



2020

## Primrose and Other Stories

Demetra Koras  
*Butler University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/grtheses>

 Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#), and the [Fiction Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Koras, Demetra, "Primrose and Other Stories" (2020). *Graduate Thesis Collection*. 519.  
<https://digitalcommons.butler.edu/grtheses/519>

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate Scholarship at Digital Commons @ Butler University. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate Thesis Collection by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Butler University. For more information, please contact [digitalscholarship@butler.edu](mailto:digitalscholarship@butler.edu).

Primrose and Other Stories

By

Demetra Koras

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
of  
Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing  
to the Department of English  
at Butler University.

May 2020

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

WILHELMINA	1
CAMILLE	9
PRIMROSE	20
MABEL	51
HENRY	63

## WILHELMINA

The moon was clear and bright and hung low in the sky, and I walked along the garden path without the need of a lamp to light my way. A series of dark streaks to the west threatened rain, but I paid them no mind; the great house that overlooked the garden would protect me against any storm. I strolled the lengths of waist-high hedges, past verdant patches of rose bushes and hydrangeas, my polished dancing boots reflecting the moonlight as I moved along the crushed stone paths. Perfume from the flowers floated lazily through the air and a marble fountain bubbled happily to my left. I had loved this garden, always, for its beauty and peace and distance from the din of the house. As a child, I spent much time here adventuring in the brambles. As I grew, the games gave way to more serious endeavors, and I was often tucked away on a stone bench with a book or sketchpad. On this night, I had come out only briefly, for my parents were hosting a party and I was eager for a moment of calm before joining the fun. From my position on the path, I had a clear view of the terrace doors, flung wide to allow our guests to wander in and out as they pleased. The band had tuned and now the music was beginning. I gave in to the sweet melody and allowed it to pull me through the foliage, up the handful of steps, and over the threshold. I turned left toward the ballroom.

Figures whirled in dizzying arcs of color under five elaborately tiered chandeliers, fashioned from thousands of glittering crystals. Some member of the family, a great aunt, perhaps, or a cousin, had commissioned those chandeliers the century previous, and they were a source of considerable pride to my parents. Bulbs ensconced in ornate fixtures ran the length of

the room and their light reflected off of the crystals and the gilded wallpaper—it was as if all of the various points of sparkling light were one heavenly, shining mass. I watched from the outskirts, having entered the room in the middle of a dance, and sipped champagne, and took in the radiance of the gathering. An ensemble of musicians, tucked into a far corner, played a lively polka. The dancers, breathless and rosy cheeked, leapt and twirled every which way, and I reveled in their vivacity.

As I reached for a fresh drink, a pack of children dashed by the room in a cloud of shrieking laughter. Curious, I stuck my head around the door and caught snatches of their excited chatter. They were off to see the Puppeteer, a woman of substantial reputation and much acclaim, who my parents had hired to keep them entertained. While I was too old to match their buzzing enthusiasm, my curiosity was piqued, so I followed them down the hall and into the eastern wing.

The chairs and settees that normally peppered the drawing room had been banished to its outermost edges, and heaps of giggling children surrounded a small stage adorned in velvet curtains. The stage was in front of the fireplace, and the entire structure reached high toward the ceiling, obscuring even the mantle. The panels above and below the staging area were embossed with intricate loops and swirls painted a glimmering gold. The Puppeteer, I presumed, was already hidden behind these panels. A smattering of adults lined the walls and took up posts on the furniture, keeping watch with wary eyes for any troublemakers in between sips of wine and snippets of conversation. I, with no charges to be mindful of, selected a tufted armchair the color of overripe plums, and settled in with my drink, only intending to stay for a few moments. As if by some signal, the clamor became a whisper and then faded away entirely. An eerie tune spilled

out from the silence and flooded the room. A piccolo, or flute, perhaps? The curtains peeled away and gasps of awe and delight were only just audible over the music.

Tiny marionettes twirled on shimmering strings, their painted wooden faces frozen in bliss. They were dressed in hand-stitched silks lined with twinkling gems, their small caps and dainty shoes trimmed in lace and seed pearls—finer clothes than I wore, surely. They leapt and spun and danced together and danced alone, in perfect synchrony with the piercing notes, their strings never once tangling. A strange feeling began to build behind my breast then, and the room and its occupants faded further from my mind with each pirouette, until all that remained were these lovely, tragic little dolls and their mournful dance. Their faces, meant to be joyous, were full of despair to my eyes, which filled with tears at their forlorn movements.

A cry bubbled up in my throat and was about to escape my lips, but the puppets came to rest and the curtains slid closed and I was stifled. Applause erupted all around me, shocking me from my trance: polite clapping and nodding from the adults and exuberant cheers from the young ones. My hands trembled and some champagne spilled over the top of the glass onto the silk of my dress. I took a sip in an attempt to calm myself and set the glass on the floor next to me. Amidst the clapping, a woman slid from behind the paneling and stepped in front of the stage. The Puppeteer. I quivered and pressed back in my chair, feeling fear instinctually, but unsure of its source. She was a beautiful woman, with hair so pale it was nearly white falling in cascades around her shoulders. Her pupils were pinpricks inside a ring of the palest mossy green, under lashes so faint they were nearly invisible. Her cheekbones were high and pronounced, and her face tapered to a point, accentuated by full, pink lips. She was garbed much like her puppets, in folds of silk, and pearls, and jewels at her throat and wrists that flashed as she swiveled her

head, surveying the room. Her eyes came to rest on me and I gasped, feeling from her a wave of hot, malignant hunger. She bared her teeth and I caught a glint of something on her incisor. A diamond? Her smile widened, leering, and I stood so quickly that my vision darkened and I swayed. I waited for the feeling to pass, anxious to escape the room, and as my surroundings refocused, I noticed that I, alone, had stopped applauding. It was not the same frenzied response from a moment ago, but rather mechanical, compulsory. All heads faced the Puppeteer. All faces displayed the same unblinking smiles. The Puppeteer stared at me alone. I turned on shaking legs and stumbled out the doorway.

The haunting sound of clapping followed me down the corridor, but the farther I got, the clearer my head felt. I stopped in the foyer, grateful for the breeze blowing in from the terrace. The air was colder, wetter, and I saw a mass of clouds taking shape above the garden through the open doors. I knew I had acted foolishly. How silly to think that this woman, whom I had never met, could bear me some ill will. I thought about returning to the drawing room to offer an apology for my sudden retreat, but an unpleasant gurgling in my stomach dissuaded me. I would find the Puppeteer later in the evening and make amends.

I reentered the ballroom and circled the perimeter, hoping to shake the last of the disturbed feelings from my mind. I mingled, speaking loudly so as to be heard over the musicians, entering into any discussion that seemed ordinary and mundane with a gusto I rarely displayed around others. I politely refused offers to dance, offers of liquor, in case either led to another unusual occurrence. For some time, all seemed normal and I almost forgot about the sorrowful marionettes and their puppet mistress. It was during a discussion about traveling abroad in the spring that a familiar, sickening fear rose in my chest. I lifted my head from the

dialogue and scanned the room. My eyes found hers through the swirling of couples. Even at this distance, across the room, I saw her smile clearly; it was gleeful, anticipatory. The light from the sconces and chandeliers took on a phantasmal glow, and my companions melted into fog, becoming wispy and formless, and the music, so happy and melodious, cracked and shattered beneath the shrill notes of a piccolo. The dancers before me twirled faster, round and round, and I realized, with some distant shock of horror, that they were no longer breathless or jubilant; their features were unmoving, lifeless, painted masks of false euphoria. They traced careful circles around the dance floor, their limbs rising and falling with jerky repetition. I saw a flicker in the open space above their heads. I looked more closely—there it was again! Lines perpendicular to the ceiling ran down and were fixed to shoulders, wrists, knees, ankles. I ceased to breathe. Their skin had assumed the texture of polished wood and their limbs were now under the control of a myriad of strings.

“Mina! Mina!” Hands shook me from my daze and I gasped. The air was too thick, the press of bodies around me too heavy. Was I mad? Was I losing myself?

“P-please,” I stammered, “you must excuse me.”

I pushed through the throng, heedless of those in my way, and ran through the house, not stopping until I was on the terrace. The storm had arrived at last. Rain lashed down in vicious torrents upon my uncovered neck and arms, stinging my scalp, biting my face. I slipped down the stairs and skinned my hands but was immediately on my feet again. I staggered into the garden and fell against a hedge. The hedges! Where once they reached my waist, they now were at my shoulders. I touched the leaves with trembling hands. Raindrops fell thick and heavy now, bursting upon my skin, which began to resemble the sheen of oiled wood. The scrapes on my

hands were vanishing as I watched, and did not ache or twinge as I imagined they should. The hedge was now level with my eyes and still growing. I could not make sense of it. A droplet fell on my lashes, but I found I could no longer blink, and it rolled, unimpeded, down my eyeball and onto my cheek.

“There you are, my lovely.”

Her voice was poisonous. I turned, haltingly, to stare at the Puppeteer, a large smile spreading across my face, though I tried desperately to twist my mouth into any other shape. The rain abated as she approached.

“There is no need to be afraid.” Her words were long and unhurried and matched her movements. She towered over me, a behemoth, holding a leather satchel in one elegant hand. Her grin was wicked. I tried to cry out, to turn my head, to raise my arms. My legs could no longer support my weight and they bent at the knees and I toppled over into a heap.

The Puppeteer bent down and scooped me up, smoothing the wet hair from my wooden face. “I will make you something lovely to wear, and then you will dance.” She straightened my dress, a facsimile of the one I had been wearing only moments before, but in miniature. “You will dance for kings and queens, and none will rival you in beauty or in grace.”

I shrieked, I cried out, I tried to beat at her palm with my tiny fists, but all of my efforts were in vain. My wooden body remained still and heavy in her hand; my voice was smothered behind my frozen smile.

She unclasped her bag, and as she brought me down toward that dark, yawning pit I summoned up all of my residual courage and strength and attempted to fling myself from her hand and onto the sharp stone path below. I was utterly powerless to move. She nestled me in

with all the others, winding my strings so they would not tangle. The last image I saw of my home was the moon slipping out from behind the clouds; its light touched my wooden skin and then all was dark.

I heard the click of the latch and then we were airborne, I and my fellow captives, a dozen other dolls who were all as mute and as unmoving as I was. By the swaying of the bag and the dull crunch of boots on gravel, I knew that the Puppeteer was moving. But where? Toward the party, my parents, my friends and relations? Toward my possible salvation? The muffled sounds of music and merriment grew louder, and this meant that we were now inside. I hoped that someone had been watching in the garden and would come to my aid.

Our puppet mistress, our heartless captor stopped suddenly, as might a dog who has reached the end of its lead, and hope bloomed in my chest, for I heard a person call out urgently, faintly, “Madame! Madame!”

I was saved! There had been a witness after all!

“A most wonderful performance, most wonderful.” It was the voice of my father, breathless as he so often was. The hope I had been sheltering in my tiny wooden form melted away then, for he made no mention of me, no mention of the garden scene, had no demand to open the bag and display its contents.

“Yes, the children were thrilled.” The voice of my mother, a smooth, warm timbre that so easily balanced the excitable nature of my father. It was this pleasantry that revealed to me the extent of this horror. They did not know the danger I was in, how close I was to them, that I had been trapped by the very woman to whom they now gave praise!

The Puppeteer’s response to this flattery was not audible; perhaps she did not give one.

“I had hoped to introduce you to our daughter, Wilhelmina, but I can’t seem to find her anywhere.” My mother, again. I pictured her face in my mind; I had her hair, the color of a raven’s wing. I took after her in all aspects. I shared her appearance, her temperament; could she not sense my anguish?

“To be young and at a party such as this,” the Puppeteer replied. From the darkness above me, I heard the creak of a hand tightening around the bag’s handle. “She must be tucked away, absorbed in some little conversation.”

My father rasped a laugh. “Young people love their parties. They seem to think of nothing else these days.” He would be mopping his face with a silk cloth or swirling the ice in his drink. My small, ineffectual ears could not pick out the noise of his mannerisms from among the music, the cheer, the conversation.

I made a final, desperate attempt to call out to my parents, to reach for them through the darkness while they exchanged goodbyes with my wicked jailer, but they ceased to speak and the Puppeteer began to walk once more. The party faded behind me. I heard the stamp and snort of a horse, and the groan of a carriage door. The bag was jostled and then came to rest, and as the whip cracked and the carriage lurched forward, I screamed. I screamed from the place in the body where the soul resides, but in this body I had no breath. Gone was the rise and fall of the chest, the beat of the heart. Gone was the power to clench a fist or grind the teeth. Gone was the curling of the toes, the deep inhale during a spring rain, the sweet scent of the summer rose.

