

“But From My Lie This Did Come True”: The Fall of Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter*

&

Hook Tender

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Thesis submitted as partial fulfillment of the PhD in Creative and Critical Writing

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Abstract

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My thesis consists of two interrelated projects. The first analyzes legal and aesthetic testimony in Atom Egoyan’s film *The Sweet Hereafter*. “But From My Lie This Did Come True” is an extended meditation on falling: literal accident, communal loss, ethical lapse, and imagistic and linguistic vertigo. Falling is this film’s instigating event, but falling is also a figure for trauma, and its capacity to make reference itself fall. By definition, a trauma exceeds our ability to contain and communicate what we have witnessed or survived. How then can it be possible to testify to a traumatic event and its effects? In dialogue with Paul de Man, Jean Luc Nancy, Sigmund Freud, and Cathy Caruth, I argue that *The Sweet Hereafter* reveals how one fall can powerfully reference another.

My aim is not simply to apply theory to a film, but also to explore how the film reconfigures the theory. Just as Egoyan’s work adapts a novel to the cinema, my project adapts film to the essay form.

The second part of my thesis excerpts *Hook Tender*, a novel inspired by archival research and oral history, including travels to BC logging camps and Canada’s Arctic. *Hook Tender* explores falling through the actual labour and visceral experience of felling trees. Set in an immigrant logging camp on Canada’s West Coast, the narrative also dramatizes falling in the ethical and psychological dimensions addressed in my essay. An accidental fall causes Eva to lose a child through still birth, and this loss instigates an emotional crisis and moral lapse as she begins an adulterous involvement with Charlie, an Inuit logger who communicates injustices survived by Indigenous communities.

So both sections of my thesis offer a sustained reflection on falling: its broken narratives, questionable bearing of testimony, and the incalculable power of its emotional charge.

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For my father, who told me stories.
And for my mother, who listened to mine.

Acknowledgements

An *Inukshuk* is a statue of unfinished stones that the Inuit use as place markers. In their language, the name means “the likeness of a human,” and the figures appear human-like, with arms stretching out to indicate a path to follow, or a migration route, or a spot where fish or animals can be found. Imagine the relief of encountering such a haunting figure while tracking across the Arctic landscape: you are cold, hungry, perhaps disoriented in the vast white terrain. And there arises this presence, familiar yet strange, marking the border between the human and the wild. Its unspoken message: someone was here; you are on the right path.

On rare occasions there will be a cluster of such statues—a stone celebration marking a place of great power, even spiritual significance. The people whose stories inspired my work, and the people who listened as I wrote it, have been for me a community of *Inuksuit*. Through challenging seasons they helped me cross what felt like an internal Arctic, pointing to pathways, sustenance and even beauty in a landscape that had seemed only inhospitable and harsh. When I lost hope with this project, what drew me back to it was a rising sense of responsibility not just to my fictional characters but to all those who trusted me with their stories. And I felt indebted to those who helped me believe that something I imagined could come to exist—that I might lift what felt lifeless and so leave a singular form on the horizon for others to find.

While *Hook Tender* is fictional, its pages are informed by numerous interviews I conducted with retired loggers in Powell River, Squamish, and Vancouver, British Columbia. I also met with Inuvialuit elders and other storytellers in Inuvik and Tuktoyaktuk, in Canada’s

Northwest Territories. I was looking to learn of the sensuous texture of daily life in logging camps and above the tree line in a Northern climate. The lessons I internalized—about loss, resilience, and interdependent survival—were unexpected and profound, exceeding what words alone can grasp.

These interviews continue to this day, and to list the names will take pages: I will publish a complete account when the book appears. I feel similarly inadequate that I am not thanking individually all those teachers, mentors, colleagues, friends, family, and loved ones whose presence marks these pages. This failure gestures to the richness and diversity of my supports. Put simply, these people make my writing possible. For now, for the purposes of this particular document, I will thank by name only those who played a supervisory role in my PhD program at the University of East Anglia.

My time at the UEA began and ended with a change-making encounter with the writer Andrew Cowan. He was my mentor when I first arrived as the Charles Pick Fellow, and I'll always remember his handwriting on my initial drafts—and his later comment that he “liked the bear.” Andrew's wry wit and friendly welcome made the university a warmer place. So I was delighted when my experience within the PhD program concluded under his supervision. His stylistic verve, creative vision, and emotional insight were evident in his abundant comments and suggestions: I've never worked with a more caring and careful editor. Under his astute direction, my novel found its shape.

I would not have stayed at UEA to complete the PhD had it not been for the invitation of Lyndsey Stonebridge. I remember being thrilled that something in my writing intrigued Lyndsey and I was honoured to work under her supervision. She had faith in my prose when I sometimes did not. Our conversations were pivotal to my psychoanalytic thinking on Atom

Egoan, as was my teaching of the course she developed on trauma and modern literature. Her critical acuity and cultural reflections helped me to see my creative work anew. Lyndsey also did a marvelous job captaining a “motley crew” (our affectionate term) of co-readers, managing to unite us together for ricocheting four-way dialogues. These encounters were a highlight of my studies. My secondary readers included George Szirtes, who brought a poet’s care to every line of my prose—it was captivating to witness his attention to sound and image. Ross Wilson brought his own poetic sensibility and asked beautiful questions. I loved the course I took with him in which we explored how literature could somehow come alive. Jon Cook read with his customary rigor and clarity. I can only hope the final work speaks to the issues he and the others so eloquently raised.

Sometimes a manuscript flounders until you find just the right reader—that was the case with my critical essay: the voice and argument crystallized when I knew Denise Riley would be receiving the draft. For an emerging writer obsessed with challenging the boundary between the creative and critical, I can think of no more exciting thinker to have as an interlocutor. With her unusual sensitivity and brilliance, Denise encouraged me to translate theoretical ideas into my own words and to risk disagreeing with canonical concepts. Her thoughtful responses invigorated my imagination. Her daring prose reminds me that the essay is itself a literary form.

Finally, thank you to my examiners, Stephen Benson and Richard Kerridge. I was moved to have my work read with such challenging yet generous attention. Stephen opened an intense dialogue about the border between literature and philosophy. And Richard, a fellow explorer of the outdoors, vibrantly situated my work within a tradition of nature writing. In my novel there’s a salamander slipping into a creek—that one’s for you.

Note on Style

Within my creative work, I've used italics to indicate when I'm referencing a word as a word, a letter as a letter, as this seemed the more elegant choice. But with the critical work I've used a single set of quotations in order to keep the style of the text consistent with the theorists whose work I quote.

Given that both Egoyan's film and my novel are set in Canada, I've chosen to honour this former colony's idiosyncratic spelling and punctuation. Please note, for example, the residual British *labour*, even occasional *humour*, and, in contrast, the North American placing of periods and commas *within* quotation marks: "Only in Canada, eh? Pity."

Part One

Linking the Critical to the Creative: A Paradoxical Response

My foot slips. My life is still a poet's existence.

--Søren Kierkegaard, *Either/Or*

The ice grew to a patch the size of a body at the bottom of the stairs, not white but grey, scattered dull with old snow but still slick enough to catch my stride and pull me to earth. Muscle seized around the crack in the bone and I writhed, falling through time back to the first occasion I broke my leg, when I was ten years old and speeding down a hill on the handlebars of a bicycle and I spiraled through the air and crashed in a tumble and felt *this*, the sudden shattering of the hardest part of me.

One minute previous I had been an adult preparing for an academic job interview, busily ticking chores off my to-do list on a day full of preparations for a future over which I thought I had some control. Now I splayed horizontal. Twisting, screaming, although the sound didn't seem to be emerging from my mouth but from the bone itself that I held in my hands as if my grip alone could silence the pain.

I performed my job talk on crutches, one day after the accident. I did not wear a cast, as the hospital had initially failed to identify the break, and I was not taking the prescribed pain medication because I wanted to be alert. The agony pulsing from the

cracked bone was so intense that it seemed to sharpen my thinking, making each answer a bit too heightened, my words gaining a strange visceral quality, voice trembling low and then arching high as I tried to readjust my leg. A question was posed about the fact that I write both creative and critical work—this crossover seemed, from the tone of the query, to be some kind of contradiction or paradox, or at least an exception to a generic rule. But what of Foucault’s dramatic narrative opening to *Discipline and Punish*, I asked, or Lacan’s metaphors, Derrida’s postcards, Hegel’s flowers and skulls? And as for the creative, doesn’t a story harbour theoretical assumptions—about race and sex, for example, or good and bad, cause and effect? The professors eyed each other uncomfortably. I sensed that in this setting I was to keep the creative and the critical more tidily apart. But my thinking had begun to slide as quickly as my feet on that ice.

Not until I reached my hotel room did I open the bottle of pain medication. I became increasingly agitated. I checked the label, which said the drugs were sedating, and I took a couple more pills. My body grew warm, then hot, as if I were next to a furnace. Skin itchy, energy bristling along my nerves, I twitched in bed until dawn when I emerged for the second day of the interview. As I reached the library tour, a new symptom developed. I had the urge to laugh. There was nothing particularly funny, not the accident, not the interview, not the man who was giving me a tour of the library. But suddenly a laugh released itself from my mouth. Was that sound mine? I was looking at the librarian. I laughed again. I could not stop laughing. I became afraid that he would think I was laughing at him. So I turned to a shelf of

books instead, facing their burgundy and navy bindings, and—assured that I would not hurt the books' feelings—I continued to laugh.

Later I would consider how laughing is a near anagram of falling, and how there is something of the same surrender to the corporeal event. Later this laughter would itself become funny, of course, as I told the story to friends and colleagues. Perhaps the falling and the laughing, their mirroring of each other, expressed some ambivalence I had about an academic career?

But in the moment, the laughter did not correspond to any particular joke or form of amusement. It was simply a sound that my body needed to express. *Ha ha ha ha*. A strange sound, an expulsion of air universally recognizable and yet having no clear referential status. Freud identifies the uncanny in those moments when we witness something that slips between the human and the nonhuman—a slumped puppet in a corner, for example, a life-like manikin. My laughter was both familiar and strange, this animalistic interruption, machine-like in its repeating inanity, a guttural throaty surprise of noise that corresponded to no sentence or sense. The effect was itself a kind of falling. It reminded me of the moments my sister and I would repeat a word—*fridge* was a favourite—until it would become emptied of meaning. Something about its consonantal richness, the *d* next to the *g*, the way the word vibrated like the thing it named and yet could begin to mean nothing, just the pressure against our lips. I've encountered this effect too when I heard jarring news. Over the telephone a plaintive voice repeats the word no one wants to hear. Echo and static on the line.

Word becomes sound. I say it, and stumble. Again that *d*, what a dull dunce letter, tongue on the roof of my dumb mouth, how could that sensation possibly begin this intensity of loss? Word becomes thing. Thick on the tongue. Syllable echoing, slipping. Falling in my chest, on the floor.

It is not proper to laugh in an academic interview. The librarian and his staff ushered me to a small room inside the library where I continued to bubble forth. Except the laughing was getting serious. My throat had begun to close. I was losing the ability to breathe. And still I was laughing. The paramedics arrived with their oxygen masks and their blood pressure cuffs and I was rushed way from an academic job interview—on a stretcher—and into an ambulance—and to the hospital—for the symptom of excessive laughter.

The emergency doctor checked the name of the pills. He did his research. You seem, he said, to be experiencing a paradoxical response.

Ha ha ha ha.

Pumped full of drugs to counter the ones I had so diligently swallowed, I returned to my own campus, obviously jobless. What I didn't realize at the time was that another offer was in the making—and so, my bone on the mend, I found myself in an unexpected future accepting a position as a visiting writer at the University of East Anglia, where one year to the day of the accident, I would be asked to pursue a PhD.

This chain reaction, from falling to laughing, would lead my life in an entirely new direction.

We fall asleep, fall in error, fall in love, fall pregnant, fall apart, fall insane; opportunity falls into our hands; we fall into bad habits, fall prey to an experience, fall into hysterics, fall on the battlefield. We use this verb to describe a moment of surrender when our upright will is at least temporarily suspended. Martin Heidegger asserts we exist in a state of *thrownness*—a word which always made me pause. Who is doing the throwing? By this term he means the ways we are born into constitutive conditions of human existence, the given language and culture and historical circumstances into which we emerge. What we have not chosen makes possible our being. To fall reminds us of this condition and yet also implies some rupture within it. It invokes both the limits of our powers and, potentially, those of the circumstances that have until that point surrounded us. We can be walking within one understood world and suddenly slip.

And yet to fall also denotes an ethical lapse, a fall from grace—through which, like Milton’s angels, we drop from one station to the next. The weight of this particular meaning requires that we have some control over our moral uprightness: we fall because we succumb not to the whims of gravity but to our own devious desires. With its coincident and yet contrary denotations, this paradoxical verb, *to fall*, both invokes our free will and its frightening thresholds.

When I was still hobbling around on crutches, and before I would encounter my future decision to pursue a PhD, I watched Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter* with my classroom of creative writing students. The film pivots around a terrible fall—a school bus full of children careers off the edge of a mountain and into a ravine where the vehicle cracks through the ice. We witness this devastating accident, but almost more menacingly we see again and again the moments that lead toward it, as if time had begun to stutter. Our own visceral sensation of falling emerges through vertiginous effects of the camera angles and the discordant cuts in the film's temporality that create in the viewer a shimmering sensation, our watching minds re-experiencing and re-tracking the tragic events. With the characters, we fall through time.

The students' assignment was to consider these cinematic elements and how they might be replicated in a work of literature. Shifts in point-of-view, ruptures in the order of the story, repetition of words or sound patterns: how might we as writers create corresponding vertiginous effects?

But our discussion was wide-ranging, from the literal fall of the accident to the ethical fall of the community as the parents pursue a dubious class action law suit to compensate for the loss of their children. Throughout our analysis, one scene produced the most curiosity and confusion—that of a seduction between a daughter and her father. The girl and father walk together into a candlelit barn, seemingly on the evening before the accident, and we witness a different kind of fall. The girl leans

down to kiss the father and they join in a passionate embrace. My students had trouble comprehending the nature of this dynamic. Was it a consensual act? Was this seduction really happening or was it a fantasy? My students struggled even to locate the scene in time, although there were clues: the girl is mobile and she will later survive the accident as a paraplegic. As I watched the film, my own disability temporary, I felt a wincing identification with the girl's new physical fragility. What is striking, however, is that the experience of surviving one fall seems to enable this character to grasp the significance of her father's assault, as if a singular trauma could somehow enable the representation of another.

I quickly fell to writing. In the way that can happen when a project seems to drop into your lap, this film's obsessions mirrored and made more pronounced those I explore in my own creative work. My novel-in-progress, *Hook Tender*, set in a logging camp on British Columbia's West Coast, begins when one man falls to earth as he is dragged to death by cables that pull him down the mountain. Scenes of falling recur throughout the text: we first meet Eva, the main female character, on the day that she saunters confidently through the camp, eight months pregnant, and she slips and falls, which causes the loss of her unborn child. This arbitrary accident, a moment of chance, leads Eva to make an ethical slip when she betrays her husband by turning to a new lover who offers her solace. So Eva falls, through no fault of her own, and then she falls, like her prelapsarian namesake, through her own rebellious will. And these actions, in turn, will lead, through a series of interconnected lapses, to this man's death, the accident that begins the tale. I'm interested here in both the choices we

make and those moments when our choices are suspended. And how the ethical lapses of an individual or a community can sometimes occur not through a singular evil decision but through a series of incremental and seemingly innocent events.

I'm also intrigued with how one can invoke, on the page, the same kind of visceral effect of falling that Egoyan creates in his film. One way to produce this sensation is simply to involve the reader fully in the sensuous reality of a risky climb—as I do in the section of the novel, “Surge,” that I’ve published separately and have included as an appendix. In this work, a group of boys ascend a three-hundred foot tower and one boy almost falls to his death. I want the reader to feel the vertigo that the characters experience. Initially, I tried to create this sense of drama by using explicitly emotive and dramatic words, but found that I could accomplish this effect more readily by stripping the prose to the bare physical details of what the boys were accomplishing: no words for their internal apprehension but just the sensory data they would encounter as they climbed.

Throughout my novel, my characters rise to deadly heights—a high rigger sits atop a two-hundred foot tree—and the loggers’ daily activity is to fell trees that crash to earth in a monstrous crescendo. But falling also echoes within the language of the prose, its sound. Two of my characters’ names—and this coincidence was unconscious—invoke the actual word: *Olaf* is almost an anagram of *fall*, and *Ralph* also echoes its consonants, as does the word *laugh*, fall’s mirror. When Ralph clings to the tower, his laughter is eerie and birdlike, dangerous. I’m intrigued here to represent

those times when language uncannily falls away from us: Jean-Luc Nancy considers sonority “as time and meaning,” yet sound can also disrupt our experience of both, through repetition or pitch, through the announcement of a traumatic loss, through an unexpected encounter with the unknown. In one of my novel’s opening scenes, a strange noise erupts in the woods, animalistic and yet mechanical, familiar yet strange. No one can identify it. This event will later be invoked in the looming oddness of the noise that accompanies the dance of the Northern Lights—a vibration like a voice, but also otherworldly, our own and not our own. And it will be echoed again in the haunting noise of ice breaking in the Arctic spring—a painful sound, the first crack of the new, that inhuman white expanse calling us to it.

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Part Two

“But From My Lie This Did Come True”:

The Fall of Atom Egoyan’s *The Sweet Hereafter*

No, my dear
look here, at me. Here
is the face,
the warm, living body,
while there—
just a mirage
begat by yearnings.

David Grossman, *Falling out of Time*

In kitchens hundreds and thousands of miles away, she'll watch the soft skin form on the back of a wooden spoon and her memory will twitch, but it will not quite reveal to her this moment when she seems to be looking into an open secret, something not startling until you think of trying to tell it.

Alice Munro, *Open Secrets*

The camera slides along lines of wood: we are watching what appears to be the outside wall of a house, dappled with shadow cast by leaves. The credits roll; we hear the chords of a harp and a flute, early music, haunting notes—and the camera continues to move, the screen full of wood and shadow and light. Then we come across the image of a woman and a man, asleep with their young daughter on a mattress. With this juxtaposition, we realize—if subliminally—that the camera lens has been facing downward. The mattress is on a wooden floor. The scene is intimate, idyllic; the three are naked, covered only by a sheet, the child rustling close-eyed, curling toward her mother while the father lies on his belly surrendered to sleep. But our own position seems to hover unclaimed for a moment as we reorient our vision from possible to actual, vertical to horizontal, exterior to interior—from the initial uncertain referent of the lines of wood to the ground on which this family finds its rest. So as viewers we experience a kinesthetic shift, a kind of falling. And just as we are compelled to reorient our vision to understand the layout of this scene, we will later come to understand that this seemingly bucolic vision is instead the site of a crisis. Wait—we will be forced to wait in order to find out this family's context: in this film the telling is fragmented, the juxtapositions startling, time shattered and reshuffled like the colourful glass and mirror shards inside a kaleidoscope. We come to know what is *here only after* it is gone. We hear a troubling irony only after we listen to its echo. Repeatedly we realize that what we are viewing has already been lost. Even this displayed unity of mother and father and child has fallen terribly apart. So starts—or restarts—Atom Egoyan's *The Sweet Hereafter*, a multilayered meditation on the

experience of falling: a literal accident, a community's ethical lapse, a father's deceit, a child's loss of innocence, a lie that performs a horrible and ironic truth. An aesthetic testimony to the possibility of referencing trauma, the film achieves its troubling thematic effects through a corresponding imagistic and linguistic vertigo.

*

Jean Luc Nancy's thinking in *The Inoperative Community*, which itself develops through fragments and repetitions, forms a critical lens for the traumatic testimony in *The Sweet Hereafter*, this film that reveals a fractured community encountering almost unimaginable loss. The parents in a mountain town must grieve the death of their children in a bus accident, only one child surviving and she permanently disabled. Once this collective trauma takes place—if trauma can be said to take a place—the community cannot return to what it once might have been. A series of class-action law suits will mark how low the community has fallen. We will witness the economically exploitive and legally dubious efforts that the members pursue in order to regain a sense of impossible wholeness. We will witness too a singular voice that manages to interrupt these efforts through a startling testimony that communicates an enabling dislocation.

Nancy aims to critique an operative movement within community wherein our worth develops only through what we produce or what economic value we contribute: “Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible . . .” (31). The ‘inoperative’ in his title might be compared to ‘nonexploitive’ or even ‘unworking,’ a community in which our value as members would arise from something other than economic production and financial exchange. Following Maurice Blanchot, Nancy argues that community arises not through exploitation but precisely as it encounters “interruption, fragmentation, suspension” (31). In Egoyan’s film, the shock of profound loss and consequent fragmentation are circumstances that compel a desperate community to pursue a questionable resolution. The issue at stake is not the value of labour, per se, but the value of disability and death. A lawyer convinces grieving parents to sue for the loss of their children, as if the ultimate human threshold could be traded for economic gain. Through this law suit he aims to unite the parents around a new vision—an “ongoing relationship to time”—and so to transform their orientation to grief. Loss can ostensibly become something other than loss. Loss must be made to work. The children who have perished become entities leveraged for financial compensation. The surviving girl’s disability becomes fodder for her father’s drive for cash. And so it appears the tragic interruption of the accident will be transformed into a suspicious redemptive wholeness. The film examines the devastating conditions that make such a collective response so seductive—and yet it also begins, frame by

disorienting frame, to envision a different possibility of community: individuals precariously poised together to face such pain.

When Nancy critiques exploitive maneuvers that situate our human value within systems of economic exchange, he does not suggest in turn that value should therefore be considered intrinsic to the individual or the community as a whole. Indeed he aims to challenge a belief in 'immanence' —a term with a religious heritage that in his use comes to mean the self-present and unified identity that somehow should exist within a community and its members, and that we may anxiously realize we lack. Nancy's writing compels us to consider the dangers in the elevation of such ostensive completion. He argues that this unified and harmonious community has never existed—not in our idealized vision of it—and that we must learn to be suspicious of the economic and political exploitations lurking behind the call to its return. The community he offers us, in contrast, is a contingent entity, not a unified whole, with no member complete unto him or herself. When Nancy describes the members of a community leaning on and sharing with each other, he may be accused of harbouring his own nostalgia, yet when he uses a familiar term such as 'lean,' or 'share,' or even 'communication,' his usage is catachrestic: he places the given word in a context to invoke a meaning for which no word is yet available. His vocabulary might appear initially recognizable—and yet in his hands the words become something other: when he tell us that "in a certain sense community acknowledges and inscribes—this is its peculiar gesture—the impossibility of community," his paradoxical double use of the word 'community,' distinguished here only by its spacing from itself, requires that we

see a difference between identical terms (15). Community in the first sense is not a totalitarian whole but a complex sharing within and across differences. Such an interdependent yet internally disparate grouping confronts loss, disability, death—that radical encounter between one singularity and another—and hence the absence of any continued idyllic harmony. This sense of community exists in opposition to the second sense implied in the sentence—community-as-fusion—and in fact comes to exist through this ostensive unity’s very dissolution. He speaks of groundlessness, and this leaning or inclining might be imagined as almost but not quite a kind of falling, a radical dependence on the other that is not unity but rather a constitutive interweaving of connections: “It is a groundless ‘ground,’ less in the sense that it opens up the gaping chasm of an abyss than that it is made up only of the network, the interweaving, and the sharing of singularities: *Ungrund* rather than *Abgrund*, but no less vertiginous” (27).

The opening of Egoyan’s film offers us a visual representation of such groundlessness: the wooden floor underneath the couple becomes what it is, within the moving screen, only as we see the unknown figures juxtaposed with it. Mother next to child next to father. The gestalt is itself a kind of leaning. We identify the existence of one thing through its relation to another. What appears to be outside—the external wall of a house—is instead inside, beside the tripartite human composition. Nancy speaks of singularities ‘compearing,’ or of their ‘compearance’—the English neologism for his ‘*la comparution*.’ His original wording is striking as it combines several senses at once. In French ‘*un comparant*’ is one who testifies in

court—who speaks in person before a judge. This particular meaning will resonate throughout Egoyan’s film as members of the community prepare to become ‘*les comparants*,’ giving testimony in a deposition hearing that will fundamentally alter their existence with each other. In Nancy’s use ‘*une comparution*’ suggests ‘appearing with,’ a kind of presentation together, implying that revelation of a self happens not on an individual basis but as part of a composite. ‘Compearing,’ also echoes ‘comparing,’ how one singularity is distinguished from the other: Nancy suggests that the relational differences between singularities are what give us our very sense. Our interiority, our ostensive essence as individuals, is radically dependent on what is outside ourselves, our constitutive relation with others: “‘Together’ (and the possibility of saying ‘we’) takes place where the inside in so far as an inside, becomes an outside, that is, where without building any common ‘inside,’ it is given as an external interiority. ‘Together’ means not having one’s own essence” (159-60 *Being Singular Plural*). Just as the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure illustrates that language functions through a relationship of differences—‘A’ is itself not because of its intrinsic nature but because of its spacing from ‘B’—Nancy effects a similar radical movement within and against our concept of community. Meaning in a community—and the meaning of community—depends on the ‘and’ connecting one singularity to the next. We are not ourselves except as we are spaced from—and hence share our being with—each other.

The Sweet Hereafter establishes its logic through juxtapositions—between members of the community and between disjunctive moments in time—that unground our viewing as they make a new understanding of community possible. This is

storytelling through compearance. Nancy asserts that “compearance is of a more originary order than that of the bond. It does not set itself up, it does not establish itself, it does not merge among already given subjects (objects). It consists in the appearance of the *between* as such: you *and* I (between us)—a formula in which the *and* does not imply juxtaposition, but exposition.” (29) The development from one term to the next is subtle but important: whereas ‘juxtaposition’ would imply the setting of one identity alongside another; ‘exposition’ is rather the constitutive relationship between individuals that makes their very appearance possible. Here ‘exposition’—a nominalization from the verb ‘to expose’—can be opened in several ways. First, the compearance of singularities is a constitutive *exposure*—to each other, to our radical dependence on each other and to the possibility of the other’s death, and hence to an exteriority that makes the singularities always something less than a complete entity to themselves. But the noun ‘exposition’ also invokes the simple expository form—the analytic movement of an essay or even that section of a story that establishes the dramatic backdrop of events.

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A stranger drives into town. The reason for his arrival—the tragic bus accident that kills almost all of the children in the mountain community—will initially be suspended. We will see the bus—and later it too will be suspended, hanging like a

defeated metal monster above the oil-spotted ground of a garage. The accident itself will not take place in *The Sweet Hereafter* until after we meet those members who are so devastated by it. The accident is not a thing on its own but rather a crisis revealed through a community's fractured grief—the falling bus a kind of ground as unground, what now unifies this town as it tears its members apart. If the initial stages of grief include shock, disbelief, disorientation, fragmentation, a feeling of meaninglessness, what this stranger will be able to share with the mourners is instead his sense of certitude. For him, nothing is contingent or beyond the working of human hands. “There is no such thing as an accident,” he will soon assert to a grieving mother, and he promises to find the cause of this tragedy even if it's as small as a loose bolt. He works as a litigation lawyer and his role is to find a cause and effect, a villain and a victim, a beginning and hence an end. He evaluates each member of the community in relation to his or her potential usefulness in his legal battle, fitting disparate lives into a unified tale, exploiting death and grief for his own rewards.

But before we come to see how this man—*Mitchell Stephens Esquire* say his business cards, without irony—will determine to use this community, we learn that he has already faced loss within his own family. We encounter this stranger before he arrives, in a transitional space between his story and the town's. The haunting medieval music that plays over the opening scene will merge into his scene: as will repeatedly occur in this film, the auditory track creates a link between disparate images. In this case, the music emerges from a car radio as the vehicle moves through a carwash, the spray of water and the rub of brushes contributing their own rhythmic

beat. Atom Egoyan in his directorial commentary describes the car wash as womb-like, an experience of containment and passivity within liquid wherein your needs are met without effort. But this choice is equally compelling as a simulacrum of the accident: in a story about children trapped within a bus that falls from a highway into frozen water, we first meet this lawyer within his vehicle that is itself within a watery hold.

A phone rings—in this film, his cell phone will continue to ring, the voice of his daughter constantly interrupting his attempts to drive a line from cause to effect. The operator asks him if he will accept the charges. “Yes,” Mitchell says, “I’ll accept the charges”—these are the first words spoken by a character in this film. At the literal level, he is speaking of course about the cost of a long-distance call, but in this script the lines are often haunted with a double or ironic sense. To accept a charge is also to admit responsibility, to accept one’s guilt, and the simple sentence resonates throughout a film that explores where guilt can and should be admitted and when it cannot be traced. The daughter is a drug addict—the father’s voice and face is distraught as he expresses uncertainty about what state she is in. “I need to know,” he says, “who I am speaking to.” His daughter is outside this community, but haunting its tale. Her circumstance of addiction is an extreme kind of leaning—“do you think I’m stoned,” she assails him, “that I’ve got a needle up my arm?”—and through her taunt we are reminded of the kind of human dependence with which communities often don’t want to reckon. Yet if her fix is drugs, his fix seems to be the telephone: Mitchell tenses at the ring but picks up the call, always accepting the charge, desperately attached to his paternal obligation even if he can never bring himself to accept any

responsibility for her pain. His dogged determination to make a litigation case out of the town's suffering seems to serve as a surrogate solution for his own feelings of grief. "We've all lost our children," he testifies to Billy Ansel, a mourning father: repeatedly his telephone conversations with his daughter are situated alongside his entreaties to the parents, and he explicitly raises her addiction as evidence that he too understands what it means to lose a child. While this entreaty can be read as nothing but a cynical attempt to establish companionship with those he aims to manipulate—"why are you telling me this," Billy angrily responds when Mitchell presents his daughter's plight—it also suggests that he indeed sees his own suffering as linked to that of the town's. His zeal to organize the parents and his inflated rhetoric—his claims to protect other innocent children, and so to speak for the future itself—suggest that he believes a triumphant win in court will enable him to realize some larger redemption. He cannot tolerate his grief, cannot bear the life of shameful addiction to drugs to which his outcast daughter has succumbed, and so he is determined to find a reason for the bus accident, as if closure in this case could heal his daughter, as if identifying a cause for another's tragedy could release him finally of any sense of guilt for his own.

The telephone exchange between father and daughter is itself interrupted. We are viewing a stage, a rehearsal at a county fair, a young woman singing with a guitar, a large backdrop poster of her image behind her: a double portrait, a two-headed Janus image with twin features facing both left and right. And watching her sing, his pride lighting his face, a lanky man stands drinking a cup of coffee, a carpenter's belt around his waist—it appears he has built the wooden stage. He steps back to appreciate her

further, smiling as she sings the final lyrics: “all the sky is is blue, all that blue is is one more colour, one more colour now.” As with the opening words spoken by the lawyer, these lyrics will resonate with an ironic and darker meaning once we see the actual circumstances of the accident, the bus skidding off the highway and into the sky’s empty blue. After the performance, the singer runs up to ask the man his opinion about her singing—she is eager to hear his response, doubting his initial praise, only reassured when he asserts that it was “awesome.” It’s an adolescent term, and his use seems a bit contrived. At this point in the scene their relationship is still withheld. Is he an older boyfriend? Only when the singer Nicole says “I’m so happy, Daddy,” and leans into his body, asking childishly for ice cream, are we able to place these two in relation to each other, an ambiguity that will become more ominous as the tale unfolds.

The lawyer is still inside the carwash. At this point, he begins to realize something is wrong. His car is not moving. The brushes keep brushing, the water spraying. He begins to panic. As Egoyan points out, if the carwash is a soothing womblike environment, there is something uncannily horrifying about being trapped within it, the cogs going terribly awry. The lawyer can see the light where the car should be emerging, but he and it are stuck in the dark and the wet and the noise. He is at the wheel of the car, yet has no control over its movements. He is trapped within the machine. His first impulse is to reach for his phone. He calls the operator, loses connection and finally forces the car door open against the force of spraying water, trying to protect himself, absurdly, with a black umbrella. He emerges wet and

disheveled into a disorderly garage where an abandoned electric guitar screeches its high-pitched call alone, as if all the machines are now working with their own monstrous will. He walks through the garage and sees the school bus, parked benignly outside. The sound of children laughing, screaming.

The next time we see this lawyer he is registering at the Bide-a-Wile motel, home to a mother and father who have lost their son. “Is it raining outside?” the mother asks, noticing his wet hair and clothes. But her tone is indifferent, her attention no longer quite attached to this world. “I’ve had an accident,” he says. Again, his phrasing is ironic, a dimension we will hear perhaps only retrospectively when he later declares that he believes accidents do not exist. But it is also a strange thing to say even this early in the film, given what he has just seen and heard—the suspended bus, the voices of the lost children—as if he is already prepared to exploit the accident as something he could himself possess.

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In the climactic scene of *The Sweet Hereafter* we will see an instance where the lawyer uses irony explicitly, angrily—and where its point is intended as his own—but at this early development in the film the irony is beyond the various characters’ knowledge, perhaps still beyond the viewers: it is rather a turning that builds

retroactively and only through the exposition of the film as we hear the echoes of the words against tragic circumstances. Rather than having a humorous purpose, this structural irony serves to unhinge the meaning of a given statement in an uncanny way, creating a shimmering effect in the film until language itself can be described as falling. The word play here is subtle, often integrated into dialogue that has an informal feel, as when the bus driver teases one of the parents, Wanda Otto, about a painting she is contributing to the school bazaar: “It’s bizarre alright,” the bus driver says, playfully exploiting the near homonym to establish what she thinks of the unusual work of art. A bazaar is a collective jumble sale of miscellaneous objects—a representation of the community as such, a moment of sharing. Wanda’s paintings do appear to unite the town—one is the backdrop of Nicole’s stage as she sings; we see another in the lounge of the grieving parents who welcome the lawyer at the Bide-a-Wile: by the time we see this new image displayed to the bus driver, we recognize the familiar if unusual style, as if we are gaining some fluency. In spoken language, the difference between ‘bazaar’ and ‘bizarre’ is only a slight shift of emphasis, a change in a vowel sound, something barely heard. In this case we immediately recognize the difference because of the grammatical change—from “It’s for the bazaar,” to “It’s bizarre”—where the meaning evolves from a collective noun of joint contribution to an adjective describing a given characteristic of a singular object. But the discrepancy between the words will resonate with an ironic and darker meaning as the film unfolds, and as the relationship within one particular family is exposed to be profoundly disturbing: this revelation will be explicitly associated with the word ‘strange’—a

synonym for 'bizarre.' What the film teaches us through its ironic juxtapositions—through such lines as 'I'll accept the charges,' and 'I've had an accident/there are no accidents' and this evocative play on the words 'bazaar,' 'bizarre,' 'strange,'—is to attend to how meanings begin to shift between recurring uses within the exposition, ultimately sustaining a disconcerting indecidability.

Paul de Man pursues a most challenging understanding of this kind of indetermination. Rather than simply close the meaning with one intended use or the other, he asks us to suspend our very drive to understand—arguing that in fact irony is understanding's suspension. He asserts that irony cannot be reduced to "'saying one thing and meaning another,'" or "'blame-by-praise and praise-by-blame'" (209 "The Rhetoric of Temporality"). Rather, irony is "disruption," "disillusion": when irony plays its role in a text it begins to unhinge our confidence in language's referential power—and to make language refer to its own unhinging: "Irony in itself opens up doubts as soon as its possibility enters our heads, and there is no inherent reason for discontinuing the process of doubt at any point short of infinity" (182, 166 "The Concept of Irony"). De Man's use of the word 'infinity' refers to a figural effect of language, a radical indetermination that upsets meaning, but the word 'infinity' also invokes both a spatial and temporal category. In Egoyan's film, infinity can mean the abyss, the hereafter, of the children's death—something the camera suggests when it swoops up into the unending blue. De Man argues that the shimmering play of language can itself create such vertigo: "Irony is unrelieved *vertige*, dizziness to the point of madness" (215 "Rhetoric of Temporality").

Yet while the film's wording and imagery do reverberate in unsettling ways so that viewers are sometimes not quite sure where to take hold, many of its scenes of dialogue also give us a chance to ground ourselves within the daily, domestic intimacy of a mountain town. Irreverent wit and friendly banter: these instances illustrate the kinds of connections that have been lost through the accident, and also motivate a critique of De Man's perhaps unduly catastrophic reading of irony's power. Does irony always result in a radical even sometimes frightening indeterminacy? When Wanda Otto offers to cover her image in order to "protect the children," her irony is easily understood by Dolores as a form of play, and yet we might already hear a kind of shivering echo in the offer. Similarly, the word 'bizarre' arguably ricochets through this film: we are later introduced to a seduction that we may viscerally construe as 'bizarre,' just as the bus driver rejects the vaginal imagery of the painting. Yet what we encounter with this initial exchange between Dolores and the Ottos is actually far from rejection: Dolores may not like the painting much, but when she suggests with impunity that she could tie it to the top of the bus, Wanda and Hartley Otto both respond immediately with mock offense and laughter—they know she is being ironic, and their communication is warm, easy: at this moment language is not a dizzying indetermination but instead basic evidence of how intimacy informs our linguistic encounters, and how these in turn shape our intimacies. "Lying in a simple inflection of the voice, of the voice slipped onto the page," Denise Riley says, irony "generates puzzles of recognition and of knowingness. For if verbal irony states the opposite of what its speaker or writer means, the listener or reader must 'get it'—but must already

have grasped enough of something to realize that something does need to be got" (*The Words of Selves* 147). In this scene, the banter between Dolores and the Ottos reveals how irony can in fact take hold. A shared sense clicks resolutely in place. Irony can momentarily suture a meaning, thereby establishing a relationship or revealing the strength of a bond. In this informal interaction the characters' faces reveal how joyous it can be simply to get the joke. That de Man ignores this aspect of irony's power seems questionable given his own careful attention to the interplay between a statement's grammatical and rhetorical sense. What is lost in his reading of irony is the pleasurable texture of linguistic intimacy itself. Who has not been involved in a conversation in which an ironic interjection is suddenly realized for what it is—and that quick jump to understanding propels an immediate closeness, even between relative strangers? Given irony's uncertain reference, there may occur an initial slippage, confusion, a momentary fall of meaning—but then there is that sudden delight of the catch. We comprehend precisely what language does not say. Within this mountain town, irony arises because people already know each other well, are relaxed in each other's company, and grasp what another is expressing even when the words contradict the sense. Such rapport, which enables irony to function so effortlessly, is for example immediately apparent when during their clandestine meeting Risa Walker mentions to Billy Ansel that her husband is away watching a hockey game and Billy quickly responds—while facing his lover who is posing expectantly in her underwear and bra—"oh, *the game*." He turns on the television, pretends absorption, and we know he is playing his own game, his irony received as such because at this moment

there is no tension between this couple other than a sexual one. In this ironic exchange, they do not find each other hard to understand.

The warmth of this couple's rapport contrasts painfully with how they will interact once the accident has occurred. The setting is the same, the wooden room of the Bide-a-Wile hotel, and Risa expresses some relief on finding Billy: "I knew you'd be here," she says. But Billy is almost unexpressive. The two are in each other's presence, yet are no longer connected. Grief rips at each separately as it reveals underlying rifts in their world views. Billy has discovered Risa and her husband have hired a lawyer, and she feebly defends their choice by repeating that Mitchell said "someone put a wrong bolt on the bus." She in turn heard that Billy gave Nicole his deceased wife's sweater, and that the girl was wearing it on the day of the accident. She asks him why he did it. "You think that caused the accident," he asks angrily, "that it brought bad luck?" As he prepares to leave, their connection obviously strained to breaking, he icily adds: "Sounds to me that what you need is a witchdoctor, not a lawyer." Here the statement does and does not speak what Billy means. Irony has turned cold. He does not share Risa's superstitious analysis of the tragedy, nor her belief that a class-action law suit is the ritual to bring closure. His words are an example of the kind of cutting irony that makes its refusal of intimacy immediately clear. The contemptuous tone erects a barrier between them, situating the former lovers on different sides of grief's divide. A similar kind of iciness haunts the phrasing of Wanda Otto, who has lost her son, Bear: she listens reluctantly to the lawyer offering his services, with his claims that he alone can find justice, and as he pauses in his entreaty, she flatly interjects "So

you're just the person we need." The subtle way the actress delivers this line leaves us suspended momentarily as to its immediate sense. Is she actually making this claim? But she follows this sentence with the clarifying accusation, "That's what you want us to think, isn't it?"—at which point the reversal is clear. She is being ironic—once more we see an example of irony that serves to link speakers only in order to establish a chasm between their individual perceptions. The sentences here are especially compelling because they refer to the theme of community itself—to those we need, those we invite into our systems of interdependency, and those we exclude. She gives Mitchell, deceptively, the suggestion of intimacy and then turns the sense on its head. She makes a claim so to distance herself from its meaning, establishing that the sense she originally intended is the lawyer's alone. Here irony depends on the establishment of a shared clarity: as his face and subsequent dialogue reveal, he does indeed 'get' her meaning, the reversal of what she says. Yet this seeming connection occurs only as the speaker, Risa, deploys the irony to negate a more significant communion of values.

Finally, however, the irony with this scene is that Michell's change in tactics—his very use of the rage Wanda has betrayed, and his plea to let him direct it—do convince this mother to sign with those involved in the law suit, and thereby to accept the terms he presents and so to lose her initial grasp of the separation between his truth and her own. He does, in effect, become what she thinks she needs. And yet we are led to doubt the ethical efficacy of the bond. With her ironic statement an indetermination begins to take place, the kind de Man warns us not to try to understand: we have no trouble grasping her barbed meaning in the immediate

context, but when we situate it within the larger dynamics in the film, the statement creates its own ironic truth. If Mitchell does become what this community needs, the resulting dynamics are far from anything he or she could predict. The dynamic reveals what Kierkegaard describes as irony's way. In Riley's reading, "irony, once achieved, will always sidle away from anyone's ownership" (162). Irony's outcome, she warns us, "cannot be guaranteed" (165). When it "appears on the scene," says Kierkegaard, "it brings the way, though not the way whereby one who imagines himself to have a result comes to possess it, but the way whereby the result forsakes him" (340 *The Concept of Irony*). Attending to these spiraling effects—the initial 'click' of shared irony that reveals a linguistic intimacy even in those moments when it refuses true closeness, together with a contextual drama that turns and recreates a given statement's meaning until it achieves a startling suspension—can prepare us for the power of the final scenes in which one girl testifies in court and uses this opportunity to create a troubling linguistic bond with her father while she tears her secret story away. In the end, the film reveals something strange that irony does to the time of meaning, and the meaning of time.

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In his analysis of irony's rhetorical effect, de Man turns to a material example—that of a literal fall. Borrowing from Baudelaire, de Man describes not a tragic

accident, but just an ordinary stumble. It seems a disappointing choice given that tripping on our own feet is hardly an instance of any kind of rhetorical flourish. This seems the realm not of irony but slapstick. Yet de Man suggests that with such a fall we receive a kind of come-uppance, the kind a philosopher smitten with his own cleverness might require. So in this way, there can perhaps be a kind of irony at play when such a physical lapse happens, and de Man isn't the last one to grasp that the joke may be on himself. Even with his banal example, falling never stays in place: instead, it resonates with the sense of a very human lapse, the fall in its religious and ethical connotation. When we slip and crash to earth, we are brought up against our own inadequacy, forced to confront the irony of our very uprightness:

The Fall, in the literal as well as the theological sense, reminds [man] of the purely instrumental, reified character of his relationship to nature. Nature can at all times treat him as if he were a thing and remind him of his factitiousness, whereas he is quite powerless to convert even the smallest particle of nature into something human. (214 "The Rhetoric of Temporality")

If a literal fall invokes an ethical fall, it also reminds us precisely of the limits of our freedom to choose. To fall down is to be beholden to the call not of sin but of gravity. It is to have one's own will suspended, and hence to be split precisely from what would cause a metaphysical lapse. To fall is not to fall. The experience both recalls and betrays its identity. When for example the children in this film fall to their deaths, they are pure innocents, trapped within a machine whose path has gone arbitrarily askew.

