, I walk back out to my car, where I turn the key only far enough to look at the dashboard clock without starting the engine. It is not nearly late enough, so I sit for a minute or two after making sure the bag and its contents are resting stably on the front seat. Finally I start the car, fasten my seatbelt and head back out onto the road. There are still a few more errands I can do.

At one of the more conventional crafts stores I had in mind earlier—the sort dominated by bolts of fabric, spools of ribbon, picture frames, and at this time of the year sprays and wreaths of fake fall-colored foliage; with names like Jo Ann's or Michael's, though this one is of neither chain—I buy several lengths of thin elastic for making new parachute shock cords with. After realizing that I will need several new parachutes, too, I decide to try my hand at making fancy cloth parachutes instead of the cheap plastic ones that come in rocket kits: an excuse to spend more time here, finding likely-looking pieces of silk, and to not have to show my face at Hobby Heaven again.

When I'm done with my supply-buying, time-killing orgy, it's still not even three-thirty. I drive to the supermarket across the street and buy my groceries for the week, which I usually do when I leave my job at a different supermarket on Monday nights, but I need to deplete more of Sunday afternoon. The specter of another evening at home alone looms in the distance like a childhood outing or a first date, threatening to drive me to distraction. I load my bags in the trunk of the car, I unload them and carry them up to my apartment and my refrigerator, worrying briefly and perversely that I should not have bought perishables and thus forced myself to take them home, that once inside my apartment I won't have the courage to leave again, as though something of Sandy's psychological illnesses is transmissible and I am at risk of having caught it. When I boil spaghetti and cook sauce for my dinner, I don't sit down, not even when it is done. I eat standing up at the edge of the kitchen, plate in hand, looking across the living room at the television and tapping my foot against the linoleum, not in a steady rhythm but occasionally, as a sort of punctuation to my rampant thoughts.

I fish in my jeans for the crumpled-up receipt. They're the same pair I wore yesterday, which is fortunate, as I'm not certain I would have bothered to remove this paper before sending them through the laundry. I smooth it out against the edge of the counter and enter the number into my phone's memory, then press the call button.

A man's voice answers after a single ring. "Hello there. What can I do for you?" It strikes me as the owner of an overbearing, bassy voice doing his best to sound friendly, like a jovial disciplinarian.

"I'm calling for Mel," I say carefully. Maybe this is her father? "She gave me this number," I add, a touch defensively.

"Oh, of course. No problem. Let me get her for you."

The way the nameless, faceless voice says this is guileless enough to perfectly reassure me that I will not, in fact, have any problem with this guy. Simultaneously, it leaves me with the distinct impression that there are plenty of ways in which it *would* be possible for him to have a problem with me, as though his world is a snugly fitting yin-and-yang of the joviality I heard and its polar opposite.

I frown over this ominous sensation for an uncomfortably long minute or two before Mel's voice speaks. "Tyler! That was fast."

"Were you timing me?" I say irritably before I can put the brakes on my impatience.

She laughs in my ear. "No! It's better that way, like a good surprise. What's the occasion?"

I close my eyes in response to a sudden ache, and rub the bridge of my nose between thumb and forefinger. When I open my eyelids, I see the glowing blue digits of

the kitchen clock in front of them, just above the edge of my hand: still a few minutes shy of five.

"I need to get out of my apartment," I say, in a voice that sounds like a sigh, as though despairing of being able to express myself any better.

Mel's response is brisk. "Okay. Have you eaten yet?"

"Just did, actually," I answer ruefully.

She laughs again. "Call faster next time! Nah, it's fine. Do you drink coffee? Black or fancy."

"Not usually," I say. "Not by myself." Then, since I am alone in my apartment, I punch myself in the forehead with my knuckles—literally, if gently. It doesn't do much for my threatening headache, but it feels refreshing somehow. "I mean, yes," I say afterwards. "Yes, I do."

"Want to meet me at the Starbucks on Eighty-first in about fifteen minutes? That'll give me just enough time to get the keys to the truck."

I think. "Not the one way out south?"

"No, the new one, up near us. At least, near where I'm guessing you are if you're still driving around the old streets."

It takes until then for me to realize the one she is talking about, even though I've been driving past it on my way to and from work several days a week since it opened a few months ago.

"All right," I say. "Fifteen minutes."