## CAMILLE

Maren figured the guy who sold her the glass bead was full of shit, but it was Joshua Tree and the campsite was pulsing and she wanted to be wild. She had walked by him and he nodded at her with his whole shirtless body, bending somewhere around the ribs in time to an alt-rock song Maren didn't know, his eyes glittering like obsidian. He held up the bead between his thumb and forefinger, and Maren stopped to get a better look at it because this wasn't what most people were offering there around the fire. He told her this was a magic bead that would make her heart sing or unlock her wolf spirit or something, and maybe daytime Maren would've rolled her eyes and walked away, but nighttime Maren was three drinks deep under a black plum sky. She paid him with a wrinkled twenty from her fanny pack—fanny packs being in again, in terms of fashion—and he told her to take the bead with a full glass of water, like an aspirin. Held up to the light, albeit light from the bonfire, it looked like an ordinary glass bead, papaya seed size and glossy, and if she turned it just this way and squinted just like that she swore she could see a tiny red heart, like a real one with valves and an aorta and everything, suspended somewhere in the middle. She took it back to her friends. She showed Alice first, who laughed, and her laughter floated up above the music and noise, and made the night glow. She then turned to Camille to show off her treasure, but Camille was a ball of tense, angry energy. Camille told Maren to throw it into the fire. That at best the guy was a con, and at worst—. Camille let the sentence hang there, trying too hard to be ominous in Maren's opinion. Still, the yawning emptiness of that unfinished sentence closed in around Maren and she fought to keep her legs from running away

into the infinite night. This was Camille's thing, lately, trying to live Maren's life for her, and so Maren told her she didn't care if it was a bead or a pill; she was going to swallow it and turn into a wolf. The horrified look on Camille's face as Maren gulped down water was worth the twenty bucks.

The next morning, Maren worked her way out of the tent she shared with Alice and Camille, who were both still asleep. They'd purchased the tent for this trip, split it three ways, and though they'd selected the pale blue and gray option, what had arrived instead was green bean and beige. At least it wasn't *camo* like some of the others. Even the sprawl of ugly tents could not ruin the early morning landscape. The shaggy, bristled Joshua trees in the hazy light reminded her of furry monster paws, the kind that belonged to giant, happy monsters who lived in kid's movies. She stared out across the spiny palms, dusty rocks, and strange, tentacled plants that speckled the ground around the trees, and what she mostly felt was endlessness, a wild kind of freedom that prickled up her arms.

She headed for the bathrooms, grateful that they'd booked a campsite with plumbing. She'd recognized the bathrooms yesterday as the same kind found along the beach by campus: metal toilets, large drainage holes, automatic faucets. The only difference was that these were full of dust where those were full of sand. Maren hoped, as she picked her way around tents, empty bottles, and the occasional shoe, that nothing disgusting had happened in there the night before.

The door was stuck so she shoved it, shoulder first, and almost fell on her face, grabbing hold of the door jamb to stay on her feet. A boozy wave of joy shot up her foot and flooded

through the rest of her, and everything was beautiful. Her heart beat erratically for a moment, and she figured she'd moved too fast, that the effects of last night hadn't actually worn off. She stumbled to the toilet to relieve herself and then to the sink to wash her hands, feeling all the while that the party from the night before was alive and well in this bathroom. She felt the thumping of the music in her chest and was breathless about the bigness of the sky and giddy with love for everything. She felt like she'd drunk a feelings smoothie, all happy and warm and desperate in a hopeful way. She squinted into the clouded glass mirror. She still looked like Maren. She opened her mouth, stuck out her tongue and ahhhhed. That checked out. A small part of her worried about the bead she had swallowed, that maybe it hadn't been as harmless as she thought. Maybe she really did have wolf senses now. Or maybe she was an empath. That was stupid...right? She'd really only swallowed the bead because Camille was being so snobbish, so superior. As if Camille made the rules for when it was okay to be wild (after Maren moved away) and when it wasn't (now that Camille and Maren were together again). Camille had followed Maren around for the rest of the night, to make sure nothing *bad* happened. Camille's words. Said just like that: *bad*. Maren could still hear the italics.

Maren and Camille had been best friends since seventh grade, when they'd joined the same volleyball team. They lived a neighborhood apart, but Camille's house was closest to school and so that's where they went after volleyball practice until Maren's mom, who taught biology at the local community college, or Maren's dad, real estate, could pick her up. Maren was around, therefore, when Camille's parents began to *talk*. That's how Camille described it—they were talking, talking a lot, talking things over—and Maren would nod as if she understood. Camille

told Maren her dad had started sleeping on the couch, and soon Maren's mom began to encourage her to take the bus home after volleyball. After Camille's dad began renting the apartment on El Camino, Maren went to visit. Camille shared a bedroom there every other weekend with her older sister Deb, who was in high school and always out. Camille showed Maren around the room, which was small and mostly metal bunks and a plastic desk, and told her how Deb would open the window at night and sneak off to meet her boyfriend. Camille had almost gone with her once, she said. Maren, jealous of this new, grown-up Camille with easy access to the street and adventure, wished her own parents would find things to talk about. Then her dad would rent an apartment on El Camino, too, and she and Camille could sneak out to high school parties and have high school boyfriends and run wild together under the stars.

When Maren returned to the tent, feeling fuzzy and unbalanced, Camille was outside on a rock, wrapped in a knit blanket and casually flicking through her phone. Maren knew it was an act.

“God, Camille, I'm fine.”

Camille looked up at her, eyes parentally narrowed. “He could've given you anything.”

Maren crossed her arms. “It was a glass bead—totally harmless. Stop trying to make it a big deal.”

Camille glared, thumb hooked and frozen above her phone screen. “How do you know it was harmless? You were drunk.”

Uncertainty gurgled in Maren's belly, but she was feeling unkind and wanted to escape with her sleeping bag so she could lie down in the open and clear her head.

“I was having fun. You spent the whole night sulking. If I’d known that’s how you were going to act I wouldn’t’ve asked you to come with us.”

“I was looking out for you.”

“I don’t need you to look out for me.”

“Well someone has to, Maren. When the hell did you get so stupid?”

“You’re calling me stupid?” Maren barked an ugly laugh. “I guess you’d know.”

“What does that mean?” Camille snapped.

“You were so bummed out that your mom left and didn’t take you with her that you spent the last two years of high school doing nothing but getting high. How did you even get into college, acting like that?”

Camille shrugged off the blanket and stood up, suddenly not looking at Maren. Maren tightened her arms around her chest, trying to smother the guilt, trying to lean in to her anger. Camille stood there for a few long seconds before softly sighing and walking away. Maren huffed and wriggled back into the tent to grab her phone. It wasn’t even 7 a.m. Somehow, Alice didn’t wake up as Maren extracted her sleeping bag from the tent. She didn’t want to be here when Camille came back. She stomped off unsteadily, Camille’s sigh floating around her head, following her as she went to find a quiet place to nap.

Camille’s mother left sometime during sophomore year, and Camille and her sister went to live in the small El Camino apartment full time. Maren didn’t like the apartment. She didn’t like being around Camille’s increasingly distant father who worked nights and was therefore always home when the girls got out of school. Didn’t like sleeping in Deb’s unmade top bunk that

always smelled like cigarettes and Axe body spray—the signature scent of Deb’s boyfriend. Maren began to make excuses when Camille invited her over, suggesting instead that the girls go to Maren’s house. Even there, though, Maren felt uneasy. She knew Camille was sad. Knew that her own parents, who lived in the same house, and slept in the same bed, and who had benign conversations about groceries and television, were entire continents away from Camille’s absent mother and far away father.

Right before junior year, Maren’s mother took a job at some research institute in La Jolla, and the family prepared to move to San Diego. Maren and Camille cried together and promised to stay friends, but once Maren was settled into her new school with new friends she found it hard to make time for Camille’s calls. They talked infrequently, and then not at all, until one day at the end of senior year when Maren posted online that she would be attending the local state college that fall. Camille, it turned out, had been accepted into the same school on a Division II volleyball scholarship, and wanted to know if Maren would like to live together in the dorms. Maren agreed, telling herself that it was nostalgia, not guilt guiding the decision.

The Camille that Maren met at freshman orientation was not the same Camille she had left two years before, who used to goof around in volleyball practice or spend Friday nights singing into hairbrushes. This Camille was grim and turbulent. She made Maren uncomfortable because of how she spoke to people, especially school officials, professors, real adults; she was eighteen and the entire world was hers to yell at, or ignore. At first, Maren tried to ask her about life back home. Was that old donut shop still across the street from the high school, did they still light the tree at City Hall during Christmas, was the Art in the Street Fair still every July and did they still make those giant chalk murals? But Camille always twisted these conversations, took

them over, told Maren instead about smoking pot in out of the way parking lots, or jumping fences with baggy-jeaned boys from neighboring towns, or about her time spent in piercing shops that didn't check ID. Maren stopped bringing up their hometown. If Camille still spoke to her family, she did so when Maren wasn't around. Only once did Maren overhear her talking to her sister, Deb, and that was by accident. It was a low, rough conversation late one night when Camille probably thought Maren was asleep. Maren lay still, trying to regulate her breathing while across the room Camille whispered harshly, *No, Deb, I can't. I've sent you everything I have.*

When Maren returned to the tent, it was almost ten o'clock and most of the fuzz was gone from her brain. Now, she just felt sick. Maren would never ever admit out loud that she had tried smelling the tents on the way back to see if she could tell who was sleeping where. But, no special wolf powers. Just regular Maren, out smelling tents in the desert. Camille wasn't there, but Alice was awake and packing. Alice smiled but didn't say much. She looked a little green and Maren patted her on the shoulder. Alice was more Maren's speed. She'd lived across the hall from Maren and Camille during freshman year, and was an Anthropology major, like Maren (Camille was sport administration), so they often saw each other in class. Alice took the work more seriously than Maren did, and was even planning to attend a field school in Peru that summer, which sounded like a lot of work to Maren who wanted to keep her summers open. The three girls had moved in together the past year and it was nice to have someone around who balanced out Camille's energy.

Camille's blanket was still on the ground where she had left it, and Maren picked it up, scanning the campsite. She recognized Camille talking to some seated figures at the far end of camp. Maren couldn't make them out, but she could tell that Camille was angry. Maren sighed, alternating between uneasiness that she had helped cause this new Camille-fire, and irritation that Camille was spoiling their last moments in Joshua Tree. Camille spun and started marching back. Maren didn't want to look like she'd been spying, so she folded the blanket and then helped Alice roll up the tent. Camille returned but said nothing, which was fine with Maren, and the three of them finished packing in silence.

On the way back to the car, Alice broke away for one last bathroom run, and Camille and Maren reached the car alone. The air between them felt heavy.

"Here." Camille held a small bag out to Maren.

"What?" Maren took it, confused, and then she read the label—BEAD MIX, GLASS—marked with the logo of some craft store. Among the various multi-colored beads were exact duplicates of the glass bead she had swallowed the night before.

"Looks like you were right. Harmless." Camille's face was stone. She turned away from Maren and climbed into the back seat. Maren looked at the bag and wanted to throw it. She wanted to throw the whole stupid thing out into the dirt and never look at it again. Instead, she threw it into her bag and sat on the ground by the trunk to wait for Alice.

Maren drove home. They'd brought her car—it had four-wheel drive. Alice was in front posting pictures of their trip and humming along with the music, and Camille was in the back, sunglasses on, asleep or maybe not. Maren's hands tightened around the steering wheel. Camille had been

her best friend, once. They'd walked home together every day after volleyball, slept in the same bed, told secrets, laughed. Life was good for them, endless and full, until it wasn't for Camille. And now, they didn't understand each other at all. The spindle of the speedometer was creeping up and up and Maren pulled back her foot, slowly letting out the breath she'd been holding. She kept her eyes forward the rest of the way home. At some point, Alice's phone dropped softly into her lap, and the slow, steady breathing of Maren's two passengers told her they were asleep. As she drove, she tried to remember what it felt like to be a small thing under a big sky.

They arrived late in the afternoon. The girls split off and Maren was grateful they each had their own rooms. She was looking forward to a nap in a real bed. Camille's door shut and the sharp noise, so loud in the still apartment, startled Maren. Her heart fluttered and she felt muddy all over. Camille's door was down the hall, opposite her own, staring at her, waiting for her to make the next move. She shut her own door so she wouldn't have to look at it.

Maren tried to sleep for an entire hour before she gave up and started to unpack. Most of what was in the suitcase ended up in a dusty pile on the floor beside her. The bag of glass beads ended up on her desk. She stared at the beads and they stared right back, and then she had a weird idea. Before her dim brain was aware of what was happening, she was up and rummaging through her desk.

It took her thirty more minutes to sort herself out and finish her craft project. When she was done, she had two lumpy bracelets full of glass beads. She'd had to cannibalize some of her thin hair ties and tie them together to get the right length, but she'd made sure that the center bead of each bracelet had a little replica of a heart inside it.