Yet with the lawyer's coaching and his firm belief that it is possible to find a compensation for their loss, the parents soon respond to this tragic accident by succumbing to a collective fall in the ethical sense: when members of the town rally to sue for damages, they are attempting to find a redemptive narrative of blame within an accident that ultimately exceeds human responsibility. Yet 'fall' also can mean defeat—and in this film the town's efforts will be thwarted, the legal case succumbing, through startling and bizarre circumstances, to a downfall both abrupt and final.

De Man examines this kind of ambiguity in the unfinished epic *The Fall of Hyperion* by John Keats. The genitive case within the title, which establishes one noun in possession of another, could refer to the defeat of Hyperion: the fall would then be a downfall, a nominative completion of an event. But the fall could also refer to a continued action, "the much less specific but more disquieting evocation of an actual process of falling, regardless of its beginning, its end or the identity of the entity to whom it befalls to be falling" (16 "Resistance to Theory"). It is impossible to determine from the text which meaning is the correct one, suggesting that Keats makes poetic use of the ambiguity. Retrospectively, this title possesses another related layer of indetermination, at the self-referential, intertextual level: Keats originally wrote an earlier draft called *Hyperion*, which suggests that the fall can refer back to the failings or failures of this work. And this second version, the epic he titles *The Fall of Hyperion*, remains incomplete. So the title can ultimately refer to the epic's own unfinished quality—and therefore to the defeat of the very writing itself, as if Keats were so compelled by this fall's indetermination that he could not fully compose it. The

meaning of the title, determined by its figural dimensions within and beyond the text, is not reducible to its grammar but becomes rather an unsettling rhetorical imbalancing. Raising the question whether we are then “telling the story of why all texts, as texts can always be said to be falling”—yes, is the conclusion, but not quite—de Man asserts that it is crucial we attend to this indecidability “as an exercise not only in semantics, but in what the text actually does to us” (16). The word ‘fall’—its thematic and figural and hence rhetorical elaborations—has a dizzying power.

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A poem’s medium is language, and while the language of *The Sweet Hereafter*, with its ambiguities and echoes, often functions like a poem, film is also a visual medium: Egoyan can deploy imagery and camera angles to create self-referential and vertiginous effects similar to those de Man finds in Keats. When it comes to the force of a fall, a director’s powers are perhaps more viscerally immediate. The scenes themselves are falling. We are caught in the camera’s hold as the lens swoops up to the sky and then drops us back down to the bus in the moments before the accident. We are momentarily suspended, watching from above, then we return to earth. As with the disorientation of the film’s opening credits, this experience of viewing the human world from on high creates a kinesthetic sensation: momentarily we are moving with the camera, our position precarious. In contrast to the rush of this vertical

ascent and descent, many scenes emphasize the horizontal: the vista stretches wide as we witness the long strips of a mountain road, or the articulated line of a train reaching along a railway from one end of the screen to the other, as if this moving horizon could continue the life the children have left. With the train as backdrop, two children run joyfully toward their father—and toward us, almost ready to run out of the image. In another scene, we return to the sleeping family of the opening credits, and at first it seems we are looking at a static picture. The bodies are positioned upright. Then the camera slowly rotates so that the family turns with it, as if on a dial, falling slowly, finally resting. When the child twitches, rubs her eyes, her hair lifting in the wind, a picture has come to life. What a blessing, in that moment, to witness movement.

These cinematic choices are subtle, and Egoyan has asserted when interviewed that he chose in this film to avoid the more explicitly self-referential features of his earlier works. He had initially envisioned a journalist as an additional character—he'd be a companion to the lawyer, and he would videotape the town's response to the accident, like a miniature director (*Charlie Rose Show*). In contrast to this more obvious form of meta-fiction, Egoyan creates a seemingly realist narrative that deploys self-reflective qualities in a way that is organic to the process of grief. Here we are attuned not to the artistry of shooting a film, but rather to how an image can and cannot capture life. A film, Egoyan says in interview, is a medium of loss: as soon as an image is captured, it is gone. *The Sweet Hereafter* makes evocative use of this dynamic. We repeatedly see the community's beloved photographs—images of children adorn walls and decorate side tables, from the tattered snapshots when we

first meet the Walkers, to the enormous display of grinning faces in Dolores's home, to the haunting portraits of Bear in the Ottos' 'A' frame, to the collage in the Barnell family's hallway, together with the deceptively joyful family portrait displayed prominently in the their front room. The children's faces peer out at the living. But the living are also often surrounded by a frame: the camera pulls away and we see figures through door frames, windows, the rectangular cut-out between a kitchen and a living room. Composites of talking people seem on the verge of becoming photos. While the still picture of the sleeping family can be made to move, Egoyan creates moving images that in effect still time. This phenomenon is most startling when the narrative radically undermines linear development. The technique by which one scene is spliced to another is called a 'cut,' but here the cuts seem to be internal. Time is jagged; time is shattered into pieces the way it is for those experiencing trauma or encountering profound loss. Each scene in the past is interrupted by the present; each scene in the present interrupted by the past. In total, the film contains thirty-five separate temporal categories: we shift constantly back to scenes of living children, before the present is allowed, fitfully, to continue.

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"Like plucking berries and putting them in my basket," so the bus driver Dolores, who has survived the crash, describes how she used to collect the children

each morning. Interviewing her, Mitchell Stephens is obviously troubled by the simile—the word “plucked,” perhaps, her smiling possession of a basket full of innocents, how she sees herself “clearing the mountain of its children.” Given what we now know of the accident that killed these children, there is indeed something ominous about the comparison. We watch her school bus wind its way along the snowy mountainous roads, each curve a potential location for the tragic fall. Nothing seems to happen, not this day, but the ordinary is troubled in this film. We hear the stories of the parents as the lawyer meets each anguished family individually, adjusting his words and tone to cajole them into joining in a class-action law suit. So we are in the days that fall after the accident. But then the camera zooms upward, returning us to the sky, and the bus is once again travelling that road and collecting the children—all of them bundled against the cold, still quite alive. The relief of their words, their laughter, their breath. When the bus driver describes the beautiful adopted boy, Bear, she uses the present tense. Then her face flickers with realization that her sentences have slipped out of time. These scenes that display the children *living* suggest, for a moment, that the parents could wish them back into being, as if the hallucinatory path of grief had found a filmic fulfillment. Watching the course of the bus, its optimistic yellow, its steam-filled windows, the film’s audience may experience a visceral if impossible hope that it won’t crash; we may even possess the magical belief that if we brace ourselves in our seats and keep our eyes on the winding path of the bus we can prevent the crash from taking place. Fighting the vertigo of inevitable loss, our response becomes irreducibly kinesthetic. The accident itself does not occur until the

mid-point of the film, and until then we watch the parents saying goodbye to their children without being able to warn them.

This fractured returning to the bus on its journey recalls Sigmund Freud's analysis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* of the experience of traumatic neurosis, in which the mind repeatedly returns in dreams to a devastating, life-threatening event that consciousness itself cannot hold. His initial example is that of a railway accident: the trauma happens without warning, without our preparedness, outside of temporal containment. He is careful to use the word 'fright' in this context, distinguishing it from what might be taken as its near synonyms, 'fear' and 'anxiety': 'fright' has the specific element of surprise, the sense that we did not see the crisis coming; it is "the name we give to the state a person gets into when he has run into danger without being prepared for it; it emphasizes the factor of surprise" (12). The trauma occurs too soon for our mind to grasp. In dreams the survivor returns to the event as if to prepare for what has already occurred—and so to fill in what could not take place within human understanding. Trauma splits time: in her reading of Freud, Cathy Caruth dwells on trauma's temporal strangeness, how it destroys the simple present tense: "The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the fact that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known (62 *Unclaimed Experience*). There is a latency at the heart of trauma, a delay in our comprehension not just of trauma's effect but of its initial surprising force. Freud describes traumatic nightmares as a drive to master the trauma, as if dreams could be a retroactive practice, a chance

for the mind and body finally to be prepared, and so to fulfill the wish to encounter the crisis differently: “These dreams are endeavoring to master the stimulus retrospectively, by developing the anxiety whose omission was the cause of the traumatic neurosis” (32). And yet Freud suggests there is something paradoxically demonic in this obsessive return, something beyond the drive to master the crisis, akin to the mind’s very downfall as it tries to recapture what hurts it most.

This bus journey has a haunting dreamlike power: the clamorous voices of children, the call and clash of medieval and modern instruments, the camera swooping high above the mountainous depth. We cannot keep our eyes away, feeling not fright in the face of an unprepared-for event but looming fear of what we know has already occurred. Then it happens, the surprise we have been made to dread: the bus skids off the road, through the guard rail and over the cliff into a half-frozen reservoir of water. Yet even here we are not privy to the accident from the perspective of the survivors. Rather we view it from that of the sole unsuspecting witness to the crash, Billy Ansel, who always drives his truck behind the bus to wave at his twins. Billy forms a moral centre at the heart of this film, although he has his own secrets to contain: he is a man who has already encountered the loss of his wife to cancer, leaning on the desires of a married woman for his solace and sexual release, yet when he must face the death of his children he is not willing to trade his memory of their last moments in this tragic crash for a recuperative law suit that promises a false wholeness. Instead, he will hold the loss within himself—so it is significant that we literally see the accident occur through our view of his face. We are watching him through his windshield,

happily waving to his children, and then there is a shuddering change to his expression: disbelief, horror. The desperate grasp of the bus driver to the steering wheel as it spins out of control, and the screen switches and we see the bus veer suddenly over the cliff—and still here there is something unreal, unbelievable, even toy-like, in the way the bus skids, then falls free of the road: the crash is too simple, too small, too fast. Through other films we have perhaps grown accustomed to slow-motion drama. An accident in real time does not quite seem to be taking place. Has it happened? Will it happen? “Jesus,” Billy curses, “Jesus,” and runs toward the bus as it cracks through the ice.

What the film captures in this moment is the trauma not of the victims, but the witness. We watch the powerlessness of the man as he runs to help, his feet crashing through the crisp top-layer of snow. It all happens quickly from here. Billy identifies the bodies—again, the event is told through his face, just a taciturn nod for one child, then the other. In the next frame the children are alive, first the boy, then the girl, their images sharpening as they run toward the camera then past it to some unknown. Through the magic of film, his wishing memory is shortly as vivid as life. To witness the death of one’s children is to lapse out of time, out of reality, and even Billy, the stoic man who won’t fold to dishonest compensations, cannot sustain his present truth.

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Denise Riley suggests that what a parent experiences when facing the sudden death of a child is not just the disorganization of temporal sequence—a constant shifting between the unbelievable present and the consolation of the past—but a sensation rather of being “cut off from any temporal flow” (1 *Time Lived*). The inevitable ‘and-then’ of life may externally continue, like the stretching line of Egoyan’s mountain road, and yet as Riley describes her own ordeal, a bereft mother finds herself static in time, or time is found static in her. This strange relationship of habitation—the time of the dead child now exists within the mother who has “become time,” a time that is no-time, a “non-time of sheer stasis”—seems almost a spatial and not actually a temporal experience at all: time has become something other than itself (20). Indeed the metaphors that Riley uses are physical ones—and there are metaphors, in a stark essay that asserts how nothing feels “either familiar or metaphorical” about this sustained experience of arrested time (2). Language here is both power and failure, sentences crackling at their inadequate reach. Riley uses few words that explicitly designate emotion, as if the freezing of time had stopped the flow of feeling or created a new state, “carnal,” and “physically raw,” and not to be captured in our accustomed words (7). No use, vocabulary such as “sad,” “sorrow,” “grief,” or “mourning”: Riley explicitly renounces these terms. No—this is a state of abject paralysis. Where once time was “flowing, extended, elongated—a river, a road, a ribbon—now the river is damned, the road blocked, the ribbon slashed” (14). Time has become a “plateau”; it is in “shards,” “crystalline,” a “suspension”; the mother is pregnant with the dead child as she was once pregnant with the living one (18). Riley

articulates this agonizing suspension initially through a series of journal entries, ordered like snapshots, in linear sequence, but invoking the bare jaggedness of Egoyan's scenes: even as we read these notes' titles that seem desperate both to mark time's passing and to pin time irretrievably to death's zero hour—"two weeks after the death," "one month after the death," "five months after"—these prose sections don't seem to move forward in narrative or analysis but stay locked in time with the dead. Riley depicts in prose the sensation of arrested time, reluctant as she is to cede the experience to the inexpressible, and yet she also suggests that film may be in a unique position to demonstrate this state that "resists intelligible description": "A life of no time can't be recounted. Your very condition militates against narrative. Maybe only the cinema could show it. Not by means of any cinematic plot, certainly, but through the camera work itself (23).

Riley's metaphors call to mind the visual motifs of Egoyan's film: the empty sky, the crystalline winter light, the scenes in shards, the vertical lift of the camera that literally suspends our view. Instead of propelling us forward through the plot, the angle of these shots hinge us upward into the vista of a strange blankness. In Riley's essay, this blankness is described through the recourse of the physical matter of film itself:

At the death of your child, you see how the edge of the living world gives onto burning whiteness. This edge is clean as a strip of guillotined celluloid film. First came the intact negative full of blackened life in shaded patches, then abruptly,

this milkiess. This candid whiteness, where a life stopped. Nothing ‘poetic,’ not the white radiance of eternity—but sheer non-being, which is brilliantly plain. (5)

Egoyan’s camera angles capture not just the sweeping whiteness of the sky above the falling bus, but also its visual opposite: the empty, black interior of the bus with its shattered windows. Just before Dolores begins her testimony, we return to a flash of this stark scene: her words “I remember” bring not the revival of life but rather its negative, the aftermath of death. This scene marks a change: from this point in the film, when this character says she “remembers,” we no longer see living images of the children. It is as if the syntax of the testimony has situated the accident into the past. Before this turning point, even as *The Sweet Hereafter* maintained its plot-driven momentum—unlike an actual shard of celluloid film—the images kept returning us to the moments before the accident, the way a grieving mind loops back incessantly to the instant before loss. This filmic shattering of linearity does suggest something akin to what Riley describes as the brutal cessation of time. The days do not go forward. The living are still and the dead are moving: photographs of the children are immediately juxtaposed with images of them shuffling and talking vigorously within the bus. And given the hybrid nature of film as an art form, here the soundtrack eerily complements the visual effects. Beyond the camera angles and the cutting of scenes and the juxtaposition of the living with the dead, *The Sweet Hereafter’s* use of medieval music together with the invocation of the myth of the Pied Piper contribute

to the strange timelessness of the film, as if the grieving parents were now suspended in the static yet also horribly indefinite temporality of myth.

Into this agonized experience of time, Mitchell Stephens forges his own. While the parents are adrift in their homes, he is full of bluster and purpose. While they move in a state of listless stasis, barely attaching any emotion to their initial interactions with the visitor—"will you be spending more than a night?" "You want a cup of tea?"—his statements are full of emotion and full of words *for* emotion. "You are angry," he says to the parents, trying to pull them into action, asserting that he represents the parents only in their anger and not their grief, using these words that the parents do not. He articulates their feelings as easily as he says he understands. He tells the parents he recognizes that this is "an awful time"—his banal words so inadequate, this phrase he repeats like a memorized script. Then he immediately lets them know he can "direct" their rage, for those who so obviously lack direction. He drives the long mountain roads and literally runs from house to car when he believes one of the parents will sign onto his case. His strategies rely on the parents' own drive to find the cause of death—an imperative Riley describes, this obsessive preoccupation with the minutia of the very moment of loss as if an empirical understanding will prevent the past, "the uselessness of thought trying to rewind time, to master what cannot be mastered" (11). Yet it is by capturing this very longing to rewind time that Mitchell manages to seduce the parents out of their paralysis and forward into his own futurity. The plot is based on a battle between different temporal orientations. To one set of parents he offers "compensation for the loss of your son"; for another set, when

he realizes that such a strategy of exchange will not succeed, he instead asserts that such compensation is of course not possible. To these parents, the Ottos, who hold each other as they weep, he offers rather to “speak for the future.” The lawsuit, he argues explicitly, is about “an on ongoing relationship to time.” In this town, the grieving parents who fall for his promises do so because they lapse out of the arrested time of grief and into the seductive, impossibly redemptive futurity this lawyer says he will provide.

This compulsion to assert the primacy of linear time, of cause and effect, is most starkly demonstrated when Mitchell interrupts Dolores’s testimony on the stand. She is describing what occurred on the day of the accident, but instead of proceeding forward, she begins to list all the children who were in the bus, identity by identity, name by name, “all the children,” she says, “of my town.” The incantatory list is structurally a suspension of syntactical progress. The camera circles around her while she continues her recitation. She struggles with her words, yet remembers each child. It is as if she is declaring them, in that moment, dead. And yet she is also emotively grasping at their identities as if to bring them back from the brink through the force of naming itself. Mitchell is unmoved. “And then what happened,” he says. His interjection feels almost violent. He needs time—the time of the accident and the time of the testimony—to go according to plan.

This scene in which Dolores repeats the names of the dead children contrasts with the earlier dialogue in which her syntactical choices suggest the children are still

alive. When she uses the present tense to describe Bear, her face is joyous: for a moment she seems to have forgotten he has died. Riley offers an interpretation of such syntactical errors: she says that even as one faces the fact of a recent death, to speak of the deceased in the past tense may still seem wrong. Words stumble, stutter. And yet if the past tense is somehow disloyal, the present tense too seems faulty. We use the copula, 'is': 'he is dead,' when there is no longer a subject to possess the verb: "It's as if any death causes the collapse of the simplest referring language" (23 *Time Lived*). So when Dolores points over her shoulder at an image of Bear—"just look at the smile on his face," the gesture is a disconcerting source of comfort. Here the verb tense finds its referent, if only through the recourse to a photograph. She points at this happy evidence just before her face shifts with realization and she describes him not in the past but the conditional—he "would have been a wonderful man." The plaintive truth of "would have" both posits the future and negates its possibility.

Billy Ansel, who is the only parent to have witnessed the crash, finds his own memorial not in photographs. Risa Walker asks him if he's going to the funeral and in response he tells her he drove to the station to "stare at the bus." Mitchell has been videotaping its interior: for him this hulking piece of damaged metal is evidence to be used in his legal propulsion. But for Billy, the same vehicle demands a surprising reverence. He walks up to the bus in the dark. Stopping at the rear, where he last saw his son and daughter waving to him, he takes off his hat. He stands still. The window stays empty, black—it does not reveal his children. Mitchell will lurch into Billy's sight

line at this moment, literally interrupting the stillness and this private moment. When Billy later speaks with Risa, he says he could almost hear voices inside.

In the immediate aftermath of the crash, he does seem to hear his children's laughter: the emergence of the dead is an aural as well as visual presence. His reaction to the crash is powerfully revealed not just through sight but through sound. The visual collage at this point in the film is so compelling that we may realize the equally visceral effect of the soundtrack only subliminally. Before we see his stricken face at the scene of the accident, we view the transition of the empty sky, clouds only beginning to shift into a more somber register. Then he emerges, his dark frame entering the clouds, his face as empty as this whiteness that stretches blank behind him. He seems to loom into presence—he is above, tipping forward, his eyes peering down, so that we are underneath his gaze. We comprehend what he is seeing, immediately below him, when he nods. The bodies. He is identifying the bodies of his children. His own body shudders with recognition. And in this moment, the soundtrack too seems to shudder. Up to this point, we were hearing notes—slow, spaced apart, but still the tune creates a sense of anticipation. The gaps between the notes enable us to hear crying voices, the whirr of a helicopter. But when Billy sees the faces of his children, the music stops. What is this thing we hear? Metallic, hollow. Impossible to identify. Not silence, not discordant notes; it can't be described as a note at all, but a sound nonetheless. Nothing within an ordered sequence, but something being scraped. It is as if sound itself, the moment of a single sound, were being violently stretched. The very timing of sound, the time of sound, is suspended.

And then when the notes do continue, as he walks up the snowy hill and away from the scene of the accident, the slow, reluctant music takes us not into the momentum of temporal flow but backward to the scene of the children who run joyously to their father in hallucinatory clarity. When we see Billy next he is sitting alone, in silence, in the room at the Bide-a-Wile. He speaks with Risa, prepares to leave, and this scraping soundtrack continues; it has become his motif, returning to him, and returning him to a time he can't escape.

Riley gives us the example of a moment of aural suspension in a poem by Emily Dickinson:

The Thought behind I strove to join

Unto the thought before,

But sequence raveled out of sound

Like balls upon a floor. (27 Dickinson cited in *Time Lived*)

When he identifies his children, the confused, distraught, yet strangely static face of Billy Ansel needs no verbal accompaniment. Yet when Dickinson's poem is read alongside Billy's immediate recognition of what has happened, the poet's words evoke the acute shock, the disrupted sequence of time, and that one stretching strained noise. Dwelling on the evocative, troubling word choice—the sequential order of thought becoming a thing that then “raveled out of sound”—Riley reminds us that “sound is sustained on the ear by its repetition, and by the expectation that another

sound will follow on" (28). Sound requires and implies movement, linearity, the anticipation of a future. She asks then what sound would become "if the possibility of succession were to abandon it" (28). Perhaps silence, a collapsing compression. Or perhaps in answer to her question, we might imagine this sound as something like the noise we hear when Billy sees his children lying dead. His face flickers. The sound is far away, yet seems to be internal. It is like thought itself become unrecognizable. We hear a shudder not just in and of time, but in human subjectivity. For without this succession, Riley asks, with sequence itself dropping, falling, like balls upon a floor, what then do we become?

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Fear of falling is primal: watch an infant when its flailing limbs slip into the air, even if it is in no risk of actually being released from the parent's hold, and the baby's face reveals the wincing shock. To fall at this early stage in our lives is to disintegrate. D. W. Winnicott includes falling on his list of "primitive agonies,"—asserting that "anxiety is not a strong enough word" (104 "Fear of Breakdown"). But perhaps no word can truly capture what it means to fall. Caruth suggests that trauma resists representation, that the effect of trauma is so overwhelming that it cannot be contained by referential means and instead enters our system unmediated, unimaged, without word. The trauma of falling has a privileged place in relationship to

reference's failure. Falling is both a kinesthetic sensation and a conceptual entity, and Caruth suggests that something specifically about falling challenges our ability to refer to it: "the problem of reference," she asserts, "is: *how to refer to falling*" (*Unclaimed Experience* 76). She brings us to Paul de Man via an analysis of Immanuel Kant's aesthetic philosophy and Isaac Newton's discovery of gravity, the scientific assertion that we are all in a perpetual state of fall. Historically, gravity could be represented through mathematical formula, but the introduction of the new concept confounded philosophy. Invisible, almost magical—it made no sense: "That is, as a mathematical formula it could be applied perfectly to the world, but as a thing *referred* to by philosophical discourse it seemed a pure fiction. . . . In a world of falling, reference could not adequately describe the world" (76). Yet falling also figures precisely that moment when reference demonstrates its force: "the impact of reference is felt in falling" (89). So falling is both the resistance to representation and the resistance that is referential effect. Falling seems to stand as the paradoxical challenge at the core of reference, the inability for reference to capture the world in any linear or logical means: "direct or phenomenal reference to the world means, paradoxically, the production of a fiction" (76). Caruth can be taken to mean 'fiction' in terms of the distortions of lie or fantasy—how reference can only ever pretend to hold what it assumes to grasp—but fiction can also designate the specific art of literature or drama or film. Indeed as Egoyan's camera angles and temporal shifts indicate, film may be able to capture falling—or more accurately the fall of falling, how falling shatters representational possibilities—in a way that philosophy arguably cannot.

The way that Paul de Man's theory manages to refer to falling is through a turn—and turn is the appropriate word—to fiction. De Man writes a playful yet serious analysis of Heinrich von Kleist's "On the Marionette Theatre," a tripartite narrative that begins with an enraptured aesthetic appreciation of dancing puppets. The principal dancer of an opera company tells the narrator that he believes the marionette's artistry is superior to that of humans. Suspended by strings, the puppets do not need to rest on the floor in the midst of the dance: they are at once free from tiring gravity—they are 'anti-grav'—and yet can create a visual representation of its pull. Their wooden limbs involuntarily express movements initiated by the puppeteer and completed by gravity's force. Caruth asserts that there is something troubling about this admiration for the mechanical over the living—and indeed, in de Man's elaboration these figures become a kind of dancing death: "By falling," he says, "(in all the senses of the term, including the theological Fall) gracefully, one prepares the ascent, the turn from parabola to hyperbole, which is also a rebirth. Caught in the power of gravity, the articulated puppets can rightly be said to be dead, hanging and suspended like dead bodies" ("Aesthetic Formalization" 287). But this suspension is of course not a real death, but rather a death-like illusion of life, and it stands as a representation of the mysterious performative effect of a text, how the play of tropes seem to conjure a reality beyond the words.

De Man chooses to read the story of the dance as an analogy of the relationship between a literary author and his work, yet to establish its claims, this fiction effects its own turn: Kleist focuses his reader's attention not on a text but on a kinesthetic art

form, or rather its invocation through dialogue, as if his words themselves could dance.

What does this story give us to think about movement, especially the uncanny moments of lifting and dropping when a mechanical being appears human, or the reverse, when a human becomes mechanical? And how, in these respects, might a film, itself a kinesthetic art form, provide a different conception of such vertiginous moments and the ways they invoke the complex play between art and life?

There are no actual puppets in *The Sweet Hereafter*, although we will later see the bus suspended by cables. Arguably we the audience are the marionettes, experiencing as we do the sensation of rising and falling with the camera as it swoops upward and down. In some ways the parents too act as puppets: lost in their grief, they allow Mitchell to pull their strings. But it is the children, living and breathing, who are “caught in the power of gravity,” moving not by their own will, but carried into the air by the horrible flight of the bus. When it comes to the effect of this vehicle on its inhabitants, there exists another correspondence between the film and Kleist’s vision: along with his wooden dancers, Kleist provides a second example of a body—and a more disturbing example of reference’s power. Beyond the tribute to the artistry of puppets, his story also tells of a mutilated man whose limbs are replaced with mechanical legs that move with almost perfect grace. Like the marionettes’ spirals, this mechanical dancing created when a human body combines with wood is more dazzling somehow than would be a similar performance by a dancer uninjured. The combination of natural and artificial, and the consequent transformative effect of the dance—these become a metaphor for the arts and their power to create something

akin to what is real. Some element of life must be sacrificed for this dance to take place, flesh succumbing before the artistry can begin. In de Man's reading, this damaged body stands for the violence effected by certain forms of aesthetic education, the move to change art into a reductive hermeneutic understanding: "The dancing invalid," de Man says, "is one more victim in a long series of mutilated bodies that attend on the progress of enlightened self-knowledge" (289 "Aesthetic Formalization"). For Caruth the disabled body—or the "mutilated invalid"—can be none other than the "reassertion of reference" (83 *Unclaimed Experience*). Reference can only appear as "disruption and mutilation" and it is the human body that absorbs the force. Caruth is speaking in figural terms—surely referential language does not literally injure the body—but she is also theorizing beyond the specifics of Kleist's story and de Man's analysis of it: she invokes the figure itself, as if reference could have this disabling effect. But if the disabled body is somehow the locus of referential contact—its generative and damaging power—what might it mean when this fallen body actually speaks?

Three disabled bodies have a voice in *The Sweet Hereafter*. The most significant is the teenage daughter, Nicole, who survived the accident as a paraplegic. "I mean I'm a wheelchair girl, now," she says, defiantly speaking to her father. In this statement, her disability defines her very meaning. Her ability to tell the story of this falling crisis, her own near encounter with death, comes at a physical cost. The injured body has access to a traumatic truth, as this truth has access to the injured body. But she cannot remember the event, and in the end she will twist her story and change the accident's

own referential status. Before she loses the use of her limbs, Nicole reads aloud from Browning's *The Pied Piper*. The story is woven in her haunting voiceover throughout the film. Nicole is paralleled by the lame boy in this poem, who is the sole child unable to follow the Piper into the cave. The poem's other children, those who were free to run and dance and follow, are now dead, and thus have lost their voice entirely. In this myth, only the lame is left to speak. The narrative arch of the disabled girl and boy are chiasmically related: one survives a deadly communal crisis but becomes paraplegic, while another's preexisting lameness saves him from succumbing to the collective death. The boy is denied witnessing the sights the children see, but he can narrate the tale of their departure—"it's dull in my town since my playmates left!/I can't forget that I'm bereft." In these stories, the possibility of living beyond a disaster, and so being able to tell the story, is inversely tied to the mutilation of the body and its ability or inability to move.

Before we hear from these two children, we first encounter a minor character whose disabled figure erupts in a confusing speech. Dolores's husband, Abbott, has had a stroke. He sits in his wheelchair on a higher plane than the other characters in the room, like some kind of sphinx. Mitchell appears shrunken beneath him, peering with discomfort at his twitching body, especially his right hand, which we view in close-up as if it had its own judgment to make or secret to tell. Meanwhile Dolores gazes at her husband adoringly, pausing to assess his silent affirmation of her statements, holding his every murmur in great respect. At a key point in the interview, when Mitchell is trying to convince Dolores that he is the one to clear her name—first

positing that others in the community are aware of her individual suffering and then asserting that his case is the vehicle retroactively to *effect* this awareness—Dolores’s husband lurches into a determined attempt to articulate an indignant response. He speaks with force and conviction. He spits and rails. But he says nothing. His words are gibberish—we might recognize sounds, perhaps Dolores’s name, but little else. While he tries to speak, Dolores strides behind him and strokes his forehead, and when he is finished, she proudly looks at Mitchell. “Well,” she asserts, “you heard what Abbott said.”

De Man uses Kleist’s story to articulate the complexity involved in interpretation—how a text can dance away from our aesthetic and theoretical claims for it. In Egoyan’s film, this slurred moment of non-language is both an unidentifiable signifier and a philosophical and ethical pronouncement that Dolores has no trouble interpreting. With Mitchell’s prodding, she articulates what she heard her husband say. “The true jury of a person’s peers,” she confidently translates, “is the people of her town. Only they, the people who have known her all her life, and not twelve strangers, can decide her guilt or innocence.” Mitchell looks unconvinced. The statement can stand as a moral at the center of the film—anticipating the judgment that Dolores will face in this community once Nicole’s fraudulent claims have their air and the momentum of legal justice falters. But the odd dynamic between nonsense and sense, between incomprehensible syllables and a powerfully articulated ethical stance, can also give us pause about the act of interpretation itself. The disabled husband might be the philosopher, who makes impenetrable claims that then depend

on the surrounding dynamic of story in order to illustrate what few comprehend. The wise man is elevated, but fallen, dependent on an intimate to explain his terms. Or his gibberish can represent a moment of story that the philosopher—in this scenario, Dolores—must make into meaning. His speech is an evocative blur within an art form that is something more than language, both an aural and a visual medium, and not reducible to one coherent claim, especially not of the authorial dimension that Dolores is able to retrieve. Here the disabled speech from the disabled body both invokes and resists understanding. What is this falling language that seems to find its target though we witness its failure? It stands as a puzzling smear in the film, a moment where meaning emerges only as it disappears.

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The referential status of *The Sweet Hereafter* constitutes itself a complex turning. The film is an adaptation of a novel by Russell Banks. Its opening pages begin assertively with the declaration of something seen: “A Dog—it was a dog I saw for certain” (1). The dog is posited, independently, initially a subject and then an object, the initial declaration followed by a sentence with two verbs—one of existence, one of perception, as if the very status of the dog hinged on its being witnessed. But even this certainty immediately falls to doubt: “Or thought I saw” (1). Dolores, the narrating character then explains that “you can see things in the snow that aren’t there, or aren’t

exactly there, but you also can't see some of the things that are there" (1). Egoyan invites us into the film with the disorienting vision of a wooden floor; Russell Banks invokes an almost filmic blur on his first page. While Dolores is speaking of the optical effect of snow, her meditation on what can or cannot be perceived is especially intriguing in a novel that explores a shameful familial secret and its traumatic effect. This connection is emphasized when she later refers to the "intermarriage," in one part of the town, and "all sorts of mingling that it's better not to know about" (30). Even were an adult to have a suspicion of the kind of abuse a character like Nicole confronts, he or she would find that knowledge, or rather its declaration, uncomfortable and therefore uncertain.

In a story about tracking down responsibility for a tragic event, we begin with Dolores declaring the factual cause in the dog, but then expressing her potential confusion about this find. This dog will re-emerge in the film only in Nicole's testimony—we don't see it ourselves, and the thing become blur, or the blur become thing, marks the transition from what Nicole can't remember to what she falsely claims she can. "A dog," she says firmly, "there was a brown dog that ran across the road," and so begins her new story.

The novel's introduction of this theme—finding what may or may not be there in the plane of our senses—also foreshadows the interpretive relationship between Dolores and Abbott. The film portrays their intimacy through tender gesture—Dolores holding him, rubbing his forehead as he tries to speak. And Abbott twitches in

empathy whenever Dolores appears upset. In the novel, her powers of translation and her intimacy with her husband's odd form of speech are narrated in the first person:

"Never . . . that . . . cold," he said. He's worked out a way of talking with just the left side of his mouth, but he stammers some and spits a bit and makes a grimace that some people would find embarrassing and so would look away and as a result not fully understand him. I myself find his way of talking very interesting, actually, and even charming. And not just because I'm used to it. To tell the truth, I don't think I'll ever get used to it, which is why it's so interesting and attractive to me. Me, I'm a talker, and consequently like a lot of talkers tend to say things I don't mean. But Abbott, more than anyone else I know, has to make his words count, almost like a poet, and because he's passed so close to death he has a clarity about life that most of us can't even imagine.

(3)

Abbott does indeed speak "almost like a poet," in elliptical, imagistic, often cryptic phrases. Whereas in the film his words are an indecipherable slur, as least to viewers, in the novel we can recognize individual terms, adding verbal connections as does Dolores. Far from "charming," there is something disconcerting about Egoyan's version, where language itself seems to become abject. It is sound, movement, even thing—the spit that flies from Abbott's lips. His sounds are primal, the base essence of connection. Literature stays in the realm of linguistic sense, whereas within film the attempt at communication occurs at the very edge of speech. Dolores identifies that

Abbott almost crossed the ultimate threshold, passing “so close to death,” and that his strange language is therefore a kind of communication from this border. Maurice Blanchot calls such an encounter a “limit experience”—the near complete dissolution of the subject (*The Infinite Conversation*). Like Nicole, like the lame boy in Browning’s poem, Abbott is a disabled figure who almost but does not quite reach death’s limit, and who returns to speak a strange truth.

While Banks and Egoyan choose to represent Abbott’s manner of speaking in different ways, both the novel and the film enable us to recognize in the exchanges between Dolores and Abbott the precarious and yet mutually supportive kind of “leaning” articulated by Nancy in his vision of the inoperative community. Dolores relies on Abbott for moral and emotional support, and Abbott’s very meaning relies on Dolores’s interpretation. Even the ethical position she articulates, through and with Abbott’s sounds, is an acute elaboration of what Nancy invokes with the word ‘compearance’: Abbott asserts, through Dolores, that she is to be judged within her community, dependent on others for her very worth, just as he is now dependent on her.

In contrast to this ethically reflective and interdependent couple, we have in the novel a community whose ruthless drive for financial compensation is explicitly laid bare, at least through the perspective of the lawyer, who sees in the Walkers that “the lawsuit meant a lot to them, of course, but in a greedy childish way, and certainly more than they were willing to admit to themselves or reveal openly to me” (119). Nicole

too is unsympathetic when she sees her parents' greed. She asserts that "the law suit was wrong," and is deeply uncomfortable that her legs have now increased in worth to her parents through their exchange value within the legal case: she wonders how much her legs had mattered before they were damaged: "And to whom? That was the real question. To me, my legs were worth everything then and nothing now. But to Mom and Daddy, nothing then and a couple of million dollars now" (187). The assessment might seem harsh, and the contracts this community signs may seem far-fetched, yet this novel was based on an actual event. A tragic bus accident killed a town's children, and the parents became caught in a tangle of negligence lawsuits. The novel moves the crash from southern Texas to upstate New York, the film from upstate New York to the interior of British Columbia, and yet even knowing the departures the film takes from the original incident, we are still deprived of any comforting recourse that 'it did not really happen.' It did happen, not in this place, not with these characters, but there remains an unsettling referential status to the scenes as they unfold: the threat of an impact too real.

One of the uncanny ways the film evokes the real is through its turn to the mythic. In a scene that takes place the night before the accident, Nicole reads aloud to two children she is babysitting. Mason and Jessica lie sleepily in their beds, Nicole sitting between them. The book from which she reads is *The Pied Piper*, a myth told through the poetry of Robert Browning. In this poem, the Pied Piper plays on his flute in order to evacuate the town from an infestation of rats, and then when he is not paid for his work he returns to punish the town, tempting away its children who will dance,

entranced by the music of his pipe, into a wondrous cavern in a mountain from which they will never return. The only survivor is the lame boy unable to join the departing dance of his playmates and left bereft without them. The poem is based on a myth that has its roots in the Middle Ages—a town has lost its children, perhaps to plague or an accident or the enticements of a crusading stranger: the historical facts are unclear. The Pied Piper can be taken to represent death itself. Nicole’s recitation of the poem, juxtaposed with the medieval sounds of a flute, gives the film itself a mythic quality, its event somehow more than historically true. The invocation of this myth also introduces dramatic irony, in which the audience is privy to a knowledge that the characters are not. As we listen to Nicole read, we know that the children beside her are the son and daughter of Billy: the bus crash has not yet occurred, but it will, taking the lives of these children, paralyzing Nicole, leaving her lame and at a loss from her playmates. Given the coincidence between the film’s reality and the myth’s, the poem has a haunting resonance—as if the vocalized words had an incantatory power, the ability to make language into life, or rather into its loss.

“Myth,” says Jean-Luc Nancy “is not simple representation, it is representation at work, producing itself—in an autopoietic mimesis—as effect: it is fiction that founds. And what it founds is not a fictive world . . . but fictioning as the fashioning of a world, or the becoming-world of fictioning” (56). The fictioning set in course by the mythic element in this film has a multivalent referentiality, the myth making itself found, and then finding more than itself. At the most basic level, the Pied Piper is the driver of the bus, who collects the children inside her vehicle that will take them to their deaths.

What we see as the bus falls over the cliff is in fact the fatal opposite of Kleist's puppet dance, in which wooden figures are made to seem human. Here humans move without a will of their own, becoming the puppets of a machine. But the puppetry continues after the crash, as the parents prepare to dance to the tune of the lawyer, who does his best to transform their grief into his plans for litigation. The lawyer becomes the Pied Piper luring adults like children, almost as if beyond their will. If Kleist's wooden puppets represent a form of grace, this particular legal dance is a disgrace, even if the parents are enticed as much by the prospect of finding a cause for the tragedy as by the temptation of financial largesse. Billy is the only one to resist the lawyer's urging—and his stoic even heroic acceptance of the brutal facts of the accident, there being no human cause, no redemptive source or meaning, serves to separate him from a community falling in their grief for the false solace of the lawyer's story.

The Piper is both the driver and the lawyer—and the myth continues to generate referents. After Nicole puts the children to bed, her reading maintains itself in voiceover as she travels in a station wagon with her father. He has picked her up from her babysitting job, where her narration of the story had a frame of realism. In the scene with her father her narration of the poem continues as if disembodied, her words floating over their actions as her father becomes the Piper, the film taking a turn to what may seem at first to be surreal. In the previous moment, the widowed Billy has passed along the clothing from his dead wife to Nicole—she had been trying on the clothes, in front of a mirror, admiring herself in a form-fitting knit dress she decides to

wear home. She asks Billy if he is sure he wants to give her these clothes—“it seems kind of weird,” she says—and there is a gentle if uncomfortable intimacy in this scene, Billy stumbling on his words through what is an overdetermined Oedipal encounter, the passing of one generation’s clothing to the next, the man’s assurance at the symbolic ritual, the girl’s acceptance of what is not yet her own. Juxtaposed with this scene is an encounter between Nicole and her father where the exchange is more than symbolic. The music is discordant, menacing, and words from the *Pied Piper* hover over the scene, imagery gaining a devastating momentum as her father leads her home, and yet away from home—not to a cavern but to a barn, Nicole hesitating, gazing at her father as he gazes back, and then following him into the darkness. The barn is lit by candle light—dozens of candles propped on bundles of hay—and so the scene seems other than contemporary, the setting lending the events a theatrical flourish. A drama within a drama: is this happening? Is this happening in the way that we see it? Disoriented, we watch the downfall: Nicole leans to kiss her father and they lapse into an incestuous embrace.

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‘An extensive breach . . . made in the protective shield against stimuli’—as Freud describes trauma, the psyche functions as a kind of filter to external pressures: the mind can be wounded just as a body is wounded, when the force of impact is too

great for the protective shield to resist (31 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*). This dynamic between inside and outside is dramatized visually in the scene between Nicole and her father as they walk from the open night air into the enclosure of the barn. What would seem to be a safe space is instead the location where Nicole is raped. Yet 'rape' seems somehow too strong a word to describe what we see. The violation— itself a physical rupture of a protective shield—is not represented as such. It is and is not contained within the barn. The intimate setting, the candles, the guitar, and Nicole's seeming compliance, her initial hesitation, a stare shared between them, then her father turning and Nicole walking forward to follow him into the barn, their lying together, her leaning toward her father for the kiss—these elements suggest instead some kind of mutual seduction. Has Egoyan downplayed the incest, as could be claimed he has done? Has he suggested that the fall is as much the girl's as the father's? These questions point toward another kind of fall: the spiraling encounter between trauma and fantasy that can make a victim unravel.

In her reading of Freud, Caruth suggests that traumatic dreams are a direct representation of an event—in fact in her interpretation, the word 'representation' cannot properly be used to describe our understanding of the reality of trauma or its later emergence in dreams. For representation is a form of mediation, and in her analysis trauma enters the psyche without such shaping by the victim's mind. The resultant dreams or flashbacks are the "literal return" of the event (59 *Unclaimed Experience*). In this regard, we might view the glaring flash of light that bathes Nicole at the end of the film as precisely such a reoccurrence. For Caruth, this return is not

quite a memory, and not image or language but somehow the event itself, “in startling directness and simplicity, nothing but the unmediated occurrence . . .” (59). The paradox Caruth outlines is that the return of trauma occurs precisely because the event did not exactly take place, at least not at the level of the victim’s consciousness, not at the time it actually happened. Trauma’s unmediated entry into the psyche—and then its delayed literal return—mark the power of its original absence: “The return of the traumatic experience in the dream is not the signal of the direct experience but, rather, of the attempt to overcome the fact that it was not direct, to attempt to master what was never fully grasped in the first place” (32). Yet arguably the attempt to master the trauma demonstrates some element of fantasy: a wish-filled longing for control where there was none. Caruth makes it clear that traumatic nightmares are “undistorted by repression or unconscious wish” yet what seems however to be lacking in Caruth’s reading, both of the original impact of trauma and of its return in dreams, is the primal and primary role of *fantasy* in Freud’s understanding of the psyche (4 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*). “Direct,” “Literal,” “unmediated”: these are Caruth’s terms, not Freud’s, and she uses them repeatedly and interchangeably. But the word ‘literary’ haunts her use of the word ‘literal.’ What of the role of the fictive, in trauma’s horrible impact and its equally horrifying return?