She went into the hall and headed for Camille. She knocked on the door and immediately wanted to run away from the sick, tugging feeling in the pit of her stomach. Her pulse was up in her ears and she almost didn't hear Camille ask who it was. When Maren said, "Maren," she was sure Camille would tell her to go the hell away. Camille didn't say anything, though, and so she slowly opened the door and stepped inside. Camille was sitting on her bed with her computer on her lap, looking at Maren with hard eyes. Maren shut the door behind her.

"I was shitty."

"Yeah, you were."

"I'm sorry for what I said, especially about your mom. I don't know that I could have picked a worse thing to say." Camille was silent. "If you ever want to talk about her, we can do that, if you want." Camille looked away and Maren's upper lip started to sweat.

Camille looked back up at her with puddles for eyes. "What the hell is that?"

"What?" Maren looked down. "Oh. Oh!" She held out her hand to show Camille the bracelets. "I kept the beads. I don't know why. We never really did friendship bracelets when we were kids, or had those half heart necklaces. I guess I saw an opportunity and went for it..." She trailed off. The bracelets were horrendous, now that Maren was seeing them in the presence of another person. "They're pretty awful, aren't they?"

Camille studied Maren and then held out a hand. Maren set one of the bracelets in her palm, holding her breath and stepping back as soon as she released the beads. She stood there with her arms at her sides while Camille examined it, not knowing what to do with her limbs. After what felt like a year, Camille slid the bracelet around her wrist, and, without looking up, said *thank you* in a soft, rasping tone that surprised Maren. Maren shifted her weight from foot to

foot, and when Camille said nothing more, she turned and left the room as quietly as she could. The image of Camille remained firmly in her mind as she walked down the hall—the bright eyes fixed on the computer screen, the curled posture, the lumpy bracelet encircling the freckled wrist—and as Maren crossed the threshold of her own room, she slipped on the remaining bracelet, taking care to leave the door ajar behind her.

## PRIMROSE

## I

Primrose sat beside a bank of windows in the sunroom where the mid-morning light shone brightest, carefully sewing on a new right leg. She stitched in a counter-clockwise ring just above the knee, humming softly and thinking about her tomato plants in the garden out back. They would be ready for picking soon and she was nearly out of garden soil. She pulled the last stitch tight and tied off the thread with practiced fingers, and while these were not the fingers she had been born with, being rather the fourth set she'd had so far, she found that her dexterity remained intact each time she replaced her hands, requiring only the shortest period of adjustment to reach full efficiency. She admired her work and sat back in the wicker chair to wait. She had always preferred to sew in this room rather than in the cellar. Up here the air was fresh; windows lined the entire eastern wall and the room was full of comforts that were lacking in the damp, gloomy space under the property. And the house was positioned far enough away from the road to prevent the intrusion of any passersby, no matter what her mother had believed.

Already Primrose could feel the leg as if it had always been hers, propped up there on the footstool. Its fabric felt soft under calf and ankle, though she could not yet move the foot. This was a fine leg, and its pale condition would soon be remedied by the flow of her own blood. Its small, rounded toes brought to mind her first new pair of feet, given to her by her mother shortly after she had turned twelve.

Her mother's eyes had been wide and bright that day, the color of tulip bulbs. She'd always smelled of fresh sage and lavender. *I have something for you, my darling girl*, her mother had said, placing a large box in Primrose's blanketed lap. Primrose looked down at the white satin bow that curled atop the box and felt a nervous flutter in her throat. She grasped the lid with both hands—her own hands, then— and lifted it slowly, delighted by the ceremony of the moment and the anticipation of revealing the box's contents, but trying to mirror her mother's poise. There, nestled in folds of crimson silk, lay two unblemished, bloodless feet. She had finally lost her first limb—her left foot had weakened and withered away the night before. She ran her fingers over the jutting ankle bones and her mother said that they would collect the small pile of dust that was once her foot and add it to the garden. She said that the strange itch Primrose felt in the empty space below her calf would disappear once the new foot was in place, and that they would keep the right foot in the cellar for the eventual day when it, too, would be needed. Her mother then helped her down the stairs and over to the round table in the kitchen. Primrose settled her leg onto a stool while her mother closed up the windows and drew the curtains. It was early enough that there wouldn't be anyone over at the filling station next door, but the neighbor, Adelaide, was always up at dawn and liked to look in on the few people who lived out by this county road. Out came the sewing box, which was normally stored in the cellar, and her mother checked the lock on the back door for the third time. *We're taking a risk*, her mother said, *just this once. Your first sewing deserves to be special.* She set a gray and white crocheted blanket on the table between them in case she had to cover their work in a hurry, and adjusted the stool so that Primrose's leg was bent at the knee and pointing sideways. Then they sat together and her mother showed her how to sew on the new foot with a curved needle,

patiently allowing her to make mistakes with the thread, correcting her with kind words and that tinkling laugh. The sting of the needle was easier to bear with each stitch.

The steady life to which Primrose had grown accustomed began to shift under her after that night. It began gradually. The little precautions her mother had taken in preparing the kitchen—drawing the curtains, checking the locks on the doors—became daily compulsions. Her mother began refusing visitors and eventually left the house only to buy food and visit the local graveyards. She pulled Primrose out of school in favor of a sporadic home education. Primrose, for her part, wanted to do what she could to ease the clear, grueling burden under which her mother lived, hoping that life would normalize if only she adhered to her mother's rules. By the age of fifteen, Primrose knew how to dismember a body, and sewed equally well with her left hand as with her right, but she had no friends and had never felt more isolated.

Primrose's mother declined rapidly after that. She lost her limbs with the same consistency and frequency as before, but each of these episodes seemed to extract a greater toll from her. Primrose woke up one day to find a pile of dust where her mother had been, and it was easier to be angry with her mother for leaving her alone than it was to admit that she was relieved.

Primrose had been sewing herself back together for seven years now. The first puncture with that savage little needle always hurt the worst, and this new leg had been the tenderest replacement of them all. Sunlight slanted across the sunroom and made her new toes look like she'd dipped them in golden paint. Her dress was bunched up around her thighs so that if anyone were to look in at that moment, the red stitches would be fully visible, and this small rebellion against her

mother gave her a sour kind of satisfaction. She looked through the windows and out at the road, checking, in spite of herself, that no one was snooping in the yard. This was what she and her mother had fought about the most: the risk, the danger, what might happen if someone caught them at their sewing. The area was rural enough, Primrose had argued. And, besides, they had a gate. The arguments had never swayed her mother, though, and while she was still alive, Primrose had sewed only in the cellar and only at night. It was lonely, sewing there. She flexed her new foot and then stood slowly, the wooden floor cool and creaking under her skin. There was a tall mirror inside that leaned against the wall of the cozy living room, and she went to it, holding the cloth of her dress up as she walked through the doorway.

Like all of the Worth women who had come before her, Primrose kept a tidy home. The wood floors gleamed, the hand-braided rugs and crocheted blankets were freshly vacuumed and laundered, and the framed needlepoints that hung on the walls were well dusted. The most ostentatious thing in the entire house was the floor mirror with the gilt-frame, which Primrose only kept because it was an heirloom. She stood before it, curling her new toes into the rug beneath her feet, as her mother had done before her, as her grandmother had, her great grandmother. The fresh scarlet sutures that encircled her right leg matched perfectly with the faded ones around her left.

## II

The farmhouse had been built simple and sound in 1893, and had not changed much in the century since. It was a white box with a sloping roof, and had a dormer window positioned dead center below a thin brick chimney. The house was bordered on one side by a gravel drive, which

separated the property from an out of the way general store and filling station, and on the other by a long stretch of grass and a dirt road, which went through the woods for half a mile before spilling out onto the marshy shore of the lake. The front of the house faced County Road 15 which ran north to south and was mainly used by farmers headed into town or to the bigger cities to the south. Primrose had also inherited two additional lots, to the north and east, which were currently growing a strong soybean crop. A man named Harper rented that land, farmed it, and paid on time the first of every month. Primrose lived comfortably on this income, alone in the modest house, which had only three rooms on the bottom floor—space for cooking, living, dining—and two bedrooms and a small bathroom upstairs.

Four generations had occupied the farmhouse, and though the property had been passed down through Primrose's branch, it had often served as a waypoint and haven for various aunts, cousins, and nieces. Only the women were ever afflicted with the withering limbs; so few men were born into the family, and each of them seemed to escape its fold with healthy, strong bodies. Over the years, the various Worths had generated a horde of objects that the house simply could not hold, and so these items had ended up in the detached garage at the end of the gravel drive. Primrose parked the old red Ford on one side of the garage, where she also kept a wooden workbench for her gardening supplies, but the rest was given over to sprawl of the boxes and bins and assorted furniture. There had once been a sense of order about the place. The boxes were labelled with a name and a year, or sometimes a brief description of contents—*Rosalyn, 1934* or *mae '61* or *milk glass - paneled grape*—but over the years the pile had grown, spreading out like carpetweed, so that finding anything, even with the labels, took hours. After Primrose's

mother died, she had covered it all up with tarps. No one had been by to look through the mess in years.

It took a full day for Primrose to feel stable enough on the new leg to be seen by other people, so the day after the sewing she put on a thin sweater and went out to the garage with a tin full of dust from her old leg. She unlocked the side door and went in, flipping the light switch and keeping her eyes down and away from the pile on the other side of the truck. If it weren't for the truck and her gardening supplies, she'd probably never come out here. She didn't like to think about what was under the tarps. The house had been lively during Grandmother Worth's time, but after her death, the family fractured and spread apart. Fewer relatives visited the house each year, until eventually none did. Her mother never told her why. And not one of them had called when Primrose's mother died, nor had she heard from any of them in the two years since.

Primrose hung her sweater on a peg by the workbench and pulled on a pair of thick rose gloves, which extended up her arms and hid the sutures above her wrists. Not a single relation had thought to check in and see if she, only seventeen at the time, had needed help, even though they all shared her condition and knew what it took to live. She was all alone out here, and she couldn't even enjoy the pure, unfiltered sunshine on her bare arms because what would her neighbors say, or the people at the filling station, if they happened to see the red lines of thread digging into her skin. She pulled out a plastic bucket and set it down with a sharp thunk against the concrete floor. Into the bucket went the rest of the garden soil and the dust from the tin.

Primrose preferred the garden more than any other place and relished the warm months when she could be out tending to it. It was small but bountiful and had flourished under her care. There were three independent plots of vegetables, fruits, and herbs, separated by gravel that crunched under her work boots. She knelt among the basil and mint and chopped at the dirt with her spade in short bursts to unearth the clumps of weeds. She owned a straw hat but preferred the feeling of the sun on her exposed face and neck. A slight buzzing rolled up her leg as she worked, new flesh adjusting to its function.

“Primrose! Oh, Primrose!”

Adelaide, coming down the dirt road. Her shrill voice scraped the inside of Primrose’s skull. “Oh, Adelaide! Hello!”

Her neighbor, a woman with thick wrists and pudgy fingers, ambled up to her gate, slightly out of breath, flapping one hand in greeting and clutching a basket with the other. “I’m on my way to pick up some milk and thought I’d come round to take a peek at your garden.” Adelaide paused to suck in some air. “It looks stunning dearie, just marvelous, and I don’t know how you keep it so green.”

Primrose arranged her face into an amiable smile and squinted up at her. “Oh, Adelaide, you must have some tomatoes once they ripen. It shouldn’t be more than a couple of weeks, now.”

“What a dear girl you are, and thank you, I would just love some. They always taste better when I get them from you rather than that Mr. Parker in town. What a ridiculous price he charges for them!” She stood with a hand on her hip, air escaping in short wheezes from her open mouth, and looked over the top of Primrose’s head toward the filling station. That’s what

everyone around here called it, the filling station, even though it was a bait and tackle shop which sold pantry staples and had only two pumps out front.

“Now, Primrose,” Adelaide said, her voice suddenly serious, “you *are* keeping an eye on that filling station, aren’t you? I walk over there about every day to get in my exercise and I don’t like you living so close to a place where just anybody can pull over for their gasoline.” Adelaide lived down the dirt road, around the bend in the trees. She and her husband owned a strip of land next to Primrose’s and had hired the same man, Harper, to run it. She seemed to think that Primrose needed mothering.

“We’re not St. Paul up here,” Primrose said, pulling up a weed and lobbing it over the fence. “Hardly anyone comes by that filling station except for the regulars.”

“Well,” Adelaide looked down at the weed and switched her basket from one arm to the other, “all it takes is one bad egg. I read in the paper about a robbery over in Forest Lake and they’re not much bigger than we are. The paper said the robber walked right in through the *unlocked* front door. You keep your door locked, don’t you? I would never forgive myself if I let anything happen to you, what with your mother gone.”