When we encounter the image of Nicole and her father, we are not apparently seeing a dream, though the depiction is dreamlike. If we are to believe what we have just witnessed, she is a willing participant—if such can be said of a teenage daughter. The scene suggests a kind of Oedipal encounter, fulfillment of what Freud describes as

a girl's fantasized desire to seduce her father. Nicole's changing into a woman's clothes—those of Billy's deceased wife, the form-fitting dress—imply a desire to transition from her childhood role. Nicole is an aspiring singer and we will later come to understand that her father promised to light the stage of her performance entirely with candles. So the candles have been imported from this promise, a shared fantasy between the father and the girl. Even the guitar is close at hand, though no one will play it. The props may be familiar to Nicole, but the tune has changed. She remains the chosen child, performing for the man who built her stage. This juxtaposition of the candles with the incestuous embrace suggests how the trauma of sexual abuse takes place precisely *through* the very manipulation of a child's fantasies. Freud may have abandoned his belief in the widespread seduction of children by their fathers—in favour of his development of the Oedipal complex—yet in this scene we see a surreal combination of the two. Trauma or fantasy, trauma *as* fantasy: the father makes use of his daughter's dream, exploits it for his own desire: indeed this is the brutal twist of incest, where abuse takes place against the backdrop of a child's Oedipal longing to be chosen by a parent. Far from downplaying the rape of a daughter by her father, this scene reveals precisely how such abuse has its particularly devastating power and long lasting effect.

Judith Butler analyzes this potential for damage inherent in the necessity of children's psychic subjection: “. . . debates about the reality of sexual abuse tend to misstate the character of the exploitation. It is not simply that a sexuality is unilaterally imposed by the adult, nor that a sexuality is unilaterally fantasized by the child, but

that the child's love, a love that is necessary for its existence, is exploited and a passionate attachment abused" (8 *Psychic Life of Power*). What Butler's statement suggests is a complex rethinking of Freud's theories of seduction with and against the backdrop of his original assessment of sexual assaults against children: here fantasy coexists with veracity, indeed makes true injury possible.

In the novel, Nicole services her father in the car—he imposes himself on her; she obliges; the scene is dark, uncomfortable, clear and quick. The next morning she pretends it has not happened—as she has done before. She can almost convince herself it was a dream. She can almost keep from recalling the sordid moment. How can a film represent this repeated struggle within her mind? How can a screen represent such internal anguish and disbelief? The disorientation we experience as we watch Egoyan's depiction forces us to undergo the same confusion suffered by Nicole. It is not clear, not at first, that this scene is entirely real. We may ourselves doubt that the events have occurred. Certainly this abundance of candles cannot be realistic—not dangerously propped as they are on top of bales of dry hay. The hazard may make us feel simultaneously apprehensive and disbelieving. The scene reveals both how a father exploits fantasy to abuse his child but also how a child has the power to use fantasy to mediate the impact of abuse. In a complex genealogy of trauma that launches her own critique of Caruth—can a victim even be considered a *subject* if an assault makes its psychic imprint without an internal representation and consequent intervention?—Ruth Leys recalls how psychoanalysts back to Anna Freud and Sándor Ferenczi have suggested that victims of sexual abuse will identify with their abuser, and

that in fact this identification is a way to manage the violation's impact (32). In contrast to Caruth's description of the direct entry of trauma, here we have a trauma that is mediated and mitigated by the child's complex imagining of events. Such management comes at a cost—a kind of splitting. The child compartmentalizes what has occurred, perhaps believing she is complicit, and therefore as much to blame as the abuser, whom she protects with her imagined romance. This is not exactly what Caruth would call a "missed experience": if there is a consciousness in film, we appear in this scene to be with Nicole's, and it does seem that Nicole knows what actions are occurring. Yet these gestures do and do not take place. The original event is accessible to representation, but this representation is revealed to be deeply distorted, mediated by fantasy: we see something romantic, even desired, a kiss in a secret hiding place, abuse elevated to a form of theatre.

The damaging effect of the trauma is displaced onto the words from Browning's *Pied Piper*. The poem speaks what Nicole cannot. And yet it speaks through her voice, like a knowledge she possesses but is unable to realize or act upon, the eerie recitation continuing as she walks past the candles and haystacks as if back into the Medieval Age: "Once more," she says, "he stept into the street,/ And to his lips again/Laid his long pipe of smooth/straight cane" The force of the father is displaced onto the Piper, the agent of the tragedy who sends the small feet of the children "pattering, wooden/shoes clattering." Nicole's recitation grows in momentum, the clattering like the pounding of her heart or the rushing of her thoughts, the children leaping into the grip of a mountain: "A Wondrous portal opened wide,/As if a cavern was suddenly

hollowed;/And the Piper advanced and the children followed,/ And when all were in to the very last,/The door in the mountain-side shut fast.” The trauma is shut fast within the poem, the abusive dynamic told through a fictive telling juxtaposed with the almost unbelievable events. Nicole is both the child left lame—in this scene the mutilation is psychic; she is forced to leave behind her childhood and her fellow playmates—and she is the dancing child travelling to a land that is “strange and new.” In this chiasmic dynamic between the mythic and the real, it is literature that bears the brunt of the night’s true violation. The downfall is her father’s, and yet the experience leaves Nicole to fall.

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“Why was that girl making out with her *Dad*?” This enquiry, overheard after a public screening of the film, can indicate how easy it is for audience members to be confused by a dreamlike depiction of sexual abuse. The wording and syntax of this question suggest a misunderstanding of the dynamic between perpetrator and victim. But at least the question is raised, and it does indicate a discomfort with what was evidently witnessed. One would hope that the dialogue within the community of movie-goers—as people stretch from their seats and shuffle back into the night air—would prompt some collective comprehension, through or with such discomfort, so that the film’s ambiguities would eventually draw viewers to engage with and trouble

their own uncertainty. Yet perhaps this is not the case. Some viewers may dismiss the scene as surreal; some may assimilate the seduction as it appears to occur and therefore fail to perceive the abusive element; some may gloss over the scene entirely, as if it were a blur they cannot translate. Egoyan has expressed frustration with precisely this confusion and its effects on the film's final twist. In his view, Nicole's testimony is an attempt to punish her father for the abuse (Johnson 90). It would be hard to comprehend Nicole's revenge if the audience has never registered the psychological violence inherent in the initial assault.

But it could be argued that the film invites such misperception, with the romanticized vignette between Nicole and her father. The interpretive fault could lie in this scene of seduction, its lack of realistic context or traumatic effect. What is more striking is that a similar error also arises when readers confront parallel relationships in the novel. "The sexual abuse," readers have said to the author, "that's not in the book, is it?" In this question, it is the depiction in prose, and not in image, that has people confused. When narrating this interpretative error, Russell Banks notes his bafflement: unlike the film, the novel explicitly refers to a realistically abusive dynamic, together with Nicole's suicidal response to it, and these descriptions take place over several pages (*Before and After*). Nicole first alludes to the molestation elliptically, asserting that "there were places that weren't safe: the car at night with Daddy alone, the living room couch, the bathroom unless the door was locked, the toolshed out back . . ." (163). We develop a menacing sense from the hints, the terrible map of Nicole's familial geography, but while we may have our suspicions, we don't yet have a clear

understanding of what is actually happening to Nicole in these places. Then she introduces us not to the abuse itself, but to its effect, as if we were progressing in reverse order to the source of trauma: “Back then, though, with Jennie sound asleep in the bunk above me, I used to lie awake at night thinking up ways to kill myself. Dying was the only way I could imagine the end of what I was doing with Daddy . . . ” (174). She alludes to what she was “doing with Daddy,” and the very elision should give us pause. She is uncomfortable revealing the extent of the molestation even to her own consciousness. Then she continues for two paragraphs to describe her respite from the abuse, the facts of which she has still not recounted: her father often left her alone for weeks, even months, and in these times she could almost believe the abuse had not taken place, that she had dreamt it. So she first presents the facts of her father “touching me that way” *after* she states she often believed it was a dream. She even references her childhood fantasies—these are not sexual in a mature way, not as she describes them, but are amorphous, childhood longings: “ . . . I had imagined some things that had made me ashamed, sexual things, sort of. Everybody does that. So maybe I had imagined this too” (174). This reflection reveals both how sexual abuse relies on and exploits early fantasies, but also how the existence of these fantasies create a self-blaming doubt in the survivor.

While Nicole frames her references to the abuse with her wish to believe that the events had been a dream, in fact when we finally reach the description of an actual assault, the gestures are clearly articulated:

But late one night he would pick me up from babysitting at the Ansels' or somebody else's, and in the darkness of the car he'd slide his hand across the seat to me and put it on my leg and pull me toward him and keep sliding his hand up my leg, under my skirt, and I knew his pants were undone and he wanted me to put my hand on him there again, and so I would and then we would do things to each other, like he had taught me, things like I knew my girlfriends did with their boyfriends after school dances and in cars with older boys but that I would never do with a boy and pretended to be disgusted about when they told me. (174)

What Nicole describes is far from a "missed encounter": she not only remembers the event, she recalls the specific actions. Even as she refers to her father's genitals with the adverb "there," even as she ends with a vague reference to the "things" they did together, the choreography of physical intimacy and the reference to the father's undone pants should make what is happening to this teenage girl abundantly obvious to any reader. Equally evident is Nicole's distaste for the sexual relationship and her ongoing troubled response. Afterward, she escapes to her room with her heart pounding and "a roaring sound" in her ears (175). She lies awake for hours, and again tells us how she thought of ways to kill herself, "But I didn't know how to get hold of any sleeping pills, so the next day I always gave it up and instead tried to make what had happened in the car coming home from the Ansels' seem like I only dreamed it" (175). While the abuse itself takes place in a few sentences—not in a candlelit barn but in the dark seat of a car—the narration of its effects on Nicole go on for three pages.

And while these gestures in the car are the only ones detailed, this scene is described with the verb 'would' to indicate repetition: these actions represent a pattern. The abuse is not a singular betrayal of a physical and psychic boundary, but an ongoing violation. She may hope to renounce its presence in her life, yet she must continuously confront the sordid truth. Even as Nicole frames the abuse in terms of fantasy—both the childhood desires that were antecedent to the abuse and the wishes for negation that are its effects—she doesn't therefore ultimately discount its reality. How then can a reader possibly encounter this novel and fail to perceive such a devastating dynamic? And how would this reader come to understand Nicole's fraudulent claims in the deposition hearing? Without a comprehension of the extent of the abuse, wouldn't the entire story fall apart?

A dog—it was a dog I saw. Or thought I saw. The misinterpretations leave the author and the director perplexed. Such a failed understanding may represent a kind of stumble in their approach to their respective art forms: misguided responses arguably reflect a failing of both the novel and the film. Russell Banks and Atom Egoyan have somehow been unable to communicate a secret at the heart of the story. Their own creative efforts have fallen. But in a bizarre way, a viewer or reader's inaccurate perceptions of the abuse—and the effect of such interpretive misunderstanding on the larger structure of the narrative with the surprise of its concluding testimony—can in fact retroactively echo the narrative at a meta-fictional level. The story succeeds as it fails. One possibility already explored is that we are encountering the abuse as would a survivor: we register the gestures and yet

immediately distort and discount them, as Nicole does with her meditation on dreams or her fantastical perception in the barn. But an equally compelling possibility is that we—the community of readers and viewers—are functioning like the town itself, sensing and perceiving a suspicious dynamic and yet refusing to let this understanding register. Evidence of abuse stretches across the screen or fills paragraphs, but we remain uncertain in our perceptions. We do not allow what we may have witnessed to betray the view of familial bonds that we hold. This is Nancy's community as fusion, where shattering knowledge cannot be sustained. At some level, we are refusing an uncomfortable confrontation with another's pain that would undermine an established familial ideal. What will the town make of Nicole's unexpected testimony? How will her words find a referent? What judgment will this community render? Will anyone, other than Nicole and her father, ever have an inkling of the truth? In the end, these questions are left open, like a murmuring awareness. "I'm sure," Dolores says in the novel's opening internal monologue, as she introduces us to some of the more unfortunate families in the town, "it was the violence that made those children act like they were different from the others. They had secrets" (10). And she has already established that such secrets are better left alone.

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When Caruth questions how we can ever gain access to a traumatic history, part of the problem, she asserts, is that “while the images of traumatic reenactment remain absolutely accurate and precise, they are largely inaccessible to conscious recall and control” (151 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*). Coinciding with vivid nightmares and flashbacks is a form of amnesia, whereby “willed access is denied” (152). The victim cannot consciously remember the event at all. Egoyan’s film demonstrates this very possibility: after Nicole survives the bus accident, she can remember nothing. Nor are we ever given direct access to her experience. “Don’t even try to remember,” says her father in the hospital. His command has an implied but no direct referent. Given the incestuous encounter we have just witnessed, his words have a double sense, referring both to the circumstances of the crash and to his secret involvement with his daughter. In fact, from this point in the film, something seems to go seriously awry whenever Nicole and her father interact, as if the crash had somehow begun to invoke their incestuous involvement.

But can an inaccessible experience conjure an earlier trauma? The film suggests that such an interaction can become a powerful possibility. The question developing through Nicole and her father’s strained relations is whether Nicole will gain access to her own traumatic history and how she will do so. *The Sweet Hereafter* presents several different ways that the mind responds to trauma: one strategy is to view it through a lens of distortion, as with the sexual abuse; another is to block out the experience entirely, as with the crash. “The mind,” says Nicole’s doctor, “is kind.” The film demonstrates something more complicated than kindness.

The trauma of sexual abuse takes place within domestic secrecy: it is often a violation between intimates, taking the familiar and making it strange. Memory in this case may not be entirely erased as Caruth describes: instead the event may be available to consciousness, but only as something made other than itself. Fantasy and displacement can provide a distance from the actual abuse, but so can recourse to the everyday, the victim experiencing as “normal” what is severely disordered. Within the barn scene, the camera leads us slowly across a close-up of a bale of hay, the screen full of its fibers just as in the film’s opening shot the screen had been filled with the lines of wood. Whereas that wood led us to a primal scene, mother and daughter and father—the three of them sleeping, the depiction innocent of malice if not, as we later learn, absent of drama—in this scene the camera leads us above the bales of hay to the shock of an incestuous exchange. But one scene invokes the other, just as Nicole may return, during the daylight hours, to a belief that her father is just like any other father, that there is nothing unusual in his expressions of love.

Yet if we may be lulled with Nicole’s initial seeming acceptance of the abuse, we are soon to be jolted into an awareness of her loss. Egoyan splices one trauma against the next. The incest scene is positioned directly before the crash, interrupted only by the bus driver’s narration of the fateful day. We lead from the disorienting encounter into a close-up of Nicole’s face as she sits on the bus. Her expression is thoughtful, but neutral. She gives little away. What is she thinking? What does she understand? How is she affected? Who might she tell? None of these questions are answered—unless the crash itself can be seen as the response.

At the literal level the crash has no connection to the rape, nor can a falling bus be a direct correspondent to the experience of incest. Yet one event immediately follows the next as if the momentum from the evening had its fulfillment during the day. In his analysis of the compulsion to repeat, Freud suggests that repressed phenomena can make an appearance through a repetition of a similar occurrence. This is repetition *contra* representation, or perhaps, paradoxically, repetition *as* representation: with conscious constraints resisting verbal or other forms of mediation, the force of the trauma must still find its expression, as if only the emergence of the event *again* will provide evidence that it occurred at all. Freud points out the remarkable ability for such a devastating repetition to occur even when the patient has no responsibility for the recurrence:

This 'perpetual recurrence of the same thing' causes us no astonishment when it relates to *active* behavior on the part of the person concerned and when we can discern in him an essential character-trait which always remains the same and which is compelled to find expression in a repetition of the same experiences. We are much more impressed by cases where the subject appears to have a *passive* experience, over which he has no influence, but in which he meets with a repetition of the same fatality. (22 *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*)

He gives the example of a woman who loses her husband only to remarry repeatedly, each time to nurse the man on his death bed. In such cases, what Freud calls us to witness is something that exceeds the return of the individual repressed: the

repetition verges on an experience of the uncanny, as if chance had its own unconscious. While Nicole obviously has no power over the crash, and while a bus accident is not akin to sexual abuse, the coincidence between the night's events and the day's suggest that the film has its own logic of expression.

Caruth makes the case that to represent trauma is to reduce the experience to something containable, which it never was. Because the event was never immediately accessible to consciousness, its relay in the future belies what the past encounter with trauma was actually like. While the event compels integration, "both for the sake of testimony and for the sake of cure," such development within the survivor's mind fails to capture the impact: "the transformation of the trauma into a narrative memory that allows the story to be verbalized and communicated, to be integrated into one's own, and others' knowledge of the past, may lose both the precision and the force that characterizes traumatic recall." (5 *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*) Were a victim able to describe the experience of trauma, the narration would be a misrepresentation: to outline the events, within a linear form, as if they were something other than a rupture of consciousness, such would be to present trauma as something we can understand, as something that can be testified to one who was not there. But trauma, by its very definition, exceeds such comprehension.

The specific trauma of sexual abuse presents its own challenges against the possibility of representation. A parental transgression is an assault against the taboos that establish kinship systems, which themselves determine meaning. It constitutes an

attack on the very relationships that create a child's understanding of self and other, good and bad. The film starts with an image of a girl asleep in the protected hold of her parents—as if to say, here is where we all begin. It introduces us to Nicole's father without making clear their bond, in fact playing on the ambiguity. The incest scene occurs at the centre of the film, a dark and disorienting vision for the audience to witness. From this moment forward, time begins to turn, the past catching up to the present. But through all the scenes that follow, no one will refer directly to the abuse, this confusing event that has made everything “strange and new.” How would Nicole narrate this encounter with her father, even to herself? It subverts the core relationships which determine her world, her sense. The interpersonal trauma is, in its way, a crash.

Through the uncanny logic of its juxtapositions, the film shows one fall in the guise of another. The first is secret, a devastating and confusing betrayal, and the second is a collective trauma publically grieved. Nicole wakes up to a new world: her parents are waiting by her bed, and she has lost the use of her legs. But she seems to have regained the use of her voice. She may not remember the crash, but the experience has paradoxically brought something forward, as if this new absence can refer back to an earlier event that also in some ways exceeded the conscious present, the repetition of trauma possessing a sense that her father cannot repress. He tells her not to remember and she glares at him. He builds Nicole a ramp to the house, offers to paint it any colour, creates for her a new bedroom on the ground floor, complete with

a veil around the bed. She turns in her wheelchair, surveys her territory. “The door,” she says, “needs a lock.”

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As Nicole eyes her father, he nervously looks away. Her regard—her gaze and her face and the opinions they contain—have become uncomfortable for this man. In the novel, Nicole is explicit in her awareness of the unease her disabled body now causes him even if her father is merely to brush against her physical presence. Without Nicole having to move or speak, her disability acts upon him. It is as if he were responsible not just for her psychic but also her physical damage, or at least that her physical damage is now irrepressible evidence that she has been hurt and he is obliged to respond. The film reveals this changed dynamic in the father’s flustered gestures, pinched features and downcast eyes, his eagerness to please her with his building of the new ramp or the room or the door, but also in Nicole’s strangely flat curiosity as she watches his reaction. Her mouth still, eyes almost but not quite contemptuous, she keeps her father in her focus. Whereas once he gazed at her with his own desires and projections—her face and body were his to exploit, as if his own daughter were an object—now she has begun to establish some new kind of relation.

Emmanuel Levinas speaks of the ethical demand of the face-to-face encounter. His *Totality and Infinity* counters the *totality* we might think we see in the other—our projections and ideas, how we assume we see their total being, knowing easily what the other represents and therefore dismissing what we see—with the *infinity* we must instead find when we realize that in facing the other we are seeing more than we can ever know: “The way in which the other presents himself, *exceeding the idea of the other in me*, we here name face” (50). It would seem in this definition that the human visage is merely symbolic of the demands of an ethical relationship, but Levinas also approaches the face as the thing itself: it is the physical entity that summons something from us. His is a humbling and demanding philosophy. Another’s singularity—their alterity from our own position and hence the alterity of their emotions and desires—exert a response and a responsibility from us. This infinity is not abstract but is rather grounded in the very being of another person, and this being is brought to us through their simple presence. Eyes, nose, mouth, so much like our own and yet different: this alterity draws us away from what we think we know of the other—that dismissal of what is not our own, or on the contrary that expectation of sameness—and instead to an encounter with what the face itself communicates: “The face is a living presence; it is expression . . . The face speaks” (66 *Totality and Infinity*). For Levinas this speech is both more and less than language. It is, at its most basic and most strange, the simple confrontation of the physical face itself—its exposure to our view, its naked vulnerability. We might recall Dolores’s husband Abbott and his indecipherable syllables emerging from a face so openly frustrated with a flailing

attempt at vocalized speech and yet somehow determinably expressive. Dolores holds this face, strokes it, encountering another who draws forth her own ethical understanding. It is Dolores who introduces us to the idea that we can find some truth in the face of the other: she says she is aware of Billy's suffering after the death of his wife. How does she know, asks the lawyer. "I could see it," she says, as if his knowledge should be obvious, "In his face."

What we encounter in the face of the other is not just their individual suffering but a demand that we engage with it. The face, Levinas argues, enacts an ethical imperative: "The other faces me and puts me in question and obliges me"(207). *The Sweet Hereafter* repeatedly confronts us with pauses in the momentum of the plot where dialogue and action are suspended and we are left to watch two characters, two actors, simply look at each other. But the arc of the plot is also spoken in these faces. Before Nicole enters the barn with her father where the sexual abuse takes place, she pauses outside in the dark, her face lit by an eerie light. Lines from Browning continue, but she does not. She stands, and her father turns to look at her, and for a moment there is an encounter we struggle to comprehend. Is he feeling guilty? Immune to his guilt? And Nicole—what is she expressing in this moment? Reluctance? Her eyes seem knowing, although her movement is hesitant. It is as if we are seeing Nicole through her father's totalizing gaze—his projection that she wants what he desires—or perhaps through her own fantasy of autonomy. Yet her visage also reveals something else. Her face flickers with uncertainty then seems almost haughty, complicit: she meets his gaze, her chin held high as she follows her father without his urging. We

might catch, however, an apprehension in her eyes—and a discomfort in his look, before he turns away, an inkling of awareness that will only later be fulfilled.

So in this moment, while there may indeed be a face-to-face encounter, the summons to an ethical engagement does not arise, or if it is suggested by Nicole's initial tentativeness—and her searching gaze as if she is invoking her father to respond—the imperative does not yet succeed to reach him or to invoke any moral reckoning or fledgling compassion. Later we will see a less confident but more honest vision of Nicole's face. After she has eavesdropped on her parents' dialogue with Billy—when she realizes that her parents are quick to trade her disability for financial compensation, even beyond what they will need to pay for Nicole's treatment—she pulls her wheelchair back into the darkness of the hallway, so they won't discover that she's been listening. Billy passes by Nicole on the way to the door. He stops, turns to her and nods, his gestures suggesting that he realizes what she has overheard, perhaps even that he knows some of what she has suffered. We see him in profile, but sense he looks not at but into her face. Her mouth opens as if she is about to say something, but she is silent. What could words express now, about her pain, or his? There is no voiceover, no music, just this moment between Nicole and Billy when Nicole's face somehow indicates a growing awareness. Recognition? Empathy? Perhaps a mutual understanding that cannot be put into words. Her face is open, vulnerable, eyes shining as if with tears. Something profound is shared between them, and with us as we witness their silent exchange.

What we are watching in Nicole's face is her growing understanding of her father's limits and her power through this understanding. That the actress Sarah Polley accomplishes this revelation through the placement of her mouth, the force of her eyes, is testament to the power of the human face to touch us, and the resonance of her expressive abilities. As Nicole matures in her insight, Polley herself seems to gain presence on the screen. We are watching the transition in which a child performer becomes an adult. Yet while we see this transformation, we are also witnessing a changed dynamic between a parent and someone who remains legally and socially a child. Nicole is a fourteen-year-old girl, and the abuse she endures is possible precisely because of her psychic dependence on her father. That we witness her growing independence does not undermine the fact that the film highlights the ethical relation between an adult and a minor. Jean-Luc Nancy does not invoke the singularity of children—what role do they play in his reconfigured community?—and Emmanuel Levinas does not meditate on the face of the child, any more than he considers the impact of the disfigured face of a stroke victim. Yet when Nancy speaks of members of a community leaning on each other, we might reflect on the radical dependency of children. When Levinas describes the face as “vulnerable,” and “exposed,” we might consider the specific vulnerability of a child, the psychic reliance on an adult, and how a child's eyes inevitably search those of their father or mother. If Levinas articulates the ethical demand exacted by the face of the other in the imperative “thou shall not kill,” what might be summoned specifically by the face of a child? The *life* of a child is one of psychological, physical and economic enthrallment to another: in this case, the

minimal conditions of not being killed are more complex. The child's face elicits actions of care. If the child is to exist, she must be attended by another. But something more, something akin to what Levinas describes as an encounter with alterity. For the child both is and is not recognizable, knowable, to the parent. And the intimate demands of care cannot preclude this fact. Nicole's piercing gaze raises the question not simply what do we owe each other within a community, but also what does a parent owe his daughter or his son—in their dependence as they mature into their own distinguishing voice. The novel makes abundantly clear Nicole's rage over her father's abuse but also more generally her resentment about how her parents use her in order to establish their respected roles in the community. What the father has stolen, she declares, is her childhood. Here childhood is innocence—but also the state of being protected from an adult's desires. We might consider these more broadly. In the film, the appropriative dynamic is established through the sexual abuse and, with a more subtle depiction, through the father's romanticized engagement with her career as a singer, which reflects his fantasy as much as her own. His appropriative view of Nicole culminates in his drive to trade her disability for financial compensation. We might specifically examine this relation in Levinasian terms, in order to consider how the child is something *other* than the projected knowledge and wishes of an adult. The child is irreducible to a finite entity over which we have power.

In many key scenes in which we see Nicole we also hear the voiceover of her singing—and when the credits roll, it is with the background lyrics sung in Sarah Polley's plaintive voice: we have concluded the story with her character being heard.

But before we hear her startling testimony and witness how it unseats her father, the film also reckons with what it means for this girl simply to be seen. When her father comes to speak to Nicole the night before the deposition hearing, she is listening not to her own singing but that of the Tragically Hip. She doesn't turn the music off when her father sits down. And this refusal suggests a shifting dynamic—she is setting the tune. Yet if we were to mute the sound momentarily on this scene, we could begin to grasp the dynamic by watching their faces alone. Her words in this intimate moment are skillful and deserve close consideration, but for a moment let's dwell specifically on what is happening to each face. Nicole speaks while looking searchingly at her father and his face does a triple take: he looks at Nicole, looks away, looks at Nicole, looks away once more, looks again at Nicole, finally looks away. He is both drawn to what her face now expresses and cannot bear to see its new imperative. It is almost as if her face itself implicates him in his responsibility. He opens his lips and closes them. His features flicker with shameful recognition, but this insight is not to be shared. In the following scene, they are together in a car and we initially see just his face—again the lyrics from the Tragically Hip continue, and now the longing for “something familiar” articulated in the lines can remind us what Nicole has lost both through the abuse and the accident. She will be one to “watch the stage through a bunch of dancers,” and not to be a dancer herself. Other than this haunting song, in this scene there is no speech. Her father's expression is glum but apparently resolute. He is in the driver's seat, yet as the shot widens we see that Nicole is sitting right behind him—and staring at him

with a remarkable strength. Her role here seems something other than passive. He appears to shrink under her backseat supervision.

In this shot it is we the viewers, and not Nicole's father, who see her face. Earlier shots make even more pronounced this dynamic between the girl's face and our own gaze: when she sits in the front seat of the bus, nothing else is occurring at the level of story. Her expression is unremarkable. There are long shots of her looking into the distance, seemingly lost in thought. What would otherwise be perhaps an aesthetic appreciation of an actress's attractive features—we have grown accustomed to these close shots, the face sometimes as large as the screen—here becomes an ethical encounter in which we must grapple with an uncomfortable knowledge. Shots of Nicole at the front of the bus directly follow the depiction of her father's abuse. Yet her features retain their mystery. We do not know how she is coping or how she configures what she must endure. Egoyan states that he had initially recorded the actress speaking in voiceover, and that these prolonged shots of her face were to be a vision we would watch as we heard her words (Director's Commentary). But his final directorial choice leaves the face itself to speak. Levinas says that the face "interrupts us," that the face "presents itself and demands justice" (294). He is speaking of the actual presence of another human being, not an image on a screen. Such an image, by definition, implies the absence of the other. But his reflection might give us pause about what we feel when we see Nicole. And her image might draw us to consider the possible call that an image itself initiates if it is not an ethical confrontation with the true presence of another. What kind of encounter is this then, between our face and

hers? As audience members we can do nothing to protect her, yet are we not inexplicably prodded beyond our own passivity? The face of the other, Levinas suggestively asserts, “at each moment destroys and overflows the plastic image it leaves me” (50).

To imply that we have fallen, that the fall of the film is our own—as viewers we have failed in our responsibility to the face we see on screen—such a claim would seem an absurdity. What can we do when we watch? How can we be obliged in this instance to respond ethically to an image? Yet the call of the image plays a significant role in this film. When Dolores first speaks and we see the wall behind her head that is covered by a mosaic of children’s faces—her own collected family, each individual appearing next to another—it seems as if the children are overseeing her dialogue with the lawyer. This effect is even more pronounced when we later catch an image of Bear, the Ottos’ son, two images, one facing left and one right. The decision to make Wanda Otto a photographer was Egoyan’s independently: in the novel she works not with celluloid but clay. And it’s a resonant choice, given the way her images echo those on the screen. When we see the two images of Bear, we are watching Harley Otto speak in profile to Mitchell Stephens. Mitchell is trying to convince him to sign onto the case—and in this way to prevent accidents in the future, as if this is what a father owes his lost child. In between the men—in the very gap between their faces, that liminal space of the encounter—are the twin images of Bear, life size, a photograph and its negative, one facing in Mitchell’s direction and one in Harley’s. It is a haunting composite portrait. There are three face-to-face encounters occurring in this moment.

The two men speak only to each other, facing each other, seemingly oblivious to the image that looks out individually at them. The living continue their dialogue, and yet the images of the son seem to speak. We might imagine what he is expecting of these adults, and what he might make of his parents' retroactive bargain with and for his loss of life. The gathering is uncanny, as if a picture could enact an ethical summons from the dead.

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Each time we hear the lawyer's cell phone ring, we are jarred from the continuing narrative of this town. We might consider then not just the role of the photograph, but also that of the telephone, this technology through which we can speak with the other without ever seeing his or her face. Nicole is not the only troubled daughter in this film, and hers is not the only fallen father. But it is not in speaking with his own relation that Mitchell is able to confront his pain and his sense of failure. In the scene that immediately follows the accident we are with him in the forced intimacy of an airplane whose rows of seats may recall the bus full of talking children. It turns out that his seatmate knows him. He doesn't seem to recognize her: her face, to Mitchell at least, does not speak. She reminds him that she used to be his

daughter's playmate. For the viewers, her image may recall the features and colouring of his blond daughter or the blond Nicole, and all three will later be invoked when the lawyer comes upon a blond toddler in the airport, as if the film wants us to remember once face within the other, one story inside the next, the way trauma will find its echoes. In an earlier scene on this airplane, the lawyer has sent his food back—he claimed there was something wrong with the meat—and he's asked the stewardess for a cold plate: is there shrimp on it, he wants to know. He asks the stewardess to remove the shrimp and "anything touching the shrimp." The stewardess responds that she's not sure that will leave much left on the plate. It's a small interaction, but suggests the lawyer's drive to control the proximate, just as he is compelled to collect a group of parents who have no tainted background, nothing to damage the case he aims to win, as if the good can clearly be divided from the bad—and what we do want can be separated effectively from what we don't.

While the lawyer is not the abusive criminal that is Nicole's father, he too has his own form of guilt from which he wants to distance himself. He relays this sense of responsibility for his daughter's current circumstance by telling a story to his seatmate about the summer his daughter was three years old. We see a flash of the initial image of the sleeping family, the beautiful and peaceful opening of the film, and then the lawyer's narration informs us that this scene is not as it appears. The daughter, he says, awoke hot and swollen and ill. Miles from a hospital, he panics over her condition and phones a doctor, who advises him she must have been bitten by spiders hiding within the mattress. The doctor gives the lawyer instructions on how to

perform an emergency tracheotomy, using a clean knife, and then tells him to be on his way. If he reaches the hospital in time, before her throat begins to close and she loses consciousness, he won't have to perform the surgery. The entire drive he holds his daughter, knife at the ready, singing her lullabies—"Hush little baby don't say a word, Daddy's going to buy you a mocking bird": he is both loving father and surgeon ready to perform the cut. Divided within and against himself, he was prepared, he says, to go all the way.

The scene is dramatic, and dramatically told—the ending delayed until his seatmate prompts him to continue. What happened, she asks. Oh, he said, nothing. We got to the hospital in time. But if the strangely anticlimactic closure leads us to feel somewhat taxed and manipulated by the telling, it also reminds us that in fact something *has* happened to the daughter: she has fallen into addiction, and the knife has become a needle. The story suggests the father feels some sense of responsibility for his daughter's state, even if the strain over her condition has turned his love into "steaming piss." We will later learn that the daughter has acquired HIV—"I tested positive," she tells him over the phone, using the news against him. "Do you know what that means, Daddy?" Within their relationship, her suffering has become an exchange of information for money, Zoe exploiting his fear for her own ends.

In earlier interactions between Zoe and her father, the camera keeps a respectful distance. What occurs with Zoe's most recent disclosure, however, is something odd. The lens zooms close to Zoe's eyes: they are all we view on screen,

although of course her father cannot himself see them. “I can hear you breathing,” she says, and the camera’s attention on her eyes at this moment suggests a kind of synesthesia, as if she were able to see a sound. “I can hear you too,” he says. The intensity of their sensuous contact reverberates through the distance of the telephone. In times when we must share or receive horrible news, there can be a kind of slippage in language, where we hear the sounds of a word instead of their sense. Here the aspiration of breath, that base precondition of speech, is for a moment the only form of communication. Then we see a close-up of her mouth. There is something unnerving in this depiction—the lips are not quite grotesque, but we are brought full force to this elemental opening of the human body. The intimacy achieved in this moment is uncomfortable to witness. There is care—an intense desire for the father to protect the daughter—but also suspicion: he has asked for a blood test, and she knows this means he doesn’t trust her or believe her recent claim. But perhaps too his query reflects his fledgling desire that in this case a lie would be the truth.

On her side too the closeness is distorted. Her need for her father is primal—the need of a dying child for a parent—yet she is abusing this need, twisting it, in the context of the call. “I want money,” she says. “You asked me what I want, not what I wanted it for.” She is willing to trade her death, or her father’s fear about its possibility, for another installment of cash. Still, there is something else that calls to us when she says she can hear her father breathing. He does not, in this moment, speak. His presence is suggested just by the sound of air leaving his mouth. For a moment the lawyer has no words. And she is listening to him. Even as he tries to communicate,

there is a fissure in the sound, a guttural cracking from his throat. Enunciation becomes elementarily physical. We will see his mouth, the lips that quiver like hers. Her eyes, her mouth, his mouth, his eyes: the father and daughter seem to be too intimate, and yet they are far apart. They are not seeing each other's face. In fact, just as he hears this news, Mitchell will call to mind not the eyes and mouth of his grown daughter, but that of his toddler when he held her on the way to the hospital, when she was in his absolute care. We see a flash of the young girl staring up at her father who we know holds a knife. The moment suggests that he feels a similar desperation to save her and perhaps also longs for a similar power. That Zoe is now HIV positive means that her life will possibly be taken from him, but it also places this life more firmly in his hands. She is scared, she tells him, and the disclosure seems honest: her body is shaking, her lips trembling. But it is hard to read her emotion independent from the context of her manipulation, as if every expression is now viewed through a warping lens. The bond over the telephone has become a form of bondage. We end with a close-up of his eyes as he says he loves Zoe, that he'll soon be there, that he'll take care of her. He offers his presence, but still at a remove. We are never to see them speak face-to-face. The camera's attention to their eyes and mouths both brings us to an intimate awareness of their physical features and the emotions these features betray, while it reveals the troubling effects of a relationship that has become wrenchingly distorted and strained, somehow too close and too distant at once. When the father says "no matter what happens I'll take care of you," his impossible promise suggests an omnipotent belief—or a desire for such belief—that he will be

able to attend to his daughter even after her death. Is he trying to comfort his daughter or himself? His ability to give his child care does not seem to require her existence.

Even as the lawyer is obviously twisting in pain for his daughter, he has his own uses for her story: before he even takes her call, he prepares to exploit it. He shares the details of her addiction with Billy as the two men encounter each other at the garage. For the lawyer the bus is useful evidence to be deployed in the future—he is videotaping the interior—but for Billy it is a memorial. Billy has returned to see the vehicle that last held his children. Billy’s grief is visible in his face but he is not willing to trade on his pain as the lawyer does, who uses the example of his daughter to try to establish kinship with the grieving parent. “Why are you telling me this,” Billy asks. He won’t fall for the manipulation. The lawyer is left speaking to himself in an afflicted but affected monologue. “We’ve all lost our children,” he says, “They are dead to us. They are gone.”

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Hush little baby don’t say a word. Nicole is not dead to her parents, and not gone—in fact, her value to them seems to have increased with the accident. “We have

a lawyer?" she asks flatly, "I have a lawyer? Why do I need a lawyer?" Her parents are keen to trade her injuries for a financial reward. When the father jumps into the conversation to ask when the damages will be awarded, even the lawyer flinches with annoyance at his keen focus on the money. Watching her parents' interactions with the lawyer, Nicole must come to a painful reckoning. Just as her father was willing to trade on her role as a singing star, and to exploit her young sexuality, he is now aiming to make use of her suffering. And he is still manipulating what she may say. No one has bought her a mocking bird, but the lawyer has bought her a computer and is intent on controlling her speech within the case: "What is it you want me to do for you," Nicole asks the lawyer pointedly. She understands that this case is intended to meet his needs as much as her own. She might well have posed the same question to her father, both in the context of the law suit and that of the sexual molestation: the statement has a double weight.

Yet when Nicole watches her father interact with the lawyer, she learns something else: her father's power has its limits. When her father interrupts Nicole to explain "what she means," the lawyer silences him with the flap of his hand. Mitchell is now the central male voice. And Nicole is learning indeed what she means—both in the sense of what precisely is her new value to her father and how she can now begin to mean something entirely unexpected, how she can herself determine sense.

"I won't lie," she says. "Whatever you ask me, I'll tell the truth." The fact that she asserts this statement suggests that she senses the lawyer wants her to be

dishonest, or that there is something dishonest about the case in its entirety. And again, the words resonate with a double sense: she was living a lie with her father, and likely forced to be dishonest to hide his abuse. But something now is changing. Her words may well linger in our minds, returning and turning when we hear her actual testimony with its lies that do something true.

Soon another man will walk into her home. Within the terms of the court case, Billy is placed in a parallel position to Nicole: he has been served a deposition to testify, in order to assert that the bus driver was driving the speed limit. The lawyer's aim is for the "bigger pockets"—the city that constructed the guard rail or the company that built the bus. But Billy has no interest in trading his children's death for a financial reward, nor does he want to relive the circumstances of the crash, cheapening the tragedy through its repetition in court. He has already lost his wife, is therefore a man practised in grief, in living daily with absence. When the lawyer asserts that he can be of help to him, as they stand next to the bus that took the children, Billy says that the lawyer can offer nothing, "not unless you can raise the dead." Billy's voice is threatening, and deeply ironic: he speaks as if he's spitting the words. His statement is true—it tells of Billy's impossible desire—and yet of course no one on earth can conjure his children to rise.

As soon as he arrives at Nicole's house, his aim is to get her parents to drop the law suit—people respect them, he says, and if they drop the suit others will follow. "Fathers, mothers, uncles, cousins, families by tens and dozens, brothers and sisters

followed the Pied Piper's lies,"—so says Nicole's voiceover as the poem continues, outlining the extent of the community's lapse. "You've got lawyers suing lawyers," says Billy, "because some people were stupid enough to sign up with more than one of the bastards." Nicole's parents defend their lawsuit—claiming they need the money to cover Nicole's expenses. But Billy calls them on this excuse, "I'll help you pay for Nicole, if that's what you're really talking about." He reminds them that people in this town used to help each other: "we used to be a community." To Billy, being a part of a community includes reckoning with loss—and doing one's best to help others as they too must grieve and encounter disability. His is not a vision of false wholeness, but rather of sharing through incompleteness. He offers a vision other than the exploitive path of false redemption. When he leaves the house, he and Nicole share their knowing look. Sitting in her wheelchair, she had been eavesdropping on the scene, saying nothing, absorbing all.

Nicole has just learned that her parents are seeking financial compensation for more than will cover her rehabilitation. But the dialogue with Billy suggests too that the father is looking for something other than what money alone can provide: winning the law suit will put an end to the story, creating some redemption for his guilt.

In the original script, Nicole's rage is made verbally explicit: a voiceover describes her dislike of her doctor, whom she calls "Frankenstein," and her anger at her mother—"I'm as well as I'm ever going to get, so just shut up," and her rage at her father—"you're nothing but a thief" and "we know who the liar is." Even her anger at

the lawyer is expressed in voiceover, as with the scene at the bus when the lawyer offers Billy his help: “You’re good at that,” she says in the original script, “Good at getting people to believe you could do something for them.” The film, in contrast, has cut this pointed internal language, and reduced her speech to the absolute minimum, letting her eyes and facial expression gain an ambiguous power, and focusing the effect on her father alone.

When Billy visits, she speaks not at all, wheeling herself only as far as the hallway so she can listen to the conversation. But she is not a child who is “gone.” Her silence has begun to have a disturbing presence. Her father comes to her room at night—the gesture itself is menacing, given what we know of their relationship—and sits on her bed, asks her why she’s been so quiet. The lawyer has coached her about how to speak in the case, and she’s agreed to go to the deposition, and it’s the night before this crucial testimony and the father seems intent on insuring she’s compliant, that she will say what he will want. “We didn’t used to need to talk about much,” she says, taunting him with false innocence, “did we Daddy?” He becomes uncomfortable. She reminds him of their shared fantasy: she was going to be a famous singer. He was going to build her a stage lit with nothing but candles. The reference immediately invokes the props in the barn—the realization falls across her father’s face. She is giving him a chance to admit his guilt, in private, even in code. But this is the moment he is both drawn to and repelled by her face. He looks away, flustered, and looks back, then looks away, presses together his lips, looks back again, pats the bed. Nicole has

learned to use silence and irony to unsettle her father's desires. And the performance has only begun.

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When Nicole states that “we didn’t used to have to talk much, did we Daddy,” she is playing with irony in order to make an accusation. But the accusation only has its effect because her father is the interlocutor. Were she to make this statement to anyone else—or to describe the theatrical stage that her father was going to light entirely with candlelight—her tone might communicate a residual resentment about the vanished dream of her singing career, but the words would fail to act as an accusation about sexual abuse. Only because the father is the one doing the listening, and only because they share a secret, does the statement have this strangely intimate ability to refer to what is not spoken, to perform an accusation against the father without making any such statement explicit. *The Sweet Hereafter* reveals precisely how the interplay between the speaker and the listener can make language come to mean and do more than it says.

In the realm of speech act theory, first developed by J.L. Austin, little attention is paid to this essential interpersonal dynamic. Austin’s primary innovation within philosophy was to divide utterances into two basic categories: constative and

performative. A constative statement asserts something to be the case: *The Sweet Hereafter* is a film about falling. This assertion can be designated as true or untrue. But the film reveals how such designations can become fraught. When Nicole says “I won’t lie,” we will learn, retroactively, that she is lying. The statement might have been intended to be true at the moment she expressed it, but she speaks in the future tense, and her future actions undo the statement’s constative truth—while giving it an uneasy performative power.

A performative statement is an utterance that enacts what it states: I warn you that the bus will fall. It is a way to do something with words. Examples include promises, vows, blessings, apologies. Performative statements, Austin explains, cannot be designated as true or untrue but rather as felicitous or unfelicitous. Austin devotes considerable attention to the various constraints and rules necessary for a performative statement to be felicitous: his focus is on the role, actions and thoughts of the speaker. If one is to christen a child or announce a couple to be man or wife, for example, one should be vested with the power to do so. One should say the right words, and intend to say them. Austin doesn’t attend specifically to the role of the listener or listeners, and perhaps this lapse can be linked to Austin’s trouble also with the role of irony, its power to create a sometimes troubling intimacy between speakers, to undo a performative statement or to make one occur where no such act is implied at the purely grammatical level.

Within the *Sweet Hereafter*, it is the lawyer, Mitchell, who uses performative statements in the classical ways that would make Austin most contented. In fact, Mitchell's opening line, "I'll accept the charges," is explicitly performative. His statement creates a simple verbal contract with a phone company: it is a way to do something with words. Yet as earlier established there is here a shadow sense, an irony of which Mitchell seems unaware—that of accepting the charges for his daughter's state, which is a more difficult contract to establish and to keep. In other circumstances, with the grieving parents, we will see that he is otherwise at ease with such difficulty: his use of the performative, even its offer of the impossible, is seemingly masterfully within his control.

Even with this simple opening line, Mitchell speaks in the future tense: he has no power over his past, and little insight: his focus is on changing what is to come. As Egoyan himself establishes, this is a film *about* the various tenses of a verb. A trauma crashes time, paradoxically fracturing the present while keeping the dead alive: when Dolores compliments the deceased boy Bear, her present-tense statement is so unnerving as it represents the extent of her denial *and* the strange power of a constative statement. Here her assertion can almost seem to have a performative effect—as if saying something could make it so.

In relation to verbal tenses, and a confusion between them, the lawyer's case promises to make the future redeem the past. Mitchell has the ability to represent the voice of others—their rage, he assures them, not their pain—and through this

representation to represent the future, a dynamic he strives to make explicitly clear. When he speaks to his potential clients, he entreats them to let him represent them: “will you let me represent you,” “all I’m saying is let me direct your rage,” “Will you let me do that. Will you let me do my duty.” Here, he possesses the ultimate power, yet his statements put the power in the hands of those he offers to represent. In each situation, he alters his tune and the promise of what his words can offer, depending on what he thinks will convince potential clients to join his case. One of the most disturbing moments occurs when he literally makes a promise: he juxtaposes a statement about his legal services directly next to a fantasy about the return of a beloved child: “If everyone had done their job with integrity,” he begins with the Ottos, “your son would be alive this morning and safely in school. I promise you that I will pursue and reveal who it was that did not do their job, in your name and the Walkers’ name and the name of whoever decides to join us. I’m not just here to speak for your anger, but for the future as well. What we’re talking about is an ongoing relationship to time.” Here his rhetorical powers are at their disconcerting peak: note that he begins with the seduction of a conditional statement, that magical ‘if’ that would play with the parents’ hope that things were not as they are. Then he juxtaposes the immediacy of this seductively benign vision, the boy “alive this morning and safely in school,” with his promise: all he can really commit to doing is to reveal who did not do the job—and even this claim is a stretch—yet the proximate relationship between this performative statement and the fantasy of the living child, the fantasy of a different past, suggests subliminally that his performative powers can

almost raise the dead. He underlies this dynamic when he describes the case as an “ongoing relationship to time”—this new bond is indeed the underlying possibility of his performative statements, which would reorient the grieving parents, give them a new future if not a new past, and thereby granting their children the ability to be themselves something ongoing.

Certain verbs align themselves specifically with the performative dimension of language: classic examples include ‘promise,’ ‘accuse,’ ‘christen,’ ‘apologize.’ Yet the verb can also be implied. In fact, the entirety of a performative statement can be implicated within the sophisticated use of a constative statement, as with Nicole’s pointedly ironic and elliptically accusative question, “we didn’t used to have to talk about much, did we, Daddy?” Whereas the lawyer makes explicit and effective use of performative verbs, Billy and Nicole—revealed to be the two moral centres of this film—are able to make performative utterances without literally making them at all. When Billy asks the lawyer, for example, if he would sue him if he were to beat him to a pulp—“because that’s what I’m about to do right now,” it is clear from the context and the dynamic between the two men that he is issuing a serious threat. Significantly, the threat is given as a question that includes a statement about future events, although that particular future does not take place. When Nicole says “I won’t lie,” she is both making a simple statement that can itself be deemed to be true or false, and asserting a kind of promise—one that her future will not keep. So there is a strange and strained dynamic here between constative and performative realms. As Austin makes obvious through his extensive analysis, the distinction between constative and

performative utterances is far from tidily established: a constative statement has a performative dimension and vice versa: “A belief in the dichotomy of performative and constative . . . has to be abandoned in favor of more general *families* of related and overlapping speech-acts.” (150 *How to Do Things With Words*) Were someone to say “the bus is going to fall,” it could constitute a warning. It could also be descriptive of an event that we viewers simply know will take place. The dominant function of the statement would depend on the context of its utterance—and who is doing the listening.

This example raises the specter of the other sense of the word ‘performative.’ What if the listener includes an audience? What promises or warnings can this film make? Within speech act theory, the word ‘performative’ refers not to the realm of theatre but rather to that of simple action, the ability for speech itself to perform. In fact, a theatrical encounter would be designated as a moment when the performative function would *not* take place: if someone were to make a marriage vow within a play, for example, or to testify in a legal case occurring within a film, the utterance would of course not ultimately have constitutive power. Irony, jokes, citations, literature—there are many moments when we might use a performative statement and not mean it, when the effect of the utterance is undercut. Austin is anxious to separate these moments from the felicitous or effective performances, asserting that our intentions shape the significance and power of a statement, as if we could fill words with our desires, and as if our desires were not themselves conflicted by unconscious impulses. Yet we can never be entirely sure what it is we mean to express. Unconscious motives

may divide our statements against themselves—and yet these statements still have performative power whether we truly want them to possess it or not. And the theatrical will continue to haunt Austin's theory: there is a script for a wedding, and its specific recitation is necessary for the performative function to take effect.

Paul de Man asks us to consider this theatrical element even further. He suggests that language has a force independent of our intent, that it performs us. A statement, he claims, operates with a machine-like power, independent of our will, just as the electric guitar continues to play on its own in Billy's garage: "The inhuman is not some kind of mystery, or some kind of secret; the inhuman is: linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tension, linguistic events that occur, possibilities which are inherent in language—independently of any intent or any drive or any wish or any desire we might have" (96 "The Task of the Translator") De Man's definition of the "inhuman" is an odd one: surely "linguistic structures, the play of linguistic tension, linguistic events" are all constitutive of our humanity, not its negation. What is unnerving when we watch the guitar is precisely that it plays after someone has been playing it: in other words, not purely independently but only after the intervention of human hands. Someone was here; someone is gone. The continuing noise represents that threshold between presence and absence, intent and accident. And in a film in which sound begins to become unrecognizable when a character encounters grief, this initial strange call of the instrument is an unsettling introduction. The playing of the guitar is uncanny, in Freud's concept of the term, something on the border between the human and the inhuman, between what we can know and what we cannot. Likewise,

performative effects both can and cannot be predicted or controlled by the speaker. We can christen a child, name a ship, say a vow, and expect that the action will have a demonstrative force. Yet ultimately a performative utterance also has a future that no one can plan in advance. To promise to find out who caused an accident may stand, in the moment it is issued, as an effective speech act, but as the film reveals, the promise may also remain a fiction. A performative statement can even take place *in and through* fiction itself, which J. Hillis Miller claims can be considered in its entirety as a speech act, a way for an author to do things with words. De Man illustrates how narrative generates unexpected referents, just as the story by Kleist can invoke his looming death in an uncanny way. De Man asserts as well that the performative can take place through the use of irony—which has its own potentially unintended effects. “Irony,” he claims, “also very clearly has a performative function. Irony consoles and it promises and it excuses. It allows us to perform all kinds of performative linguistic functions which seem to fall out of the tropological field, but also to be very closely connected with it” (165 “The Concept of Irony”). What remains to be established, however, is whether irony continues the mechanistic function of language or whether it somehow interrupts it, jamming the gears and forcing the machine to crash.

“Courage, my word,”—the lyrics of the Tragically Hip song emerge from the music machine sitting on the bed beside Nicole as the girl tries to muster whatever resources she will need for the next day’s deposition. But a word—‘courage’—is never ours to possess. How could Nicole possibly make it her own? Words communicate beyond our individual intentions. The lawsuit is continuing with a mechanistic force:

Nicole will appear in the role the lawyer has established for her. Her father has come to her room to make sure she is compliant. How will she speak as anything but a puppet? Her use of irony—and the way only her father would catch its specific force—may give us a clue as to what lies ahead.

A testimony is, in its entirety, a performative utterance: within the context of a legal deposition, each constative statement enacts a performative role. Nicole's testimony will have a specific and immediate function, but not what her father expects. In the next scene, he will continue to be the essential listener. She will speak to him—and yet past him to the community at large. She has been inserted into the machinery of the legal testimony: the lawyer and her father both trust that she will speak what is asked of her, and that the words will enact their effects independent of what it may be that Nicole could want. But we watch as she mysteriously speaks the machine—not crashing it but animating it with her own surprising force.

*

Nicole's father carries her up the steps to the community centre where the deposition will take place. Nicole does nothing to assist his movements, lying passively in his arms, keeping her upper body stiff as her legs bob lifelessly: she does not hold her father but uses her disability against him. He reaches the top of the stairs and

passes her back to the wheelchair, rolls her into the room, this wide hall of so many communal gatherings. In the background there is a stage where she might have first performed. We hear the words from *The Pied Piper*: references to the lame child, who is left behind. In this context the quality of lameness—what it means for Nicole to be lame—has begun to change. The lame child, we are reminded, is the one who does *not* follow the Piper. Disability becomes disruptive agency.

The interrogation initially follows a predictable path. The opposing lawyer poses questions and Nicole answers, her father and her lawyer watching her as she speaks. Her father sits in the corner, relegating his role as authority figure to the lawyer who is arguing his case. There is a guitar in the background, beside the stage, and it seems that Nicole is once again positioned to perform in an expected role. She says she cannot remember the accident: “I don’t remember a lot.” Mitchell is contented, lulled to believe she will continue in this fashion. But then she throws in a detail that begins to derail her testimony. It’s nothing but a dog, a brown dog that crosses the road—the driver swerves to avoid it. But the detail marks a change in Nicole’s story. It is something she claims she can remember.

Then as Nicole continues, she is able to remember more easily—“As I’m talking, I’m remembering more about it,” she says, as if the process of testimony has prompted her recall. Then a few lines later she says “I’m remembering it pretty clearly.” The questions continue and she stares at her father as she responds. The ‘it’ here refers, we can assume, to the accident, yet through the course of the deposition something

starts to shudder in her language: the referent of the pronoun becomes split, like the two-headed image of Nicole that once formed the backdrop of her singing.

In the original script, the deposition is introduced and framed by Nicole's voiceover in the scene immediately previous, where she makes explicit both her anger at her father and her developing understanding of the abuse:

He couldn't look at me. But I looked at him. Right at him. His secret was mine now. We used to share it. But not anymore. Now, I owned it completely. . . . Before, everything had been so confusing. I never knew who was to blame. But now I know. He's just a thief, a sneaky thief who had robbed his daughter. Robbed me of...whatever it was that my sister still had and I didn't. And then the accident robbed me of my body. (86)

Yet in the film, no such voiceover occurs in the scene where Nicole sits alone with her father in the bed. Nothing so explicit is said. To grasp her changing relationship, we must rely instead on her ironic comments to her father the night before the deposition and now on her increasingly strange testimony, how the description veers from the accident as it actually occurred.

"I was scared," she says, answering questions about the day of the crash. Her eyes find her father in the corner of the room. He gazes back at her as if disbelieving what he hears. His lips open and close. Nicole's eyes fill with tears, but she does not drop her gaze. The lawyers sit up in their seats. Mitchell appears worried. The deposition has veered off his course. "Why were you scared?" the opposing lawyer

asks. There was no reason for Nicole to be scared—not before the accident itself. She seems to have misconstrued the order or the verb tense of the event. “This is before the accident,” he reminds her, “Do you understand what I’m asking?” “Yes,” Nicole says, “I understand.” And what she understands at this point is that her testimony can throw the case. “Dolores was driving too fast,” she says, her eyes never leaving her father. She claims she could see the speedometer, “I remember clearly now,” she says, looking at him as if he were this mechanism of measurement, and repeats, with the same words and syntax, the sentence “I was scared.”

We were to see a flash of the speedometer—the original script brings this image to us, fifty-one miles per hour—which would contradict Nicole’s claim that Dolores was going seventy-two miles per hour. The movie offers us no such evidence. She is lying, but there is no visual proof. We are to trust Nicole—or rather trust something in what she says. We are given only Nicole’s lying testimony, and how she stares at her father as she speaks. What does she see? She is the witness, not the viewer, and at some level we cannot be sure what she is witnessing. “You’re sure of this?” asks the opposing lawyer. She answers with one word: “Positive” she says, and then later “I told you I was positive.” It’s a troubling turn of phrase, given that we’ve just heard the word “positive” said in the context of Zoe’s HIV status, when another daughter turned her pain against her father. The echo may make us attend to how Nicole’s words have begun to slip away from their seeming immediate use.

When the opposing lawyer asks her if she said anything to Mrs. Driscoll about the speed of the bus, Nicole says no. Why not? “I was scared,” Nicole says—and it’s the third time she has used these exact words, “And there wasn’t time”:

Schwartz: There wasn’t time?

Nicole: No. Because the bus went off the road. And crashed.

Schwartz: You remember this?

Nicole: Yes. I do now. Now that I’m telling it.

Mitchell: She said, ‘Now that I’m telling it’. Note that.

In fact, we note more than the lawyers will be able to perceive. Nicole has been eyeing her father throughout the testimony. On one level, she is bluntly lying about the speed of the bus. The suggestion that Dolores Driscoll held responsibility for the crash will cause her lawyer’s case to fall. The lawyer is deflated: he knows his efforts have been for naught. Yet Nicole is staring at her father. He is the one she has defeated. He will receive no financial compensation—and no redemption for his guilt. She is no longer his to exploit.

But with her statements—their vague referents, their openness to interpretation—something else occurs with her testimony. “There wasn’t time,” Nicole says: at the literal level, she means she did not have a chance to speak to Dolores about the speed of the bus before it crashed. But she says simply and repeatedly “There wasn’t time,” which could also refer to the way that trauma betrays temporal

containment—how it happens too fast for the mind to hold. In her reading of Freud's analysis in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Caruth argues that what causes trauma "is a shock that appears to work very much like a bodily threat but is in fact a break in the mind's experience of time" (61 *Unclaimed Experience*). There is no moment of preparatory anxiety or dread—the event occurs as a temporal and hence epistemological rupture:

The breach in the mind—the conscious awareness of the threat to life—is not caused by a pure quantity of stimulus, Freud suggests, but by "fright," the lack of preparedness to take in a stimulus that comes too quickly. It is not simply, that is, the literal threatening of bodily life, but the fact that the threat is recognized as such by the mind *one moment too late*. The shock of the mind's relation to the threat of death is thus not the direct experience of the threat, but precisely the *missing* of this experience, the act that, not being experienced *in time*, it has not yet been fully known. (62)

There wasn't time when the trauma of the accident occurred: time, in effect, *was not*.

The evocative phrase could also speak of Nicole's experience of the sexual abuse, which was itself a betrayal of expected temporality. The incestuous dynamic between Nicole and her father may have developed gradually—and so was not truly a shock, as was the accident—but the effect did split Nicole away from the reality of the events, as we witnessed with the fantasy-like image of the seduction. This distortion was itself a betrayal of time, a denial of the abuse at it occurred. But now Nicole

knows what her truth is. And she has already told us she will not lie. When Nicole says “I was scared,” when she looks at her father as she repeatedly says the words, she could be referring just as easily to the rape. It too “happened too fast,” speeding Nicole past the time of her childhood to a secret sexual experience she could barely grasp. She remembers, she says, “Now that I’m telling it.” The pronoun’s referent is disturbingly vague: the performative act of testifying has given her the ability to voice her secret and yet maintain it as such.

Nicole speaks it aloud—and yet what does she speak? Hers is not a traumatic reliving of these ordeals, not a literal return of either event. Neither is it a directly referential description. Instead, she has performed something more ambiguously powerful. If trauma cannot be effectively described to another without misrepresenting the experience, here trauma is presented only as language itself begins to fall. The words evoke the accident—and don’t evoke the accident, as the listeners are aware. She is lying—there is no direct referent for her claim. And yet through this failure, the words gesture toward the unspeakable. Her father watches her—he is the essential listener—and he knows now what she remembers.

The original script focuses on the way that Nicole has thwarted her father’s desire for financial gain: “Daddy was leaning forward in his chair, his mouth half open, as if he wanted to say something. Like what, Daddy? Like ‘What about my money?’” The lying testimony is an act of revenge. The movie returns us instead to the myth of

the Pied Piper, which we will remember encountering during the scene of Nicole and her father's sexual embrace. But now her voice departs from the familiar:

And why I lied, he only knew

But from my lie, this did come true

Those lips from which he drew his tune

Were frozen as a winter moon.

Watch his lips: we can do nothing else as the camera zooms in for a close up of his open silent mouth. Nicole's telling has done more than force her father to look at her anew: it has altered his own features. The cinematic gesture echoes the moment shared between Zoe and Mitchell and indicates here the distorting force of a face-to-face encounter when the ethical relationship between a parent and a child has gone horribly wrong.

If we were initially confused about the seduction that occurred between Nicole and her father, the romantic candlelit moment in the barn, we are now given a stronger sense of what Nicole feels about the event. Whereas the original script gives Nicole a chance to speak aloud to herself and to name her father explicitly as a thief, here we have recourse to myth, these strange new lines within an old tale. But reference in this additional stanza seems to shudder. Given the line break in the poem, the word 'this' initially has an unclear antecedent. Can a lie create a performative effect? *What* has come true? Some meaning seems here to be suspended. Nicole has

interrupted the Pied Piper myth, rewriting the story. She has done more than end the lawyer's case and her community's hopes for financial gain. She has frozen her father's lips, that mouth that initiated the sexual encounter and the lies that would surround it. She has both betrayed the secret and kept it to herself. She has taken the law's machinery and played a new disturbing tune.

"The witness I bear," J Hillis Miller tells us in his *Speech Acts in Literature*, "the testimony I give, can be given only by me alone. I alone can bear witness for what I witnessed. Witnessing is absolutely individual, sui generis, unique, private, singular." (85) Yet as Caruth suggests, the survivor of trauma can hardly be considered a witness at all. Who can testify to an event that shatters time and memory? How could this be done? Nicole is the only one able to bear witness to her experience, yet we watch as her lying testimony breaks her witnessing apart. At the level of legality, her performative statement is unfelicitous: her perjury means that she has betrayed the rules of the game. But it is this betrayal that enables Nicole to use language to do exactly what she wants. The very unfelicitous quality of her words is what enables them to have their surprising performative effect. The case falls, and her father falls with it. Her interlocutors must listen to her—not for the representational reality to which her words refer, but rather for her lie's strange new world.

Nicole does not say what she means, but she means what she says. "You'd make a great poker player, kid," Mitchell says to her. "Thanks," she says, as if he intended the compliment. Their ironic exchange underscores the irony of the entire

testimony, irony in the classical sense of saying one thing and meaning another. But there is also a shivering dramatic irony: we are included in the intimate knowledge that only two characters in this public room now share. No one but her father will know exactly what she means: the performative effect of her statement depends on his being in the room. He is her witness. She watches his face and makes him watch hers. She has reversed their dynamic: now she is the Pied Piper and he the passive recipient of her manipulation. Yet her manipulation occurs in a public situation, with the legal team as onlookers, and with an implied audience of the entire community. She is speaking to her father, and through him. What will the community be led to think? "Right now, Sam," says the lawyer to her father once they step outside of the community centre, "the thing you've got to worry about is why she lied. A kid who'd do that to her own father is not normal, Sam."

"Irony and history," Paul de Man cryptically reminds us, "seem to be curiously linked to each other" (184 "The Concept of Irony"). Here the irony historically is that those who do find the words to speak about sexual abuse are often not believed. But in this film no one is left to judge the status of any such testimony. Nicole says not a word about the abuse. And when she describes the accident, she *is* lying. That is the twist. She falls, and yet she does not fall: she makes a false accusation and yet through the refractory power of her statements, her vertiginous words have impact. Her lie finds a truth. Like Kleist's invalid with the false limbs, Nicole has acquired the power to dance. Unlike Kleist's invalid, she also has the ability to force others to dance

with her. “Do you think we get to keep the computer?” she asks her father innocently when they have returned to the car, leaving him nothing but to answer her question.

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Nicole has altered the community’s future and, through a relationship to this future, she has altered her own past. Here lies the power of myth—or rather of an old myth told in a new way. “The interruption of myth,” Jean Luc Nancy reminds us, “is the interruption of community” (57 *Inoperative Community*). The community members must lean on each other, as Billy hoped they would, living without absolution, without wholeness, with no redeeming compensation for damage and loss. There is no offer of a false closure, only the reality of living with grief. We are taught the lesson through Nicole’s moving voiceover. The scene occurs in the future—the lawyer has disembarked from the plane he shared with his seatmate Alison, and as he prepares to enter a taxi he is surprised to see Dolores, now working as a driver for an airport transfer. They stare at each other, each with an uncomfortable half-smile. What is it they recognize? We hear these words from Nicole:

As you see each other, almost two years later, I wonder if you realize something. I wonder if you realize that all of us—Dolores, me, the children who

survived, the children who didn't—that we're all citizens of a different town now. A town of people living in the sweet hereafter.

This address is a strange interruption as it departs completely from the film's jagged realism: Nicole cannot see these characters, not literally, and yet here is her voice, as if she has become the author of the tale. What and where is this "different town"? It is not the afterlife, as it includes children who are living. It is not life, as it includes children who are dead. It seems to be not a place, but a time, a realm of consequence. The film shatters temporal order and then ends with this continuous present, a different town *now*, which can somehow contain the living and the dead.

We are left with three scenes that include depictions not of falling, but rising. We see the bus levered by cables so that it floats above the ground of the garage, Billy watching it, respectfully holding his hat—and we hear the final words of Nicole's soliloquy: "where everything is strange and new." These are familiar words, yet their context gives them a different nuance. Billy is allowed, quite simply, to grieve. The bus lifts, not by its own force: it hangs suspended like a puppet, with a strange new grace.

We see Nicole gazing up at a Ferris wheel—a machine we first encountered as the backdrop at the county fair. Now the sky is twilight and the Ferris wheel is glowing, moving clockwise like the inevitable turning of time. Nicole watches it, smiling. The giant wheel is circling, falling then rising, children sitting just as Nicole must sit, their legs bobbing passively as their chairs lift them into the sky. But as we listen to her incantatory retelling of the Pied Piper myth, this particular image of a Ferris wheel is

spliced by another, the shift so subtle that at first it appears we have only changed our perspective. But no, this ride is a different contraption, with canopies perching over the seats like protective shields, and its movement is counterclockwise. Indeed, if we look close enough, we see that this Ferris wheel lacks the neon light that decorates the spires of the first one, and now the sky seems lighter—perhaps we have arrived at an earlier time of day, or even further back in time, travelling on this machine to the fair we witnessed at the start of the film. Turning in the corner of the screen, lifting the children away, the wheel is shadowy and off-kilter and spiraling backwards like the bizarre reversing dial of a clock.

In the final scene of *The Sweet Hereafter*, Nicole literally closes the book: we flash back to our initial introduction to *The Pied Piper*, when she was reading aloud to Billy's twins. We fall through time, yet instead of disorientation, this jump cut offers comfort, the way a sweet recollection can momentarily sooth a grieving mind: here the children are still alive, only asleep, Nicole kissing first one on the cheek, and then the other. The easeful intimacy offers solace after the other scenes we have witnessed. When Nicole walks into the hallway, the headlights of a car light up the window, illuminating her body, bathing the screen in light. In the actual scene as it first occurs in the film, it would be too early for Billy to return in his truck—Nicole has not yet tried on his wife's clothing. Her father, too, would not yet have arrived to pick her up. So the illumination cannot be reduced to a literal effect. But if this glare at the window is to represent her father, waiting for her—and the experience with him that awaits—we can tell that something has changed. The past will continue to take place,

as nothing can alter the course of events, but the perspective for Nicole has had a dramatic shift. Her role in the testimony creates a new juxtaposition for this memory, and so our return to this moment represents not the repetition of trauma but rather its complex resolution. What might be a menacing glare now seems otherworldly, like the sweet hereafter where Nicole and her community must forge their lives. The film began with dappled light and shadow falling across a wooden floor and across the idyllic temple of sleeping innocents, and it concludes with these sleeping children and a standing girl, a girl become woman who has taken a stand, and who now finds herself caught in this mysterious spray of light that rises as bright as the sun.

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Note on *Hook Tender*

Given the word limits for a PhD thesis, I'm including only an excerpt of *Hook Tender*. This entire piece is from Eva's perspective, stopping halfway through her tale. To gain a sense of the larger context, please consult the synopsis and the other excerpts included as appendices.

To find out what happens to Eva, please buy the book...

Part Three

Hook Tender

Excerpt of Novel

There's a torn and splintered ridge across the stump I call the "screamers." These are the unsawn last bits, the cry of the trunk's heart, wrenching and tearing apart just before she gives that swing and the dreadful groan of falling—that dreadful pause while her executioners step back with their saws and axes resting and watch. It's a horrible sight to see a tree felled even now, though the stumps are grey and rotting. As you pass among them, you see their screamers sticking up out of their own tombstone, as it were. They are their own tombstones and their own mourners.

—Emily Carr, *Hundreds and Thousands*

It's my turn. The men nod as I shoulder myself into their game, Olaf strapped to my back, legs kicking. I bounce him up and down to the wheezing beat of Whisker's harmonica. *You are my sunshine, my only sunshine.* Hitching up my skirt, I make a play of spitting on my hands before accepting the horseshoe.

"Give it a kiss, Eva." "Yeah," they shout, "give her a kiss for luck."

I toss it through the air casually, feeling the warm metal leave the tips of my fingers. The arc is perfect. Then a burst of dust. The horseshoe rings the post with a loud clang.

The men clap and cheer. They cast bets on my doing it again. Squeaky Bob and Runaway have climbed into the Doug Firs that shadow the camp, their boots shaking the branches as they ascend, needles falling to the ground. They are greenhorns, still ready to shinny up a tree for sport. The sky shines blue behind their outstretched limbs. Runaway dangles from a branch with one hand while he waves at me with the other.

I wave back, reaching around to adjust Olaf. He's dry. We'll see how long that lasts. I tickle his plump legs and he laughs the peeling glee of a toddler, all unprotected joy. The men grin as the sound loops around them. Last week Cook chided me that Olaf is getting too big to carry, but I can still move faster with him strapped to my back than I can dawdling along the trails beside his poking curiosity. I sewed his harness from one of Thorvald's canvas shirts and the straps have begun to dig welts into my shoulders, but I like to feel the weight of my boy, how he balances what I'm carrying up front.

I'm here to collect the week's provisions. Today the railway speeder ran afoul of the tracks and everyone's killing time waiting for it to arrive. A few more rounds of horseshoes, and I start my sweaty walk across the camp, Squeaky and Runaway whistling and shouting catcalls. Chickadees join their cacophony. The men's attention only makes me laugh. I'm eight months along and all the fantasy they've got.

"Use your left hand tonight, boys," I shout. "It'll feel like a stranger." I keep walking, Olaf's feet tapping my hips.

The loggers are down from the mountain, last shift of the week and the camp has lost that empty feeling of the hours when they're gone. Now they're thumbing pulp fiction, talking lazily with the blacksmith, playing poker on rickety tables. Whisker keeps blowing his desperate tunes into that harmonica and Seaball has started croaking the lyrics. *You make me ha-a-a-pp-y when skies are grey.* Men nap in the sun, flat on their backs, mouths open to the flies. Men flick roll-your-owns and wander from bunkhouse to bunkhouse to bargain for moonshine or girly magazines.

Thorvald is sitting upright on a wooden chair, beside the card players—pretends he doesn't see us, sharpening the blade of an axe he's clasping between his knees. He told me to stay at home and rest today.

At his feet is the damned bird the men gave us as a wedding present. The loyal whisky jack pecks at the laces of Thorvald's boots.

Olaf starts wailing, reaching toward his father, and even then Thorvald doesn't look up, just keeps his hands busy. Smokey smiles at me a bit too generously. The

men will be able to sense we've had a spat. That's not what Thorvald would want. He's a private man, stubborn. He'll keep silent until it hurts him.

He puts down the axe and stands up, his back to me. I walk up to him and press my bump against his body. I hope this is enough. I'm not great at apologies and don't think he deserves one. He doesn't reach behind to hold me, but doesn't pull away either. I can feel his muscles adjusting. His shoulders relax. He sighs.

Before he left for work this morning I told him I've got a few weeks to wait and I'm not going to loll around at home until it pops out. I was never good at taking orders, I said, and I'm not going to start now. Whenever I raise my voice, he looks at the floor. He studies that floor. This time he let out a laugh, one exhalation of air. He didn't need me to tell him what I'm like.

The open cookhouse door releases a smell of oil and burnt milk. The heat of the afternoon has its own stink—fresh tobacco, skin streaked dark with sweat, hair gone a week unwashed. I wave my braid to keep horseflies from landing on Olaf's nose, black specks skittering through the air along jagged lines as if bumping into invisible walls.

With Olaf on my back and the baby rounding my front I'm wider than the biggest of the men and I maneuver my body between their bodies. Snowball pulls up his shirt to display his beer belly.

"You got me beat, Twig. Looks like that baby weighs more than you."

"This one's a girl. I'm betting on it."

"Sugar and spice. What are the likes of you gonna do with a girl?"

"I need the company."

"Always got company."

At his feet is a large metal pail full of peaches. I reach down and take one, biting past the fuzz of skin into a sweetness that leaks down my wrist. I give Olaf my finger to suck. His gummy strength still shocks me. Nodding at the men, I greet by nickname the ones I know. A few glance over at Thorvald as if asking permission to greet me back.

I walk up the stairs to the cookhouse, where someone's frying chicken. My stomach gnaws at the smell. A few months back, I'd be quivering with nausea, but today I could out-eat any man. A couple of loggers lean against the wall, watching Gravy sweep up what he's spilled. Cook sees me and reaches as if to give me a hug, his hands slick with grease.

"When are you coming back to me, Eva?"

"Soon as you have a job for a toddler." I unpeel Olaf and let him loose. He picks up his feet and puts them down, watches them, glances at me delighted and surprised. Look what legs can do. Then he points with noises of frustration at the pan spattering on the stove out of his reach.

"His job is to eat," Cook says. "Isn't it, Olaf?"

"What you got besides chicken?"

“The speeder’s late. We’re making do.”

Olaf is always thrilled to watch the railway speeder arrive into camp on a Saturday, the V8 motor trailing smoke as it rattles along the tracks, but today the mountain’s been quiet, no grinding roar to warn us of its approach.

“That boy have teeth yet?” one of the loggers pipes up, leaning forward to peer at his mouth.

“He’s still all gum. Does his best. I see you’ve lost one of yours.”

“Tooth fairy,” he shrugs. I notice he’s also missing a thumb. He’s too wizened to be a greenhorn, but I don’t recognize him. “I had one of those once,” he says, pointing at Olaf. He shakes his head like this news is a curiosity even to himself. I wonder if he simply lost touch, like most of them do.

In the lull, just the shuffling sound of the men’s boots, the spit of oil in the pan, then I hear Simple making his approach, his moaning growl. When he reaches the doorway, he stands rocking at the threshold, swinging his arms forward and back as if he needs this effort to propel his body into the room. It’s me he’s staring at, although his gaze is a bit to the left. I feel I should step sideways to meet it.

I shuffle through the cupboards for a bowl so I can mash up a bit of that chicken for Olaf. Gravy passes him a wooden spoon, which he bangs on the floor. Cook slides his foot close to the spoon then pulls it away just as Olaf tries to hit it. Cook performs this dance again and again and each time Olaf makes a new determined effort. I scoop

a potato out of the boiling pot and add that to Olaf's lunch, blowing to cool it, then add a spoonful of the drippings before I mash everything together into something he can chew with those gums.

Even with Simple standing there drooling at me, I feel more comfortable in this kitchen than I do in my own. For more than a year I peeled carrots in that corner by the sink, chopped potatoes, skinned chicken, and hauled meat from the freezer, served the plates, yelled back at any man who dared make a complaint. I even slept in this kitchen when I first arrived, curled up like a cat on top of a couple of bags of flour, before the men knew where to put me. You can sleep with me tonight, Eva, their voices rising from the dining hall. Yeah, they'd shout, just two men to a cot, plenty of room for a Twig. There'd be murmurs and jokes about their own twigs, while I collected their plates, and swung my hips back into the kitchen.

Now Cook hoists Olaf up to the cupboard and I feed him the mashed chicken and potatoes. He opens and closes his mouth on the spoon, gazing at the food with great concentration. He's always happy to eat.

When Olaf is done, he wants the spoon, which he immediately flings into the air. Gravy makes a display of ducking out of its path, then lifts him down so Olaf can explore. He finds the dustpan and tries to pick it up, drops it, tries again, begins to cry. Cook hands him a ball of fried dough and that quiets him. I stretch, reaching toward the ceiling, enjoying the freedom of my arms. Simple walks forward and places his

hand on my belly. I let him, but I don't like the feel of his fingers. The other men glance awkwardly at what he's doing.

"Come on now, Simple. Why don't you bother one of us."

"I wish this baby was out of me," I say, my voice too high-pitched.

Simple has seen other men touch my bump so I guess he feels he's got permission. I'm not even sure he knows what's inside it. He's always poking at my back or clinging to my arm, brushing his hand against my breast, a kind of longing in his eyes, that lonely hunger. I'm the only woman in the camp and the intensity of his attention makes me uneasy.

"All right," I say finally, backing away, but he lunges forward, flailing at me with both hands.

"All all Eva all," he says, nodding his head, then babbles something none of us could possibly decipher.

I back into the wall, and still he comes at me. I laugh like we're playing a game and circle around and manage to swipe Olaf off the floor, hitch him onto my back without taking the time to tuck him inside the bolster. I want to move swiftly, but my cumbersome belly weights every step.

Outside, I scan the crowd for Thorvald, but can't find him.

The screech and roar of the railway speeder echoes up the mountain. Olaf knows what he's hearing, tugging at my skirt. Then the rattle and clatter as it skids into camp and screeches to a halt in front of the cookhouse. Three men from the kitchen immediately begin unloading sacks of flour and containers full of fresh beef and pork.

"A feast tonight, Eva," Gravy shouts as he heaves a box up the steps. "You should join us."

"Thorvald likes to eat at home. He's had enough of your cooking."

"I don't think it's your cooking he married you for."

"Cheeky bastard. Get back in the kitchen where you belong."

I've got Olaf gripped by the shoulders so he doesn't try climbing onto the speeder or scooting underneath it.

He was almost born on that thing, which I'll tell him once he's grown. My water broke just after an ice storm and the roads were still slick and dangerous but the company had cleared the railway so I climbed right onto the speeder, with Thorvald and a couple of the men jumping aboard to accompany me. The wooden ramp has no sides to it. We were riding a raft down the rails. The headlight tunneled through air that was dark and bitter cold, the woods swooping along beside us, a blur of white. The speeder jammed in spots where the ice had crusted to the metal and the men had to leap down to use their axes to chip the ice away. Thorvald stayed on the speeder with me. First I was sitting then I was lying flat on my back. He did his best to brace my

shifting weight, my enormous belly right in the centre of the rattling wood. We were chugging forward, the motor rumbling underneath my spine. The labour pains started to come faster, and I was groaning with each spasm, and yelling every curse word I could remember, and that's when one of the men started to laugh and I said I'd kill him once this baby was out of me. Then we were all laughing, even Thorvald with his worried look on his face. We were hooting and hollering into the trees as the speeder rattled down the mountain.

"I'm not riding that damned thing this time," I shout out now to the timekeeper.

He smiles meekly, carries the mailbags up to the commissary. I realize he wasn't working in this camp that winter, and won't know what the hell I mean.

I didn't give birth on the speeder, or the story would have travelled. We made it to the ocean where Thorvald and I caught a tugboat that took us to the mill town doctor, the men waving goodbye from the shore and shouting good luck.

Olaf and I stay clear so the men can march up the sidewalk to pick up their mail, their voices quieting as they stand and read their letters and postcards, some of them walking past us to the bunkhouse with whatever correspondence they haven't yet opened, maybe saving it for after dinner when they can finally slice through the envelop they've kept for darker hours. I imagine they'll read the words slowly, passing their eyes twice over the page, maybe bringing it to their nose, smelling for someone

they miss. The men who return from the commissary empty-handed are already rolling a smoke and bantering among themselves, as if they don't care.

Someone is poking me in the back, a persistent prod between my shoulder blades. When I turn around, it's Simple. That stupid lopsided smile on his face.

I twist away, grab Olaf and hoist him onto my hip, Simple lagging behind, calling my name until one of the men distracts him. Other men are leering at me, some of them, now that I'm near bursting out of my shirt. I can usually hold my own with a quip and roll of the eyes, but what would Simple understand? The urge to grab at me seems more base with him, urgent and childlike. But no, not childlike. Something he can't quite organize in his body. A line of sweat runs down my chest, my swollen belly sticking out for all to see. I push through the crowd, stomp along the wooden ramp that slants up to the commissary door and into the dimness of a room full of mailbags and canned food, the sound of my boots on cedar.

Inside, Poker and Hoppy hunch over the counter, listening to the static crackle of a radio and murmuring about the score. Smokey rambles on about some whore he hasn't had.

"She's passing around the clap. The faller's cabin is crawling. Must have picked it up on that last trip down south."

"Down south, you say Smokey?" The men guffaw then shush when they see me.

“Don’t worry,” I say, letting Olaf onto the floor. “There’s nothing I haven’t heard.”

Olaf scrambles up to the men. But these aren’t the kitchen staff. Poker nudges him away with the toe of his boot.

“Come for your mail, Eva?”

“No one’s writing me. I got my family right here.”

On the counter three postcards haven’t been collected. There are always a few that remain, addressed to men who are no longer here, who have travelled up north or died.

I’ve ordered molasses, flour, cans and cans, a glistening ham, a side of shank roast wrapped in wax paper. The timekeeper has divided everything into two well-stuffed bags. Olaf is grabbing at my skirt. I’ve got to head home, get this boy fed. And Thorvald will deserve a hot meal after such a long shift. I scoop up the two bags, balancing one on either side of my belly as Simple comes through the door, eyeing me with that dumbfounded drooling look of his. He flaps at the groceries. Wants to help.

“No, Simple, no, I’ve got everything. I can handle it fine. You keep to yourself now. You keep to yourself.”

Resting the groceries back on the counter, I wait while he mutters. I leaf through the postcards, pretend absorption. Dear Grizzly. Dear Seesaw.

There's a ruckus at other end of the counter, men arguing about a bet.

Simple stands close, breathing with a gargling sound. It reminds me of seawater pulsing through the gills of a beached fish.

"What happens to the postcards that are not collected? They get tossed out?"

But the timekeeper doesn't respond. He's involved in whatever pitch or score has got the men excited. The announcer's voice is lost over the wave of screams from the sport fans.

Simple is staring at my breasts, the gaping space where a button has popped. Impulsively, I slip the postcards into my brassiere, the corners jabbing my skin.

Olaf is laughing, grabbing at my legs.

"Stop it, Olaf, I'm telling you. The games are over. We're going home." I lift the groceries into my arms, bristling with energy as I whisk past Simple and into the sun. As I start my way down the wooden ramp, Olaf runs right under my skirt, and then I feel myself tipping.

It is not such a long way to fall.

My hip hurts first. I land at an angle on the damned ground and flail around to check that Olaf is alright. He's on his feet, mouth wailing, both hands grasping his ears as if to block out his own noise. My water hasn't broke, my belly is hard and round, the baby safe. All I can do is roll over on my back like a bowling pin. I want to stretch under

that wide sun and let the pain leach into the ground. But Seaball is quick to lever me up and the men have their laughs at my clumsy expense, trying to nurse a smile out of me.

A couple of the men shout for Thorvald. The ones who speak Norwegian yell something I try to understand. The word for *broken*.

I shake my head and wince at the effort to speak. "Don't you tell him, will you? Don't any of you say a thing."

But of course he runs over to me, his face tightening into a pained grimace, the men bobbing around him.

I'm sitting on a chair that Cook brought from the kitchen, one of the legs shorter than the others so I can't keep it stable. Thorvald kneels down to examine the flap of torn skin at my elbow. I make a feeble joke about what I have to do to get my husband on his knees.

He asks if I can move my arm and I nod, show him that I can.

"Legs too. Everything works. Nothing a bandage won't fix."

He cups his hand on my belly. The men do their best to look away.

"How did you fall, Eva?"

"I'm fine. See. We're fine. Just a spill."

Simple has slunk off somewhere, probably as soon as he saw Thorvald, and now even Olaf is trying to hide. We have to scoot him out from where he's hunched beneath the ramp. I'm limping slightly, but refuse Thorvald's arm when he offers it. We don't talk until we've reached the far end of the camp where the woods open onto a trail and the air cools around us.

"Beans," he says, "would be easy."

Before I respond, he nods, proud to have presented some resolution. He's taken Olaf off my back and hitched him to his own. I can feel the absence of the boy's weight. I keep pace with Thorvald though my hip is aching, the skin on my elbow raw. Flashes of sun in the trees. I've got that sharp dazzling sensation you get after a fall. The whisky jack flits above our heads and lands on a branch, squawks at a blue jay.

"You won your game," Thorvald says.

"We weren't betting. Not this time."

"Nothing gained, nothing lost."

The breeze rising from the ocean sways the branches and lifts the sweat from my face and arms and the patch on my back where I was carrying Olaf. The tension between us has dissipated, though our conversation is tentative, careful, the way we balance our feet on the stones that cross the creek. Beans and ham we've agreed on so far—and fried potatoes, I add. Lots of fried potatoes. I don't point out that a cooked dinner will mean heating the stove on a day that will already have warmed the

kitchen through those slanting walls. Or that I'm now so ravenous I could eat the beans cold. I'm content with the rumbling awkward way we end our disagreements. I've managed to have my way, and I'll fry him what he wants. We have come to a truce. Thorvald lifts Olaf onto his shoulders. The boy reaches up to fist pine needles.