Primrose hoped Adelaide would move along. The woman hovered like a deer fly and had a preternatural sense for when Primrose was out among her plants. “You don’t need to be worrying about that one bit, Adelaide.” She sat back on her heels and wiped the back of a glove along her brow. The sun was on the rise.

“You’ve always been such an independent spirit,” Adelaide said, sounding like she would pat Primrose on the head if only she could reach. “Speaking of your mother, I have a favor to ask.” She set her basket down so that she could rest both hands on her hips. “Your mother used to

sew the prettiest nature scenes, and she once did one with a loon on a beautiful lake and there were, let's see, cattails, I think, in the background. Do you know the one I mean?"

Primrose did know; her mother had sewn that scene onto a pillow, which now sat tucked into the corner of the sofa. "Hmm." She set down her spade and dusted her gloves. "She did a lot of ducks."

"Oh." Adelaide cast around, looking, perhaps, for a loon to show to Primrose. "It had the white spots on its back and one of those curving green necks and a big red eye. Maybe you know where she kept her patterns? My granddaughter has a birthday coming up and I think she would just love to hang a scene like that up on her wall."

Primrose pretended to think about this for a minute, looking over at one of the tomato plants where she noticed a wilting leaf near the lower stem. Frowning at it, she said, "She never did throw a pattern away."

"No, never! And so I said to myself, Adelaide, you go down there and ask Primrose about that pattern because if there was ever a woman to hold onto a thing like that it would be Leigh Worth."

The sound of her mother's name coming out of Adelaide's mouth startled Primrose; it had been a long time since she'd heard it spoken. She looked up at Adelaide, who was looking down at her with bright, watery eyes. "I'll look for it," Primrose said, the lie practically falling out of her mouth.

A wide smile spread across Adelaide's face and she bent down to pick up her basket. "You are a dear, just an absolute dear. My granddaughter would love to have a thing like that, I know it. I haven't picked up a needle in years, but her mother is bringing her for a visit at the end

of the summer, and that seems like plenty of time to sort myself out.” She settled the basket in the crook of her arm. “You watch that filling station, now,” she said darkly. “And remember, I’m just down the road.”

Primrose waved after Adelaide with her spade, which she then used to grind up a shoot of nettles. If she handed the pattern over to Adelaide, she was worried she’d never see it again. She was also not sure that Adelaide would finish the project in time for the granddaughter’s visit, pattern or no. Adelaide was the kind of person who didn’t follow through. Her husband was the same, which was probably why they’d had to hand over the farming to someone else. Primrose had never known anything about farming, and neither had her mother, so she didn’t feel a bit bad that someone else did that work for her. But Adelaide and her husband had run their own farm until they’d realized that hiring Harper meant they could spend all their time fishing or taking walks over to the filling station. Adelaide would be over at the station for at least half an hour, gossiping with Mr. Lewis, who worked the counter. Primrose yanked up the last of the nettles and tossed them onto the road so they would shrivel up in the sun. She decided that even if she knew where that loon pattern was, she wouldn’t hand it over to Adelaide.

A beetle scuttled across the gravel and Primrose pinched it between her gloved fingers. She glared at it a moment before crushing it and flicking the remains over the fence. The garden was in complete disarray after only three days without her guiding hand. The last of the garden soil was over in the bucket, and now she needed marigolds to discourage the bugs. It would mean a trip into town, about ten miles away. The sun warmed her back through her dress and she inhaled deeply, allowing the earthy smell of the garden put her at ease. The elongated leaves of a

young ash tree, which stood solitary across the dirt road, murmured and rustled in the slight breeze that had picked up out of the east.

She was reaching across the herbs for a watering can when a cold spot bloomed in her right shoulder. Primrose hissed and bent over her knees, that familiar, biting stab radiating through her torso and up into her jaw. The feeling—as if a piece of ice had appeared in her joint—meant that the arm was on the way out. She had maybe a week before she lost it completely. It didn't often happen this way, so soon after another limb. Primrose had hoped to make it until winter, at least. The cold pulsed in her shoulder and began to tug on her collarbone in a way that made her stomach churn. She curled the gloved fingers of her left around her elbow while she waited for the pain to soften and dissipate. Her heart beat in her ears and a flush crept up her face, and as she kneeled there in the garden with her right arm across her chest and her left arm clutching at it, she realized, distantly, as if she were observing the scene from somewhere outside of her body, that the shape of a person was leaning over her fence, watching her.

The shape came into focus: it was a boy of about eight who had pale, greasy hair that hung flat in a bowl shape around his head. He was standing on the bottom rail of the fence with a bland look on his face, as if she were no more interesting than a pile of dirt. At least it wasn't Adelaide. That was the last thing she needed—Adelaide there to witness her fit and start asking questions. Primrose rubbed her shoulder and eyed the boy, not caring that there was soil on her glove and that she was dirtying the cloth of her dress. She didn't recognize him and figured he must've wandered over from the filling station.

“Your mother must be looking for you,” she said in a loud voice, picking up the spade in her left hand and turning over the soil around the plants before her. She kept her right hand in her lap while the ache faded.

“My mother’s in Indiana,” the boy said, wiping his nose with the palm of his hand.

“Well, your father, then,” she said, stabbing the spade into the ground and narrowing her eyes at him.

“He’s in Indiana, too,” he said. Primrose thought he might be laughing at her, but his expression was as neutral as a cow’s.

“Someone is surely looking for you elsewhere, so why don’t you go on and find them.” She wanted the boy to go, but didn’t know how to make him leave. Not many children lived around here and the ones that did kept their distance.

The boy looked back at her with wide, dumb eyes. “What’s wrong with your shoulder.”

“My shoulder is fine,” she snapped, thrusting out her right arm toward the watering can. She was relieved that she was able to grab it and pull it to her. Her shoulder ached like she’d been using it to chop down a tree with a hand axe. “Now, go on.”

The boy didn’t move, and Primrose had to work to keep the surprise off of her face. The nerve of the child. There was a hose attached to the side of the house, but it wouldn’t reach all the way over here to spray him. Maybe the threat of her grabbing it would scare him off. She stood and dusted off her seat and was preparing to move in the direction of the house when a deep voice coming from the paved road called out: “Wesley!”

The old man Harper was headed toward them in the same straight leg blue jeans and faded ball cap he always wore. “Wesley,” he said again as he approached, sounding like he had a throat full of gravel. Harper liked his cigars. “I told you to wait out front.”

The boy looked at him impassively before jumping off the fence and kicking at the ripped up clump of nettles that Primrose had thrown earlier.

“I see you’ve met my grandson,” Harper gestured to the boy. “He and his sister are staying with us for the summer.” He rested one hand on his hip and adjusted his ball cap with the other. “She’s a bit older than him, though. Probably about your age.”

“Oh,” Primrose said, shielding her eyes. The grandson had picked up a long stick and was poking something in the ditch on the other side of the road. “Nice boy.”

Harper watched him for a beat and then turned back to Primrose. “My granddaughter, her name’s Vera. You’d like her. She’s a good girl. In college.” He paused and surveyed the ground, keeping his gaze firmly away from Primrose. “Maybe the two of you can get together,” he gestured vaguely toward the tomato plants, “garden or something.” A red splotch crept up his neck. “I don’t know that there’s much for young people to do up here.”

Primrose did not speak to Harper often. He had been renting their land longer than Primrose had been alive, but stopped by the farmhouse only rarely. When she was younger, he had always remembered to bring her a piece of candy. Primrose had never been aware of any granddaughter. “I’m surprised we’ve never met before,” Primrose said, knowing her mother would not have approved.

The flush spread rapidly from Harper's neck up to his leathery cheeks and he cleared his throat. "She hasn't been up for a while. Used to come up when Wesley was younger," he shrugged. "Now we don't see her as much."

"I've been coming here every year since I was a baby," the boy called to her. He was in the ditch, now, which came up to his knees. There was dirt all down the side of his shorts.

Harper cleared his throat again and told the boy to be quiet.

Primrose suddenly realized that this had been her mother's doing. She saw it all at once in Harper's lined face. The granddaughter, who was Primrose's own age, had been up to visit many times, but Primrose's mother, thinking it was too dangerous to have any friends or to sew in the sunroom or to go into town more than once a month, must have refused to allow the girls to meet. There was a pit of anger in Primrose's stomach when she understood this, and she felt like kicking the tomato plants. "Tell her to come by sometime," she said. Her mother was gone and couldn't say a thing about it. Her shoulder twinged, as if her mother had somehow heard her from the grave and was voicing her old warnings the only way she knew how, but it felt too good to be reckless. Maybe it would feel good to kick the tomato plants, too.

Harper's eyebrows rose and he cracked a smile. "I'll tell her that. I'll tell her." He nodded to her and then told the grandson it was time to go. The boy followed him without so much as a fleeting look in Primrose's direction. She watched them go, the old man's arms swinging mechanically, the boy trudging behind him, stirring up dust, and the warm, reckless feeling she'd had a moment ago soured as they moved away. She felt the self-assurance drain out of her. What if the girl, Vera, turned out to be just as dull as that boy? What would she do around a girl like

that? And, worse, what if she had an episode with her arm and the girl found out? Somehow guessed her secret?

Primrose felt rooted to the spot where she stood in the garden. The sun was directly overhead and warm enough that sweat began to prickle behind her ears. She wanted to prolong this moment for as long as she could because the problem with her arm meant that she had to go down to the cellar. She didn't want to go down to the cellar. She didn't want to have to look for a new arm, didn't want to begin the thawing process, didn't want to retreat into her house to wait for her own arm to lose feeling and mobility, until it finally disintegrated into a dust pile. Primrose wondered when the girl, Vera, would show up, and what state Primrose would be in when she did. Why hadn't she told Mr. Harper to have the granddaughter come by next week? Primrose imagined the scene. The girl would appear on the stoop in a sundress, arms and legs bare because her skin was surely smooth and uniform. Primrose would be inside with a lump of useless arm. Vera would knock on the door and Primrose would open it only enough to reveal her face. She would have to hide the right half of herself behind the doorframe while she turned Vera away, while she made up some excuse, just like her mother used to do. Vera would leave, hurt and confused, and Primrose would lock the door behind her and return to the sofa where she'd sit, alone, her good arm squeezing the loon pillow to her chest, which her mother had sewn back when Primrose still had all of her own limbs, and when there hadn't been as much to fear from the people who lived outside of the house.

Movement drew her gaze. Adelaide was marching down the county road with a laden basket, making for the turnoff where she would round the corner and soon be back in front of

Primrose. Primrose sighed and knelt down, picking up her spade and using it to scoop the mixture of garden soil and dust around the base of the tomato plants.

The cellar was a wide, roughly cut room with stone walls and a single naked bulb hanging from the ceiling. There were shelves on one side which held a handful of glass jars—no one had pickled anything since Primrose’s grandmother had died—and a large chest freezer was pushed up against the back wall. A stainless steel workbench sat in the center of the room with a pair of stools around it. The various tools used to dismantle and drain the bodies were locked up in a cabinet next to the freezer. Everything was cold.

Primrose undid the chain and lock that secured the chest freezer. She lifted the lid up and rested it against the wall, and an icy pocket of air chilled her face and neck. She saw immediately that there were no full arms left inside.

All that remained were small offerings—hands and feet—mixed in with bags of frozen fruits and vegetables. Primrose hadn’t been by the graveyards in some time; it wasn’t a place she liked to go. Back when her mother had been alive, they’d kept up with the stockpile. Her mother had taught her to only ever take the freshly buried, and to avoid any body that had been embalmed, which Primrose would recognize by the particular incisions on the torso and abdomen. It was difficult, lonely work, maneuvering the dead.

Primrose selected a bag of mixed berries and then let the lid of the freezer slam shut. She needed another arm before this one got so bad that she couldn’t use it, which meant she’d have to drive out to Forest Lake that very night, maybe even all the way down to St. Paul or Minneapolis. The longer she waited, the greater the chance the arm would give out on her. She

couldn't lift a body with only one arm. She often couldn't lift a body with two arms. Tears filled her eyes and her chest tightened as she turned to the cabinet with the tools and unlocked it. She removed the hacksaw from the cabinet and then clicked the combination lock back together. The hacksaw went under her sweater, and she settled the frozen berries in the crook of her arm to conceal the lump of the saw, gripping the bag tightly to her even though the cold stung her skin. Primrose made sure to wipe the tears off her face before she exited the cellar in case anyone was around the station and happened to spot her. She walked up the stairs, blinking as she emerged into the strong sunlight, and as she bent down to close and secure the cellar doors she felt the bite of the saw's teeth against her flesh.