A gold streak in the bushes, crawling beside us.

With a coyote or a black bear, even a wolf, you might raise your hands above your head, to appear larger than you are, but you won't frighten away a wild cat. All you can do is try to shrink smaller. Thorvald's long limbs freeze in place. His hand around Olaf's leg. Our boy stays quiet. The cougar moves slowly, only a few yards away. I fear the creature will claw my belly. My heart thuds so hard even this internal pressure seems like it could harm the child. But there is a deer further ahead, nibbling at the ground, and the cougar is lurking closer to that. Paws somehow silent for so large an animal. Then the deer lifts its head, sniffs the air, turns and sees the approaching cat, and bounds away. The cougar darts through the woods, lurching after it. Birds rise into the sky, their panicked calls too late to warn the deer.

We glance at each other, not ready to move. Thorvald takes my hand and does not let go his grip even when we've reached our house. I'm trembling. Thorvald is trembling too.

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The downstairs area is one long room, the walls slanting inward, west meeting east, so it feels the house is holding you. In the window I've hung a chain of paper cut-outs, men linked hand to hand that Olaf and I scissored from newsprint. Sunlight falls through the cut-outs, creating pale shadows that quiver on the table and floor. The pattern of darkness and light flits across Thorvald's blond hair, Olaf's dandelion fluff.

I keep an eye on them as I dry the breakfast dishes then lift the tea towel on the rising loaves of bread, pressing my thumb to test the give in the dough.

Thorvald stretches his arms behind his head, his lanky legs splayed sock-footed on the floor. He always seems a bit too big for the house. Wooden blocks lie scattered around his body like a village surrounding a giant.

The kitchen I keep tidy, which is a surprise to me. That I'd take care with such things. I'll get these pans and dishes stacked away, tuck the syrup back in the pantry, leaving nothing but a bowl of fruit on the counter, yellow tea towels hanging by the stove. There's a different feel you get living in a dwelling when you've built it yourself. I never gave much thought to being anyone's wife or mother, but the fact that I sawed and hammered the cedar for these walls gives me the sense I've built my very life from the woods around us.

Our house is an A frame, a mile from the camp along a narrow trail the men helped us clear. Thorvald insisted on the distance, close enough to walk but far

enough that we can't hear the ruckus. He is the sole logger to live with a wife, and I suspect he savors the moment each Saturday when we walk away together.

I've got the arm bandaged, but it's still pulsing, and my patchwork skirt hides a bruise as big as a plate.

The baby inside me was quiet last night, no tumbling or kicking. Olaf made enough noise for two. Dark by the time we had him settled down. The whole evening a shambles. Before we tucked into dinner, Thorvald went to the shed and came back with two white pills like unblinking eyes on his wide palm. What I wanted was a glass of whisky.

Even with those painkillers I couldn't sleep. A ratchity nervous feel crept through my limbs.

Now Thorvald's careful not to disrupt the blocks when he gathers himself up and saunters to the door to pull on his boots, Olaf ambling beside his father, babbling his nonsense.

In the corner of the yard is the skeletal frame of a chicken coop, a project we're hoping to finish before the baby arrives, which only gives us a couple more Sundays. Today I'm relegated to sitting. Thorvald wants me to stay indoors, but I tell him he needs my supervision. I wipe a three-legged stool free of sawdust, settle my bulbous weight on its tiny base, and pull out a roll-your-own, my first of the day, inhaling the fumes and blowing donuts for Olaf to chase. Thorvald saws and carries, working

slowly, dragging the beams across the yard on his own, the end digging into the dirt. He builds one wall with rough hewn slabs of wood while the heat bears down on his head.

He pauses his saw to ask how I'm feeling, eyes squinting in the sun. Do I need to go lie down?

I tell him I'm admiring the view.

Scaling the side of the chicken coop, Thorvald lifts himself onto the roof. Except there is no roof, not yet, just the wooden outline where the roof will go. He balances along the center beam like a tightrope walker. Arms outstretched, he dips one foot then the next, positioning each in a line, impossibly skillful in his massive boots. But his most brilliant feat is always the descent. He reaches the end and does a handstand, holds it, twirling his body as he drops to the ground, landing softly, bending his knees. The earth itself seems buoyant. It still surprises me, how a man so tentative in his words can move his body with such uninhibited grace.

Olaf stares spellbound, then returns to building a pile of shingles from another pile of shingles.

I never get the sense Thorvald does these tricks for the display. He casts his eyes downward when he's finished, as if embarrassed by what his limbs demand of him.

With the weight of the baby pressing on my bladder I have to make multiple trips to the privy, glad I'm not in the camp where I'd have to sneak off into the woods. When they aren't pissing against the side of a building, the men all sit ass to ass in one long outhouse, newspapers thrown down over the rising stench.

I emerge from the dark space and find Thorvald struggling to corner one beam of wood with another. I lean down to help.

He looks at me with concern, then in his lilting voice he offers instructions, explains why he's constructing it this way. He jimmies the two pieces together. "Hold please," he says, and picks up the hammer.

I bend to grasp the corner, my small fingers next to his giant ones.

"There, yes." He hits the nail expertly, lightly, so close to my hand. "*Takk*," he says, almost under his breath, the way he speaks any Norwegian.

He's ashamed of the language. I grasped that right away, how he tries to hide his mother tongue, unlike some of the men who banter freely between themselves and rarely venture into English other than to shout for more meat or to flirt with me.

Pretty pretty, like they're talking to a parrot. Thorvald doesn't want the boy to hear the language of his father, doesn't think it's useful for him to learn, not in this new land. So if a word slips out—*Uff-da*, he says, when a splinter gouges his thumb—I find myself silently repeating the strange sounds, like I'm collecting some small extra intimacy he made the mistake of giving me.

“*Takk,*” he says again, this time more forcefully. He stands back to admire the growing wall.

The first time he said *thank you* in Norwegian, nodding politely in the cookhouse, I actually thought he was asking me to talk. And why not? I started rambling away to this oddly insistent man, while he scooped up spoonfuls of pie.

I liked that he wasn’t always trying to coat me with compliments like some of them did. You sure got pretty eyes, Miss Eva. Big blue eyes. What’s that got to do with me, I’d say. They’re your eyes. Well, I didn’t pick them.

Thorvald used to stand on the porch, tall and still, while the cookhouse leached empty of men. He didn’t push his way beside me, didn’t even glance in my direction, but if I turned to look at him, the colour rose in his face.

Today he places his hand on my belly, and we wait to see if the baby will wake and kick for him. Olaf was quiet too, toward the end. I guess they sense what’s coming.

The loggers will be scrubbing their shirts in the creek, cutting each other’s hair, and after supper there will be a movie in the cookhouse. But as the sun tracks its way closer to the western border of trees, neither of us raises the possibility of walking into camp. Thorvald starts on the second wall. There’s a reassuring rhythm to his labour. We laugh when Olaf tries to drag a piece of wood bigger than he is.

Thorvald continues to work while I go inside to change Olaf's diaper and make sandwiches, shouting through the open window that canned beef and mustard will have to do.

"My favourite," Thorvald yells back. He is so easy to please, in all things but his carpentry. The lines of this house are perfect. Each edge sanded smooth. He constructed a platform to raise the floor high off the ground, repeatedly eyeing the bubble until it floated to the middle and held still.

We built the house the summer I was pregnant with Olaf, my belly just starting to swell, a secret from the men. We balanced the long wooden beams between us, and walked sideways facing each other, swaying with the weight. I was good with a hammer. The solid heft in my palm, the metal head growing warm with each hit. At first Thorvald checked every nail, nodding. "I'd hire you," he said.

I remember sitting on the attic floor, breathing the smell of sawdust and watching the fading streaks of sun that lit the air the yellow of cedar, the frame for the roof angling above me. I heard Thorvald in the yard like I do now, the scrape of something, rattle of wood on wood. When I opened my eyes, Thorvald was in the air. He was passing along outside. This was on the third floor. He walked against the sky bladed with trees. He was as tall as a house. I stood up, beneath the slanting beams of the roof, and everything seemed to be off-kilter. The ground and the air had reversed places.

He was on stilts. They must have been twenty feet high. He made it look so easy, but he had to keep walking or he'd fall over. Joy flickered across the line of his mouth, each long step pulled forward by his hands, and there was a slowness—I imagine a giraffe moves in the loping way those spindly legs arched underneath him, the small base of each pole finding ground, keeping balance, more delicate than human feet. I remember how his steps dug points in the dirt, holes marking our yard.

This evening when I walk outside, balancing the plates of sandwiches, Thorvald is teetering on a wooden board he's propped across a log.

"Where did you put those stilts? Olaf would love to see you on them."

"They were just two pieces of wood," he says then takes a bite and chews before opening his mouth. "Nothing special."

"You know, I might learn how to walk on them myself. I mean after the baby is born."

"You will have your hands full."

"You just want me to stay on the ground."

"Eva, have I ever been able to stop you from doing what you want?"

Whenever his grammar becomes formal, we are nearing an argument. I sit down with Olaf to nibble at my sandwich while I spoon a paste of potatoes and mashed

beef into his mouth, both of us leaning against the A frame, his legs sticking straight out.

Soon as the food hits my stomach, the baby will take to kicking like she always does. Such enthusiasm—this one will be a good eater, I can tell. A good walker too. Once I showed Thorvald the print of a tiny foot pressed against the wall of my belly, heel and toes visible so you'd believe this baby wanted to kick right through me.

When we start packing away the tools, I notice Thorvald has got a smear of mustard on his chin. I don't tell him. The faint yellow smudge fills me with sharp and unexpected fondness. The indigo sky is sinking into the dark, and I put my arms around him, my belly hard between us.

Out in the bush I hear a moaning sound, something like a cow, but more desperate. Almost the cry of an injured man. I've never heard an animal like it. Is it hurt? Giving birth? Thorvald has his nose in the air, sniffing the wind. The regularity of the moaning is almost mechanical, threatening in the way something can be when you are unable to recognize what it is.

There are three trails from our house—to the camp, the ocean, the mountain—but the sound is coming from the northeast, where the brush is too thick to walk through.

Olaf stares into the woods, intently curious, pointing and shouting the *ooo-ooo* sound he usually saves for the railway speeder or the train.

Nothing changes, just the same incessant deep moan. Above us a narrow white cloud streams across the sky. The trees shiver in the breeze.

Then the moaning stops, as suddenly as it started.

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Moonlight catches Thorvald rising from the mattress, his solid body a darker shadow against the shadows of the room. Early shift. Shirt and trousers folded on the chair. He always turns away from me, faces the window, when he pulls on his clothes.

The stairs creak though he tries to be quiet. I have another three hours before Olaf will be awake. Yet sleep seems dangerous.

Thorvald's side of the bed is warm under my palm. Each time I close my eyes, a shudder. Legs arms heart. That same sensation of falling. My body tense against an impact.

If there were another woman in the camp, she would tell me the baby was safe floating inside me. Don't you worry, she'd say. You're the one who took the fall. Your girl will come out healthy and happy, just you wait and see.

I remember the first time I felt this baby move, the flutter of a moth. But I've come to expect a good strong kick, sometimes a jab right under my ribs, the tiny bugger.

Dawn comes and I test my legs with a few strides in the hallway. Better to be up and doing something. Scrub the kitchen counter, restack the cans and the bag of flour in the cupboard. Spoon porridge into Olaf. He coats his fingers with molasses, grabs the container and happily pours stickiness at my feet.

Then I get it into my head to take the scissors to the sleeves of my shirt, just to get some air on my skin. Look at me now, loose threads hanging at the shoulders where the shirt's arms had been. But the relief of that lightness is like water. As soon as I do it, I consider the picture I've made of myself and burst out laughing. My muscled arms cabled around this pregnant belly could be mistaken for a man holding a woman.

I wash the dishes, sweep the floor, strip the bed and soak the sheets, the wringer satisfying to pump, water spraying into the barrel. Every once in a while I look up in the direction of the mysterious noise—did the animal die? Or escape a trap? Did it bite off its own leg to get free? But who would set a trap out here?

Whenever a branch cracks in the distance, a prickly sensation runs up my spine.

Our dirt yard is blistered with light. Clean sheets hang on the line, so white in the sunshine it hurts my eyes to look. I've washed all the bedclothes and the yard

reeks of bleach. My mouth full of clothespins, I can taste the wood, I can taste my own spit. I think of the chunk of fir I bit down on when I was facing contractions the first time. I've got a couple weeks yet before I need to worry about this one. Olaf came late—he was in no hurry to join us in the darkness of winter—but this baby has already dropped down into my pelvis.

Olaf gums my patchwork skirt as if nothing could make him happier than getting a fistful of this ragged fabric into his mouth. I stitched each piece beside the next so they all fit together like one of Olaf's puzzles. Red, blue, striped or plaid—the men gave me their old shirts. Here you go, they'd say proudly, handing over something with too many holes.

A burnt stump scars the middle of the yard, black and shiny as soot. We used the cedar to build our home. The wood became the floor and the walls, and the crib in Olaf's bedroom, and the same wood will soon surround my new child as I rock her to sleep. The stump is a place for me to rest, wide as a table, solid and smooth under my hips.

Bees drag listlessly along the dirt. Olaf resumes his contented babble. He brings me a pine cone. I thank him.

The heat warps the air. At the top of the eastern trail, there's a hot spring that Thorvald first showed me one night when he asked me to follow him out of the cookhouse. Snow on the ground then, small ashy clumps of it. His idea of courtship was a four mile hike to see steam shooting from the dirt.

Today he'll be working in the new quarter. There are a hundred men above us somewhere on the mountain, each of them holding a saw or an axe or gripping the heavy cables they use to pull the logs to the cold deck pile. Most of them stand when they stop for lunch, pacing a bit so the black flies don't bite through their shirts. Thorvald works alone, but he'll eat with the men. They like to tease him about me, our two children conceived so quickly.

A breeze bulges the sheets and they flicker up into the air as full as sails and I believe for a moment that I've felt the baby kick but it's my own heartbeat. That familiar thud. The sheets rustle then fall. Olaf comes to curl up at my feet. I should get a hat on him. I can see right through his blond hair to the pink of his skull.

The baby does not move. I watch the sheets. They are stark white. Sweat trickles under my arms. When Thorvald comes home he will ask me how I am and he will put his hand on my belly and say not long now, Eva, not long. She kicked when I waved to the men, I remember that. And when she heard Snowball's voice. Sugar and spice and everything nice. Now the sheets are as blank as the face of strangers. The sheets block the trees and the sky.

AAAA

In the afternoon Thorvald returns from work suncooked and hungry, sawdust drifting onto the cedar boards around his feet. He takes off his boots and shakes them upside down, cupping his hand to collect slivers of wood and dirt and pebbles and tossing them into the airtight where they'll have to wait until the fall to burn or not burn and then I'll sweep out what remains.

He washes his hands before he plants them on the bump. "How's my Eva?" And how's my little minnow?"

"Doing great." I keep my voice even and relaxed. "She'll be out in no time."

I put the kettle on to boil, set out potato salad, ham for sandwiches. Olaf is upstairs for a nap. Perhaps, I suggest, Thorvald will want to lie down too, after he has something to eat. My words seem strange to me, as if I am speaking in a dream, substituting the wrong name for someone or something.

He eyes my snipped sleeves and looks anxious. He's not a man who likes surprises.

"You don't look well, Eva."

I tell him I'm just tired. I slice the bread and cover it thick with butter, the way he likes it. In the bread pan I catch a glimpse of my belly, but of course it appears the same. What does my face reveal? My mother used to pinch my cheeks to blush the skin. Now my skin is tanned so dark it wouldn't make a difference. She would have

told me that women don't tan this dark. And women don't come to the woods to have babies.

At the table Thorvald describes a couple new men who've arrived for work. I listen vaguely. There will always be new men.

He nudges back a piece of meat that has slipped out of his sandwich and takes another bite. He gestures that I should finish mine, which I've barely touched. I push the plate toward him.

"You have it."

He pushes it back. "The men asked about you today."

"What is there for you to tell them?" My words have a harsh edge. "I mean, they were there."

"And I wasn't."

"That's not what I said."

I get up to clear the dishes without so much as a fork slipping to rattle its prongs on the floor. Last week I tucked a dandelion in a cup and perched it on the windowsill, the lion-headed weed. Now it has curled up as tired as an old woman's hand, its bitter juice staining the wood. Soon the dandelions growing in the yard will be those wispy halos I can blow into the wind to make a wish, and it will be too late.

“The cook wagers it’s a boy.” Thorvald announces that the loggers are taking bets. Sex, weight, date of birth. “Won’t be long now till we know.” Thorvald rubs his hands together like he is trying to keep them warm.

“I need to lie down. Just like last time, Thorvald, remember? So tired.” But a dull weight nestles in my belly that I didn’t feel when the baby was inside me tumbling toward the future.

I find the postcards where I dropped them in the drawer with my nightgown. Grizzly was killed in a logging accident just last week. The men said he’d almost made it to Sunday. His postcard is dated before he died. It travelled miles across the country, through days and nights when he was still breathing. So the words have a bit of life left on them.

My mind is as fuzzy as unbrushed teeth. Did I brush my teeth? Did I wash the kitchen floor? Tomorrow morning I’ve got Olaf to clean and feed, but I have to make sure not to lift him. In the afternoon he will nap and I will lie down for as long as I can stand it. I tried to eat, when I still thought it might help. Now it seems important not to open my mouth, as best as I can manage.

Olaf was a tadpole, that’s what we called him, then a frog. Toward the end he was a frog. Froggie—we still call him that sometimes. This one’s always been minnow. Little minnow, our tiny miney minnow—Thorvald’s accent lilts the words into a song and he hasn’t noticed yet that I no longer join him.

My aunt gave birth to a child without lungs, only as big as her hand. I lie down on the bed and hold my hand against my belly and take some pride knowing that my child would have been large enough to live. Legs, arms, nose and eyes, even lashes—by this late, everything is perfect.

This baby won't gulp for air and kick its legs while the doctor slices the gristly cable connecting its life to mine. The doctor will not give that smack on the bottom. His knife and scissors will possess more energy than what has been born. Keep it from her, that's what the silent glances will mean, as if I do not know what to expect. The doctor will give it to Thorvald. They will be the ones to hold it. They will clean it. They will dig the fresh hole in the ground.

How can it not be alive if I am alive? This child needs to be surrounded by my own muscle and blood. My strength is still coursing down that cord. Nothing has changed, nothing will change.

I reach out to touch the sheets, their cool blankness. I lift my dress and examine the taut skin. My belly will stay this size, round and hard, the pale scar surging up and down like a river.

AAAA

Olaf sits in his highchair whacking a tin plate with a spoon. I test myself. How long can I tolerate that spoon. The noise is a kind of pain he makes. The metal clang bristles up my spine. Whack whack whack. Then he throws the spoon on the floor. I'm supposed to pick it up and give it back to him. I'm not leaning over. I'm looking at that spoon and I am not reaching down to get it.

The floor is scattered with bread crumbs, a smear of yolk near the ice box. Almost one week has passed and I have settled into a routine, dividing the chores that need to be done from the chores that can wait. Each morning Thorvald goes to work and I am left with this cavernous feeling. Sometimes I look at the clock on the wall and find it hard to believe that the minutes continue to tick. The stillness in my belly hasn't stopped the day. I imagine turning the dial backward, the pressure of my finger dragging the hour hand in the other direction.

Olaf gets his diaper changed and his behind patted with talcum powder. I push toys in front of his grasping fingers, a caboose he skids across the floor, puzzle pieces he tries to chew. I let him practice climbing the stairs, careful to stand behind him in case he stumbles. But we don't play outdoors, not anymore. I walk from room to room inside our wooden house carrying a stone inside me.

When I pass the row of cedar trolls that perch on the long shelf, I avoid looking at their pinched eyes, their noses like icicles. Thorvald carved these shriveled figures, and he treats them as tenderly as children, dusting them with a rag. He once told me a story about a troll being swapped for an infant. That was when I still loved the thrill of being afraid.

On the chesterfield there's a skein of wool for a sweater I was going to knit. Today I sit down and hold it in my lap, running my hands over the cables. The wool so soft. Imagine wearing something that soft in a logging camp. In the heat of summer I picked out this wool. My baby was coming, sure as the next season. Enough here for a bonnet to go with the sweater. Blue, though I was sure this one would be a girl. The palest blue, the colour of Olaf's eyes. I wouldn't have it ready, not in time for her birth, but I could sit with her on the couch, her small legs and arms tucked inside her basin, and I would finish the sweater that would protect her from the cold.

I lift one strand of wool and imagine her fierce hands grasping it.

Expecting, that's the right word for it, a sensation like running downhill.

Thorvald is miles up the mountain, believing our days will soon unspool in that bleary-eyed, happy stupor that arrives with a newborn. He once described what he can see from the height of the spar tree, when he climbs the two-hundred foot trunk and sits perched on its tip. Islands and boats, the blue strip of the inlet, and up the coast the mill town with its steeples of smoke, a view for miles, he said. Eva, I've got a god's view.

When he comes home, he kisses Olaf on his head. I serve dinner and he chews away at his pork chops and mashed potatoes. He nods at my plate.

"It's hard for me to eat," I say.

He nods again. "What about those bruises?"

“They’ll fade.”

“Goes to show you,” Shaking his head at my stubbornness, pleased now that I’ve learned to keep to the house, at least until the baby arrives.

“It is hard to talk.”

“Not usually hard for you, Eva.”

This baby, I could tell him, it doesn’t want to leave me.

Thorvald will take the next week off work, when he expects me to go into labour. It could be any day now. He’s heard that the hospital ship is docked near Camp C, so there will be no need for us to ride down the speeder, not this time. He can run to the commissary, and radio the doctor, just like that. The doctor will come to us. As he shares this news, he keeps shuffling items on the table—his glass of water, a knife, a fork—as if to show me where everyone will be.

After I settle Olaf in his crib, and change into my nightgown, I stand at the bottom of the stairs and watch Thorvald. The back cover of one of his Westerns has fallen off and he’s gluing it back on, such tiny work for his giant fingers and thumbs. When I see him concentrating like this, absorbed in that one page and the white line of glue, I can imagine the responsible and meticulous boy he must have been.

If I walked up to him and placed his hand on my belly, he would sense the stillness. Feel that? But he would not know how long I have been waiting to feel the child tumble inside me. He would not know what it has meant to rise each morning and hope that the first shuffling movements will be enough to wake the child. Even

now I'm swaying left and right, rubbing my belly, as if the child will find the rocking a comfort.

I cup my hand on Thorvald's shoulder and he reaches to pat it.

"Alright now, Eva, alright," he says, which means he wants me to stop before I distract him.

When he finishes gluing the book, he rises to collect another paperback from his satchel, a new castoff from one of the men in the camp. A cowboy rides a horse in front of a red sun. Someone will die in that story, but not the cowboy.

The trolls peer down at my belly that has grown as still as their wooden limbs.

I do my best in the kitchen. Wipe the counter, scraping some dried porridge left from the morning.

As he learned to read English, Thorvald didn't come closer to me, but moved further away. I should have predicted it. This evening he stretches along the chesterfield, his body taking its entire length, and he is lost somewhere in the world of his book. He holds it with both hands. He still mouths the words.

For the first weeks of our marriage we leaned over this table, shuffling the alphabet. I sketched letters in giant coloured lines, the kind you'd draw for a child, only they weren't just letters, but little drawings that would remind Thorvald how to pronounce the sound. A *T* was a table. A *C* became a cookie with a bite taken out of it.

Instead of a honeymoon we had quiet hours in our kitchen, no one to interrupt him. Rain on the slanting roof, warm cups of tea in our hands. It was as intimate as

the time we shared in bed. A similar urgency, intensity, even moments of awkwardness. His stumbling repetitions, the look of surprise whenever an English term would open to him. I tied signs to the objects inside our house. *Door, table, chair, ice box, window*. He'd come home from work and march through the front door, the words fluttering their hello.

Now the furniture sits dumb around me. Everything is losing its name. I am standing in the kitchen when liquid trickles between my legs. For a moment I believe my water has broken. I catch my breath as the first spasm of pain ripples through my body, just like when Olaf was on his way. But when I glance down I see there's a pool of pink blood on my nightgown as large as a baby's head.

Thorvald drops his paperback. Confusion flickers on his face. He stands and walks closer, slowly, until he is holding his shaking palms over the stain.

^ ^ ^ ^

I am not allowed to look. The doctor wraps the baby in a tea towel, white with pale green stripes.

What is it?

The doctor is cleaning the blood off his knife with a rag.

"Girl? Or boy, doctor?"

“You are lucky,” he says in his chipper voice. “Lose any more blood and we’d be... well, you are one lucky lady.”

The wet tea towel goes into the small cedar box, well-made, smooth with mitred corners—diagonal slices of wood sanded and hammered so tidy and tight they almost hide the line that joins them. I married a man for those corners.

Even with the ether I can feel the needle tug through my belly, in then out, from crotch to sternum the way a child would stitch up a cotton doll.

The doctor says he sewed me up good.

Thorvald leans down to pull the sheet over me, but I flinch and he pulls it back.

“Well,” the doctor says as he packs his bag, “a fat lot of work for nothing.”

Then he leaves our wooden house, swinging that black bag all the way to the hospital ship.

Dawn seeps into the room. Thorvald takes the wooden box and walks downstairs with it. I hear the front door open then close. My body writhes in the soaked sheets. Through the window he is a small figure stepping toward the woods. He balances the box in front of his body, the way you’d hold a birthday cake when you don’t want the candles to blow out.

AAAA

Milk sours the wool and soaks the sheets, sticking my sodden nightgown to my chest, warm, then cold. Thorvald has to change the sheets. I keep my eyes from his, maneuver my body so he can strip the bed and carry the twisted bundle through the bedroom door.

The doctor's handiwork torments me, a pulsing ache. I press my hands against my swollen breasts.

The loggers will be down from their shifts up the mountain. That supertime racket of voices. They'll be quieter tonight. They'll have heard the news and will be tallying the exchange of coins and bills. Boy, girl, seven pounds or eight. All bets are off.

I push back the covers, pull myself up to sitting, one arm bracing the wound. The smell from the oil lamp turns my stomach. I count as I breathe the pain, a sudden piercing, then convulsions and echoes of convulsions, though there is nothing left to get out.

On the bed stand is a blue plate holding three biscuits, one on top of the other. A gift for the Missus, Thorvald said, probably quoting the cook. When he uses English, his words sound like they belong to someone else. I listen to the house, but it doesn't betray his footsteps. Tomorrow morning he will take his axe and saw and walk back to the cookhouse, the tables of men hunched over flapjacks. He will slurp cup after cup of black coffee and then join them in the crummy as it rumbles to the clear cut. Shoulder

to shoulder in the truck the men will eye each other nervously, and nod at Thorvald, the way men do. He will still be one of them.

Next to the biscuits are my rolling papers. I would like a smoke. But I keep still, sitting perfectly upright. If I lean forward or back the pulsing returns.

On the metal container of tobacco is a picture of a woman wearing a small red hat. The woman is holding a metal container of tobacco, and on that container is another picture of a woman wearing a small red hat and holding a container of tobacco, again and again, inside and inside, the image trapping me on this bed, my belly containing nothing and that nothing holding nothing.

I look down at my hands, calloused from chopping wood. That scar on the knuckle from the time I burst open my fist punching a bag of flour to impress my brothers. Small nicks from peeling vegetables. No ring on my finger. I told Thorvald my wedding ring had begun to hurt. He lined my finger with lard and gripped the ring to pull it off. Now I don't like the look of the naked line of skin, damp and white as the lard.

From the next room, Olaf has started crying. I wait to hear if Thorvald is upstairs. No, nothing, he must be outside. My stitches will not let me walk down the hall to check my child, my only child. I hike up my nightgown, crouch forward over the doctor's bedpan. I don't need to squeeze, just cup my fist around the nipple to guide the white watery liquid that splashes against the tin. Easier than milking a cow.

When I was a child, I didn't like losing my teeth. My brothers whooped and hollered when they managed to yank one out, but I flicked my tongue around the ache, nudging the loose tooth up and back, sudden air at the root, then the comforting suction as the tooth fell back in its place, a sound soft as blood.

Olaf is wailing now, as if he believes no one will ever come to find him. Each cry sends a new shudder through my breasts that leak for the wrong child.

I call Thorvald, but my voice is fragile. It hurts to speak, my ribs rising against the stitches. If he can't hear Olaf, he won't be able to hear me.

Evening sun curtains the wall—one stripe of light, one dark. The man in the moon came down too soon. What was the rest of the rhyme? Someone getting lost. Or falling—no, that was Jack and Jill. Tumbling. The jingle made it sound like it wouldn't hurt.

The creak of Thorvald's boots. He comes to the door, but doesn't open it. I can hear him breathing. He continues down the hall—Olaf's door opens and his wailing reaches a crescendo as Thorvald lifts him from the crib. Then the sound muffles, just that gurgling noise when a child has no reason to cry. Thorvald must have brought him something to eat. I let my shoulders release into the bed.

Even his saw has been silent today, his axe. What can you build me now, Thorvald? What can you repair?

The summer I moved to this camp, I heard about Thorvald before I saw him. I tucked my interest close to my chest. The men told me he'd come to the BC coast all the way from Norway, had a back as straight as a Doug Fir, and that he was as quiet. He'd top a spar and all you'd hear was his axe, that's what they told me—not a curse, not a word, not even a groan, just the splitting ache of the tree as the tip came away from the trunk, then the wood chips spraying as he spiraled effortlessly down. I knew my husband first by what he didn't say.

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Thorvald has joined me in bed, slipping on his nightshirt, stripes like the tea towel. He tucks my sweaty hair from my face.

"Do you want an extra pillow?"

"If I need a pillow, I can get a pillow."

"You'll hurt yourself."

"Not with a pillow."

He lies back on the mattress, keeping to his side.

"Eva, I don't want..." he says. He doesn't continue. I roll onto my hip, my hand where the child was. Thorvald touches his thumb to my spine. A tickling pressure, but

I don't have the energy to ask him to stop. One by one, he circles each nub, his thumb climbing a ladder up my back. He could be counting the bones.

Outside, a crow squawks, then another. The crows crack apart the night. The shadows of tree branches flicker across the bedroom ceiling.

Olaf is awake. He whimpers in his crib, starts to cry. The damned crows. Thorvald rises and disappears, returning with Olaf, the boy's legs running in the air. He settles him on the bed, careful to prop a blanket between me and Olaf. He mustn't brush the wound. Olaf hushes, his big eyes blinking at me. What does he understand? I am uncertain about touching him, as if I have an illness he could catch.

Milk dribbles from my nipples. How long before my breasts accept their uselessness?

Thorvald is a heavy sleeper, his body triumphing quickly over the day's work.

Olaf reaches his hands into my hair. I pull them away from the tangles and let him suck on a finger, the way I did when I was weaning him. I forgot his gummy strength. He sucks contentedly, reaching to clench a fist around a nipple, the familiar smell. Months have passed since I last nursed him, reserving strength for the new child. I ease him toward the milky nub, slipping it into his lips. His tongue flicks tentatively, then he latches hold and pain collars my nipple. It is good though, to feel the pressure releasing from the breast. My womb quivers as I lean forward and hold his head, stroking his hair as the milk leaks out of my body and into his.

The bears are asleep, the coyotes, the deer. Only the crows flap in the trees, squawking less urgently now, leaving space between their calls, as if waiting for my answer.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

Thirsty. My lips are cracked and sore. The sheet is damp between my shoulder blades. Sweat beads my upper lip, strands of hair mat to my face. Last night I saw a shooting star and couldn't think of a wish.

I haven't changed the bandage in three days. It is warm from my body, running from crotch to sternum. The rough edges tickle my belly. Underneath the bandage, inside my skin, the wound itches. This is a good sign, the doctor told me when he first wrapped me up, this gnawing teasing pull of my skin as it heals. Now I want to push my fingers into the seam and scratch it open. The bandage smells of sick and sweat. When I untie the outer layer of the bandage and pull it back, the gauze underneath is dark with congealed blood. Don't scratch.

Water is all I need. I edge out of bed, first my legs, my feet nudging the floor as if they aren't mine. I did it yesterday. I walked downstairs. I even put the heavy kettle on to boil and waited while steam ghosted the window. What is good for pain? Ginger tea? Dandelion root? My mother used to soak a cloth in cool water and fold it twice

and press it firm to my forehead. “Close your eyes,” she would say, and I would keep them open so I could watch her hair spill to the pillow.

Around me the empty house is expanding in the heat. Olaf is at the camp. I imagine he likes being among the men. Every morning this week, Thorvald has carried him away. Until you are well, Eva, he says. I had been expecting my second child and now I have none.

I stand up, unhooking my nightgown and letting it drop to the floor. Toeing it under the bed, I pull from my bureau a sundress I’ve made of a white tablecloth. I slip it over my head and the skirt falls stiff around my calves. Through the cotton I can see the outline of the gauze. I’m not going far.

I will get to the kitchen. Wait up! I used to call to my brother—I have a stitch in my side! I yelled out to him even when no one was ahead of me on the trail, when I was alone, just so it would seem that I wasn’t.

Sunlight falls sharp on the icebox. No smell of yeast, no fat frying and spitting in the pan, no rising biscuits or roasted pork. Only wood, always wood. A dishcloth lies in a wet knot on the floor. The oven is cold. On the counter Thorvald has left a trinket, some scrap of metal he must have rescued from the blacksmith and twisted under his hammer until it looked like—a dolphin? An orca. I recognize the arching tail. The metal is soot black. It rests cool and smooth in my palm. Around the trinket he has made a ring of salmonberries. A couple of berries roll onto the floor. I place the trinket back where I found it.

In the ice box, a tin bowl of water. I balance it in the crook of my arm and set it on the counter. I dip my fingers in the bowl, moistening my belly's chapped skin, then cup the water to my mouth, swallowing fast, letting it splash down my neck and chest. I lift my dress and drip water on the gauze. The damned wound still itches. I want to rub the water right in. I wipe my chin with the back of my hand. Then I cup the coolness onto my swollen skin, splashing my belly like Thorvald cleaning his shaved face.

The ocean on this coast is murky and green, nothing like the sea I loved as a girl—a blue as clear and shimmering as the summer sky. I'd wait until I was under the surface, then tear off my swimsuit, letting the waves tumble me naked through the blue, and it didn't matter, my boy nipples, my blank crotch, water on my skin and in the folds between my legs.

I open the door and start down the path, my steps easier, bare feet on a carpet of needles and dirt.

Above me sway the trees' wavering tips and I look up, growing dizzy, my belly full of water, fingers sticky with sap. Mosquitoes form a buzzing cloud. I smack them sucking at my arms. Then the black flies find me. It is my blood they smell. Nasty things. They will be with me all the way to the shore. And the small one's blood, would they sense that? All I saw before they took it away was the blue face and limbs, its blood cold and close to the surface.

A branch scrapes at my belly and I'm buckled by nausea. Careful, slow down. Thorvald said I shouldn't be out. She should rest, the doctor said to him, though I was in the room.

One more step, two.

The trees open. I emerge into sun, legs and feet bare. Light reaches through the cotton.

The ocean I knew was the Atlantic, on the other side of the country, our cove surrounded by high dunes of sand that we used to jump off, making the noises of airplanes and bombs. The sand was red as rust. I once buried my menstrual rag in those dunes. It was shit, that's what I told myself, the first time I saw that stain. I knew that water slowed blood. Once I was under those waves I wouldn't need that pasty thing between my legs. I dug a hole in the sand and buried it. Then I ran to catch up with my brothers who were already in the waves. One week past my fourteenth birthday and the ocean took me whole.

At this beach, no one swims. The rocks are craggy with barnacles, the bay speckled with logs. Breakers spray the southern peninsula, where jagged cliffs are bare of trees.

The sun has sneaked closer to the islands. I walk toward the waves. The water will soothe the wound, clean it. Shells crackle under my heels. A gull caws and swoops over me. I'm already shaking from the cold. Eddies wrap around my ankles. I stand

with my hands under my belly, bending to flick water on my legs. A few more steps. A wave reaches my hips. I brace myself in case it hits the stitches. Then I fold my body and tumble under the surface. The salt water wakes the wound. I can hear a faraway scraping. I taste brine and feel pressure against my eyelids, fear swelling as the next wave roars closer. It passes over me, opening my mouth. I'm rising. My hands pull me forward, the ocean dragging my dress. The cold numbs my sutures, rubs my skin smooth and clean.

The seabed excited me as a girl, weeds tugging my ankles like a secret hand. Now a log pierces my foot—the bone whacking against some dead thing. It is almost delicious, that shock of pain, salt biting into a slit of pink swirling through the blue.

Blood trails behind me. I keep one leg still and kick fast with the other. When I emerge from the ocean my sundress clings to my skin. The gauze covering my stitches has torn loose. It is dangling to my knees. I shiver as I scan the shore. Clouds stretch orange from one horizon to the other. The forest is black-green, the beach a long sickle. I move in small steps, halting and clumsy.

Thorvald will be home by now. Olaf will reach up to grasp the knees of his father's canvas pants, hungry, crying and slobbering over the tiny fist he manages to jam into his mouth. Then Thorvald will get the oven started and the house will smell of smoking cedar.

I limp on one edge of my foot, trying not to let the sole touch the sand.

At the far end of the beach, someone has pitched a canvas tent. It is lit orange like the clouds, the sides catching the setting sun. The tent will be warm and humid, the day's heat held stagnant.

A shadow flickers inside the tent, or was it the seagull soaring overhead?

Sometimes tramps camp out on the beach, though they favour the one further north where the ferry docks, near the mill town and the saloons. In the trails, I've stumbled across men who ride the railway, no useful skills to offer a camp, but still scrounging. They sleep in the underbrush.

The walls of the tent sway inward. The glow isn't coming from the sun—there's a lamp inside. I begin to trudge for the trees.

But my foot is slowing me. The cut is worse than I thought.

This beach has no landmarks. The wind rises from the ocean. I turn again to the tent, then limp in that direction. When I reach it, I call hello, but there's no response, just a shuffling sound inside. I peel back the canvas flap and the smell of an oil lamp hits me, heat on my cheeks. The gap is wide enough to reveal part of a face. I am looking at a man.

"I...I'm sorry," I stammer. His eyes are a few inches from my own.

I nudge just my foot through.

"My foot," I explain.

“We usually shake hands,” he laughs. He gestures for me to come in.

I haven’t seen him before. He is stocky and dark, shirtless, the lamp flickering on his smooth chest.

The warmth holds me. The tent is cramped, but tidy. It is the size of a small room, and contains a kettle, portable stove, a wool blanket lining the floor, fishing rod bending into the wall where the canvas gives at the tip. Tucked by the door—an axe head, caulk boots. So he’s not a tramp. He’s a logger. I should feel safe, knowing what he is. But he’s an Indian, I’m sure. He’s one of those men from the reserve who skulk by me when I’m in the mill town, each with a slight smile, eyes down. They know enough not to look straight at a white woman. I glance again at this man’s face. Something in the shape of his cheeks, his square jaw, tells me he’s from somewhere else.

I try to flatten my sundress. Well, he’s seen a woman before, I can be sure of that, and we’ve all got the same parts.

He has a man’s smell: leather and that hard soap the loggers scrub against their undershirts.

I wrap my arms across my breasts.

“You’re wet.”

“I was swimming.”

His eyes flick through the sea-drenched cotton to the black line of stitches.

“So I see.”

“I thought it would help.”

He stands for a moment with his hands on his hips.

“Yes,” he says finally, turning toward the back of the tent.

A flannel shirt hangs from a hook on the centre pole. He takes it off, passes it to me, gestures to the blanket on the floor. I sink down, still shivering, and I hunch the flannel around my shoulders. Then he kneels in front of me. He lifts my foot toward the light. He brings the kettle closer.

“Don’t worry. It’s not hot.”

He pours a warm stream of water over my skin. I shudder. He keeps his eyes on my foot, plucks away the remaining grains of sand. The tips of his fingers are calloused, slow. It is strange to feel them brush against the cut. Another stream of water. Then he holds my foot between his palms and presses together the edges of skin.

He lifts his hands, one then the other, positioning mine where his had been. When he stands up, I notice the holes in his canvas pants. He’s repaired them with a sturdy fence of black thread. Those are stitches only a man would sew.

He pushes aside blankets, boots, and picks up an undershirt, reaches for a long knife that is perched across a pot on the floor. What do I know of this man? He uses the knife to slice through the shirt's neck. Then he grips the cloth in his hands to tear it lengthwise into strips. The tent fills with the sound of ripping.

"Is it clean?"

"Why, you think I need a wife?"

"You think I need a doctor?" I grab one of the strips. I tie it around my foot with a bow.

"Beautiful," he says.

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He offers me a chunk of fry bread that I consume hungrily, crumbs speckling my lap. I grip my tin cup with both hands and when I slurp the tea I feel the bits of powdered milk.

"Klim," he says.

"Klim?"

“Milk, spelled backwards.” He holds up the box, shaking it so I can hear the powder rattle against the cardboard.

I tell him I want everything to go backward.

He looks into my eyes, but doesn’t say anything, settling beside me with his cup propped on his knees. He blows at the steam.

“Some rivers,” he says. “They flow both ways. Hard to paddle.”

When the tea is gone, he takes my cup, asks me if I want more. I say I don’t know what time it is—I ought to go.

I struggle up from the rough blankets to say goodbye, and he nods, comes with me, easily, retying the canvas flap behind us, patient with each knot, then walks beside me under a tangle of night clouds. He presses his hand on my back as I limp into the trail, steadying my steps over brambles and fallen branches. That one spot between my shoulder blades, the consistent pressure of his fingers through the flannel, right there, is warmer and more alive than any of me.

I pause in a clearing. The mountain air not quite dark, not yet. Above us I can make out a few stars, but no constellations.

His voice is a low rumble.

We’re talking about the city, skyscrapers. I tell him I loved that word when I first heard it. I could think of nothing more wonderful than scraping the sky.

He laughs. Says it's a pretty word for an ugly thing.

We reach the house, stand together at the edge of the yard. He gazes at it, then away. I don't undo the buttons, not here, not in front of him.

"Thank you, you don't have to carry me across the threshold."

The old cedar with its wide base and wrinkled woman's face in the bark. There's nothing for her to see. This man walked me home, that is all. Soon as he spotted our house, he knew not to go any further.

He steps away, pauses by the tree, arms folded.

The lamp shines in Olaf's bedroom, the kitchen window another yellow square. From outside, the uneven boxes of light make me think of the game of snakes and ladders, how quickly you can slide from one floor to the next.

I limp to the door and wave goodbye and hear a branch snap as he turns to go. Then I am inside the warmth of the kitchen, Thorvald sitting on the floor in a circle of sawdust. Bits of wood he's hammered together, sanded smooth.

"Asleep?" I point to Olaf's room. Thorvald peers at the white cotton bows around my foot. Dried blood has streaked them red.

"What happened to your foot?"

"Nothing," I say. "A broken bottle. On the trail."

He wants to know if I've got all the glass out of the wound. But I pull it away from his grasp.

Clean, he assured the doctor when it was time to remove the child. He was ready to help, holding his hands in the air to demonstrate.

"It's fine. I found one of the loggers. He cut up his t-shirt. I was walking near the camp. I must have missed you." Thorvald won't go asking around the bunkhouses. My lie is safe enough. He'll leave the thank you to me.

He sighs. Passes the wooden box into my hands.

"For flowers."

I stroke the wood where he's etched a swirling groove, sawdust fleecing my palm. I don't need another box.