### III

The lake at the end of the dirt road was surrounded by dense woods. The shoreline curved and bent back in on itself and was mostly marsh, which meant it didn't attract the kind of people who wanted to own lakefront property. Only a few homes had been built into clearings in the trees, and the people who owned them, like Adelaide, also owned land in the area. Harper even had a house back there, though Primrose had never been by to visit it and didn't know exactly where it was. The filling station closed about nine o'clock, and once Mr. Lewis, who worked the counter, got in his old white and yellow Chevy and drove away, Primrose could stand in the dark sunroom and stare out beyond the empty road and across the rustling black fields and feel like she was the only person alive anywhere. The only time Primrose was glad to be alone like that was on the nights when she had to visit the graveyards. Those were the nights when she missed her mother the most.

Primrose waited until about eleven before leaving her house by the back door in the kitchen. She locked it behind her, jiggling the knob to make sure it was secure, and crept across the gravel to her garage, feeling the need to sneak even though there was no one around. She'd left the light on over the stove, and between what bled out through the curtains and the sliver of moon in the sky, she made it easily across the yard. The garage door was hand operated and the handle was on the inside, so she entered through the smaller door and felt her way down the side of the truck in the dark. Her mother had always cautioned her to do it this way in case anyone had eyes on the house from afar, but it struck Primrose, as she fumbled around for the latch, that not turning on the light was just as suspicious. She unhooked the metal piece that held the door in place and pulled up on the handle. The door slid up and thunked softly as the hinges reached their full extension. She'd stashed the hacksaw in the cab of the truck earlier that day upon exiting the cellar; she didn't care to have it in the house.

Sliding behind the wheel still made Primrose uneasy. She had never driven the truck when her mother had been alive except when she'd needed to practice for her driving test, and her mother had always been right there in the passenger seat when she'd done so. She had thought, with her mother gone, that the car would be the key to her freedom, but once she had the option to drive it wherever she pleased, she realized she didn't know where to go. She put the key in the ignition and turned it, the staccato sputter filling the room, but the engine didn't fire. She released the key and the sputter died. She tried again, and again, and once more. It was the same.

Primrose sat back against the creaking vinyl and stared down at the wheel before her. Not one thing had gone right that day. The pain in her arm was dull but persistent; Harper's granddaughter was going to appear at the farmhouse at a time unknown to Primrose because of her own fool mouth; she had to go out and find a body, which she surely would not be able to move on her own, hence the hacksaw on the seat beside her; and now, this. She slapped the side of the wheel with the palm of her hand and felt hot even though the night air was cool. The rearview mirror reflected the faint light from the kitchen and she stared at the house and chewed the inside of her cheek. There wasn't any time. There wasn't any time, and she didn't have any help, either. Her mother had worried herself to death two years ago and had left Primrose behind to figure it all out by herself, like how to get the car fixed or how to manage a body with only one good arm. A whimper bubbled up in her throat; the sound was loud and harsh in her ears and it embarrassed her to have made it. She wiped her face on her sleeve and sat up straighter. Tomorrow, she would go see Adelaide. It had to be tomorrow, before the arm got too weak. She would have to come up with a story to explain why she needed the car overnight. Maybe she could tell Adelaide that she hadn't discovered the problem with the truck until the afternoon. The plan took shape in Primrose's mind and bolstered her. She would go to the truck tomorrow afternoon, intending to drive it into town for some gardening supplies. She would turn the key and discover the truck wouldn't start, and that's why she had to show up to Adelaide's house so late. Primrose's face slackened while she thought, and a picture of the garden appeared in her mind. She would say she wanted to expand the garden. Start a cucumber crop, or maybe melon. June was the month to do it, but she couldn't waste any time. She had to get the seeds in the ground, but the truck wouldn't start, and that's why she needed to borrow the car, so she could go

into town first thing. She would get the seeds, and potting soil, and the marigolds, and find someone to come and take a look at the truck. If she left first thing, she could have the car back before Adelaide sat down to lunch so as not to be an imposition.

What if Adelaide wanted to go with her? She wouldn't need to lend Primrose the car if she were the one driving it. Or maybe she wouldn't want to give Primrose the car at all. Primrose bit down hard on the inside of her cheek and tasted blood. Maybe she could soften Adelaide up with the pattern, the loon on the water. She weighed the risks of showing up at Adelaide's door without the pattern, and decided to give herself the best chance of success. She knew Adelaide the best out of everyone in the area, and thinking about having to ask anyone else to borrow a car made the room around her blur and tilt. She would ask Adelaide, and she would bring the pattern.

Now that Primrose had formed the plan, she was able to shut up the garage and go back into the house. She lay in bed for a long while that night, repeating to herself all of the things she would say to Adelaide the next day.

Primrose had been up so late the night before that she didn't start looking for the pattern until the afternoon, figuring it would be in her mother's closet with the thread boxes and bolts of cloth. After about an hour she had turned over the whole house and couldn't find a single pattern anywhere. The sun was already low in the sky and steadily sinking into the trees behind the property. Her shoulder was flaring up and she felt sticky from rifling through the closets and ducking under the beds, and so she pushed up her sleeves, got a drink of water, and walked over to the garage purposefully, as if by walking this way she could guard herself against any unpleasant memories that might be hiding under the tarp.

Primrose opened the garage door to let in some air and peeled back a corner of the tarp closest to the front, figuring the most recent boxes would be the easiest to reach. She was relieved when, after only a brief time, she found the box marked *Leigh Needlepoint*.

The box was full of patterns, some Primrose recognized because they hung on her wall, and some she had never seen before. Her mother had been organized and it wasn't long before Primrose pulled out *Loon on Big Marine* from the box. The sample picture on the front of the packet matched the pillow inside the house, but looked dull and lifeless by comparison.

That was when Primrose heard the voice.

"He-lloo." The word was drawn out into three syllables and sounded surprisingly close to where Primrose was standing.

Primrose turned and her hand flew up to her chest when she saw that a girl was coming around the side of the house and heading for the garage. Primrose felt exposed. The girl was in her yard, which meant that she had let herself in through the gate. Primrose unrolled the sleeves of her shirt, forcing herself to move steadily as she covered up the stitches on her arms. Her tongue felt thick.

"Are you Prim Rose?" said the girl, pronouncing her name as if it were two words.

"Yes. Yes," said Primrose, staring. The girl had a long face and a button nose. Her hair was wheat colored and cropped at her forehead and above the shoulders, and she had the same wide eyes as Harper's grandson. She wasn't wearing a sundress like Primrose had imagined, but rather a pair of high-waisted shorts and a striped blue top that ended just above the denim. A band of midriff peeked out from under the top. "You're Vera?"

The girl snorted. “Vera was my grandmother. I’m Verilaine,” and she paused and tilted her head, looking at Primrose as if she were expecting something. When Primrose didn’t say anything she shrugged and kept going. “Most people just call me Elaine.”

“Primrose,” said Primrose. *Elaine*, she thought, *not Vera, Elaine, Elaine, Elaine*.

“Primrose,” Elaine repeated. She was at the opening of the garage and her eyes were going over every inch of the place. “What’s all this stuff you got?” She walked over to Primrose and began to examine the boxes, not touching them but looking like she wanted to. She had long, smooth arms and Primrose felt a pinch in the hollow below her throat. What would it be like to have arms like that?

“Just some of my mother’s old things. Old family things.” Primrose gripped the pattern tightly, wishing the girl would leave so she could smooth out the tarp and lock up the garage.

“*Leigh Needlepoint*,” Elaine read off the box. “My mother did needlepoint, too. I never understood what she liked so much about it. She would sit there for hours bent over with a needle.” She reached into the box and pulled out one of the patterns and Primrose’s mouth parted in shock.

“I have to go,” Primrose said, not sure how to get Elaine out of the garage. Elaine looked up at her, frowning. Primrose cleared her throat and held up the pattern. “I have to get this to Adelaide.

Elaine’s eyebrows went up into her hair. “Now?” she asked. “It’s getting dark.”

“She’s been asking about it,” Primrose said. Her heart was hammering against her ribs so loudly she was sure Elaine could hear it. There hadn’t been any person in the yard or in the

garage in years except for her and her mother. Primrose couldn't help it; she looked past Elaine at the cellar doors.

“What's she going to do with a pattern this late? I bet she'll be in bed soon.”

It hadn't occurred to Primrose that Elaine might know Adelaide; but of course she did, because Harper worked Adelaide's land, too. “I need to borrow her car,” Primrose blurted out. “Tonight. So that in the morning I can leave bright and early and head into town to buy the seeds. The cucumbers. Find someone to fix the car.” The story tumbled out of Primrose's mouth all garbled.

Elaine looked over at the red Ford and then back to Primrose.

“It won't start,” Primrose offered, hoping Elaine wouldn't go over and look into the cab. The hacksaw was still on the seat.

Elaine shrugged and put the pattern she was holding back in the box. “I'll come with you, then. Nothing else to do.”

Elaine stood out on the gravel with her arms crossed, kicking at the rocks while Primrose grabbed a flashlight from the workbench and locked up the garage. Primrose hadn't been able to make the boy go away the day before, and the girl seemed to be just like him in that regard. If only she had been specific with Harper and told him next week. She'd regretted the words as soon as they'd come out of her mouth. *Tell her to come by sometime*, that's what she had said to him. It was her mother's fault for keeping everyone away. If only she hadn't done that, Primrose wouldn't've been so quick to have the girl over. If her mother had let her have some friends, then maybe she wouldn't be this way. Primrose tugged on the handle for the big door to make sure the latch would hold, and then went through and locked the side door. She might've tried harder to

put Elaine off, except that she knew Harper's place was somewhere close to Adelaide's, and once they arrived the girl would surely split off on her own and head home.

The girls headed out through the front gate, which Primrose noticed was open. She shut it firmly behind her and they stepped onto the main road. There were still lights on over at the filling station, but only Mr. Lewis' car in the small lot. Primrose didn't switch on the flashlight until they'd turned onto the dirt road and were almost at the garden. They didn't need the light yet, but Elaine's proximity made her nervous. Primrose remembered the boy, yesterday, hanging on the fence with his greasy hair, and she said, "Your mother's in Indiana."

Elaine's head bobbed up and then went back down. "Sure, she's in Indiana. And she's never going to leave!" This amused Elaine for some reason that Primrose did not understand, and the girl let out two or three high, sharp bursts of laughter.

Primrose kept her head down and adjusted her grip on the packet, sweeping the beam of light across the ground before her. "Your brother was here yesterday. He said—"

"He's only my half brother," Elaine interrupted. She paused so long that Primrose thought she was done speaking. "My mother's been dead ten years. She's got one of those stone angels above her grave." Another pause. "After that, my father married *Dolores*. She wants everyone to call her Dolly, but I don't, I call her Dolores and she hates it. She's Wesley's mother."

Primrose opened her mouth and then closed it without making a sound. Silence fell between the girls and they didn't say another word to each other for the rest of the walk.

Adelaide's house was less than ten minutes from where Primrose lived. Primrose had been there a few times before, usually when she needed to return a casserole dish or a pie tin. It was a low,

brown building with faded green shutters, and had at least four sets of wind chimes hanging from the porch. The roof sagged in places. Primrose saw a soft glow through a gap in the drawn curtains. She tucked the packet which held the sewing pattern under her arm and rapped on the door. Elaine leaned against the railing behind her.

Primrose heard a creak and the shuffle of heavy footsteps. The porch light came on and then Adelaide opened the door. "Primrose! What are you doing out this late?" She peered around Primrose at Elaine. "Vera?" Her eyes narrowed. She had on a long, floral nightgown that was tied at the neck, and was holding a pair of thick reading glasses in one hand.

Elaine stepped forward, arms crossed. "Hi, Mrs. H." She spoke slowly and in a higher pitch than she had to Primrose.

Primrose held out the packet out to Adelaide with the picture facing up. "I came by to give you this."

Adelaide's hand fluttered around her face. "Oh, you found it! Of course you did, you sweet girl. Come in, come in."

She took the packet from Primrose and led them into the sitting room right off the entryway. She put on her glasses and held the picture under the lamp to examine it. She touched the face of the loon with a wobbling finger. "Just like I remember it."

"Mrs. H, may I use your bathroom?" Elaine stood in the doorway with her hands clasped before her.

Adelaide looked at her over the rim of her glasses and studied the girl. "Down the hall and past the kitchen." She gestured vaguely over her shoulder. Elaine turned and left and soon there came a thudding sound from somewhere in the house. Adelaide snorted. "That girl will

wake Roy right up slamming doors like that.” She looked at Primrose and said in a flat voice, “I didn’t expect to see you hanging around a girl like that.”

Primrose rubbed her thumb along the textured grip of the flashlight. “She stopped by for a visit. I told Harper she could.”

Adelaide sniffed. “You be careful around her. I’ve heard stories.”

“I have a favor to ask,” Primrose said quickly before Adelaide could get worked up. “I was hoping to borrow your car. The truck won’t start and I want to go into town to buy some cucumber seeds. If I take the car tonight, I can leave bright and early without disturbing you and have it back to you before lunch.”