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The next morning I hear steps in the yard. For a moment I think it might be the man from the tent, but it's only the bull cook, Sinbad—the camp's runner-boy and gangly jack of all trades. Through the window I glimpse him piggy-backing Olaf, and my heart lurches to see my son's face. Sinbad unpeels his fingers from his arms and lets him down, keeping his hand on Olaf's head like a preacher with the power to bless him.

“He was fussing. The cook said to bring him for a walk but I thought you’d be best.”

“I still have my uses.”

The boy is uncomfortable. Olaf clings to his leg. It has been a while since I have seen my son’s bright eyes in the outdoor air. Nudging him forward, the boy smiles shyly and I sit down on the doorstep to hold Olaf, breathing the sweet smell of his skin.

“You can’t be more than thirteen.” He’s wearing some dead logger’s clothes, a new hole hammered in an old belt. His pants have been cut at the thigh and his hair is cropped short. The men must tease him something awful about those ears. “Looks like you planned to join the army and got lost.”

He does not respond. I forgot about teenage boys.

I give Olaf’s head a kiss. “Got many of these at home?”

“Some.” His Adam’s apple bobs when he speaks.

“Boys or girls?”

“Both. Not my own.”

“Course.”

“I’m the oldest?” He glances up at me as if I’m going to contradict him, then he flaps his hand over his shoulder. “I came here all the way from the city.”

“Long journey. You must be hungry.”

“Nah,” he says, missing my irony. “I work in the kitchen.”

“Boys always hungry.”

Sinbad nods glumly. Big ears big elbows big knees. He saunters along the trail and makes a show of jumping to grab a tree branch, swinging until he’s looped his whole body over it, and then down with a thud of his boots, glancing to check if I’ve seen him. He picks up something that’s slipped from his pocket, then starts walking, keeping whatever it was in a loosely clenched fist, like he’s holding dice and waiting for the right moment to throw them.

When I was that boy’s age, I used to slide out my window, my parents asleep, my brothers asleep, and climb onto the roof where I’d pretend to smoke, puffing my cold breath. Under my feet was a bedroom full of brothers, their tangled bedclothes and open mouths, the stagnant reek of boys. The clouds were so close I could feel the vapor wet my hands. Each house a small box I could lift and drop. The people were in their rooms. I was above them all. I was in the night. BB guns and slingshots, tables, beds, pots and pans—all of it was inside those rooms. I once dared to climb down, and I ran the street, between the dark houses. I threw my body into cartwheels, a chain of cartwheels, the streetlamps catching my flying limbs as I appeared and disappeared.

That's what it felt like when I first arrived at this camp, though there were no homes at all, no rooms, just rows of bunkhouses and the long cookhouse where everybody kept their elbows on the table, fork in one fist and knife in the other.

Olaf runs to rub my belly like he used to do. I block his touch, but even this movement is enough to buckle me in pain.

I can't get rid of an inkling that the man from the tent could be standing at the edge of the yard, watching me, concerned in that off-hand way he had last night. But there's only the trees.

I walk Olaf to the rain barrel and drop my hand into the coolness, ripples breaking the reflection of clouds. Floating pine needles form a prickly bracelet around my wrist. I would have washed the baby with this water.

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Thorvald says he stopped in the cookhouse and Olaf wasn't where he left him. We are standing in the garden, Olaf clapping at his father's arrival. Thorvald repeats what he just said. I tell him I heard him the first time. I tell him to watch where he's stepping, those are the strawberries, although there's nothing sprouting, just the soil.

"Eva, you aren't strong enough. You can't be lifting him."

“I wasn’t the one to carry him back. I think the men have had enough of this little rascal, haven’t they, Olaf?”

The whisky jack lands on my head, the scratchy determined claws, and I wave him off.

Thorvald says Joe Spit was asking after me.

“I’ll be news until someone gets injured.”

Thorvald stammers as he explains that the men care, that’s all he’s trying to say. He slips into Norwegian then catches his mistake.

I wonder if Thorvald worked today with that man from the beach, if they were on the same crew. Both of them out in the open, on a wide stretch of mountain cleared of trees. Neither of them would mention the previous night, but it would be on their minds. I’d be a different woman, depending on who was remembering what.

Olaf and I follow Thorvald to the shed, a smell of turpentine when he opens the door. Threads of sunlight fall through chinks in the wall, dividing his body. Otherwise the room is dark and has a damp feel that reminds me of mushrooms. Thorvald hangs his axe and handsaw on the wall. He’s tarred the outline of each tool, auger and drawknife, claw hammer and crosscut, so he knows where they belong.

On the workbench sits a troll, or the rough shape of a troll, blank where the face will be. He shows me the knob that will be the nose. He’ll carve the other features by following the gnarls and knots in the wood. When he expresses pride, he

does it at arm's length. He strokes the wood, hands the troll to Olaf, who hugs it to his chest. This seems to cheer Thorvald.

"I don't want that thing in the house."

Perhaps he hasn't heard me. He crouches to tell Olaf about one of the tools, how to make an eye.

Something catches in my throat, but it's only sawdust. I'm not going to cry over a faceless piece of wood.

While he talks to Olaf, he pats my hip. Lightly, absentmindedly, like he sometimes pats my shoulder before he goes to sleep. You are here, I am here beside you. I used to love his quiet ways, how he held back his strength to touch me. Today the contact brings forth a meanness I can't explain. All the energy intended for nursing that child is trapped, twisted.

Maybe it would be easier for Thorvald if I did cry. He wouldn't like it, no man does, but he would know what to do. Part of me wishes I could collapse beside his workbench and release great sobs of grief, let him hold my shuddering body and stroke my hair. But I don't want to make it easier for him.

He takes the troll from Olaf, positions it back in its place, adjusts one of the tools on the wall that is hanging at a slant. Olaf waits patiently, staring up at his father. Thorvald grips Olaf's hands from behind and holds them in the air as he leads him outside, just as he did when the boy was learning to walk.

Returning to the sunlight is a respite. The fluttering welcome of the whisky jack.

I take a breath before entering the house and Thorvald asks me what is wrong. The question stirs a silent rage in me. His innocence, confusion, as if nothing has happened within these walls. But how has he been changed? The baby was not torn from his body. I've watched him blithely renew the order of his days, just as he would have done had the child lived.

Olaf shoots his caboose from living room to kitchen. We both step out of his way. When I sit down, he runs the caboose over my feet. It's a comfort to be so sturdily used.

On the chesterfield I find the small blue sweater and begin to unravel it, the lines of yarn coming loose in my hands.

Thorvald watches me uneasily. I tell him I'll save it for something else.

"Enough here for a placemat. What do you think, Thorvald? What should it be?"

He stands with his big hands empty by his side.

Then I realize he's looking at the wound, the slack skin visible where the shirt has pulled open. He hasn't seen the stitches since the day the doctor made them. He kneels, reaches for the hem of my shirt. He's tentative. He could cause pain. I sigh with apprehension. I can't feel his touch, just his fingers moving the cloth, and I sense

for a moment that I could let him see what has been done. But I flinch, pull away. I tuck the shirt back in.

He rights himself. Bites his lower lip, his eyes cast down. Olaf pulls on his pant leg and Thorvald slowly turns his back to me.

He takes Olaf upstairs for a nap, but the boy won't settle—I can hear him fussing, and Thorvald's quiet insistence. When he brings him down, he walks close as if to hand him over. But he keeps Olaf to himself, bouncing him slightly. I envy Thorvald's arms, the weight they hold. I begin making dinner without asking him what he wants. We only have the ham, in any case. The train will soon be making another delivery and this time I won't be the one walking to the camp to collect it.

Olaf manages to grab a plate of peas and send it tumbling off the table. I sweep up the mess, but can't bend to use the dustpan, so I leave it for Thorvald. His big feet smashing peas into a green smear. At first I think the plate has survived, but then I see the chip, and before I know it, I've snapped at Olaf.

"Eva," Thorvald says, "sit."

I could correct him. In English that is how you talk to a dog. Still standing, I ask him if he trusts me with Olaf. "You don't—is that it? Is that why you are taking him to the camp? You need to keep my son away from me?"

"When you are better..."

I feel like tossing the damaged plate to the floor, telling him that I lied about last night. Instead I clear the remaining plates from the table and put them into the sink.

I remember when just standing near him in this kitchen was enough to get him hard. He didn't like to show it, not at first. Desire tensing his face. What's wrong, Thorvald, I'd tease. We'd push against each other, and he'd lift my skirt, then lift me, my legs locking around him, my breath rising like I'd never again need the floor.

Nothing bad could ever come of it.

Olaf has fallen asleep in his highchair. Thorvald carries him upstairs and I follow behind, watch as he settles Olaf in his crib, pulls the blanket to his chin. We have to walk together into the bedroom. I keep my arms stiff by my side. He knows enough not to brush his hand along my neck, won't lean down to touch his lips to mine. None of those small gestures that could lead to something else. And it is almost funny how I pull my nightgown over my clothes before I take them off, shimmying out of my skirt, sliding clumsily out of my sleeves, dropping the clothes to the floor underneath the nightgown. It's the way I used to change in front of my brothers.

Before the doctor stitched up the wound, Thorvald saw right into me, muscle and organs, my body a raw slab of beef. Tonight he keeps his gaze on his own clothes, each button, each hook-and-eye, the concentration necessary to undo himself.

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We keep the door to this room closed. I pause with my hand on the knob, sensing I'm about to betray some agreement I've made with Thorvald. The sun has just begun to rise, the hallway is dark. Thorvald has already left for the logging camp with Olaf and the house sits quiet. The doors to our bedroom and to Olaf's room are open, the air still stagnant with our sleep, though soon the daylight will spill through.

I nudge the door, just a crack wide, as if checking on a sleeping child. The cradle should be waiting. I want to see it, the solid empty thing. To find it missing sends a jolt to my heart. I breathe, steadying myself. I walk into the room and peer around foolishly. Even in the dim light, it's clear the four walls hold nothing.

Yesterday Thorvald watched me unravel the baby's sweater, the pattern disappearing. I'd knit the sweater and he'd built the cradle, and I suppose if I am free to destroy one thing he can destroy the other. But my husband isn't one to make such balances. He thought it was time, that is all. He must have removed it when I was asleep.

The only colour in this room is the pale brown of the wood.

For Olaf he built a crib, but for this new child I wanted something I could rock.

I wait as sun fills the window. Thorvald might have taken the cradle outside. Removed the nails, used it for scrap. He's a practical man. But then I remember the

butterflies he carved on the sides. And that the cradle was so small he would need to build another one as soon as the baby grew. I teased him about that.

This morning he changed Olaf's diaper. He doesn't require my help, knows where the baby powder is kept, the safety pins. Olaf is at the cookhouse and it'll be the men who wipe him clean with their tobacco-stained fingers. He has no need for me. I could stay in this room all day.

I walk to the window and open it, let in the smell of pine. Wind rustles the branches.

That Indian man I met is new to the camp. He might have asked about me, the woman in the house along the trail. Or he's already heard from the men. There's only one woman here. The spunky one. Thorvald's wife. I'm not a mystery for long.

But maybe he's kept me a secret.

It's then I guess that the cradle is in the attic. I leave the room and mount the ladder, slowly, painstakingly, suffering with each rung. Thorvald would be angry at me for risking the climb. One more step and I pry open the trap door and sure enough the cradle is there, as small as I remember. It sits under the sloping roof, where it will stay. Thorvald took care with it.

When he comes home, I don't mention what I've found. But my voice is gentler. I ask about his work rigging the spar tree. His face brightens.

I take Olaf from him and lift the boy onto my hip, away from my stitches, proud that I can do such a small thing. Thorvald tenses, but he doesn't take him back. Pain shudders through my belly that I do my best not to show. And there's a strangeness I feel now with my son. His weight has changed over the last weeks, and his smell. What are they feeding my boy? Olaf wriggles against my grip. He wants down.

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This time they send One-Eyed from the camp to tell me Thorvald is needed to repair the donkey—he won't be home for dinner.

"So he's found something he can fix."

One-Eyed nods exuberantly.

"And Olaf? You didn't bring him back?"

Not a peep out of One-Eyed.

I tell him I have half a mind to march up and collect him myself. But Olaf will be chasing the men table to table, stealing from their plates. That frenzied excitement he gets when the whole crew returns from work. He doesn't run to me like that, not any more. He hangs around his father's legs and needs to be prodded forward. He senses there is something I can't give.

And I don't want to face the way the dining room would hush as I walked through. The loggers glancing at the middle of my body and noting what is gone. They'd be men, all the same, and say not a word, but they'd be nicer to me than they were before, uncomfortable and formal. Their efforts will make me cringe.

One-Eyed is pleased when I offer a fresh piece of pie, though he won't cross the threshold to eat it. He won't even accept a plate.

"I'm used to tin," he says. He stands on the doorstep like a nail needing to be hammered into the wood. Blackberry juice leaks through his knuckly fingers as he gulps the pie down.

"Thought the men fed you."

"Can never get enough. Pie, I mean." He mutters something about my crust then blushes.

When he turns back up the trail, I walk into the kitchen where streaks of sun have started to pull across the table.

What I need now is another chore. The cupboards are almost bare, a can of peas, an open box of stale crackers, potatoes with arms of dusty coiled tendrils. The pantry is better—there's two sacks of flour, canned lard, sugar, salt, tinned ham, tinned corn and peas, tinned milk.

A corner of a plaid sleeve sticks out from behind one of the sacks. I jammed that man's shirt back there, the night I returned from the tent. I push it down so it's hidden again.

The window screen is veiled grey with insects, some twitching with determination, some dead.

I yank the whole shirt out and give it a shake, whacking it a few times to release the flour, then I hold it up and let the lamplight flow through the fabric. There it is, red and burgundy, bright as life. Horse flies have bitten a constellation of holes.

He isn't tall. When I stood next to him, my eyes were level with his lips. But he's wide through the shoulders. The shirt fills the pantry with the smell of kerosene and pine and soap. I run my hand over the buttons and find one loose, so I slip back to the front room to collect my needle and thread.

Bring it right back—that's what I should do, and tell him thank you. He'll slide it on and roll up the sleeves. And it will be his shirt, once more, not a relic in my pantry. I go upstairs to find a sweater, shimmy into a pair of Thorvald's trousers that will make it easier to walk. In Olaf's room I take a fresh diaper that I cut into strips to wrap around my foot.

My winter boots are large and black at the bottom of my bare legs, the only shoes I can fit around the diaper. The leather is cracked, and a tear opens and closes with each step, like the boot's own mouth.

Once outside I grab the rifle, walk quickly past the garden, the sweetness of strawberries and bitter smell of marigolds, blood on the ground from the rabbit I shot and skinned this morning, then down toward the creek. The trees grow narrow along the bank, slanting toward it then correcting to vertical. The skin on my belly is tender when I breathe and I'm still favouring my right leg. I stop to drink from the creek and a ladybug lands on my arm. That's good luck. Count the dots on her back—when I was a girl those six dots would mean six months until she brings me my beloved.

On the other side of the creek I know there will be a rough patch of earth where Thorvald buried the child. When I remember the sight of him walking alone across the yard, I imagine I'm able to call out and he hears me and waits for me to join him, and we break the dirt together. But it's just the way I turn it in my mind. I couldn't have walked past the bedroom door, not in the shape I was in after the surgery. I'd never have reached the spot he chose. And I don't want to walk there now.

I knock low-lying branches out of the way with my rifle. I catch a musky whiff of bear. She's nosing around the creek, a clump of pine needles hanging on her coat. She eyes me flatly the way an animal does when it finds something it doesn't have much interest in trying to eat.

I make it to the beach where the ground is more level and I can see the open sky. At the far northern end of the shore, the tent glows like a lantern. I drop the stick I've been using as a cane and run my fingers through my hair. Sea air cools my face

and arms. The sky is tinted orange and violet. Over the waves the summer day has begun to shut like a clam.

Thorvald's trousers are bagging around my knees. My damned belly is still too swollen to button them closed so I've belted them with twine and wrapped that man's shirt around my waist to hide where it gapes. I swing the rifle as I walk closer to the tent. I probably smell of rabbit.

He's there—a dark figure in front of the canvas, on his knees. He is bending over to sharpen something. His shoulders are hunched and he holds the blade close to his body. A flicker of rage runs through me. He had a satisfied way of talking, I remember that, as if he knew what I was going to say or do and it didn't matter to him either way. A man could pass for a saint living out here alone, on the very edge of land, sufficient as a jackknife slipping neatly into itself. He hasn't given me a thought. When I get closer I see he's scrubbing at a frying pan. And beside it, a pot, a plate, a cup.

"Where's your apron?" I untie his shirt from my waist and hold it out.

"Ah," he says. "Laundry. I don't usually have mine delivered."

His face has some sun in it. His wide smile brings out my own.

"I want to thank you."

He accepts the shirt, folding it inside the pot. I realize I've now left a patch of my stomach exposed, where my trousers are mouthing open and if he looks up he'll catch sight of the black stitches. I wish I had that shirt to hide me, but he's taken it

now, I can't ask for it back. A line of sweat trickles down my sides like a seam. I should go. But my eyes are caught the way they would hold to a campfire—he has his sleeves rolled up and the muscles are twitching like flames. He goes at that frying pan again with a metal scrub, round and round, shaking the pan upside down to dump the bits on the sand. His bare feet are tanned as dark as his hands. Specks of black crust fall across his skin.

“You look different,” he says. “Now that you are dry.” He gives the pan one more shake.

“You don't seem to be much of a cook.”

“So I take it this time you didn't come from the sea?”

“I thought I'd surprise you.”

“You're a surprise.” He balances the pan, pot, plate, cup, tucking the arrangement under his chin, then he elbows open the canvas flap and slips inside.

He talks to me through the canvas, but I can't make out the words, and when he comes out he's buttoning up his shirt—he's changed into a new one, not the one I brought him. It is a city shirt, white, with a stiff colour. And he's wearing plastic suspenders. Transparent. Where would he find those? He tightens the suspenders and they almost disappear against the white cotton.

“The moon is full tonight.” He nods at the sky. “I like to dress for an event.”

“Listen, I just...” A seagull flaps close to me and I wave my rifle.

“Don’t shoot. They take it as flattery.”

“I’ll be off home.”

He glances at my gaping waistband, then nods at my heavy boots. A mischievous tilt to his grin. “Thought you might stay. Since you’re dressed for the next snowfall.”

The soft edge of the diaper is visible over the leather and I step backward to hide it, knocking over a small tower of stones.

He grabs a stone and tosses it down the beach, walks after it, waiting for me to catch up, his white shirt against the twisting orange and purple sky. I walk closer until we are standing hip to hip. Then we move forward, the crackle of shells underfoot, and into the craggy wet shallows of mussels and barnacles and crabs. The tide is rising, waves tumbling inland, the whole swelling world out there coming to reach us. The seagulls have stopped calling. The only sound is the tide sliding up the beach. Our feet disturb the phosphorescence sparkling in the ripples. That eerie shimmering mirrors the constellations that are emerging above our heads now, a hazy white. The sky deepens to indigo. A rim of pink holds the horizon, creviced by dark islands.

“Red sky at night,” I say. “Sailor’s delight.”

“I’m not a sailor.”

He's no saint, either, I know that much—he gives me a sideways glance with that sly grin. Then he strides into the water, fully dressed. I shout at him that I don't expect he's going to be able to walk on it.

He disappears under the waves. I'm alone on the beach. I count the seconds he holds his breath. The current can move harder and faster than you expect so you don't know you are travelling until you are too far out to get back on your own.

But he emerges right where he was, exploding in a splash and spitting a high spout of water toward me. He walks to shore, his shirt and trousers rippling wet, bends over to dunk his head into the ocean and then whips it back, an arc of water. He wags his hair. Plucks away a bullwhip hanging over his shoulder. One of his suspenders has slipped down, the waistband dragging uneven. I let the raw sea air fill my lungs. He stands knee-deep with his hands in his pockets, casual as any man on the corner of a street who wouldn't mind company but would be just as happy without it.

There is a pier at the Northern end of the beach, a long spindly stem. From here it seems to touch one of the small islands where no one lives. He starts walking without leaving the water. I keep to the land, but follow him. I drag my rifle, the phosphorescence marking my trail. The pillars bracing the pier are blackened by creosote.

Climbing, he reaches to offer me a hand. I struggle to pull myself up on my own, but I've lost all strength. I have to stop, bending until the pulsing ache subsides. He steps down, beside me. I don't want to look at him.

"I'm alright."

"Are you?"

"Stitch in my side."

The pier creaks, waves splashing the pillars. Finally I glance at him. We stand for a moment, just looking at each other. He has kind eyes.

"Let's try again then," I say.

He jumps back up, and reaches his hand once more, and this time I take it. He pulls me carefully and then I'm on the pier and we are still holding hands. I laugh and wish I hadn't.

When I let go, he leaps ahead, feet heavy on the pier, lunging his weight to test the wood. He points to a hole where it has rotted, watches as I avoid the danger. The pier leads to a floating wooden raft, attached by chains creaking and groaning against the waves' pull. He leaps onto it and I climb down warily, his arms ready to brace me.

The raft dips and lifts. On all sides nothing but water.

"I was the one who always got thrown in."

"I'm not going to throw you." He points to the horizon. "The moon," he says, "will rise right there. Best seats in the house. I'm a fan of that moon." He checks his wrist, though he isn't wearing a watch. "I'd say we've got ten minutes."

He puts down the rifle then stretches out, cradling his head in his arms.

“I don’t know your name.” I feel overly tall, the only one standing. The raft tilts me.

The waves swallow his response.

I sit, grasp my knees to my chest, and then I rest on my back and it feels right, to be low on the wood. I am lying next to him—our heads are close but our bodies angle from each other, feet pointing to the corners of the raft. Between us, we shape the night air and the wet wood and there is energy in this distance. I can trust where he is now, in relation to me.

“Your name.”

“Char-lie.” He says each syllable separately, puts them together the way you build something new. “Call me Charlie.”

“Charlie.”

“That’s right.”

“Eva. Pronounced with a hard *a*. Eva, like that.”

“Eva with a hard *a*.”

“It’s spelled with an *e*.”

“I wasn’t planning to spell it.”

“People get it wrong.”

Our voices vibrate under the raft, in the pockets of air between the water and the wood. My limbs seem to float above the rest of my body. He doesn't look like a Charlie. I know that is not his name. And I've gone and given him mine.

"Up could be down out here, Charlie. It's not land and it's not water."

He gestures to look. Right there. Just a fingernail's worth of light divides the water from the sky. Charlie and I breathe together. The sea releases the moon, a half-circle so white and clear it seems liquid. Then it is whole. A seal pokes its head through the ribbon of light. Nothing but good can come from watching this moon.

It moves through the sky yet remains still. He stands up, his white shirt iridescent as a candle, walks to the edge and looks ready to dive in. He begins to sing—not words, or none I can recognize. A guttural vibration emerges from his chest and he shifts his weight to start the raft rocking so it rises and falls with his voice. The seal swims closer, nudging the raft. His voice resonates through my skin. My cheeks are wet. A tear tickles my neck. I slip my hand underneath the shirt to rest my palm on the stitches. When the singing stops, he stands silent for a while as the sea absorbs his voice. Above him are the seven sisters, Orion, the big dipper, all in their familiar positions.

"Women sing that," he says, sitting down. He rips a piece of wood loose and tosses it into the water. "On the east coast, in the north. I travelled there, when I was working the ships. A few of them taught me, though they weren't supposed to. When

the hunters leave, the women sing, they do it together, two at a time, right into each other's mouths. You can't tell who is making which sound."

"What does the song mean?"

"Oh it doesn't have any meaning. It's a game. They are trying to make each other laugh. Whoever laughs first is the loser."

I start to laugh.

"I'm winning," he says.

"Sounds to me like you're the woman."

Then we are quiet. The air has a chill on it. Waves slap the raft. I shiver and he looks at me so I tell him I had best be going home. "No," I say, as he stands up to accompany me. "Not this time. You stay. You stay here."

He hands me the rifle. I walk along the beach to the trail and when I glance back, I can't see where Charlie is, but tell myself I don't need to know.

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I'm rolling a red ball back and forth to Olaf, but he isn't interested, stepping away and letting the ball bounce off the legs of the kitchen table. This evening Thorvald has left for the shed, and it's the first time since the surgery that I've been

alone with Olaf. It's a test, to see if I can manage him on my own. My voice sounds like someone unused to children. "Look, Olaf, look at the ball. Bring it back to Mommy." He doesn't come. He finds a scrap of cheese on the floor to eat. I scoot over to him, but leave him the cheese. I don't want him crying. He looks at me like he's not sure what to expect.

He doesn't reach for my hand or skirt, the way he used to when he wanted comfort. I should lean down now and gather Olaf in my arms, smother his face with kisses. My hesitation is unnatural. He senses my unease.

It's no use, my trying to play with him. I settle him on the chesterfield to listen to a story—this morning I found the *Brothers Grimm* tucked in the pantry, the cover dusty. The pages flip open to a milk stain that has rippled the paper. "The Little Mermaid"—I remember reading that to him when I was pregnant with the second child, when even the weight of a book fatigued me. But no, I don't want to read that one, not about a girl falling in love and trading her beautiful flipper for feet. Instead I find the story about the girl who has to sew shirts for her brothers who have been turned into swans. Only she can save them. She can't speak or laugh for seven years. When they return, she has one last shirt that isn't complete, its sleeve missing, so the last boy is left with a wing for an arm. When I was a child I relished this story, the sister's power over her brothers' fate. I used to pick out which of my brothers would get the unfinished shirt. Olaf leans into me, his thumb in his mouth, eyes on the book. It's the pictures he likes. Green and blue background, the brother trapped in his

transformation between swan and human. I read the same lines again, letting the story pause. Olaf sighs, shifts his weight. I savour the feel of his small legs next to my hip.

I remember my mother reading these stories to me, her hand lotion leaving shiny prints on the page, the odor of soup clinging to her hair. She made her voice gruff when she read the part of the men. I loved to witness the change in her, shadows dancing across her face.

Now Olaf grabs at the book. He has no more patience for my reading. I used to keep toys in my pocket, bits of yarn I'd knit into puppets. I don't know where they went.

He scrambles toward the door, can't reach the knob, makes frustrated noises to show he wants my attention. Perhaps he hopes to find Thorvald. Their closeness has left me behind.

I manage to distract him with his caboose and train set, and go into the kitchen to scrub the dishes while I keep him in my line of sight. Thorvald will be happy if I can get the kitchen cleaned up before he comes back from the shed. I've left the whole day's dishes in the sink, and the food has hardened on the plates. But I find the work satisfying, something I can do.

"You know, Twig," one of the loggers said, the evening we had a party here, "I can't quite see you as anyone's wife."

It was their jealousy talking, I knew that, and their respect for me, my wiry independence that brought me here and made me so comfortable amongst them. They were all mine, every one of them, these men. They'd had too much to drink, the devil's liquor provided by the bald one we call the Pope, their words exuberantly slurred. I'd been laughing with them, although I wasn't into the moonshine like they were.

"And I can't see you as a mother." It was Snowball who said it. He thought it was funny. When you are drinking, everything is funny. It got them all roaring. One of them, Smokey, was laughing so hard he had tears on his cheeks, which he wiped away with the back of his hand. I felt a hollow ache inside, the way I'd felt when being teased by girls for having dirt on my face or scabs on my knees. But this was worse, much worse. I remember it was early October, but already cold. I'd known I was pregnant since the summer, and the secret remained a thrill that Thorvald and I shared—I was only starting to show. I was surprised at how easily I'd fallen pregnant, as easily as I'd fallen for Thorvald. My body worked the way any woman's would.

Now the men had identified what I'd feared, that in the end none of it would come to me, not in a natural way. Something was awry. Their laughing wasn't meant to be hurtful—they meant to include me in the banter, I'm sure of that. They didn't know I was pregnant or that I'd ever hoped to be.

Pregnancy makes you more susceptible to crying, but I wasn't going to let the men see any of that. The house was full of bodies—there must have been near forty

men. As many as we could fit indoors, and there were more standing outside in the cold, their voices raising the volume whenever the door opened to let someone in or out. It was a house-warming party. Thorvald and I had finished building our home. The men had carefully removed their caulk boots on the steps outside. And one by one they greeted me, some of them holding their hats behind their backs while they reached out to shake my hand. Now they were filling our living room and kitchen. Standing in their socks with the woolen toes that had bunched up or flattened out in front like webbed feet. The ripe rank smell of cheesy toes. There'd been frost on the windows that morning, I remember that, but it had been steamed away by the heat of their bodies, their breath. They'd brought the whisky jack, their idea of a wedding present. I looked at its hooked beak and its ugly talons and thought that this awkward winged creature is all the men think I'm capable of caring for. The bird scratched its claws across the floor, unfamiliar with the slickness of polished wood. And that's when the men got the idea that they could do the same thing—they were slipping and sliding across the floor. They were used to the ragged ground of a logging site, or the haggard wooden floor of the cookhouse that was all pock-marked by their boots. But in our house they raced each other back and forth from wall to wall. In their socked feet, skating. Whooooooooop, they shouted. Whooooooooooooooooop! Even Thorvald joined them.

I don't know if I've ever felt more lonely in my life.

I found Simple upstairs, in the room that would be Olaf's. He was looking out the window. Or at the window, the lace-pattern of frost. And I wasn't good to him.

“This room isn’t for you,” I said. “This isn’t yours.” It seemed an omen, at the time, to find him so close to the crib.

When all the men had left, and their plates were piled high on the counter and in the sink, ashes under our feet, I asked Thorvald if he saw me... I remember I had trouble saying it. “Do you see me as a mother?”

“I want to have a child with you, Eva,” he said. “I want to have this one.”

And five months later, we did. I should be grateful for that.

^ ^ ^ ^

The whiff of smoke comes off the mountain and seeps into our bedroom. Night clouds glow the colour of melting iron. A forest fire—not close, but close enough, raging somewhere on the other side of the camp. Thorvald pulls back the sheets, says something in Norwegian under his breath. We dress without turning on the lamp, our skin lit by the sky. Find ourselves huddled in the kitchen. I hurry to fry him eggs and hash browns, strips of bacon crackling like flames. Normally he’d eat in the cookhouse with the other loggers, but this morning it seems important to feed him. I won’t see him for supper, not until the fire is dead.

Thorvald eats like he is trying to get rid of the food. He pushes back his empty plate, stands up, gives his suspenders a tug. He checks to make sure the windows are shut.

“You’re safe, you and Olaf.” He slips his rough fingers along my hand. Then he’s gone, footsteps even and solid up the trail.

I check on our son, his diapered bottom and sweet breath. For weeks I have asked Thorvald to leave him with me. Now he has.

I make determined, magical combinations as I clean the kitchen—an extra sweep of the floor to keep the men alive. I count to eight as I wipe circles around the frying pan, white suds against the black, one circle for each man who died in last summer’s fire. I boil Thorvald’s shirts, the pot bubbling like an enormous cauldron. Then I lay his shirts flat along the counter and the table, and do up the buttons, all the way to the collar the way a logger never would. I make the arms stretch wide as hope.

When I hear Olaf fussing in his crib I manage to lift him out and I walk behind him downstairs to the steamy warmth of the kitchen. I feed him leftover eggs.

When he finishes eating, I wipe his face and hands with a cloth. He doesn’t resist my efforts.

Outside, I spray down the roof. Cedar shingles are a hazard, and the air is already flecked with ash. Early this season the men burned a line to separate the stumps and the flashing from the logging camp and if the fire meets that line it will

have nothing to consume. A controlled burn, that's what they call it. We are on this side of the fire line and Thorvald is on the other.

I shoot an arc of water over Olaf who dances under it, then I point the nozzle at the dirt beneath his feet. He reaches for the water and I lift the hose away.

A tug across my stomach. But not pain, not anymore. I direct the spray at our bedroom window, which is shut tight. I pretend the stream of water penetrates the glass to flood the whole room and float that damned bed away.

I don't want to go back inside the house and seal it up around us so we can watch those crying windows. It's better to be under the open sky and not inside a thing that can burn. I walk with Olaf to the creek and we both stamp right into the water, the shock of cold seeping into my boots.

The birds are gone. No coyotes, no deer. As I amble beside Olaf's dawdling steps, I wonder where animals go to escape.

The smoke thins at the shore. Sunshine makes shining coins of the waves. Curling at my feet are long strips of seaweed like the discarded skin of a snake. It's high tide and the space between woods and water has narrowed to just this alley of sand. I wish I could fold the earth along this horizontal crease, letting the force of the ocean engulf the flames.

Charlie's tent shifts in the sea spray. One of the pegs at the corner has come loose and the canvas flaps open. It looks flimsy now, fragile.

Both he and Thorvald are up there in the smoke. All the men along the coast will have been rounded up to fight the fire, the men at the mill town, the reservation, even the Japanese on their boats, and the Chinese shingle bolters. Any man walking along a street can be conscripted and rounded up in a truck, as long as someone can find him a pair of caulk boots to fit. Charlie has his own.

Behind the tent are the soaring trees and the mountain: it is hard to believe that anything so green could burn. At the edge of the tumbling clouds, a vivid orange border marks where the fire is making new ground. One eagle casts circles in the sky. Around and around on the rising currents. Its nest must be inside the cascade of smoke.

I turn back to face the sea's teeming blue expanse. The world has split in two.

Not a thing on this shore would keep a fire burning, just stones and broken seashells. The beached logs are doused daily by the tide, covered with mussels and seaweed. What the men on the hill would give for such a bath.

Olaf and I build a castle with a deep moat. Sea lice and miniature crabs scatter. He holds up his hand to me and I suck his finger where salt has seeped into a cut. Then he examines the fingertip thoughtfully and sucks it himself. He'll soon be hungry.

If I can get Olaf inside that tent, we'll at least be out of the sun and Charlie may have something I can feed him. Charlie invited me back, though I'm not sure how he'd

feel about me foraging in there when he's gone. Nothing is normal in a fire. The first day is always the worst, the acrid stink in your nostrils, the blank landscape waiting.

Olaf runs through the open flap to the back corner, covering his face as if this will hide him. I duck my head inside. The tent seems the right size for a child, with the slanted ceilings and small two-burner stove. The smell of canvas gives me the same comfort it did the night I cut my foot. Here are the pots and pans. A kettle I can take to the creek. Two cans of beans. Four potatoes are lined upright against a pillow like sleeping dolls. Even the blankets on the ground are welcoming. Charlie has a small area to keep clean—no need for a broom, just a wipe of the hand. He's not the one using the timber. For his needs, not a single tree would ever need to fall.

If I find a can opener, I can get into those beans and fry them, smash a paste for Olaf to eat. I rummage through Charlie's supplies, apprehensive I might find something I'm not supposed to see, a girlie magazine or a postcard from one of the women the men visit in the city. Their skirts, the loggers call the women. I'm going to look up my skirt, they say. Some of them are shy about it, scooping up their mail so I can't see. But Charlie has nothing to hide. A drum rests in the corner, a blanket rolled around it. He is tidy as a cat.

Olaf and I set up camp. We cook, eat, drink tea, roll potatoes back and forth endlessly across the lumpy blankets.

“I thought I heard you.” Charlie is standing in the open flap of the tent. He squints at Olaf warningly, then smiles. “Company,” he says. His face is black and streaked where sweat runs rivers across the skin.

“Charlie. Are you alright?”

“Hands, feet, I’ve still got my parts.” He holds up his hands. They are as black as his face. He starts coughing and gasping for air, the sound brittle and rasping. He braces his hand on the canvas, pushes at it, as if the tent were a lung he could stretch.

I stand up and pass him water and he slurps it, breathes a bit easier. Relief eases my shoulders. I feel breathless myself—jaunty at my daring, crossing into his territory. The sound of his breathing fills the tent. He’s alive, he’s here and alive. Down the mountain so early in the day—it must be only three, or four, and the fire brigade will be up there until midnight. But he is here. I don’t ask why.

Olaf starts to wail. Snot links his nose to his mouth. He’s just done a load in his pants.

Charlie nods at him. “He looks like you.”

“We came down here to get away from the smoke.”

“He doesn’t smell like you.”

I strip Olaf of his diaper, his tiny penis like a snail. He keeps his eyes on Charlie.

Rummaging through containers, Charlie pauses between movements to focus on his breathing. He doesn't seem to find what he wants. Wherever he touches the canvas, he leaves a black smudge.

I slip Olaf's trousers over his bare bottom. Conscience bites at me when I see my son without his diaper.

"And the rest of the crew?" I don't want to say Thorvald's name.

"Seaball took a piss on the flames." Charlie turns away to spit black phlegm onto the ground. He takes out a handkerchief to wipe his mouth.

"TB or not TB," he says. He kicks a mound of sand over the liquid.

"Jesus, Charlie, please say you're not."

"Just swallowed some smoke. My blood would be red, same as yours."

I gather then that he's been sent away from the fire. He won't be much help to the others if he can't breathe. He picks up Olaf easily, and walks out of the tent. Olaf reaches to touch the smears of soot on Charlie's face, awestruck at the stranger.

"He's going to drool on you."

"I have that effect."

"He's teething. It's not your good looks." Charlie glances at me and I can feel my face getting flushed. "His name's Olaf."

“Hello, Olaf.”

“He doesn’t always answer when called.”

“We’ll use the post. Won’t we, Olaf? Come on then, let’s get us a bath.”

We walk toward the ocean, Charlie bouncing Olaf on his hip. I look back at the smoke billowing from the trees. The eagle is gone. I wish it was still up there where I could see those symmetrical wings circling above the men.

On the sand our shadows merge together. It would do no good now to take Olaf back. Charlie sucks one long deep breath and I turn to join him, ignoring the wincing pain as we run, hollering, into the waves.

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Four hours sleep and then once more Thorvald is gone. He cuts the night in half. I go, he said this morning. When he is tired his English folds up.

His shirts have dried and I tuck them away in our bedroom and return to the kitchen. The sun isn’t out. A low ceiling of smoky cloud covers the woods. It will be clearer down at the ocean, but today I won’t let myself see Charlie.

The cookhouse will be full of shouting. With the fire crews to feed, there’s always more of an effort, hours stretching into the night, no complaints. Today I’m

sure they could use another pair of hands. When Olaf wakes up, I tell him we're going to the camp, just to hear my voice say it.

I'll only have to see the kitchen crew, none of the loggers. Sinbad has already been to the house and seen the shape I'm in, and One-Eyed can't see much of anything. I don't know how Cook will respond. Gravy's always quiet. The other flunkies, Juneau and Perfect, I can't predict. But I'll be old news now, with the fire demanding all their care. I suppose for them it may seem that losing a baby doesn't compare to the possibility of losing a man. I won't take up their attention for long.

I'm trembling as we approach the wooden sidewalk. The ramp leading to the commissary doesn't appear steep enough for anyone to fall down it.

I let Olaf walk on his own and he picks up rolling papers and throws them in the air.

There would have been a celebration when I brought the newborn to camp for the first time, as there was for Olaf. That day the men acted like I'd won a match. Toasts of moonshine and cheers when he poked his head out of the blanket. I remember showing them his skull, and explaining that it hadn't joined up yet—there was a soft spot I had to protect. We all had it once, I said, and a few of the men reached to rub their heads as if to check if their own spot was still there.

No one said they couldn't see me as a mother, not then.

Olaf climbs the steps to one of the bunkhouses, finds a page of a comic book by the door. He tries to eat it and I pull it away and pretend to eat it myself, which makes him laugh. I sit down with him on the steps, relishing the sound.

The first day I arrived here, all these rough buildings looked to me like teeth. Some of them white-washed, some of them plain cedar left to fade and warp. But it was how the bunkhouses faced each other in rows. The mountain had been given a mouth. And soon enough my waking hours consisted almost entirely of peeling enough potatoes and whipping enough cream and pounding enough rib-eye to keep one-hundred men chewing.

“Eva, Eva, Eva.” Cook bounds off the porch, his voice so pure and loud he could be singing. He walks over to where Olaf and I have settled, Cook’s hands on his hips.

I get up, wiping dirt off the back of my skirt, and take Olaf’s palm in mine. “Any use for a mother and son team?”

We walk into the kitchen, that familiar smell of rendered fat.

The men pause in their work. Gravy wipes his hand with a towel. Sinbad coughs. I try to think of something to say. Gravy’s eyes fall to the middle of my body.

Tomorrow will be easier, and the day after.

Olaf is climbing a bag of flour, and I’m ready for the distraction. I run to catch him, Cook beating me to it. But he leads Olaf to me, the way he used to do. Today he has to nudge him forward. Then Olaf walks to me and holds onto my knees, peers at

the men with his thumb in his mouth. The men don't know he hasn't grabbed onto me like this, not in a long while.

"Eva, I'm thinking of bringing a wife up here."

"Are you, Cook? And where are you going to find her?"

"Down in the mill town," One-Eyed answers, pointing with his thumb. "Plenty of them. Curvy."

"You got one in mind?"

"One or two," Cook says.

"This isn't any place for a woman," Gravy says in his soft voice. "Ask Eva."

"What is that supposed to mean?"

"Just that you would know."

"What I know is that those sandwiches aren't going to be made on their own."

I start with the bread, slicing it. Olaf plunks himself at my feet, then toddles away to Sinbad and Perfect to yank on their pant legs. Cook rotates the dial on the radio and it crackles and blurts the horns of a big band. I'm glad for the music. Everyone has turned to their work. Gravy busy kneading a loaf of dough. I wonder if some of the men blame me for coming to the woods. To think of giving birth out here. What could I expect?

Chance, that's what it was. That's what I have to believe. It could have happened anywhere.

On each window of the cookhouse soars the shape of a bird, wings outstretched, made of black electrician's tape. Crows, or maybe ravens, given the size. They keep the pesky blue jays and whisky jacks from crashing into the pane. But the real birds won't be filling the air until the fire has stopped.

"Alright, Eva?" Cook asks me.

"Right as rain."

"We could use some of that."

"Was anyone scared?" Last year one of the men had to come down the mountain, couldn't stand the sight of the flames. He didn't last long in the camp after that.

"They're holding up good. Don't you worry."

Perfect tries to entertain Olaf by dancing around with a pot on his head. That just sets him to screaming.

The roar of the crummy comes down the mountain road and around the corner, the engine cutting out when it reaches the camp. The men start shuffling through the door with a tin bucket of food in each hand to begin loading the truck.

I lead Olaf outside, and though he's still whimpering, all the action in front of him soon grabs his attention.

What I see first, when the driver climbs out of the cab, is a red bandana around his nose and mouth. But it's Charlie, that black shock of hair, his eyes shining at me. My stomach does a stupid little leap.

"You planning to rob us?"

"Doesn't look like I have to," he says, pulling down the bandana. He begins to load the truck with buckets of food. Juneau comes rolling an oil keg and lifts it into the back. I give it a shove. Cook shouts at me to let the men do it.

Olaf has started to wave. The other men don't seem to notice. Charlie raises his hand in response.

He grabs onto the roof of the truck and swings himself into the cab, tapping two short fast pats on the horn, and he wheels out in a spray of dirt, the swoop of headlights climbing ahead of him as he disappears back up to the men. The camp is a darker place, but that would just be my eyes needing to adjust.

AAAA

My breasts dry up and I can almost believe it's the crackling heat in the air that has done it. Thorvald and I are too tired at the end of the day to wash. We meet exhausted under the bedclothes, neither of us touching. The room reeks of chicken and smoke and dirty sheets. Only in the morning do I pour water over my face and my boy, and give us a solid rubbing. I braid my hair and slip on my patchwork skirt.

By the end of the week, the cookhouse has the feel of a celebration. We haven't lost a man yet to the fire. Cook spins me to the radio static of the big bands. He holds his palms up, away from my body, because they are slick with lard. Just the light pressure of his wrists guiding me across the floor. Juneau and Gravy stand and clap. Sinbad sways along with his broom. Perfect slicing ham to the beat. We've got Olaf in the corner of the kitchen with some toys I packed from home. Charlie returns to load each meal into the crummy, pulling down his bandana to say a few words, eat a few cookies, then cover his face again to return to the smoke.

"TB. Are you sure?"

Gravy is the one to tell me, but says he doesn't know the details. "That's why he's not with the men," he says. "Had it as a boy. Better now, but he can't be fighting fire."

"He told you?"

Gravy laughs and shakes his head, then Cook emerges from the freezer with another wedge of meat and Gravy stops talking to concentrate on the chicken he's gutted.

I want to ask Cook if he knows about Charlie, but don't want to bring his name up in conversation too often. I hang back, hoping the men might continue between themselves, but the topic seems to have been dropped. Cook starts to whistle.

Later in the evening, when he's unloading a last batch of cookies from the oven, the air sweet with the smell of ginger, I ask Cook about his wedding plans, and he laughs. Sinbad says Cook already brought some woman up here.

"She brought herself," One-Eyed contributes.

"She came on her own?"

"No, with another one," Sinbad says. "There were two of them."

Cook keeps his eyes on his spatula.

"Three. Maybe more," One-Eyed says. "On the train. Only two got out. In *fluffy dresses*. With *parasols*."

"*Here?*"

"They came for Cook," Sinbad says.

"They didn't."

“No,” Cook says. “They didn’t.”

“She walked right into this kitchen.”

I look around at what she would have seen, the chicken carcasses piled high on the counter, stacks of plates still greasy from breakfast. Hardened jars of bacon fat. The men with their blood-stained aprons. I doubt she rolled up her sleeves.

As they continue to tease Cook, imitating a lisping feminine voice and waving a hanky, I realize that this visit would have happened when I was at home, in bed. Some other woman appeared soon after I left their sights.

“It was the dining hall that did it,” One-Eyed says.

“She couldn’t stand the stink of the place,” Sinbad says.

I think of the room full of the men and their appetites. The stench of their armpits and dirty hair. I doubt Cook is going to convince any woman to stay.

“You don’t notice it, do you, Eva?” Perfect has a hopeful sound in his voice and I smile at him, but can’t bring myself to agree.

It’s then I get a sense of the isolation of these men, all of them, so far away from anyone who could offer solace after they’ve fought a fire or scrambled in a kitchen all day with the worry that one of the loggers won’t come back. Gravy’s sweeping the floor, and he seems wistful. I wonder if he has a girl he likes to imagine.

Night quiets the kitchen. We sit on the porch steps, fingers pinching our roll-your-owns, Olaf inside splayed on a bag of flour, blessedly asleep. Perfect's real name is Per, Norwegian, but he works hard to deserve his nickname, and is always the last one to rest. He hands me a store-bought, and I take deep puffs of the strange menthol taste. We've finished the last load of the crummy, and wiped down the counters, and it will be another two hours yet before the loggers return from their shifts.

"This is the hardest time."

"The day's almost over, Twig," Cook says.

"I don't like the waiting."

"He's going to come back just fine. You'll see."

"I need to keep busy."

The grey puffs from our mouths meet the haze from the fire. No moon, no stars, just smoke thickening the dark.

"Cook, would you leave, if you can't bring a wife up here?"

"I'm thinking on it."

"I wouldn't want you to leave."

"You're already taken."

"You don't want me. I'm all muscle and elbow."

“Oh you’d be surprised. I could do with a little elbow.”

There’s a growl of an engine around the corner, lights swooping white across the camp. The crummy has returned unexpected. This means it will be carrying a man who’s been injured or worse. My heartbeat grinds faster as the crummy slows and the wheels roll one more time and stop.

“Jesus Christ.”

“Let’s hope not.”

But the crummy is full of men who are alive, Indians mostly, from the looks of it. One climbs out and walks toward a bunkhouse to take a long piss against the wall.

“You got any more of them cookies?” Charlie has jumped down, looking happy with his surprise cargo. Perfect goes running inside and comes out with a bundle wrapped in his apron and passes it to the men who stay in the back of the truck. They fold their large hands around the cookies. Men always seem like boys when they are eating something sweet.

“They’re from the reservation,” Charlie says. “Volunteers.”

“They need beds?” Cook says. “We don’t have beds.”

“No no. I’ve got to get them back to the reserve, before the last run. We just stopped for some grub.”

Cook and Sinbad nod. I get the sense they are relieved. We often have a couple Indians do a shift here or there, but nothing steady, and never a group as large as this one.

"The loggers must have been glad for the help." My voice is strained. One of the men swipes off his undershirt and uses it to wipe his face. They stare at me but don't say anything.

"Can I come along for the ride?" I ask Charlie impulsively. "Get some fresh air?"

"You'll have to drive a long way for that," Gravy points out.

"Do me good," I say.

Charlie opens the passenger door and gestures for me to get in.

I hesitate.

"Go on, Twig," Cook says. "We've finished up in the kitchen."

"You're alright with Olaf? I'll be back in an hour. He won't miss me."

"He's asleep," Cook says. "No point hanging around."

I pause, wondering if I should invite one of the flunkies. It would look better if one of them joined us.

"I said go on now, Twig. You aren't going to rest until Thorvald gets back."

Then I'm sitting down on the seat that is one wide piece of slippery cowhide stretching from passenger to driver with nothing in between.

"Twig? You prefer Twig?"

"Eva."

With a blast from the exhaust pipe, the engine jerks to a start and he loops the crummy out of the camp toward the main logging road. Trees loom all around us. In the headlights the dancing smoke seems almost alive. Inside, the sheen on the windshield, the sputtering motor, the rattling dashboard, Charlie's hand shifting the gears—he lets the motor slide into neutral as he releases the clutch, there's a looseness to the ride, the road full of trenches that bucket the wheels, the truck bed swaying easy as we turn north onto the main road that runs loyal to the coast. The road juts and jags like someone's taken a pair of scissors to it. This stretch could carry us to Alaska if that is what we decided.

"They like you," he says finally. He means the men in the kitchen. "They play tricks on you?"

"Only at the start, same as with all the greenhorns."

He smiles but doesn't respond, waiting for me to continue.

"Alright. The kitchen staff got me to carry a bucket of water, all the way up in the crummy, for the donkey."

"You find anything with a mouth?"

"I poured my bucket over the engine."

"Might have done some good."

He's driving with one hand, lets it rest low on the steering wheel. Smoke dims the road. Usually the headlights would catch the liquid eyes of animals, but this evening there are just the trees.

"Where do they go in a fire?"

"They?"

"Bears. Wolves."

"I saw coyotes," he says, "up on the cliff last night."

"Coyotes." I let the word have some air around it, thinking of the animals on their rocky perch, throats stretched to the moon. "You're still on the beach?"

"Door's open any time."

"You don't have a door."

Behind our voices, the men in the back are making a rowdy noise that surprises me after they've done such a long day of work. Their bodies shift as the truck wheels the corners. One of them knocks on the metal wall of the cab, a brisk rat-a-tat-tat, like the opening of a joke.

Charlie swings the car into the road that leads to the reservation. No place name, just that dark gap in the trees. The road narrows and we tunnel through a space that is barely wide enough for us to fit. A wiry noise as branches scratch against the doors and the windows and the roof.

Where the road ends, there is an overturned rowboat, white, the colour peeling. Someone has painted a smiling face on the hull, and Christmas tinsel hangs across it, like it's supposed to be hair. When the boat gets back in the water, the smile will be the wrong way around.

The first houses we see are nothing more than shacks, clapboard dwellings leaning south or north, wood slapped over gaps where the wind could reach. A broken window has been covered with plastic sheeting. One home looks better kept than the others, with a porch, a row of tea-cups on the window sill. A sturdy woman comes to the doorway, her arms crossed like she's annoyed at the wait.

Charlie cuts the engine. He leaves on the headlights, though the air here is clear. The dank smell of crab-traps drifts up from the ocean. The men leap out of the crummy, a few still loudly talking. They get shushed mightily from the woman on the porch. The children must already be asleep. Charlie walks over to her and stands nodding as she talks. She seems distressed. Another man has reached his arm around her shoulder. Charlie leans back with both hands on the porch railing, which gives with his weight, and I worry for a moment that he's going to fall. But he steps forward to

hug the woman, then the man—each time it's a long, patient hug, two people breathing together. You don't see that kind of thing in the camp.

I look away. The other men have all disappeared into their homes, and the reservation has a ghostly feel to it. I remember being excited to hear about this place, when I was new to the coast. Real Indians. There weren't any left where I grew up. I knew them from movies, of course, where they raided villages and scalped men and stole brides. Wagon burners, they were called. It's a disappointment to see the reserve is nothing but a cluster of tired buildings.

Thorvald says you can never keep an Indian working past Sunday—five or six days logging and he'll disappear for a month or more, back to fishing or hunting or whatever else they do to keep themselves alive. Not reliable, he says. Lazy. They don't have to work, not like the immigrants who come to this country with nothing. The Indians get these houses for free. But these houses don't look like they were ever worth much.

The women here can give you herbs to bring on your bleeding, when it's late. A girl on the ferry told me that. I wondered if she'd ever needed those kinds of herbs herself, being so young, then figured she was only trying to impress. We were talking in that familiar way that sometimes happens when you are caught next to a stranger on a boat or a train. We stared out where the wake of pearly waves led back to what we'd left. The Indians were riding below us, in the heat of the furnace room. When she talked about them, the girl pointed toward the floor.

Now I wonder if a white woman has ever shown up here to ask for help. I suppose I'm the only one around these parts, and that wasn't the care I needed.

Charlie returns to the truck, revs the engine and backs expertly as the couple watch us go. Then he smiles at his hand and reaches his finger. A beetle crawls along his knuckle, like the last living thing on earth. I offer my palm, touching my finger tip to his, and we let the beetle cross. It skitters up my sleeve and I shake it loose and it disappears somewhere under the seat, leaving a rattling energy in my body that I can't quite blame on the feel of the insect. Without the rowdy voices in the back of the truck, I'm more aware of Charlie sitting next to me, the two of us together, branches scratching at the glass. We're travelling toward the smoke and I feel a sense of urgency to talk to him before the air gets hazy again.

"You ever live on the reserve?"

"I don't think they'd have me," he says.

"But you know those people."

"I come and go."

"And is she alright?"

He shakes his head.

"I guess they don't have much to gain, do they? Sending their men to fight the fire. It won't be reaching them down here."

"That's not the worst of it."

"Something else then?"

"Something else."

I put my feet up on the dashboard and hug my knees to my chest.

"She's like you, Eva."

"Me?"

"Lost a child."

Charlie and I have never spoken about what I've lost. I feel a watery sensation in my gut. The truck rattles around us. I clasp my hand around the door handle, though we're a mile yet from the logging camp. Tree trunks rise like columns on either side of the road. Suddenly I'm glad we're driving further and further away from this woman who needed to be comforted, standing there on her porch, out in the open.

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I am telling Charlie about my first day in the camp, how Cook carved faces in the potatoes. I stop my story as soon as we see the glow motored by the camp's generator. Charlie doesn't drive the truck right to the cookhouse like he usually does,



but parks nearer the wooden sidewalk. The kitchen crew are indoors, so they can't see us in the cab of the truck, although they'd be able to hear the engine. The light is shallow, stark. It feels unexpected now to be visible beside him. I miss the darkness of the coastal journey, the twists and turns that shifted our bodies as we braced them to stay in place.

We aren't talking, just sitting here. I don't want to get out. He doesn't move either.

"Back to the kitchen," I say.

He says to wait. He gets out of the crummy and walks around to open the door, which sets me to laughing.

"I can do that myself."

"Sounds like you've done quite a lot by yourself."

He offers his arm, like he did when I limped from his tent. We walk past the bunkhouses and up the cookhouse steps, where he leaves me. He turns to offer a salute. Then he walks back to the crummy and drives off. There will be two trips up the mountain tonight. The crummy holds sixty men. He'll have half an hour alone before he reaches them. If I wore perfume, the scent would linger in that front seat.

Gravy's got his hands in his face, sitting on a chair beside the stove. Cook scrubs a pan without much effort. He smiles at my entrance. He is exhausted, and hiding his curiosity. Juneau is the one who asks about the trip. I describe the shabby

buildings, the boat with the tinsel hair. I leave out the woman on the porch, and how Charlie held her. Sinbad is listening intently, Perfect with his innocence—he's new enough to the country not to know the rules. You don't travel like that to a reservation, not if you're white. You wouldn't be welcome. And if you're a white woman, you wouldn't want others to know where you'd been.

Juneau says the reserves are even bigger where he comes from, the Indians meaner. Gravy is looking at me, but doesn't say a word.

"You don't approve," I say.

"Not up to me."

"Cook?"

"They show you how to do those dances?" Juneau asks.

"They didn't show me anything."

"Cook could go there to find a wife," One-Eyed says.

They all laugh.

"I hear they let you have more than one," Sinbad says.

Cook tells him he's too young to be thinking about that.

I say they need to get to their bunks, but they aren't going to retire for the night until we get the men back. Cook tells the staff they've got me safe and sound now.

That's the end of it, he says. Thorvald won't hear a peep from them about where I've been. I know they'd enjoy some small sense of conspiracy. Just that I'm still free to do as I please. We used to get up to our own escapades, before I had Olaf. One day four of us from the kitchen went on a joy ride on the railway speeder, and Gravy puked—he pushed us aside so he could belch one long blast into the woods. Thorvald never heard wind of any of that.

We spend the next hour readying the kitchen for when the men appear. Napkins, flasks of coffee, bread and butter for those who need something to eat. Juneau keeps sliding his finger into the jam. As the time nears, the sense of anticipation sends Perfect and me to the porch to check for the first glimpse of the crummy, even though we'd hear it approach from inside. The men are later tonight than usual.

"I think the Indians..." he says. "What do you think, Eva?"

"Oh probably the same as you, Perfect."

"I've never. Not until I moved here."

"Now you have."

"I just need to see a cougar."

"Be careful what you wish for."

"Or a whale."

"You have whales in Norway."

"But I don't ever see one. Not in my whole life. My town, where I am from, it's boring. We live in the middle."

"Right then. Indians and whales."

I'm walking back from the outhouse when the crummy rumbles into camp with the last shift of loggers. They climb down from the truck, moving slowly, some bent over like old men. A bunch of them stand groaning and stretching, trying to release the kinks at the base of the spine. Charlie has backed the crummy right up to the porch, so they can practically fall out of the truck and onto the steps. For some reason most of them usually stop for a cup of coffee before they head to sleep. You'd think they'd want water or something cool. But they want to grip a warm cup, feel the hot liquid reach their belly. Now the crummy is empty, and I still don't see Thorvald, which worries me, though I know there'd have been word if he'd been hurt. Then I do see him, sitting beside Charlie in the front of the cab. To catch them together like that gives me a start.

They are talking, the two of them.

I walk over to the window, which Thorvald has rolled down. They both stop their conversation and look at me, Thorvald smiling, Charlie with a comical grimace.

"You boys here for a good time?"

This gets a holler from the crowd. I'm trying to appear casual, to counter the tightness I feel in my chest.

"I get all the good time," Thorvald says slowly, in his stilted, accented English, which makes the line funnier than it would be if it were just cast off. You wouldn't expect something brazen, not from him. The remark reminds me of what drew me to him when we first met, those moments when his politeness fissures like dry clay. Tonight it also makes me proud, and I find myself wondering what the words brought up in Charlie. I glance at him, but can't tell what's on his mind.

Thorvald steps out of the car, carefully holding his axe so the blade doesn't come near me.

A group of us gather in the kitchen, which is already thick with tobacco smoke. I'm glad Thorvald and Charlie aren't standing close together, although on the long journey downhill they would have had all that time to share whatever they wanted to share. I can't see Charlie saying anything to Thorvald about the trip to the reservation, not about me. They would be sitting beside each other like that, the rumble of the truck around them, their bodies shifting like ours did, and Charlie would keep our trip quiet. It would be on his mind though, I'm sure.

The men hold mugs of coffee in both hands, close to their chests, opening their mouths to suck at the steam. Someone is passing around a bottle of moonshine and I grab it and swallow a large swig before I hand it along, grimacing as the liquid scorches my throat.

“That’ll burn you a new hole.”

I want to say something in response, but my throat is so inflamed all I can do is shake my head.

“There’s a lady present.”

“Where?”

“She’s already got an extra hole.”

“Oh come on now,” Seaball shouts. “Hold back fellows. Twig, you tell us old farts to mind our manners.”

During all this kafuffle, Charlie is leaning on the kitchen counter, arms crossed, looking at me. He seems to like what he sees.

Thorvald has already nudged Olaf from his sleepy perch on the bags of flour, the boy’s arms limp, his head lolling on Thorvald’s shoulder, eyes squinting against the light, opening, then falling shut again. When Thorvald hushes the crowd, they all grow quiet. They watch the man and boy, respectful. I guess they’d like one of those to hold, at a time like this.

The men begin muttering amongst themselves. Thorvald and I walk out with Olaf.

When I turn around in the door to say goodnight boys, I catch Charlie’s singular voice rising over the others. Goodnight, Eva, he says.

AAAA

On the first stretch of the trail, I can still hear the rowdy energy of the cookhouse. I wonder aloud when the men will ever calm themselves enough to fall asleep. Thorvald says they'll see the fire on the back of their eyelids as soon as they lie down in their cots.

"Is that what you see?"

He shifts Olaf in his arms. The voices begin to recede as we turn the bend that leads into deeper forest.

"Remember last summer," he says, "It was the donkey that started the fire? The donkey was spitting oil. This time the fire isn't anywhere near where we were cutting trees. It just happened on its own."

He explains spontaneous combustion, drawing out both words so he gets the pronunciation right. He likes to use technical vocabulary, new terms he's probably learned from the supervisor. The trail here is so narrow that we're walking single file, Thorvald ahead, talking into the darkness. Olaf's mop of blond hair bobs on his shoulder. Thorvald reaches a branch that crosses the trail, and he holds it back, waiting for me to walk by, and then I'm ahead of him, and strangely uncertain, finding my footing, listening to his voice behind me.

"Does that make you feel better," I ask. "Or worse?"

"I'm not talking about feelings."

"Just that it's not in our control."

"No," he says.

"But you can stop it? The men will."

"The fire won't burn this far."

"How much damage will—"

"We're doing what we can. We clear a border. We wet the ground. And cut away all the underbrush. When the fire reaches that ground, it will... Nothing will feed it."

"Nothing," I repeat as if speaking an incantation. The smell of smoke hovers around our words. But the wide arms of the trees release a whiff of pine, fainter than normal. These trees hold enough water inside them that they'll last through a dry summer.

"Charlie—"

My heart skips a beat.

"--he says we shouldn't be up there at all."

"Does he?"



"Says we should let the trees go."

"That's what he said?"

"He said we're just going to cut them down anyway."

I can see Charlie announcing just that. Of course the men need to preserve their livelihood, but he'd grasp the irony in risking their lives to save trees they are planning to kill.

"Well, that's Charlie," Thorvald says, shaking his head.

He's beside me now, though I can't see his face in the dark. I don't allow myself to ask what he means.

We hear the creek, the burbling that used to welcome us home. For me it will always be the sound I listened to when I was recovering in our bedroom. The trickle of time continuing when I wanted it to stop. I feel a wave of anguish, but keep walking. Thorvald pauses at the creek's edge. If he were alone, without carrying Olaf, I know he'd splash water across his face and hands and it would dampen his shirt so the material would ripple and cling to his chest. I've seen him at the door like that so many times, and have held him then, feeling the moisture pass from his clothes to mine. Tonight he stands and inhales, as if the water could reach him through its boggy smell.

He steps across the slick rocks, stopping to reach a hand to help me. And it's then he stumbles. The night sky seems to keel. His feet splashing, a dance of desperate steps, and he catches himself. Laughs awkwardly. Olaf has been roused

awake, but doesn't seem frightened. He is dazed, looking for my face. Thorvald was going to spill Olaf as he fell. Neither of us say it. Thorvald embraces our boy more tightly. I cup both palms to Olaf's head the way you hold something fragile.

"Thorvald, you are tired," I say. "Too tired."

But he seems to have been woken by the near fall, and strides faster now, past the garden to the door of our house. Once inside he carries Olaf upstairs, getting him into the crib as quickly as possible.

The soot from the fire has transferred from Thorvald to our son. Olaf's face is smeared with grey streaks. I want to brush the marks away. I want to pick him up and bring him to our room. But he's already closed his eyes. He'll grow up to be a logger, like his father, and he'll risk his limbs and his life to fight a fire that happens for no reason.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

In the middle of the night Thorvald is spraying down the sides of the house. The battering noise of water hitting glass. Finally it stops. His boots up the trail to the camp. I can't fall back asleep. The room around me, empty. Water drips off the eaves.

I notice something in the corner—the cradle, but why would he have brought it down from the attic? The smoke so thick that I can't see the edges of the cradle, just its vague shape. I climb out of bed. My feet disturb the smoke. I'm moving more

slowly than I want to, my legs heavy. It takes me a long time to reach it. The cradle is small, even smaller than I remember. I see there's a blanket. I have a sense that if I touch the blanket, the child will disappear. The room is black now. Can she breathe in all this smoke? How can I rescue my baby if I can't touch her? I'm beginning to choke. I can hear the fire—it's reached the hallway, licking the bedroom door.

Then I gasp awake. I look for the cradle. The absence feels fresh. Nothing there, nothing in the room but the bed and the bureau, the bedside table, the chair where Thorvald leaves his clothes. No trousers, no shirt. He has already left. I get up and walk to the window and see the beads of water at the bottom of the pane. So something was real. And smoke, the smell of it, but not enough to choke me. I find Olaf in his crib. He's breathing so lightly he's hardly moving. I tug one hair from my scalp, and hold it in front of his lips, to watch his breath lift it.

AAAA

The clatter of the cookhouse doesn't shake my sense of unease. Even Olaf seems to be feeling it today, clinging to my legs. In my rattled state I want to pull away from his grip. Cook keeps an eye on me, tells me to sit down, but I keep at the counter. Smears of mustard on roast beef. I find myself looking out the window, as if I might

catch a glimpse of the men fighting the fire. They are miles away. All I can see are the birds made from black electrician's tape. I haven't set eyes on Thorvald's face in daylight, not since the fire started.

Charlie comes mid-day for his truckload of food, and I storm him with questions

Later, as we are loading dinner, I whisper that I could help him.

He shakes his head. I tell him I can pass around the meals. It'll be faster, safer, to have two doing the job instead of just him. I turn to look at the men lifting the buckets of food into the crummy. Charlie climbs up to shuffle the load. I go back to the kitchen, where Cook has his hands deep in suds. When I check the window, I notice Charlie hasn't left yet—he's leaning on the truck, watching Sinbad and Gravy toss a ball made of tin foil.

I stand in the open door. "You waiting?"

Gravy looks from Charlie to me.

Cook shouts to get to work on the dishes and the flunkies ramble back inside. It's Gravy who announces that I want to go up the mountain with Charlie. He says it like a young boy tattling on his sister.

"She does, eh?" Cook says. "Not near that fire."

"But it's safe for Charlie? It's safe for the men?"

"It isn't safe," Cook says.

“But you said....you keep saying—“

“Don’t go listening to Charlie.”

“I’m the one who—“

Charlie has entered the kitchen. He picks up a leg of chicken and takes a bite. He doesn’t seem to be in any hurry. The other men look at him. Except Perfect, who has his back to us, his hands on a plate he’s about to scrub, though even he is keeping still, listening. The only one who moves is Olaf. One-Eyed has passed him the ball of tin foil and he’s tossing it against the wall.

“We’re dropping off food,” Charlie says. He’s says it like it’s already a plan. And he’s talking to me, not to them, as if the men aren’t a concern.

Cook takes a broom and sweeps great broad strokes across the floor.

Thorvald won’t like it either.

Sinbad says he’d love to get up there. “Next year,” he says, “I’m going to join the fire crew. “

“If your mother lets you,” Gravy teases him.

“Well I don’t have a mother,” I say. “And I want to check on the men.”

Cook nods. He sighs. “I’ll hear from Thorvald,” he says.

“I’ll handle Thorvald.”

My heart is racing. I'll leave Olaf—we'll be back in an hour or so. Charlie tells Cook he'll take care of me.

"Yes," Cook says. "That's what has me worried."

AAAA

We take the kick-backs in the mountain road, up and up until we reach a scar in the woods where just days ago the forest fire travelled so quickly it left the trees standing, eviscerating only the undergrowth and branches. Charlie slows the truck. Sunlight catches the charred trunks, that strange glistening darkness. We are near the rocky edge of a cliff, the ground here so steep the trees are spindly thin, nothing a logger would bother to protect.

Charlie asks me again if I'm sure I want to come with him. I don't answer. White ash falls on the windshield. The wipers can't quite clear it, pulling a ridge of ash back and forth, back and forth.

He begins talking, faster than he usually does, his voice countering the slowness of the truck as it grinds uphill. I think he's trying to calm me. He talks about things that are far away, the city, how wide the streets are, and the American border, an hour south of the city, asks me if I've ever crossed it.

“There isn’t even a line,” he says.

I stare out the window at the burnt silhouettes of trees. “What did you do in America then, Charlie?”

“I didn’t stay.”

“And in Vancouver?”

“You’ve been there.”

“Stanley Park,” I announce. “That’s what I thought a forest was, until I landed here.”

We’ve escaped the black stretch of land and the truck is climbing past trees that are still alive.

The swelling in my fingers has gone down, but I’m not wearing my wedding ring—no use in the cookhouse where I’ve always got my hands slick with lard. Thorvald hammered the ring from a penny, and the feel of it against my skin always reminds me of the pennies my brothers and I used to put on railway tracks, flattening them so the face of the queen would disappear. But I liked that he’d chosen a penny, and not a nickel or a dime, just the base simplicity of copper.

Charlie asks me what brought me to the West Coast.

I tell him I took the train.

He peers in his mirror like he's expecting to see someone behind us. At our feet is a thermos of coffee and I open it, pour some in the tin cup, doing my best not to splash, and pass it to him, my hands trembling. He takes a sip before giving it to me, keeps his eyes on the road.

His hair is longer than the other loggers, but not as long as the Indians. I tell him I always wanted hair like that, dark and straight and easy to braid.

"You're pretty enough as you are."

*"Enough?"*

All the men with their compliments. I shouldn't see too much in his words. Still, my stomach does a little turn.

Olaf took to Charlie, when we visited him in the tent. Toddlers can be shy when they meet someone new, but he climbed over him and laughed. Enjoying them together reminded me of how I used to play with Olaf myself.

Not so long ago I ran the length of the yard with Olaf giving chase. And when he caught me I let him rub my round belly. I told him what was growing inside. We played patty-cake on the taut drum, and sometimes he'd sense a kick. Now I wonder what he understands. Just that Mommy doesn't want him to touch her. And I won't stay in the house. For him—the excitement of walking to the camp or down to the beach. But I have to return to that bedroom. Thorvald scrubbed the floor, but I still



see the stain. And I remember how the doctor removed the baby, my body slumping lifeless into the bed's soft grip. He may as well have cut out my heart.

Now the steady rumble of the truck, my limbs shuddering against the seat. We're driving higher than I've ever been.

If Olaf came with us today, he'd be pulling at my hair. Pointing at things out the window with his 'oo oo' sound. But he loves to be with the men in the cookhouse, the pots and pans to hammer and clang. And Thorvald wouldn't want me bringing him any closer to the danger. I tell myself this.

I feel a quickening inside me when Charlie says my name.

"Yes?"

"I asked if you've ever been close to a forest fire."

"No, not close."

"This one's burning bad, but they've got it contained."

I wonder if it bothers Charlie that he's not fighting the fire with the men. He hasn't said why he's the one driving the truck.

We round a curve and the woods give way to another opening where scattered loggers wield axes to clear the land. The fire is visible from here, miles wide. Heat is a thing. Step out of the truck and it holds my body, my face, a dangerous hold.

The air is full of the sound of wax paper crumbling, but it's wood, branches, entire trees, crackling.

Charlie pulls his red bandana over his face. I've got nothing but my hands.

Men bend over their work, small dark figures like cut-out dolls. Bandanas around their mouths. A tattered collection of masked men. I scan the group for Thorvald, but can't find his shape. I identify Squeaky Nelson, Blackie. And the Pope. One of the men hollers and they put down their axes and walk then run to the truck. This will be a ten minute break. Chicken and mayonnaise on thick slabs of bread. Bird's nest cookies. They pull down their masks, eat standing up, buckets tucked between boots. With the smoke I can't smell the usual reek of their bodies. Their shirts are soaked with sweat. I lean on the truck, happy to watch them. They are famished. An ordinary sensation, that gnawing in the belly. An ordinary meal. But behind them, the axed land and wall of orange flames.

"Well, Pope," I say, "we've found you in hell."

"Left his beads back at the camp."

"What good they doing there?"

"Charlie's here to deliver us."

I glance at Charlie, the bandana hiding his face. I pipe up that I made the food.

"He's just the driver."

The other men echo me. “Yeah, hear that? Charlie’s just the driver.”

I wonder if the words have an edge, given that he’s not helping them fight the flames, but the talk seems good natured.

They nudge their rollies from pockets and we get back inside, wave goodbye, driving farther uphill to the next group. The men are dispersed along the road and we’re driving closer to that fire. I feel safe with Charlie. I can hear his breathing. He’s starting to struggle. I offer to take the wheel, but he shakes his head. Another breath out, this one with more power in it.

At the next stop, after we disperse the food, a few of the men from the reservation gather at the back of the crummy, ready to climb inside, and Charlie says we’re not done yet. The word “we.” “We’ll pick you up on the way back,” he says.

I don’t know their names. Charlie teases them that it’s hard to tell the Indians from the whites. Everybody’s mouths and noses covered with bandanas, any exposed skin smeared with soot.

The next group of men is working farther from the road, so we have to stop and carry the buckets into the woods, surrounded by the choking smell of smoke that has overpowered the pine. I don’t see Thorvald. I wave at Snowball, Whisker. Poor Boy.

They tell me he’s here. Where? Charlie is behind me. Whisker points toward a column of firs. I run toward the trees, then stop, catching my breath. No one is here. Thorvald once warned me that if a speck of fire ever fell on my clothing, I should roll on

the ground, never run. Running would ignite the flames. I pat my hands on my patchwork skirt, but nothing has fallen, nothing has sparked. I walk back. Charlie takes my arm and leads me to the truck. The solid feel of his grip on me.

“He’ll be up there.”

I nod, reassured.

Smoke settles around us inside the cab. Above this ridge, the fire skips across the tips of trees.

Another curve of the road and there’s one last group. The men are spraying the ground with water. There must be a creek nearby. They are using a portable pump. That water exists, this close to the fire, seems impossible.

The roar of the flames is so loud that we are shouting over it, gesturing wildly. Everyone sounds angry.

One of the men turns the spray toward me, and I walk through it. The cold is wonderful. I take the hose, suck greedy gulps. When I pass it to Charlie, he lifts it above his head and lets it shower over his body.

I see Thorvald, emerging out of the dark toward us. His easy steady walk. He accepts the hose from Charlie and uses the water to wash the soot from his hands. For a moment I think he is going to set his palms on my face, but he never touches me in front of the others.

Charlie and I unload the last of the sandwiches. I match him stride for stride. Energy rustling in my chest. I tell Thorvald I've got a special bucket packed for him, with two slices of yesterday's cake. I say it loud, and know I'm making up for what I feel.

The heat causes an air tunnel that pulls at my hair and my skirt, skidding sticks along the ground. Nothing is stable. We could all be lifted off our feet.

A few of the loggers are at the tip of the mountain road. Charlie carries their buckets toward them. Pancake Pete I can see. I get in the truck to tap the horn hello. They shout something back. Waving. Of course I can't make out what they say.

When a sheet of fire lands behind them, it seems to be called by their voices. An avalanche of fire.

The trees light fast as matchsticks, from the tip to the ground. The men are suddenly surrounded. Only the bare road is clear of fire, but I'm not sure what they can see from inside the smoke.

Charlie disappears within the rolling flames.

Then I'm at the wheel, leaning on the horn and yelling to the men to get out of my way as I career along the road, maneuvering the truck over the rough ground, speeding to the men who are crouched together with Charlie, their arms reaching forward like they are trying to feel their way out, blind men seeing with their hands. A hat lights on fire. It lifts off a head. It flies up in the current. Behind the men, the

flames are liquid. Things fall from the sky. Sparks and a cascade of branches as trees crumble and collapse. Fighting the heat, I slide over to open the side door and they are running to get in. The cab is full of dense smoke and I'm swallowing it and my lungs spasm for air. I reverse the truck down the road, wheels squealing. And someone is screaming *breathe breathe* and I realize it's me and then I am, I can.

Men around the truck, the sound of bodies in the truck, something dark on my face, a cloth, a wet cloth, and all the bodies are moving. Someone is carrying Charlie.

^ ^ ^ ^

I open my eyes in the bunkhouse. Olaf asleep at my feet. One bare bulb casting a yellow glare. Snoring has shaken me from my dream. Three or four men snoring, different rhythms like the syncopation of drums. A snort, cough. Shoulders turn in sleep. The smell of socks. Undershirts hang over the airtight. A pack of cards lies strewn on the chipped wooden floor, the Queen of Spades, the number nine. Olaf and I have the mattress to ourselves. The bottom bunk. All around us the other beds are full of male bodies.

I love these men, the tired tangle of their limbs. But how have I found myself sleeping among them?

Bird song—no, it's someone whistling, in another bunkhouse. The flunky will be ringing the triangle soon. The bunkhouse door creaks open and Thorvald walks toward

me with two blue mugs in his hands. He kneels down beside the bunk, offering me one mug and sipping coffee from his own. There's a froth of real milk on the top, not the powdered kind, not Klim.

Charlie.

Not a dream. I remember the sheet of fire, how it reached around and enclosed the men, Charlie trapped within it. I scan the other bunks but can't see him. He could be above me. There must be a dozen men on the upper bunks. The bucketing weight of thin mattresses. Just a hand I can glimpse from here, palm open, hanging over the edge. A bare foot. Someone's tousled head, the wrong colour.

"I don't remember how we got home."

"We're not home, Eva."

We both drink our coffees, and I wince as the heat hits my lungs, an ache in my chest from the smoke I've swallowed. Thorvald tells me that he had the floor. He pats it proudly.

I must have blacked out in the heat of the truck.

Someone took the wheel. And we made it this far, and didn't go to our house, which would have meant walking along the trail. Thorvald put me in this bunk. He would have watched me sleep. I look at the playing cards and guess he didn't get much rest. Around us the men have started rustling, but no one rises.

I still feel the nearness of the fire, flames like curtains. A crackling sensation inside me. There I was, driving with one man and looking for another. But fire has no story. It has nothing to do with us.

Olaf squirms, opens his eyes and crawls up the mattress toward me, peering around at this new sleeping arrangement.

I wait to see if Thorvald will say anything about the risk I took travelling up the mountain. For now, he just seems glad to sit beside me. Peaceful, somehow unguarded. His face so tanned, with streaks where he has tried to wipe off the soot. I tell him he reminds me of a raccoon.

Breakfast is an explosion of noise. The lady wants flapjacks! The men escort me to the end of the table—a coveted spot, not in the middle, where you have to do all the passing. Flapjacks, fried eggs, baked beans, fried potatoes, sausage, bacon. Platters ringed with smears of grease. My appetite comes as a shock. I line a slice of bread with the fried eggs and fold it over like they do, filling my mouth. For once I'm not waiting on the men, but sitting among them. Thorvald beside me, Olaf reaching his hands into the food. Charlie is nowhere. I feel disoriented, lightheaded. My mind reeling like the wheels of the truck.

"Go on, eat, Eva, eat."

"You're the hero, today, Eva."

"You got to sleep with us," Seaball says, exuberantly slurping his coffee.



"Some hero," I say. "And you're some prize."

Hungarians, Norwegians, Swedes, Finns, large-framed and ruddy-faced, these are my company, the men at our table. Fallers mostly. My sleeping mates last night. The Indians aren't eating with us, though I've seen them sitting in the dining hall before, three or four together, usually close to the windows, like they don't want to be too far from outdoors. They never sleep in the camp. I wonder who drove them back to the reserve last night, if not Charlie.

"Which men were surrounded by the fire?" I ask Thorvald. I want to hear their names.

"Pancake," he says, swallowing the last of his bacon. "Poker, Charlie, Clothespin."

I look around. Not one of them is in the room.

The men are shuffling out of their seats already. Another hour yet before sunrise.

"We're letting them sleep," he says.

I shut my eyes, grateful.

Charlie must be back in his tent. So he was able to walk. I imagine this morning he'll bathe in the ocean surf, removing last night's soot, inhaling the cool air. I wonder what he remembers.

“The doctor is coming up this afternoon,” Thorvald says.

The doctor will touch me soon enough when he snips the hardened black thread from my belly. So I won’t be staying around to see him. It’s not my own breathing that worries me, in any case. And I doubt Charlie will be coming to camp for a doctor’s visit.

^ ^ ^ ^

Cook keeps to himself. When he sees me come into the kitchen, he shakes his head. He doesn’t want me in here, not today after the stunt I pulled. He’s refilling salt and pepper shakers, the clink of metal and glass. Salt spills on the counter and the floor. Bad luck, I tell him. This chore seems to require great concentration. I assure Cook that I’m not planning to stay. Before Thorvald left with the loggers for the mountain, he’d asked Perfect to walk me home.

“What do you think, Cook? A romantic walk with Perfect?”

He’s not one to joke when he’s in a bad mood.

Perfect and I collect enough food from the pantry that the pack is bulging. I don’t have much left at home. Perfect carries the pack on his hip, and as we walk he

rotates it to the other hip, eventually holding it with both arms in front of him, waddling uncomfortably the way I did when I was pregnant.

Olaf seems happy to be heading back. He wanders ahead of us, pulling at moss. A breeze is rising from the ocean and it makes me hopeful, the way it lifts the branches. When we reach the creek, Olaf splashes at a newt perched on a rock, and the creature skitters into the water and slips away. I imagine this creek is stitched with small life that is unaffected by the fire, unafraid.

Perfect drops the food on the porch. I tell him I'm good.

"You *are* good," he says.

"Oh, not always. You wouldn't want to be married to me."

"No," he says, and we both laugh.

He looks at the house gloomily. Then as he turns to go, he says something in Norwegian, as if Thorvald were nearby, or someone who'd understand.

The door won't budge. There's a towel stuck under the sill to keep out the smoke. I forgot. Bending down, I prod it back with my finger. The door opens reluctantly, drags across the floor. The house is a foreign thing. Dim, even in the daylight. Under the ice box, a shallow pool of water.

I open the windows, upstairs and down. A smell of smoke remains, but the wind creates a cross-flow, making things new. I feed Olaf canned peaches with

spoonfuls of condensed milk. I open another tin, this one without a label. Pears. The pale, heart-shaped curves.

Even Olaf is subdued. Around us, the beams holding the house creak and shift.

I need to nap, but not in the bed upstairs. I tuck Olaf beside me and stretch out on the chesterfield under the shelf full of trolls. I dream that Thorvald has returned in time for dinner, and I am glad to lean against his solid heft.

AAAA

I don't get a chance to speak to Thorvald until he's slipping out of the house the next morning. I catch him in the yard. It's still dark. The distant clouds are underbellied by that weird blush from the fire. He pauses long enough to let me know the men are faring well. Pancake's sticking with kitchen work for a few days.

"I think it got to him," he says. "And no one's heard from Charlie. Someone should check on Charlie."

I make sure I don't show too much interest. Thorvald's anxious to get going. I tell him to keep safe.

The clothesline divides the sky, bobbing slightly in the wind, just the wooden pegs to weigh it down, a row of small birds. I remember looking at the sheets on that

line, when I thought the baby was waiting to be born. But the static weight inside me, I'd sensed that. Moments later, the sheets remained that same expanse of white, nothing had changed, but my understanding did. Right here, I knew.

A chill now along my shoulders. I walk back inside. With Olaf asleep, the house seems eerily quiet.

There's something I couldn't know, not then. That each day I'd track how old the baby would have been, if it had gulped for breath. She wouldn't be a newborn, not anymore. I imagine the talcum smell of her hair. Still unable to focus her eyes, but turning her head to my voice. Six weeks on Monday. Death has its own life.

As soon as Olaf wakes, I feed and dress him so we can get back to the cookhouse with the kitchen staff—my crew: the cook, the bull cook, the flunkies. Men with narrow shoulders. Men in aprons, respected because no logger can work without a good meal.

But then I recall Cook's attitude when we spoke and think it might be better to give him more time. They'll need me as much tomorrow as they do today. And they can't be expecting me back so soon.

I managed to help those loggers escape the flames, but they've gone and returned to the danger, most of them. The campaign up the mountain continues. I cut through chicken breasts and think of Thorvald's exposed hands, cracks where the soot

collects. Those hands caressed me. Placed a ring on my finger. Buried our child. And now he belongs to the fire.

I look down and realize I've cut more chicken than Olaf and I can eat. I've grown used to feeding the men.

I'll be the one to check on Charlie. I pack sandwiches, some shortbread, and bring Olaf to the trail. I keep having to stop and let Olaf explore, so slow.

There's a chance I'll bump into someone else—Thorvald might have passed on word about Charlie to one of the men in the kitchen. Or they'd get the idea on their own. Well it's nothing I need to hide, walking to the ocean with my boy.

A coyote scampers past, a streak of sun on its grey coat. I take it as a good sign. The animals are returning.

Charlie is standing on the beach, one arm reaching up to the sky. Relief washes over me. He's holding something in his fist, and smiling—no, squinting, against the bright air, his mouth tightened. He hasn't seen me. When I walk closer, I realize he's grasping a string, two strings, attached to a kite that lifts and drops, then lifts again. A box kite. A wooden frame covered with newsprint. When I catch his eye he doesn't say hello, but jumps onto a log and walks along it, his feet splayed like Chaplin.

"They won't need to be fighting the fire today," he says. "The wind will blow it to the peak of the mountain, away from the men. This wind will do all the work."

He passes me the strings.

The wind is strong enough to lift my arms and pull me along the beach. I can feel the force. The kite seems alive.

Olaf holds out his fists and whines for me to give it to him, but I keep it in my grip.

Charlie stands at my back, reaches his arms around mine to adjust the strings so the kite dips and dances as it rides the current. A stubborn tug on the strings. I'm laughing as the wind blows my hair into my face. He kisses my neck. It could almost be a mistake, it's so fast.

I pull free of his hold, walking ahead, my heart skittering like the feet of a mouse. The skin feels cool now, where his lips were.

Slowly I pull the kite down. On the sand it releases a dry rickety sound that makes me think of the fire. I can see how light it is, delicate, despite its size. One corner of the newsprint has begun to tear away from the wooden frame. I lean over to look at it more closely, still feeling the mouse in my chest. Bits and pieces have been taped over each other, rows of words bending around the corners. I don't know what he meant by that kiss, but I know that what I've got here is the mill town newspaper, with a recipe for lemon muffins and a report about how much timber has been lost.

Charlie and I carry the kite, walking toward the tent. I'm glad the kite is between us. We lift it up in the air and Olaf runs underneath.

Inside the smell of canvas, I realize I've left our lunch near the trail.