Adelaide waved the packet around. “You take the car as long as you need it. We hardly use it anyway, and if Roy wants to go down to the lake to fish in the morning, it won’t kill him to walk.” She set the packet down on the end table next to the lamp and patted it. “We park it over on the side. Come on, let’s get you the keys.”

The tension in Primrose’s neck and back released and she felt like pooling to the floor. She waited by the front door while Adelaide went to the kitchen to get the keys, and then followed the old woman outside.

“That girl is still in the bathroom,” Adelaide mumbled while they walked around to the side of the house. “Here we go,” she said, stepping up to a chocolate colored Cadillac that was rusting along the bumper. She unlocked the driver side door and then handed Primrose the keys. “You keep it as long as you need.”

“Cool car, Mrs. H.” Elaine walked up and stood so that the car was between them.

“Thank you, Vera,” Adelaide said.

Elaine yawned wide. “I guess I should be getting back. Wouldn’t want Grandpa to worry.” She turned to Primrose. “Maybe I’ll stop by in the afternoon, once you’re back from town.” She turned without another word and began to walk quickly down the road.

“Well,” Adelaide said, her eyes following Elaine, “you just be careful,” and patted Primrose on the arm. By some miracle, Primrose didn’t flinch, but she did go still, realizing that Adelaide’s hand had landed right above her stitches. “Stop by Bob’s Garage tomorrow,” Adelaide said. “He’s right on Main Street. He’ll get the truck fixed up for you.” She sighed. “I’d send Roy over to take a look if I thought he could help.”

“Thank you, Adelaide,” Primrose said, inching toward the car.

“I’ve always told you to ask me for anything. And that pattern, you are an absolute dear for bringing that over. My granddaughter is just going to love it. I haven’t done a bit of sewing in years but I’ll bet I pick it back up like that,” and she snapped her fingers.

Primrose got into the car and backed out carefully onto the road. She waved to Adelaide before setting a slow pace toward home. The Cadillac was low to the ground and didn’t manage the pitted road well. It was the worst kind of car for this setting. The last thing Primrose needed was to pop a tire.

Primrose would stop by her house and pick up the hacksaw and a tarp. From there, it would take her twenty minutes to get to Forest Lake, and if she didn’t find what she was looking for, another thirty minutes to get into St. Paul. There would be enough time for her to get back home, and maybe even sleep a little, before setting back out in the morning so she could pick up the cucumber seeds. She’d have to plant them now that she’d mentioned them to Adelaide. The headlights seemed to illuminate everything but the road as the car bounced along, which is why,

as Primrose reached the fork in the road, she had to stomp her foot hard against the brake pedal to avoid hitting the pale figure that appeared in the faltering light before her. The body of the car lurched forward and shuddered to a stop.

Primrose's knuckles were stark against the brown leather of the steering wheel. There came a *tap-tap-tap* on the passenger window, and Primrose pressed a button beside her.

Elaine's head appeared. "About time," she said, and Primrose could smell the alcohol on her breath. "I've never met a person who drives so slowly." She opened the door and climbed in. "Here." She stuck a bottle of clear liquid under Primrose's nose.

Primrose leaned away. "Are you lost?"

Elaine giggled and took a long pull from the bottle. She screwed up her face and shook her head mechanically. "Lost? No way." She pointed. "Lake's down there." Her arm swiveled. "Your house is there. You know I used to walk by it all the time when I was kid." She leaned her head back against the seat. "They started bringing me when Wesley was born. My mother never did like it out here." Elaine rolled her head toward Primrose. "Hey," she said and then sat up, "*Hey*, let's go down to the lake."

Primrose hesitated.

"Just for a minute," Elaine said. "I used to go there. To get away." She looked down the fork toward the water. "I can show you where. It's this big rock."

There was an earnestness in Elaine's voice that made Primrose stare in the direction of her own house, before swinging the car around. "Fine, but I can't stay long. I have to—"

“I know, I know, you need your plants.” Elaine was leaning forward with her forearms against the dash, her face searching the woods, as if she could make the water appear faster by looking for it. She held the little bottle between her knees.

Primrose eyed it. “Where’d you get that anyway?”

Elaine laughed. “*Adelaide’s* kitchen. She doesn’t let me call her that. *Adelaide.*”

They reached the end of the road and Elaine told Primrose where to park the car.

“Leave the headlights on,” Elaine said, and led Primrose down a short drop and onto a rocky ledge above the water. Elaine stumbled and sat down hard on the rock, spilling some of the bottle. Primrose stood a few paces away.

The lake appeared smaller than it was because of how it curved. The moon was a curl in the sky. Below them, water lapped softly against a rocky strip of shore.

“Whenever I wanted to get away, I would come here,” Elaine said, stretching her arms out behind her.

Primrose rubbed at her right shoulder and shifted her weight. “I should get back,” she said. “I don’t want to kill the battery.”

“Oh, who cares about the battery,” Elaine said, standing unsteadily and brushing off her shorts. “It’s a piece of junk, anyway. *Adelaide’s* probably hoping you’ll wreck it so that you have to buy her a new one.” Elaine huffed. “Oh,” she said, as if she had surprised herself. “Look what I have.” She set the bottle down, almost tipping forward as she did it, and pulled out a folded up piece of paper from her front pocket. She unfolded it and dangled it in front of Primrose. “Let’s see her sew that stupid duck without *this.*”

The yellow glare from the headlights warped the girls' shadows. Primrose looked at the paper in Elaine's trembling hand and realized it was a page from *Loon on Big Marine*. Primrose recognized the small, sloped cursive of her mother's handwriting at the bottom, but the words were in pencil and too faint for her to make out. Without thinking, Primrose made a grab for the paper, but Elaine whipped it away and stumbled back.

"Hey!" she said. "She deserves it. Always trying to get me to call her Mrs. Hardy. Always talking down to me like I'm some idiot. She has it out for me. Thinks I'm some big screw up." Elaine pointed at Primrose. "She deserves to lose the page."

"Give it back," Primrose said, her eyes fixed on the paper. "It's not yours."

Elaine's eyes glittered. She lowered the paper and held it in both hands before her. Her brow wrinkled as if she were studying some illustrious text. "You know your mother wasn't nice to me either." She looked up at Primrose with wet, angry eyes. "I came by your house once. I'd seen you outside and thought we could be friends. I didn't know anyone around here. But your mother told me to get lost. Said she didn't want to see me at her door again."

Elaine crumpled the paper and Primrose lunged. The girls struggled and Elaine's hand wrapped around Primrose's forearm. "What the hell?" Elaine said thickly. Primrose tried to pull away but Elaine had a tight grip on her sleeve. She ripped back the cloth exposing the red threaded sutures around Primrose's arm. "What the hell?" she said again, dangerously close to the edge of the rock. "Are those in your skin?"

Primrose sobbed and wrenched her arm away from Elaine. The girl tumbled backward off of the rock.

The police arrived sometime later for routine questioning. Primrose served them coffee at the round table in the kitchen and answered all of their questions. They knew that Primrose and Adelaide had been the last two people to see Elaine, and they also knew that she had stolen a pint of vodka from Adelaide's kitchen. Primrose frowned and shook her head when they asked her if she knew about the vodka, if the girls had planned to meet up after to drink it. She didn't drink, Primrose told them, and had only met Elaine that same night. "She let herself in through my gate," Primrose said. "Who does a thing like that?"

Once Primrose was alone, and after she had secured every door and window, she stood before the gilt-framed mirror in the living room and pulled off her sweater. She let the cloth fall at her feet, and reached up a hand to touch the line of bright red sutures encircling the smooth skin of her new arm.

## MABEL

The woman at washer seven had flowers in her dress. Mabel had seen her before, always in the hours before sunrise, but never like this with the flowers. The woman removed a wet blouse from the washer, shook it, and placed it in a wheeled basket by her hip. Each piece she did just like that. Mabel swayed on a plastic chair by the glass windows where she could see the parking lot, and where she could see the room, and the woman. The flowers in that dress made her sad. Purple violets, stuck in the cloth with no earth, and no way to get to it. Mabel thought it might be a silly thing to feel. She knew they had never known earth; they didn't have roots, didn't need to take in water or food, had no use for sunlight on their flat forms. Mabel's feet pushed hard against the ground as if they might go through her shoes and through the tile. Trying to find her own earth. The woman shut the washer's lid and rolled her basket across the floor to the wall of dryers. Her slippered feet rustled like brittle autumn leaves.

When her clothes were tumbling, the woman went to a nearby chair and sat, leaning her head back, eyes closing as she settled. She seemed to sink into the plastic, hand moving to smooth her hair where it fell in a dark tangle across one shoulder. Mabel tried this: she became aware of her swaying and quieted herself, easing back until she felt the wall, and then lifted her arm to touch her own hair. It was dense and soft under her fingers. She tried to shrink down, but the back of the chair dug at her and the wall was rough against her scalp. She glanced at the woman who looked at peace with a lap full of cloth and flowers, and a hand that kept smoothing.

Mabel had first found the laundromat by the flickering glow of its sign. She had stood in the dark lot on aching feet and stared at the red letters. They were strange to her, and angry. Below the letters was a wall of glass, and through the glass was dim light and some people, and chairs which she knew were for sitting, like park benches. She pushed down with her heels, but feet were not roots, and this ground did not yield like her plot of earth. There was nowhere else to go, so she waited outside and watched the people walk and sit and move until finally the place emptied. She had some trouble opening the door, being unbalanced and not used to her arms and her legs.

The inside was weary, painted the color of a dead field mouse. All gray and metallic, and the light was a dull yellow that felt heavy on her skin. Rusty washers squatted in the center; yawning dryers lined the walls. She came to learn these names later: washer, dryer, bleach. It smelled wrong—clean, it was called. The ground was cold and eased her feet, sore after the long, stumbling walk she'd taken around the park, before she'd seen the red light. She looked along the window at the chairs—beige scoops, some cracked—and walked down the line of them, trying to move naturally, to keep from rocking like her body wanted, prepared, as it always was, for a strong wind. She stopped in front of a chair and tried sitting, like she'd watched the people do. Her legs shook, unwilling to bend even though they were made for it.

A man entered the room from a door at the back. Mabel eyed him like she might eye a bird alighting on a branch. He stood there for a moment and then walked toward her, and she envied his gait, which was natural for him even though he limped on one side. He asked her name in a kind way, and was red in the face when he did it. She replied as best she could,

speaking slowly with her new voice, despising the sounds she made which were guttural and ugly in her ears.

“Mabel?” he asked, leaning toward her to hear better.

“Yes,” she rasped, which was easier than correcting him.

Mabel thought about her words as she sat in the chair, swaying, a motion which felt more instinctive to her than stillness. Her thoughts were slow, and she swayed and thought and watched the woman in the flower dress who was up now and tending to the dryer. Perhaps the man pitied her—Lew, the owner. She had appeared so suddenly, after all, a strange thing whose voice creaked, who walked deliberately in a breeze, who didn't know washer or bleach or clean. She'd hardly spoken that first night, mistrusting her snarl because she couldn't control it. Mabel followed the woman's arms as they folded the clothes into a canvas bag. She could see the woman's lips moving, and she leaned forward in her chair and listened but heard nothing except the usual sounds: water in the pipes, a rumble along the walls, snoring from a man who had fallen asleep waiting for his spin cycle.

Maybe the woman was making no sound. This bothered Mabel. She wanted to practice her words but needed to hear them spoken. The people here, the ones who came at night, grew quieter, harder the later the hour. They clutched at their sacks of laundry and at their purses and pockets, trying to muffle the coins they carried, keeping their sounds small. Sometimes they came in together, and then they spoke, but their words were short and sharp and spilled into the washers along with their clothes and were swept clean away.

Lew had deep lines near his eyes. His eyebrows were sparse, like his hair, and after learning her name and glancing at her dress—a shapeless, green thing that had stepped out of the ground with her—and at her feet, which were bare and caked in dried mud, he gestured for her to follow him. He led her to the other side of the room, where there was a machine set in a small alcove. He pointed at some chairs.

“I’m Lew.” He dropped coins into a slot on the front of the machine. “This is my laundromat, here.”

Mabel tried sitting again, this time using her arms, too.

“You look like you come a long way. No shoes, either.” He pushed a red button. This red was happy, like a cardinal or her own fall leaves. “You have a place? Somewhere to go?”

It would take Mabel too many words to explain, to tell him about her roots and her earth, her new feet, so she stayed silent, glad to be sitting but feeling strange about it all the same. The machine *clang clang thumped* and then Lew bent down and retrieved a can. She’d seen cans like this before, in the park. The people brought them when they sat under her leaves. She sheltered them from the sun and listened to them speak and in return they gave her the names of things.

Lew popped the tab on the can and held it out to her. His hand was steady. “Maybe the sugar’ll help.”

She tried a sip. The sweet was thick on her tongue and the bubbles churned in her center.

He stood more on his right leg than on his left and picked at the hem of his striped shirt, not meeting Mabel’s eye.

“Hang on a minute, will you?”

He left her there holding the sweating can, and now that she was sitting she wasn't sure what came next. She pressed her heels into the ground, straightened her back, tilted her head up to the light, but this light was nothing like the sun. Lew returned holding a pair of shoes—sandals, he said, from the lost and found—and they were big on her feet but he told her they were better than no shoes. Once, maybe, they had been blue like the midday sky.

“Look,” he leaned against the machine and crossed his arms, “you in some kind of trouble? You need help?”

She looked at Lew's eyes, the soft brown of a fawn's neck, and turned her head to the right and to the left. This meant no. Lew said nothing. Maybe she had done *no* wrong.

“No,” she said, feeling the word scrape in her throat. “No,” and sipped from the can.

He watched her, and because she wasn't sure what other words she could give him, she watched him back. His cheeks swelled, and the tufts of hair around his head made him look like a fluffed up wren. He blew air out through his teeth.

“Okay. All right. You stay here if you'd like. I'll be in back,” he pointed at the door. “I'll keep the door open like that. You yell if you need something.”

He left her alone for the rest of the night, and so she sat and sipped from her can and tried to absorb the place.

She returned every night for the rest of the week, as soon as the sun set. This was when her roots shrank and became feet, and branches shrank and became arms, and she would put on her sandals and walk to the laundromat. The walking was easier after that first night, and she found a better path forward. After five days of this, Lew asked her if she might want a job cleaning up in

exchange for a little money. She knew about money. So, he showed her what to do, and in the early hours of the morning, when dawn was still far away, she swept the checkerboard floor and wiped gummy detergent from the metal and checked the lint filters and dusted powdered soap from the dispenser. He paid her in wrinkled bills which she kept rolled up in a laundry bag that she'd bought from a machine. When dawn arrived and she felt the buzzing start up her legs, she took her bag and walked back to the park and to her spot in the ground next to the other maples, who had all remained trees in the night.

The woman and her violets were preparing to leave. The clothes were clean and folded and the woman had keys in her hand and was moving toward the door. Mabel always wondered about this, the leaving, and where the people went, and what there was to see out there beyond her park and this place. Mabel had been a tree for a long time. She did not remember a life before that. She did remember the people who came and sat against her trunk, spread blankets under her canopy. They stayed a while, sometimes hours, and then they would pack up their baskets, roll their blankets, and walk away on their legs. Mabel would watch them until they were out of sight. She began to wish for walking, and for words. It started as a small hum somewhere in her roots, and grew each day, until every branch and leaf was brimming with it. Soon it became too much and she felt like she might split in half and that was the first night she stepped from the earth.

The woman was now in the parking lot beside her car, loading the basket through an open door. The two lamps on the front of the car made eyes, and the grill made a mouth, and the face stared at Mabel. The lights came on and Mabel had to look away. By the time she looked back

up, all she could see of the woman was her hair, glowing red and hazy. Mabel flung out a hand, wanting to shout and ask the woman and her flowers, *Where do you go? What do you see?* but the car was at the end of the lot, and then on the road, and Mabel knew her words were slow and wouldn't carry through the windows and into the night. Her legs began to buzz then, which meant it was time to go. Lew was in his back room doing the books. He rarely left the office, but always looked up long enough to wave. She waved back and hefted her laundry bag, making her way outside where the breeze was light. She stopped a minute and swayed. Her park was a dark mass in the opposite direction the woman had gone. Mabel stared down the road after the fading taillights, and thought she saw a few shapes that might be trees somewhere distant. She stared a long while, longer than she'd meant to, and by the time she started walking, the sky was a deep gray and the other maples were waving their branches at her as if to say *hurry, hurry*.

After a while, Lew told Mabel she should keep her laundry bag in his office while she worked. He also told her she ought to keep her money in the bank, but that was her business, not his. Lew often talked about banks, which is how Mabel learned words like deposit slip, checkbook, interest rate. Mabel didn't know why Lew wanted her to keep the money in a bank; her bag was big enough to hold all of the bills she had and more. She only ever used the bills to buy soda cans from the machine.

Sometimes Lew let her look through the large cardboard box marked LOST / FOUND and take things the people left behind. He always pointed out the sweaters to her. He told her the cold wasn't far off and that soon she'd need more than a dress and some sandals. She already had two sweaters in her bag, and kept her money wrapped in one that was green like milkweed

leaves. Once she had enough clothes, the right kind of clothes for the cold and the wet, maybe she would leave her park, find out what was beyond the laundromat, beyond the road.

Mabel walked into his office one night after sunset. He was behind his desk with the books again. The desk had a plastic top with metal legs and was always covered in papers and yellow legal pads. He kept a corner of it clear. This is where the calculator sat, and a white mug with a star in the middle, which held the pens, and a picture of a girl in a silver frame. Lew pointed a black pen at the LOST / FOUND box, which was on the floor next to a filing cabinet. “Nice sweater there that looks warm. Been here three weeks now. No one’s coming for it.”

“Thanks, Lew.” Her voice was smoother, now. She hooked the bag by the door and pulled out a bill for the soda machine. She bent to pick up the sweater. Lew never watched her examine the clothing. She was glad because she still had trouble with bending, though the walking and the sitting were much easier. She always felt, when bending at the waist, like she might topple to the ground. She turned the sweater over in her hands, feeling the material. It was the gray of a storm cloud, but it itched her palms. She looked at Lew and saw that he was staring at the picture on his desk. “My daughter,” he had told her once. That was all he would say. She bundled the sweater up and tucked it into her bag.

The man and the woman came in just as Mabel was about to leave. They stood near the entrance, looking around and speaking too quietly for Mabel to hear. They had no laundry with them, and there were no clothes in any of the machines. Mabel didn’t find this strange; sometimes people came in to sit for a while, like she had once done. The buzz in her legs that told her the sun was

on its way was warm and gentle, so she put away the broom and retrieved her bag from the hook. Lew waved a hand at her without looking up from his papers. She left his office and headed toward the exit. The man and the woman were circling the washers now. The man was like a young sweetgum tree: tall and thin with a grooved face. The woman was sharp, like a pine. Mabel was almost at the door when the man called to her.

“You got a drink machine?” He walked up to her, followed by the woman. The smell of them pushed Mabel back a step. It was the smell of roots that had been left too long in the water. The smell of rot. Mabel looked at the door and then back at the man.

“There,” she said, hardly feeling the word in her throat. She pointed at the alcove where the machine was. The woman laughed; the sounds were short and piercing.

The man looked at the alcove. “I knew you’d have one, I knew it.” Mabel started to move again but the man stepped in front of her with a hand up. “Now, would you believe that my lady and I,” he jerked a thumb at the woman, whose eyes were watery and yellow, “we’ve been walking up and down that road out there, looking everywhere for a nice cold drink. Haven’t we?” He turned to the woman, who nodded at Mabel and showed her teeth. “Yeah,” the man continued, his voice a nasal whine, “and we are about as thirsty as two people can be, but we’ve checked all our pockets and we don’t have any money with us. Can you believe that? Thirsty as can be and no money to buy a drink.”

The buzzing in Mabel’s legs was getting stronger, and she looked outside to see that the sky had gone from black to dark gray. The man smiled wider.

“You wouldn’t happen to have a dollar for the machine, would you? I bet a nice girl like you has a dollar for a can of soda.”

Mabel had a lot of bills tied up in the sweater in her bag, so she nodded.

“Just a dollar to help out a thirsty guy and his lady and then you can be on your way.”

The man’s teeth were stained and crooked.

She wanted to get back to her earth and to stop smelling the rot smell. She set the laundry bag on the floor and took out the sweater that was green like milkweed. She loosened the knotted arms so that she could see the bills. She handed the man a dollar. He glanced at the woman, and then they both looked down at the money sticking out of the sweater.

“Well,” the man said, “seems like you have enough money there to buy out the whole machine. How about you give us another dollar, that way we can each have a drink.” Mabel handed over another bill. The woman laughed again and the man was grinning and then he was reaching for the sweater and trying to pull it out of her hands.

“No,” Mabel said. “No!” She felt the words in her chest and they were loud in her ears. The man’s suddenness had surprised her. People didn’t move like that in this place.

The man yanked at the sweater and yelled, “Grab the bag!”

Mabel tried to hold on but the man was strong and she had no way to brace herself. He yanked again and they both stumbled. Mabel fell to the ground, striking her knees and palms on the cold tiles. The man did not fall. The woman had Mabel’s bag by the strap and ran out the door with it and into the parking lot.

The man stood over Mabel, breathing hard. His eyes were narrow and bright and his teeth ground against each other. In the struggle, he had ended up facing the parking lot, so he didn’t notice Lew limping fast toward them from the office. The man raised a booted foot as Mabel looked up at him from the ground.

“Hey!” snarled Lew, but the man’s boot was already on the move. It cracked into Mabel’s jaw. Pain bloomed through her teeth and up into her eye, and she gasped, falling back against the door.

The man whipped around just as Lew’s fist skidded across his cheek and nose. Blood splattered the tile. The man dropped the sweater and bent, cupping his hands around his face. Lew’s fist swung up into his middle and the man fell to his knees. Then Lew was on him, fists thudding and cracking as the man cried out and tried to curl away from the blows.

Mabel used the door handle to pull herself up and then pushed outside. The sun was a flush of gold on the dark horizon. Mabel’s heart throbbed in her chest, her throat, her ears, across the side of her face where the man had struck her with his boot. There was blood on her dress. She looked around but couldn’t see the woman or her bag. The sound of slow, dull thuds continued behind her.

Mabel took off in the direction of the park and her earth. She ran through the parking lot, across the empty asphalt road, and down the street. Her legs were weak and the buzzing in them was incessant. She fell a few times and skinned her knees, and finally kicked off her sandals to make the running easier. She didn’t look back until she reached the edge of the park and her feet were touching earth.

The laundromat was nothing more than a red glow surrounded by dark shapes. Mabel could not read the sign, but knew what the words said: LEW’S LAUNDRY. She was too far away to see Lew, or the man. She pictured the man on the floor, bloody and wheezing, and Lew above him, face mottled, veins pulsing in his neck, mouth thin. Arms that wouldn’t stop moving. Every part of Mabel hurt, now. Her feet were pushing hard against the earth, recognizing it,

trying to take root. Her legs ached from the running. There was a pounding in her temples, her teeth, her eye. The part of her that hurt the most, though, was the spot in the middle of her chest behind her ribs. It was like a hole had formed there, like a grub had gotten past her bark and was chewing her up. Mabel turned away from the laundromat. She began to walk toward the other maples and her place in the ground, swaying from side to side on unsteady legs. Blood dripped from her mouth. In the distance, a siren wailed.

## HENRY

Her boy was down there in the darkening yard with the other children who were collecting sticks. She watched from the deck while she bounced the baby on her knee. The children ran eagerly to the firepit to deposit their tiny hauls on the twig pile and were sent out again by one of the fathers. Some got lost along the way, distracted by the fallen acorns or games of fetch with the pups romping by the fence. Her boy, who had made no trips with no sticks, lingered near the bottom of the deck steps. He made a show of scanning the ground and scuffing the grass with his sneaker, but really, she knew, he was monitoring the dogs. She bounced the baby and nodded along with the other mothers and fathers while they discussed home-grown vegetables and baseball practices, but mostly she watched her boy watch the dogs and hoped to God he did not cry.

The dogs had been kept away during the meal, and when the children grew restless and retreated into the yard, she pulled her son aside under a string of plastic lights and scrutinized him. There was pizza grease on his pant leg, the collar of his shirt, and his face, but she had not expected to leave the party without some kind of mess following them home. This wasn't the worst she'd seen. She scrubbed the grease from his cheek while the baby fussed on her hip, and then she told him, calmly, that he should go down to the yard and help collect sticks for their little fire, because didn't he want to roast marshmallows? His eyes widened, and she explained, again, how very nice all the pups were, how they were excited to have so many new friends to play with, and how they weren't going to hurt him. She was aware of the other parents behind

her, whose fearless children had all already vacated the deck, and the baby was tugging at her hair, and her husband was working late again, and so she gave her son a push toward the stairs and told him it was time for him to be brave. He was almost nine now, and nine-year-olds shouldn't be scared of a few puppies and one old lab. The look on his face, then, as his eyes watered and the corners of his mouth twisted, had knotted her stomach.

At the beginning of the summer, he'd had a run-in with the neighbor's mutt. A shallow bite; nothing to worry about, the doctor had said. Ever since, he had quietly avoided the vicinity of the shared fence, and had even taken to arguing with her on the street when a dog on a leash approached and she wouldn't let him cross to the other side. It wasn't just the dogs, either. By some miracle, she'd gotten him on the ferris wheel at the county fair, but after that he had refused to get on any of the other rides, even when she pointed out the fun all of his schoolmates were having. He avoided any game with a ball. He was timid about running. And, when it was his turn to bring home the class hamster, she'd had to feed and water the thing because he wouldn't go near the cage. She had tried to explain this to her husband one night after the children were asleep.

"I'm worried about Henry. He's always been shy, but ever since that dog bit him he's been nervous, afraid."

"Afraid of what?" her husband asked, rolling his head back to look at her over the sofa.

"I don't know, the outside" she said, waving a hand around toward the back door.

"Activities, other kids, dogs, certainly."

Her husband sighed and turned back to his news program. "I don't know what you expect me to do about it."

She wanted him to look at her, to see her face and how serious she was. “Talk to him, spend time with him, something! Show him how to deal with that damned dog next door who bit him. A swift kick would even things out, I think.” He grunted and remained facing the television. She tried explaining a different way. “He doesn’t really have any friends. Did you know that the neighborhood kids organize a kickball game every Friday, and he never participates?”

“So what if he doesn’t like kickball?” He put a hand over the remote, which was next to him on the couch.

She stepped forward so that she was staring at the side of him instead of the back of his head. The tops of his ears were shiny and pink, and his hair was still damp from the shower. “He doesn’t like any group sport,” she said, “and then, there’s the bugs. Most boys his age see a bug and go wild. Joy Dalton told me that her son had a cockroach in a shoebox under his bed for a whole month before she found out. Not our son. He won’t even go—”

“Marla.” He turned and was frowning up at her.

She stopped, feeling hot in the face.

“Isn’t it better that he doesn’t like bugs?” He threw an arm over the back of the couch, as if to brace himself. “I don’t think you’d really want to have to pull cockroaches out from under his bed.”

She lifted one hand, fingers splayed and palm open, and as she spoke her hand moved sharply up and down. “He’s afraid of the bugs. Not uninterested, afraid. Have you ever seen him when there’s a moth in his room? He waits in the hall until I kill it. A *moth*. Of course you don’t know what that’s like because you’re hardly ever here. You don’t see what I see.”

His eyes narrowed and his mouth hardened. Deep lines appeared between his eyebrows. “If I’m not at the office, I don’t get the accounts, and if I don’t get the accounts, I don’t get the commissions.” He turned away from her and clicked the volume on the TV up one level. “So what if he doesn’t like moths. Or bugs. I don’t need to be around more to know that I don’t want an infestation in the house.”

“It’s not just about the bugs.” She tried to keep her voice reasonable, but each word felt like the point of a knife. “I don’t want him to be one of those kids who grows up with no friends. He already spends too much time alone. All of this, the dogs, the bugs, the games, it’s isolating him.”

“Look, Marla,” he said to the television, “it’s the end of the quarter at work. I’ll be doing ten, twelve hour days for the next two weeks to make sure all these contracts get finalized. Just leave him alone. Let him read in his room if that’s what he wants to do.”

She held her breath until her face smoothed out, recognizing the end of the argument, the dismissal, the inevitable power down of the conversation. “That party at the Enfield’s is coming up. Sarah’s going to do s’mores for the kids. All the parents are going to be there.”

Her husband sighed and settled deeper into the couch. As Marla walked away, she heard him mutter, “*Bugs.*”

Henry looked like Marla. He had been born with her cleft chin and wide owl-eyes. It had shocked her to look down at the small, flushed bundle of new baby and see the curve of her own face peeking out from the blankets. That first night at the hospital, both her son and her husband

had fallen asleep, and she had rested against the thin pillow, watching them, feeling raw and tender, knowing that her boy was going to have the best of everything.

Now, as she sat on the deck and watched her son, and bounced the baby, and listened to Sarah Enfield talk about her zucchini plants, all she really hoped for in that moment, as the sun slipped away and the shadows deepened around the yard, and it became obvious to her that her son would not follow the example of the other children, and that her husband would not make the party or even attempt to call, all she really hoped for was that they'd get on with the marshmallows already so she could get to bed.

Marla had been prepared to raise rambunctious children. She'd had daydreams about being the kind of mother who was always happily exasperated by her kids. She'd imagined wiping mud off of their bright, round faces or patching up scrapes on their knees, and they would be squirming while she did it because their game of tag wasn't over and they did *not* want to be *it*. Two would be best, one right after the other, so they each had someone to grow up with. Henry had come along, but the second baby had not, not for years, and by the time Marla was pregnant again—a surprise, the result of a rare, clumsy night of intimacy—Henry was almost eight.

One of the boys from Henry's class named Sam ran up to Henry and started to talk to him. Sam was small for his age, but constantly on the move. He reminded Marla of a pinball, and he always wanted to talk about sharks. Marla couldn't make out what the boys were saying to each other, but Henry had an arm wrapped around the corner post of the stair railing like he was worried that Sam's pinball energy would sweep him out into the sea of children and dogs. The baby's pudgy hand patted Marla rapidly on the arm and she squealed. Marla patted her round

baby belly in return and wished, not for the first time, that her two children were closer in age.

By the time her little girl, Alice, was Henry's age, Henry would be in high school. Marla watched Sam run off, leaving Henry alone, and saw at once his whole, lonely future, a lifetime of being left by the fence post.

Marla had no siblings. Her father had not liked having children underfoot, and her mother wasn't the type to push the issue. Her father had been strict and liked a quiet house. When Marla thought about her mother, the same image always appeared in her mind: she stood in the yellow kitchen staring through the small window over the sink, her right arm balanced upright on her left hand, fingers miming the act of holding a lit cigarette between them. The casual stance of a smoker. Marla's father had made her give up the cigarettes before Marla was born, but her body had never forgotten them. In one of those strange turns of fate, Marla's father was the one to succumb to lung cancer. Her mother lasted a few years longer before her heart gave out.

Some of the men were down by the fire pit now, building up a pointed structure with the twigs. They enlisted a few of the children to collect handfuls of dried leaves, which they then stuffed under the wood. Soon, there was a happy blaze, which brought the rest of the children running to pick out their roasting sticks. Some of the parents remained seated, as Marla did, what with the baby, while the others brought out plates of marshmallows, graham crackers, and unwrapped chocolate bars. The dogs were underfoot, waiting to snatch up any treats that the small, clumsy fingers of their tiny companions were likely to drop.

"Go on, Henry!" she called to her boy, who looked up at her from the bottom step, where he now sat. She motioned to the fire. This was her last attempt to make something of the night, to score one small victory before retreating down the road to her house where her husband would

not be. Henry's face was blank, difficult to read in this low light, but to her surprise he stood and stepped down onto the grass, wavering a bit, but then moving forward. Headed to join the other children, despite the dogs.

"Is that your boy?" A woman came up beside her and took a seat. "He's so patient. All the other ones can't wait to get in there."

Marla glanced at the woman before turning back to her son. "Yes, that's Henry." She flapped a hand toward the yard. "I think he's winding down. He was out running around earlier; you know how boys are."

The woman nodded, swirling her wine glass. She leaned back in the patio chair and stretched her legs. Her ease startled Marla. Marla had not felt leg stretching ease in a long time, and suddenly she was jealous. Of the lean, the stretch, the glass of wine. The woman took a sip and said, "I'm surprised more of the kids haven't quit for the night. I thought there'd be at least a few tantrums by now. Though, I think I always expect a tantrum or two from a group as large as this."

Alice gurgled and shrieked, as babies do, and waved her chubby arms, and the woman, whose name was Beverly, Marla learned, made silly faces and waggled her fingers, which the baby seemed to love. Marla then spotted one of the more rambunctious pups taking a lap around the yard. Her son noticed this, too. He had remained at the edge of the group while the parents worked through all of the s'mores. The offending pup spotted him, an outlier, and went barreling toward him, and Marla's breath hitched. Beverly did not seem to notice. Henry gasped. It was an ugly, squeaking sound that carried up to her seat on the deck, and when she heard it her throat went tight and heat spilled out into her ears. He was going to cry in front of all these people, in

front of this new at ease Beverly, over a *puppy*. The dog that bit him had been mangy, raised mean. It had black pins for eyes and coarse, matted fur. This soft, loping, floppy puppy looked nothing like that other dog, but it didn't seem to matter to Henry. Beverly continued to entertain the baby, oblivious. Henry ran back to the stairs and stumbled up them, right to Marla's chair. His nose dripped onto the deck. He looked at her with a frozen, desperate face, and, though he was trying not to cry, the tears came anyway.

She looked sharply at Beverly and fumbled for some napkins. "Oh, Henry, it's just a dog," she said, while blotting at his eyes and nose. "Just a dog, and I told you, they're friendly. Now, stop your crying." The baby was worked up, startled by the suddenness of his arrival, and whimpering. "Take this and wipe your face." She didn't know how to fix this fear in him. This sudden, arresting fear that forced him to run to her for comfort.

"It's all right, Henry." Beverly leaned forward, the arm holding the wine glass resting on her knee. "I wasn't so fond of dogs myself at your age." Then, to Marla: "Would a s'more help? He can eat it up here, away from the fuss."

Marla faltered. "He really should go down there himself, I think." She patted the baby, trying to prevent a fit.

"Oh, it's no trouble." Beverly stood. "Sarah's over there doing the plates, and I'll bet she has some already made up."

Beverly left and Henry moved into her vacated seat, still sniffing. Now that he was away from the dog, he seemed to be calming down. Marla had known the dogs would be a problem, but she assumed that the old lab was the one to watch out for. The old dog was as docile as a stuffed toy, but she was big. Marla had thought Henry would've handled the pups better. She

looked over at him; the tears were drying, and he was swinging his feet and looking down. It would just take time with him. Time, and persistence on her part. This didn't even count as a real cry. There had hardly been any tears and, look, he was fine now.

Beverly returned and handed the plate to Henry. Marla felt compelled to explain. "It's just that he was bitten by the neighbor's dog," she said, as Beverly pulled up another chair. "We've talked about how these dogs are nice, and so there's no reason to be frightened of them. Isn't that right, Henry?"

Henry nodded at his s'more, his hands and face already sticky with marshmallow.

"That must've been scary for you, Henry." Beverly nodded along with him.

"It's just that he was bitten pretty recently," Marla said, searching Beverly's face. "The dog that did it is vicious. Gave him a really good bite on his leg. I think the memory of it is still fresh in his mind, that's all."

"Well, I hope you called to report that dog. There are too many kids around here for dogs like that to be out." Beverly squirmed in her chair. "I can't imagine being a parent. A bird feeder in front of my house is about all I can handle right now."

Marla laughed to be polite and looked out into the yard. Beverly engaged Henry in some talk about his schoolwork. The baby had calmed and was dozing across Marla's shoulder. Beverly predicted the sugar would set most of the kids off again, and soon they were running around with the pups. The old lab stood off to the side with some of the parents, panting and wagging her tail in slow arcs. Tired, Marla thought, just like her.

"Mama?"

Henry was staring up at her, his face half covered in chocolate. His eyes were dark and worried. What if she had done this to him, somehow? What if she had given him fear when all she'd meant to do was give him love? What if he suspected, as she did, that his father was on the way out? She looked down into her own eyes and she recognized the loneliness in them. She took his plate and turned away.

“Well I don't think a napkin is going to take care of that. Why don't you go inside and wash up. You know where the sink is?” He slid off his chair and went to do as she asked.

The children and their parents were coming back up onto the deck. Most of the kids were covered in melted sweets, and everyone smelled slightly of smoke. It was a good smell. Marla cuddled the baby and relaxed a bit. She thought about Henry walking toward the fire, before the puppy interfered. He was improving, she had to remember that. Maybe she would call up Sam's mother and have him over for a play date.

A hideous sound interrupted her thoughts. A sharp, lonely wail rose from behind her and burrowed into her gut. It spiraled up into her chest and sucked all the air from her lungs. She did not need to turn around to know it was her boy.

The baby was awake and crying, and Beverly twisted around in her chair. Marla stood, shushing the baby, and turned to look. Henry was backed up against the house, and the old lab was right in front of him, nose against his calf, going after that pizza grease. *Stupid*, Marla thought. *Stupid, stupid*. She hadn't remembered the grease, hadn't thought the dogs might smell it on him. She headed for him. Henry shook as if the dog were a live wire. Tears flooded his cheeks and spilled down onto his shirt. He looked at Marla, the pain and fear clear on his face, and looked away. Marla stepped back, clutching Alice to her. She heard Beverly from far away:

“Oh, she won’t hurt you, Henry.” The old lab moved on, responding to a whistle from Sarah, who was on the far side of the deck and patting her leg to encourage the dog while conversing with one of the other mothers. The old lab moved on, but still her boy did not run to her. He always ran to her. Instead, he had looked at her and looked away. There was a curve in his shoulders and neck she had not noticed before. He stood there, bent. She opened her mouth to speak to him, but did not know what to say. Henry did not look at her again, and, once the trembling in his shoulders had subsided, he turned and walked quietly back into the house.