Charlie has found two cookies wrapped in wax paper and he offers me one and then breaks the other cookie in half to share between himself and Olaf. I recognize the cookhouse recipe.

“Chocolate chip. You’re trying to keep me.”

“You can be kept?”

Olaf climbs triumphantly onto a pile of blankets and Charlie reaches out a hand to steady him.

“I was once tied to a tent pole.”

“That’s a sight I’m sorry to have missed.

“My brothers did it. Punishment for something. They put a bird on my head, a budgie, or a parakeet. I remember the feel of those scratchy feet on my skull. I wasn’t supposed to cry. Girls cry.”

“Seems like a girl rescued us.”

“You didn’t thank me.”

“Is that what you came here for?”

He is wearing a white t-shirt, thin, the kind you slide underneath something else. His nipples are visible through the fabric. I could put my mouth on him.



I undo the buttons of my shirt. I start from the bottom and do it bluntly. No slip or brassiere hides me. I tug down the waistband of my skirt so he can see the full length of the stitches.

There, kiss those.

He reaches out, but doesn't quite touch me. I can feel the air move under his fingers.

"You've been cut in half."

"Yes."

"You won't be the same."

He's right. I will be something different. What?

The waves are coming in. Water rising up and clinging to the shore, the pause before it retreats. Tiny transparent crabs are climbing the hills of the blanket.

Olaf totters over to tug my skirt. Then he runs at Charlie and starts hitting him, pushing him away from me. Charlie laughs. Says he has competition. He picks up Olaf and plants raspberry kisses on his stomach, blowing the vibrations until Olaf giggles helplessly. Charlie claps and gets Olaf clapping, then he settles him on the blanket with one of Charlie's boots, pulling the laces loose so Olaf has something to tug.

"He's going to try to eat those."

He shrugs.

Olaf happily pulls at the laces with the concentration only a toddler can muster.

Charlie lifts his own shirt. There is nothing for me to see. His healthy skin.

Dark skin. It would show a scar if he had one. He taps his chest. "Tuberculosis," he says.

So he wasn't joking.

"Oh, I don't have it now. Cured. When I was a kid, it was a rite of passage.

There was so much TB they sent entire ships of us down the coast to the sanatoriums. The TB ships."

"You were how old?"

"Seven."

"I'm sorry."

"Why, was it your fault?"

He uses his palm to sweep up the crumbs that have excited the tiny crabs.

"The things you remember," he says. "I liked playing dominoes. They brought food on little trays. Gravy! I discovered gravy! Cheese! Bright orange. I had never eaten anything orange. But I did not see my mother. And those walls, so flat, stiff, they did not change. Through all the seasons, the same. I did not understand the use of such walls. Month after month, sun or rain, always those walls."

"How long were you..."

“No more hospital.”

He scruffs Olaf’s hair and drops a potato into the boot. Olaf shakes it until the potato falls out, then he drops it back inside. He bubbles forth with some kind of command, his face pinched with determination. We both watch as he stands up, bouncing on his chubby legs, tries once more to talk, then plunks back down, grows quiet, content to stare at us.

“You don’t say,” Charlie wipes his hands on his trousers and leans forward to touch my neck where he kissed me.

“When my stitches come out...”

His finger along my collar bone.

“Talk. You talk, Charlie.”

“What do you want to hear?”

“Tell me what you will do to me.”

“I will start here,” he says, touching the dip at the base of my throat. “And I will draw a new line, Eva. You want a story? You want me to continue?” His questions are steady, not gentle, the thick low sound of his voice. I lie down, compelled to invite his words on my skin, the ground beneath me hard and unmoving.

AAAA

I walk back with Olaf, not wanting to risk being seen with Charlie. No one passes us on the trail. The trees are thinner near the ocean, and closer together, the network of branches tracing delicate triangles in the sky. A cool mist rises with the wind. We stop when we reach the creek so Olaf can build a fort of twigs. I wonder what he grasps. There was a chance—I realize this now—that someone might have come by the tent when we were inside it. One of the flunkies could have thought to check on Charlie. And he might have listened to our voices, the pauses where I waited for what Charlie would say next. I can imagine the picture his words would have conjured. But no—we were alone, I’m sure of it. We’d have heard anyone approach, the sound of boots on sand.

It’s then I do hear someone, behind me.

“Gravy, you gave me a scare.”

“Oh,” he says. He’s got his hands in his pockets. I don’t know how long he’s been there. “Sorry. Sorry.”

“Where did you come from?”

“The camp.” He looks perplexed. “We were...getting concerned.”

“Not about me.”

“About you.”

"I needed one more day. A bit of fresh air, didn't we Olaf? He likes the creek."

"I'll let Cook know."

"You do that. You give all my love to Cook."

He doesn't respond. I wonder if he saw me coming up the trail that leads from the ocean. But that wouldn't tell him much.

"Oh, and Gravy, I heard Pancake is...keeping to the kitchen. And the others... You know how they are?"

"Not Charlie."

"What do you mean?"

"No one's heard."

"He didn't go back to work?"

Gravy shakes his head.

"Someone should check on him," I say.

Gravy pauses. He rubs his lips together. Then he says again that he'll let Cook know how I am.

Once we get home, I'm glad to shut the door. None of kitchen staff walked to the beach. Gravy will report he saw me near the house. And now we're safe inside it. Olaf with his train set, like we've been here all day. I pace the room. From their perch

on the shelf, the trolls watch my movements. Beady, suspicious eyes. Charlie and I talked, that's what we did. He told me a story. Nothing happened.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

Thorvald stands shyly at the edge of the yard, puts down his axe.

Daylight and he's returned.

Olaf and I both keep still at first, as if expecting his presence to vanish. Then Olaf runs towards his father and Thorvald lifts him up, turns him upside down, the boy's hair like a flame.

We don't go inside. We sit on the dry ground, and he points to where the air is clear. He says the wind is blowing the fire toward the peak of the mountain, where there is only rock to feed it. So he was right, I think, Charlie was right. Everything is fine. No one has been hurt. Thorvald laughs like it's a trick, as if the fire has been fooled.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

Thorvald and I move slowly, tentatively, around each other. Neither of us is accustomed to him being at home. He reads his Western novels, putters in the shed, plucks weeds in the garden with fingers too large for the small plants. He's a man who needs his axe and his saw. For once he is letting them rest.

The house has been ignored and I have the beds to strip, the floors to mop, sheets and shirts and trousers to scrub clean and hang to dry. I make carrot cake, Thorvald's favourite, and a thick stew with the pork one of the flunkies brought us as a gift. Thorvald is usually a steady eater, but he leaves his food almost untouched. I notice that soot lines the side of his cheek, near his temples, and there are dark grey smudges on his wrist. At the pulse point. Smoke has clung to his pulse.

"Fire is necessary," he tells Olaf. "A new beginning," he says. "It opens pine cones, lets the seeds release."

One evening Olaf falls asleep early, leaving a reservoir of energy in my limbs. It is only seven o'clock. I boil water and carry it out to the wash basin that sits in the yard. I add cool water from the rain barrel, then soap, pulling my arm back and forth to form a roof of suds. Thorvald wanders into the yard to see what I am doing.

"Get undressed. I'm going to give you a wash."

He pauses, looking down, then undresses with the same quiet dignity he uses in the bedroom. Boots, socks, shirt. Keeps his eyes from mine. His tan stops at his collar and at his elbows where he must have rolled up his sleeves as he worked. He folds his

shirt before he slides off his trousers and these too he folds and sets on a patch of grass.

Above us on some branch, a chickadee begins *dee dee dee-ing*.

Thorvald stands in his underwear and then he removes those too, slipping them down his leg with his thumb. The muscly girth of his thighs. The thatch of hair darker than on his head, his cock soft, almost hidden. He shifts his weight back and forth on his bare feet, as if the ground were cold. Then he links his hands around his privates and he looks back at the trees, at the trail, though no one is there to see him. I think he won't acknowledge me at all, but he turns to find my eyes, his face filled with delight.

So, a bath. Under the sky. He lowers himself into the basin, the water shifting over the edge with his weight. He crouches in the tub and I start to scrub his back. Dirt and old skin peel off in small pellets. The neck is the hardest, where the soot seems almost a tattoo. I wash his hair, thick strands in my fingers. My blond man. I rinse away the last residue of the fire. The muscles in his arms and back ripple as I drip water over his shoulders and I remember the sight of him when he let himself lean over my body, the first time we made love, careful, but he has always been careful, bracing himself with his arms, never letting me feel his full weight. He used to look down to where our bodies joined.

Now I cannot see his face at all, just the wet locks of hair around his ears. The water cupping his hips has turned black.



He grips the sides of the basin with both hands. The rest of his body is relaxed, just his fingers tight. Last summer three men from our camp were killed in the fire—*lost* the mill town newspaper called them, three men were lost. But loggers don't get lost. When Thorvald climbed out of the crummy that day I was waiting with the flunkies and he caught my eye and lifted three fingers. He held them in the air. That was it. That was all. No talk afterwards about how the men died, not the way the news would be shared in a rustle of voices in the bunks. He didn't rest after that fire, did not let me care for him, not like this. He went back to the hill and kept clearing the land when it wasn't going to do anyone good.

I think of the tender way he told me that someone should check on Charlie. Worrying about another man. He doesn't deserve me, not the way I am. Or no, it's him that I don't deserve.

He gets out of the basin. With his wet hair and arms held tight around his chest, he seems shrunken. I wrap Thorvald in a towel and we walk together back into the living room, his feet leaving wet prints in the dirt and across the wooden floor. He goes upstairs to dress. When he comes downstairs he reaches for his Western paperback and begins to read where he has dog-eared the page, his lips moving ever so slightly with the words. English must be heard aloud, is not entirely trusted if it's not.

"Read to me. The last bit."

"I'm not there yet."

“But you’ve read this one before.”

“That’s not how it works.” He reaches up to pat my hand.

Annoyed, I could remind him that I was the one to teach him to read the language. All our lessons, those same Western novels. Sometimes I think I fell for the heroes, as much as I did for him.

In return he told me stories from Norway. I loved how they began. Not once upon a time, but once when all things could talk.

Now I imagine walking into the woods and returning with a pine cone to place in his hands. I’d lift the novel and close the cover. Replace the yellowed pages with the rough scales of a single cone, the stickiness of sap, but I don’t know what I hope it would say.

AAAA

The loggers drift into the dining hall and settle on chairs set up in rows. Supper has been cleared, the tables pushed to the edge of the room, except for a card table that holds the projector. The summer sun won’t set for another two hours so the windows have been covered with grey blankets nailed at the corners. Thorvald and I sit together where he likes to sit, at the back. One night the movie began to frantically

unreel, spilling film in a puddle on the floor like the machine was vomiting. He was the one to jump up and make it stop.

This evening we carried Olaf from our home along the trail, his small body wrapped in a quilt, and laid him to sleep in the kitchen, on the other side of the thin wall behind my back. He's awake now. I can hear his gurgling babble. I'll go to him if he starts to cry. The flunkies, who are still washing the dishes and pots, will be sneaking him cake.

I watch for Charlie, but don't see any Indians and wonder if they were invited, if they felt the need for an invitation. Now packed with bodies, and with those thick blankets covering the windows, the dining hall is over-warm, the air close. The men wash on a Sunday and so the room smells unusually of aftershave and soap. I'm surprised some desperate rascal doesn't get his hands on that blue brew to drink it, given the state some of the men were in last night, when they returned from the mill town up coast.

When I used to work in the cookhouse, I'd sweep this room while they digested supper, the dustpan full of potato and bones and gristly meat. Tonight the floor is mostly clean, though still grainy with sawdust and slivers of wood. There's a bit of pork chop stuck beneath the leg of a chair. No one's paying me to pick it up.

In the front row Whisker is puffing on a cigar. The heady smoke rising. That anyone would want more smoke, beyond what these men have had to swallow for the last two weeks fighting the forest fire. The ones who are wearing hats take them off.

They hold their hats in their laps and I wonder why they bothered to wear them at all. They are already more subdued than they are when the tables are full of food. Their talk rumbling like the noise of truck wheels on a wooden bridge. Movie night. The closest we come to church.

We usually get some flick that appeared in the city months ago, sometimes years ago, but tonight we've heard it will be a new release. There is an air of expectation. The men have earned a reward.

The lights are dimmed, the men hush each other, and the *clack clack* of the projector begins. Gravy sits alert behind it. Specks of dust dance in its glow. The white-washed wall is good enough for a screen.

A beam of light captures the heads of the men sitting in the way of the projector. One of the young ones stands up to see his head entire, waving foolishly at his shadow, and the others yank him back to his seat. The taller men do their best to hunch down, but there remains the black shape of their heads prodding into the bright flickering image, like a rounded mountain range at the bottom of the screen.

News reels. Across the country men are lining up for work. Men are sleeping on concrete, with only newspapers for a mattress. They are lining up for soup. But this isn't news. The loggers watch these jumpy images solemnly, waiting for the cartoons.

I know some of the men in this room must have themselves been hoboes who stopped by the logging agency asking for work, any paid work. But once they manage

to reach the camp, they'd best keep that kind of story quiet. The super will find something for them to do, but not falling, or hooking, nothing like that. Most of the loggers are skilled labourers with years of apprenticeship behind them. They take pride in having never been out of a job.

The last time I spent a Sunday evening like this, I was eight months pregnant, heavy and tired and happy to lose myself in a movie. The child kicked hard and I gasped like some heroine and the men in the back rows turned around to check me, smiling. Poker was sitting on my right, fanning my face with his hat, and when I'd had enough I grabbed it and plunked the hat on my belly.

First we see the orchestra, black men in white suits so proper and clean, putting my men to shame, even tonight. I once saw a railway conductor who composed himself just like that, a blade-straight part running along his scalp.

Then the cartoon. "What you gonna do?" Minnie says to the horny old geezer. "Gonna do the best I can," he says. The loggers all love that line. I will hear it all week. I lean over and whisper loudly to Seaball that my favourite part is when Minnie's dress slaps him.

"Hi di hi de hi de hi. Hi de hi de hi de ho." Seaball is still repeating the scat, tapping away at his knee, to the annoyance of his seatmates, when the movie starts. *The Thin Man*. The room settles down. The white-washed walls of the cookhouse are built of cedar, so the giant faces of the actors are split every few inches by the groove between the vertical slats of wood. It's good to hear the loggers laughing. And

they've got a pretty woman for their pleasure, how she waltzes into a room in her long silk gowns. For once the woman has as many good lines as the man.

Charlie walks in, and the door lets a slice of light widen across the room, breaking the darkness. The image on the wall fades. Grumbling and complaints. He shuts the door behind him. In the movie someone has just shot a bottle, aiming for Nick. "Great way to kill a bottle." Charlie scans the rows of men. I wait for his eyes to find mine. Here I am, Charlie, next to my husband.

One of the fallers chooses this moment to turn around and shout that I'm better looking. Miss Eva, he calls me. Yeah, another man pipes up, you and Nora, no contest. I'm pleased that Charlie hears it. He catches my eye and grins.

A man points to a seat for him in the front row, but Charlie stays standing near the door, so it seems he is expecting someone else to arrive or is waiting to leave. Then he relaxes, arms crossed, leans back comfortably. The room has forgotten him.

"I heard you were shot five times in the tabloids," Nora says.

"It's not true," says Nick. "He didn't come anywhere near my tabloids."

I look over at Charlie, and there's just the shift in his eye to acknowledge my presence. His own laughter is more contained than mine, or the other men—he is like Thorvald in this way, both of them conserving their energy.

Now I'm hardly watching the movie at all, my attention quickened to the shift in his limbs as he adjusts his posture.

Simple jumps up and tries to touch Nora's dressing gown. The movie continues around his flapping figure--Nora keeps talking, a black space where his body cancels hers. He's erupted with the kind of noise you make when you've stubbed a toenail. *Ah ah ah ah*. Sit down, Simple, sit down. I remember how he accosted me just before I fell. He had that same lurid gaze, his hands grasping like the old man in the cartoon. I want out of the room. I want to grab Charlie and slip away into the cool evening air. Whisker jumps up and settles Simple, his arm around him. The men are used to his outbursts. I wondered what happened to him, to make him the way he is. Perhaps he was born a disappointment. A child in a man's body. No, a child wouldn't be grabbing Nora's dress, not like that. His mouth all a lather. He's up again, making the same *ah ah ah* noise, and when Whisker tries to pull him away from Nora's beautiful face, he darts across the room and through the door. Charlie follows him.

AAAA

His scissors are efficient, the thread resisting at first then falling away. I stand still, holding my breath. We are alone together on the ground floor of the house, with the carved wooden trolls for an audience. Olaf napping. Thorvald up the mountain logging a new quarter with the rest of the men. A fresh, clear morning.

The doctor told me he would do this upstairs, that I should lie down. Do it here, I said. So he is kneeling in front of me. Specks drop to the ground like ants. I half-expect them to move. Bits of dried blood are released with the scissors, black dust. I will have to sweep the floor.

The doctor wears a dark suit. I see his thinning hair. Reddish hair. He has combed over the strands to hide the bald spot but its shining nakedness peeks through.

Each snip of the scissors tugs the thread in my skin. I feel as if his hands are reaching inside, that without this binding the wound will open and I will become two pieces, two people. But no, the skin holds. Beneath the stitches the skin is red, angry.

Snip, snip, snip, and then we are done. Finished, he says. He slaps one hand against the next. He is free of me.

He will go back to the loggers and their injuries that either kill them or don't.

I walk a few steps, swinging my arms, to gain a feel for how this new belly will move. When he performed the caesarean he had to slice through the muscle, to reach the baby. You will lose some strength, he told me. He has made my body what it is now. His signature on my skin.

Like Frankenstein, I tell him. In the days after we watched that movie in the cookhouse, the loggers walked through the camp with their legs stiff, arms out in front, reaching at nothing, like the lonely monster.



He begins to pack his bag. The house is quiet around us, Olaf in his crib. Just the sound of metal instruments rubbing against each other. I have never been as close with a man as I have been with this one, how his hands reached right inside me and pulled out the unmoving child. The cord to cut. Blood leaking from his fingers. The wide gash in my stomach the most intimate hole.

When he is gone, I wipe myself down at the sink. I get out the broom. I think of burning the stitches but don't want the smell in the house. I walk outside with the dustpan, past the garden and into the woods, cupping the stitches to toss them into the wind the way you scatter seeds.

Back in the house I pick up one of the trolls and stare into its pinched unliving face. Ugly thing. But I envy Thorvald the distraction of carving these creatures. Today I want to craft something myself, a memorial, a memento. Pressed flowers, but no, I'd open a book and the crinkly heads would come apart in my hands.

Upstairs Olaf breaks out of his nap with a whining cry and I have to go lift him from his crib. He cries even harder when he sees me at his bedroom door. He pulls himself up, red-faced, those little fists gripping the rail.

"You'll wear out your lungs. That's a lot of noise for a wet diaper." I brace myself for a wave of pain and heft him up, balance him on the side of the crib, struggling to keep him away from the scar. I am just capable of swinging him down to a chair, then I fold over as the pain pulses. The doctor said the outside heals more

quickly than the inside. I hope I haven't done anything wrong. Olaf keeps whimpering. I tell him he's not the one who's hurt.

He was screaming this morning and there was nothing I could do to stop it.

I rifle through his cupboard for something to entertain him, but he pushes away the rattle, the finger puppet, the toy caboose. Tucked behind the diapers is a new box of crayons. I bought those when I was pregnant with the second child. A dreary day in November, the usual incessant rain, and we had made a rare trip to the mill town in a truck borrowed from the logging camp. I had just missed my period and wasn't happy about it. I hadn't been elated to find out about Olaf either, not like I imagine some women would be. But I come around. It's only those first days that are a worry.

I saw this box of crayons in the back of a dry goods store. Eight colours. Like finding tulips in winter. In the truck home I pulled them out of my pocket and held them against the window to show Thorvald the brightness I'd bought. The grey sky lost some of its power.

Walking slowly downstairs with Olaf, I hold his hand as he manages each step. I've brought the crayons with me. I have an idea. I scramble in the kitchen for the other supplies. A jackknife, wax paper. The crayon labels I slice through lengthwise and peel off in one piece, leaving only the potent slabs of colour. I give Olaf half a crayon to scribble with while I cut the rest into shavings, making chipped piles of red, orange, blue, purple, black, brown, yellow, green. I am happy to use up the entire box.

I hide the knife and let him have a go at spreading the colours on the wax paper. I show him how to sprinkle blue and purple at the bottom of the wax paper, the other colours above. Olaf gives the activity hushed attention. His little fingers pick up the green shavings and delicately let them fall. Then he claps, pleased with himself, colour stuck to his palms. On the floor I find one stray piece of the thread and add that to the composition, which seems right. I press black shavings of the crayons on top of it. The wax paper show through in places, translucent like the pale colour of the doctor's scalp.

Olaf grows impatient and slides his palm across the design, making one black sweep.

"We're done, Olaf. Look at that. Look what we made."

What I need now is an iron, but who owns an iron in a logging camp? The best I can do is the oven. I don't know how I recollect these steps. Perhaps I did this with my mother, on one of the rare occasions my brothers left us alone.

I press a second piece of wax paper over the top, slide the entire mess onto a cookie sheet and into the oven, careful not to let any of the scrapings slip out. I weigh it down with a frying pan.

In minutes I take the project out of the oven and the crayons have melted to create something more beautiful than seems possible for this wooden house. The blue

and purple at the bottom of the wax paper have become mountains, with a streak of yellow above like the setting sun, red bleeding into the clouds.

I hold it up to the window so Olaf can look. He smiles and blinks, reaches for the image, but I tell him it's still hot. He probably thinks it's something to eat.

The thread from my stitches is at the centre of the page, the ridge covered by melted black crayons, in the shape of a V. Like a bird. A bird's wings in flight. Above it there's a stick figure with bent arms. Compared to the mountains its proportions are giant. Black mixed with green, like wire twisted with a plant's stem. Dead and yet alive. The figure lies sideways, floating in the sky.

But none of these things is true. It is only colour, crayons, the smell of melted wax, the feeling still warm in my hands. It is enough. Light comes through the page to give it the effect of stained glass.

Olaf comes sliding across the floor to hug my leg. I have Olaf.

I test the temperature, then let him touch the melted crayons. He's tentative, curious, stroking the image. It's the way I would have taught him to touch the baby's head. Gently, gently. Then he grabs at one corner, crumpling it with his enthusiastic grip. I unclaw his fingers.

It's Charlie who should see it.

^ ^ ^ ^

My courage falters. I call Olaf, and he stops obediently, finds a butterfly to torment. He claps at it as the yellow wings flutter away. I sit down by the creek. I roll up my pants and scratch at my shins where the mosquitoes have left itchy blotches. The air here is cooler, though we are a ways yet from the ocean. Through the trees, the roof of the house. We haven't gone far. It would be easier to walk home. Toss dandelion heads to Olaf in the yard like I did yesterday and will do again tomorrow.

Olaf picks up a pine cone and throws it at me. I throw it back, making sure to miss him, and he gleefully runs after it.

By now Thorvald will be in the crummy travelling down the mountain, his body slack after his hours of felling trees, though he will be sitting tall, not slumped over like the other men.

If I keep walking down this hill, the next hours will always stay with me. I will have to live with my choice.

I pull the picture out of my bag. The crayons have melted an uneven thickness. Through the wax paper, I can feel the ridge of thread. I consult the coloured shapes the way you check a compass. But I know where I'm going.

Thorvald will be welcomed by half a pan of corn bread. And a note. *Gone for a walk! Home for supper!* That gives me a couple hours. He won't try to find me.

Most of the loggers aren't big swimmers, and I'm glad of that. They'll wade in the river near the camp if they need to cool down. They aren't going to come all the way to the shore, not after a long shift on the hill. They'll keep their bodies in a state of rest, moving only their hands as they flick their cards or their cigarettes.

On the beach a baby seal lifts his head as Olaf and I emerge from the trail. I know the mother left it here so she could swim for food, but it's still a wrenching sight, the seal struggling with his small flippers to drag closer to us, too young to know what is friend or foe.

The tide has come in, Charlie's tent closer to the water. It could be a sailboat, beached here. Behind the tent stretch the massive cedars and firs and the mountains. I can hear the wistful squawk of seagulls. I cast my eyes across the beach, just to make sure no one else is around. No one, not for miles.

When I tap on the canvas, he opens the flap and announces it's his birthday.

"It is?"

"Sure," he says. He shrugs. He doesn't sound that convinced. "You bring me any cake?"

"I've got corn bread. Will that do?"

"Candles?" He rustles Olaf's hair.

"It's not your birthday."

“Could be. How would you know?”

I give Olaf the wooden duck with wheels that he’s determined to drive up and down Charlie’s leg. The toys in my bag were all carved by Thorvald. This duck, and a wooden truck that can carry a load of sticks. I pull out a hollow box with open spaces carved into its sides—triangles and circles, a rectangle and a square. These match wooden cubes and spheres that can be pushed through the windows, falling into the box with a clunk, so that Olaf can learn his shapes. Thorvald sanded the wood so smooth. Feel this, he used to say to me, pulling my hand along the surface.

“I did bring you a gift.”

“You did.”

“Of course. How could I forget?”

I pull out the wax picture and hand it to him and he holds it up, looks pleased, then perplexed.

“This for me?”

“For now.”

“Olaf’s doing?”

“I made it.” I pat Olaf’s head. “He’s my assistant.”

“Alright,” he says. He props it against the canvas, on top of a pot. I point to the propane stove.

“The wax will melt.”

I hand him an extra safety pin and he hooks the picture on the wall of the tent. The pages fold inward at the corners. Behind it streaks a wide smudge of soot. The faded orange colour of the canvas shows through the wax paper. And the glow of the sun. The picture becomes a window.

“Lie down,” he says. “Let’s have ourselves a look.”

The paper flutters slightly with our movements as we crouch then stretch out next to each other in this humid tent that reeks of kerosene. So this is it. I dare to lie down on these blankets with Charlie and we are gazing at melted crayons.

“The Northern Lights,” he says. “That’s my guess.”

Olaf climbs on top of Charlie, grabs at his lips. The confident physicality of a child.

“Don’t be rough, now,” I tell him.

“I won’t.”

“I meant Olaf.”

Charlie pulls Olaf’s arms away so the boy collapses giggling on his chest, and he holds him there, and Olaf settles down, exhales contentedly, his eyelashes fluttering and then the lids closing. His body lifts and lowers with Charlie’s breath.



But Olaf is too excited to stay still. He makes growling noises, then twists around and sits up. Charlie points at the picture and asks him what he sees. Olaf emits a stream of sounds, and Charlie says, yes, it's just as you described.

As soon as Olaf learns to talk, I won't be able to come here. When he can point to the stove, or the caulk boots, the cans of beans, and make sounds that are recognizable, the words beginning to emerge in his babble, then my escape to this tent will be dangerous.

And when he can say Charlie's name, that will be the end. Though by then it may be too late.

Olaf scrambles away from Charlie, runs close to the stove, and Charlie yanks him back, settles him between us. I can't seem to look Charlie in the face.

"So where did you see the Northern Lights?"

"You hear them before you see them. You ever hear? There's a kind of humming, crackling noise. Energy you can feel under your skin, through your bones. And then you look up and the sky is dancing, all these loops of colour. Blue and green, pink. Ribbons rippling and twisting. And that sound. The colours, they sing."

"Sing?"

"Voices in the sky. That's what it... I can't describe it. Voices. Not human, almost human. The most haunting sound. It can be frightening."

"I haven't heard them. Or seen them."

"I'll take you."

"I'll pack tonight."

He gestures at the picture. On either side of it there are small holes in the canvas, the size of pin pricks. They let in specks of light. Those are the stars, I tell him. I close my eyes. I can't imagine how coldness would feel, not now, next to Charlie, with Olaf breathing between us in the warmth of the tent.

"I know people," he continues. "They believe the lights are the spirits of hunted animals. Seals. Even salmon, they got a spirit up there."

"What do you believe?"

He just smiles. I sit up to take off my boots, tucking my socks inside them. Now my white feet are as bare as Charlie's. The pants I'm wearing belong to Thorvald, old pants with a hole at the knee, brass buttons at the crotch. Charlie slides Olaf to where I was lying and then pulls me back to the blanket, beside him. I haven't told him the stitches have been removed, but maybe he knows, maybe he can tell.

"You missed the end of the movie."

"Yeah," he says, running his finger along my forearm. "And the beginning. Liked the middle. Simple liked it a bit too much."

“He was upset,” Charlie continues, though I haven’t asked. “I don’t think he understood why the lady kept disappearing when he touched her.”

“I know he’s harmless. I just hate how he moans.”

“Oh he’s alright. Doesn’t do anything in public we don’t do in private.”

“Who’s we?”

“All the men thinking about you in their bunks.”

“They’ve got their movies, their hookers.”

“Can’t touch a movie.”

“They can’t get hold of me either.”

“Oh Eva, you wouldn’t believe what you get up to when you’re not there.”

“Right. I’m a busy girl.”

He’s stroking my arm. My heart is thudding. I remember the first time I came to this tent, the feel of his rough fingers on the sole of my foot. How it seemed I knew him, even then, when I was scared. Today I have to tell him it’s too soon. The wound is still sore. He can’t be climbing on top of me.

“I’m a hooker,” he says.

“That’s not a job I’d confess to doing.”

“A hook tender. I tend the hooks.”

"I know what you are."

"And what brought you here, Eva?"

"Ah, that's the question."

He shifts to gaze at my face. I wonder what he sees. Then he adjusts so I can settle my head in the crook of his arm. Olaf is playing with the wooden shapes Thorvald made.

"I don't know, Charlie, if it's a good place to have a child."

"He seems happy."

"Olaf. He'll grow up to be a logger."

"Fine thing to be."

"I don't want to lose another child."

Charlie puts his hand on mine.

"I thought I would crack open. All of me, my whole body would rip apart at the wound. I...I knew...for days I knew. I didn't tell...anyone. I thought I could stay...continue, like that. With the baby. I could keep it inside me."

"You have, you will. In your way."

"How?"

“A child who... Eva, I’ve been told that it can be a messenger. There’s still something here, of that child, with you.”

“But what’s the message?”

“Nothing either of us could understand. Not now. You have your whole life to listen for it.”

“I don’t want that life.”

Charlie moves his head to look in my eyes.

“Sometimes I think I’ll go mad. I imagine the baby, week by week, how she’d grow. I’m living beside a shadow child.”

Olaf tugs at my skirt and I settle him beside me. He puts his thumb into his mouth, hides his face in my bosom.

“It’s not fair to him, I know it. I’m not... I can’t be his mother, Charlie, not the way I was.”

“You are his mother.”

“I shouldn’t have come here.”

“Here?” He taps the blankets.

“No, the camp. No woman would.”

“You’re the jewel of this place, Eva.”

Olaf is nuzzling now, the way he used to do when I was breast feeding him. But he can't be hungry, not yet.

"Tell me about the women at the sanatorium."

"We were kids."

"No, I mean the ones who took care of you. Nurses. Were any of them...were they kind?"

"There was one I liked best, a big lady, with a big broom, she did the cleaning. Never came near us, no bedpans or thermometers, but the way she sang out hello and my name, with the most beautiful voice, like she loved you, loved me. She had polio, and one giant black boot, the sole was almost a foot thick. Just the left boot, the right leg was fine. I was so ill when I first arrived, delirious. I thought her feet shrunk or expanded depending on which side of the bed she was standing."

Olaf has curled up on the blanket, but he hasn't shut his eyes, not quite. We watch him, not speaking. I glance awkwardly at Charlie, then back at my boy. We both know what we are waiting for. I stroke Olaf's hair and finally he settles into sleep, his body loosening.

Charlie and I whisper at first, then grow more comfortable.

"You must have been lonely, away from your family for so long."

Charlie doesn't answer.

"I love how you say my name," I say.

He sits up, and I think he's going to cough.

"You alright?"

"The TB didn't come anywhere near my tabloids."

He leans towards me, and his mouth meets mine, our teeth knocking against each other. A long grinding kiss that rearranges my insides.

"Touch me," I say.

"Tell me where."

I tug at the buttons of my shirt, slide my finger slowly around a nipple.

"No. Say it."

"Here. I want you here. I want your mouth on my breast."

He does only what I tell him to do, coaxing the words out of me. I pull down my trousers, my underpants.

He takes off his own clothes. His cock bobbing.

"So you do like me, Charlie."

"Eva..."

"Oh let me enjoy this moment. The look of you."

“How do you touch yourself? Tell me.”

I stretch out on the blankets and he smiles, leans over to reach my inner thighs and pry them open, rubbing me as I start to moan, then using his tongue to prod where I want him most. I shudder with a piercing ache, my thighs clenching his arm.

Olaf still asleep. Charlie too has his eyes shut fast, savouring my pleasure.

Then I take his cock in my hands. I tell him I don't need directions.

Spitting on my fingers to slick them, I take it slow at first, then faster. I slip down his body the way he did. He's inside my mouth. He says my name as if he's surprised. I twirl my tongue around the shaft, relishing each rising groan. I can feel him start to come and I stop him, my hand clenching the base. Then I take him again in my palm, ever so slowly, up and down, his body quivering. There's his spasm and release, my satisfaction in hearing him give up a grunt.

We lie on the rough blankets that itch my bare skin. Our clothes tangled together. I can feel the stickiness cooling on my palms. I'm aware of my naked body, the ugly stretch of red running down my stomach, the slight rise of my breasts. Their milky fullness is gone. Lying on my back I could pass for a boy.

“You know one of the loggers told me he likes small breasts,” I say. “He likes how they wake up and say hello to the sky. He said this over his plate of eggs.”

“Did he.”



"I told him my breasts don't wake up and they weren't going to be saying hello to him."

"Eva, you're at your best when you're not talking."

"Go to hell."

"Anywhere for you, dear."

He kisses me again, this time softly. Then his lips brush my cheek, my chin, my neck, the hollow at the base of my neck, and he drags his tongue between my breasts and along the red line.

Olaf twitches in his sleep and we both freeze in place, watching him, Charlie with his lips on my skin. Shhhhhhhh. Charlie pulls away. I reach over and grab my shirt, drag it toward me and slip it on, slowly, so as not to startle Olaf, the way you move around a snake. I pass Charlie his trousers. We both suppress laughter, trying to keep quiet, Charlie nearly tipping with one pant leg on and one off. Olaf wakes up, his eyes unfocused, confused. He knots his fists against his cheeks. Then he discovers us, climbs to his feet, and starts to hit Charlie with an explosive joy. We're safe.

I pull on my socks and boots, button Thorvald's pants, collect Olaf's toys.

"You were the one who wanted me to talk."

"Had to get you going."

"I am going." I mean to sound cheeky, but it comes out plaintive.

I lead Olaf from the tent. Charlie ducks through the flap behind us. When I turn to say goodbye, he cups my face in his palms. He leans forward to press his nose to my nose, takes a deep breath.

“Eva, you won’t disappear?”

I walk backwards away from him, waving as he waves. I blow him a kiss. Olaf mimics me, making a sputtering noise with his lips. The baby seal has gone. I’m filled with hope when I see that wet space of sand.

AAAA

Charlie is tying a rope to a hemlock branch at the edge of the beach where the sand meets the trees. He swings the rope and it drops water to the ground. The fibers are stretched and swollen after a week of rain. The earth lies eddied with puddles and the birds are calling out to each other, the squirrels and beavers and crawling things emerging back from wherever they disappeared to when the smoke choked the mountain. Olaf and I stood inside the house watching the rain pound the dirt, then the mud. A celebration of rain. I could feel the slamming energy of it against the windows and the walls. I could imagine the tent being beaten by the downfall of water, the canvas collapsing, Charlie drenched to the skin. But the tent is still standing, releasing

swirls of steam in the sun. The blankets too are steaming, hanging from the trees, dripping onto the sand. Charlie seems dry enough. No complaints, he said.

“You planning to hang me?”

“This will help you get back your strength.”

I point Olaf to an earwig that has escaped the coil. How it manages to live there, in the tight twisted darkness, I don’t know. Charlie flicks it with his finger.

He nods at the rope. “I’m going to teach you some games.”

Charlie ties a bone to the bottom of the rope, then pulls at the other end so the bone lifts several feet above his head. He touches the bone and he walks backward, casually, his gaze on it. He pauses. Even Olaf keeps still, his mouth open as he watches. Charlie runs toward his target, throwing just one leg high into the air and above his head, opening his body like a pair of scissors. His foot taps the bone. He lands back on the same foot. He shows no pain. The bone is bobbing. He does it again. A lunge and lurch upward and his body snaps open and the bone is left twitching on the rope that shivers so slightly that the wind could have caused it to move that way. Each time he jumps, the tip of his shoe barely taps the bone, despite the force of his kick. I wonder if this element of control is part of the game. He reaches up to make the bone still.

“Strengthens the stomach,” he says.

“So does whisky.”

He takes my hand and walks me a good ten feet from the bone and tells me to have a go. I run at the bone and kick, feeling the strain in my legs. Of course the bone hasn't been touched. I am left feeling insubstantial. I stretch up to flick the bone with my finger. Then I lift Olaf and he grabs at it.

“There,” I say, “teamwork.”

“Try again,” he says. “It takes practice.”

My body feels alien, unwieldy, and each effort brings my foot no closer to touching the bone.

“You can do better.”

I like this about him, that he gives me no other assurance or assistance. But he watches me intently, commenting on my technique. He holds onto Olaf while I try once more.

By the end of the afternoon, I know how to jump and kick the air, though I still haven't touched the bone with my foot.

“It's all you,” he says finally. “You are almost there.”

I curse him for my aching muscles, but it feels right, my legs trembling, my sweaty shirt clinging to my collar bone and nipples.

He has another game to show me. He sits down and tells me to sit with my back to his. We link our arms together, spine to spine, our legs in the four directions of the compass. We are a human crab. He says the game is to push against each other. Push, he shouts. We struggle, grunting. Slowly I begin to make some gains.

“You are letting me win.”

“You want a fight?”

“I want honesty.”

He pushes back harder and I resist, grinding my heels into the sand and pressing against his spine. I smell his hair and hear his breath. My arms are buckled to his, the inside of our elbows squeaking with sweat.

“Push, Eva, push.”

Olaf stops dragging a piece of seaweed and stares at us, afraid of our red faces and struggling.

“Mommy’s fine, Olaf.” I dig my heels into the sand so I can exert more pressure against Charlie’s back.

When we finally untie our arms and stretch our legs, the air feels too easy. Blood is pulsing in my thighs. We stretch out on our backs, our clothes full of grit. Olaf comes to sprinkle sand over me.

“That,” Charlie says, still breathing hard, “is day one.”

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When we finally reach the tent, Olaf won't rest. He jumps up and down and yells. He seems to think Charlie is his playmate, pouncing on him and shrieking with frenetic excitement. I stroke Olaf's hair and hold him to me and still he won't sleep. Charlie and I keep our clothes on. The air bristling. Olaf grows wired with exhaustion, fretful, then starts to tantrum—a new experiment—not just screaming but pounding his legs and hands against the ground until I think he will hurt himself. The tent is such a small space, pots and pans so near his head. I try coaxing him to be quiet, lulling him with songs, plying him with cookies.

“Cook baked these,” I say. “I feel guilty.”

“About the cookies?”

Then Olaf is throwing them, crumbs hitting the canvas walls.

For another hour we wait together in the muggy closeness, hoping for Olaf to close his eyes and give us a chance to get at each other. I begin to sing a lullaby. I say a few words, then hum them, because I don't want to say what happens to the baby when the bough breaks.

Charlie doesn't know that song.

How could he not? His strangeness rises between us. “You really don’t know it?”

He shakes his head.

“I could teach you.”

“I don’t want a teacher,” he says, and undoes the buttons of my shirt.

But we get no further, not with Olaf pulling at me.

When I finally get Olaf home, he starts once more with the screaming and pounding the floor. He’s a toddler, I tell Thorvald, they all go through this stage. Thorvald stands beside him with his arms folded. He waits as Olaf shifts into a grinding whine and finally slips his thumb into his mouth. Thorvald is more patient than I can be.

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Some afternoons I walk with Olaf to the beach only to rap my knuckles on an empty tent. The sun glares down on my head and my pack of food and toys. My disappointment is shameful, to have walked so eagerly for nothing. But even on those days I can gather some pleasures, the giddy rush in my chest, the sense of secret adventure.

Hip bones, the smell of his skin, the cord of muscle on his upper arm, kisses languid then more forceful, I walk home with flashes of Charlie filling my senses.

When I do find him, he doesn't kiss me, not at first. Always we begin with the games. He leads me to that patch of sand where our bodies have already dug trenches. The activity keeps Olaf's focus. He imitates me, doing his own high kicks, or settles on the sand to watch. Sometimes we toss sticks and he chases them, like a dog. I'm soon able to kick the bone and Charlie raises the rope higher.

"All you, Eva, it's all you."

But it's the pushing game I love, the force of his spine against mine, muscle on muscle. Then we are finished, sweating, lying on our backs, and Olaf is yanking at our clothes. Charlie will reach his arm out to mine and we'll hold hands, no other part of our bodies touching.

Each time we reach the tent, we have to give up our hopes, eyeing each other as we keep Olaf busy. Sometimes I think he's keeping awake on purpose.

One Sunday I tell Thorvald that he can take Olaf to the camp without me. I need an afternoon by myself. I know it's a risk, to walk to the shore on a day when the other men might have the energy to wander down themselves. But I'm desperate to be alone with Charlie.

When I reach the beach, he's sitting close to the water, resting his back on a log.



"Where's the entertainment," he asks, as I settle beside him.

"Olaf?"

"I see I have you to myself."

"That's if no one followed me."

"Oh you have followers."

I know he's kidding, but I still turn to look at the empty mouth of the trail.

"Tranquil," he says, when I lean against him.

"Sure is." I look out at the ocean. The light has that brittle quality after a storm.

"The sanatorium," he says. "The other day. You asked where it was."

It is the only home he has invited me to enter, other than his tent, this sanatorium where he smelled the piss stink of ammonia.

"Tranquil," he says again. "Tranquil, BC."

I imagine it's a dot you pass through on the way to somewhere else. "Did the sanitarium give the town its name, or the reverse?"

"It isn't there, not anymore," he says. "The building you can still find, but not the patients. I don't know what it is now."

"Tranquility can be a torment."

“There were voices down the corridors, and screaming, someone sounded like a cat, that twisted horrible sound of a cat calling at night, only it was a human.”

Charlie says *human*, not person or man or child. He says it like he does not include himself in this category. The humans around me. He says he tried to escape and the police found him on the highway. He was eleven then, and he could speak English, he explained to them he was going North. He was going home, but they took him back.

“Another year I stayed. Five years,” he says, “is long enough to forget.”

“Forget what?”

He scans the beach, gets up and gestures to the tent. I nod. We shouldn’t be out in the open, not on a Sunday. Inside the canvas walls we keep our voices quiet. There seems to be more space. I’m suddenly shy, without the distraction of Olaf.

“Come here,” he says.

But this time I slip his clothes off before he’s touched mine. I pause to absorb the sight of him. Is there anything more vulnerable than a man with his cock sprung out like a lever? All that wanting, so visible. And they say women are the weaker sex.

“What do you want, Charlie?”

“I want to enjoy you.”

Then he's unbuttoning my shirt, sliding down my trousers. He's never been inside me. I feel a delicious lurch in my stomach.

Our movements are so free, untethered to Olaf.

But when we lie down together, I find myself wondering what Olaf is doing. Probably showing the men his new skills at staging a tantrum. Thorvald will try to steady him, embarrassed in front of the men. Charlie encircles my nipple with his lips. I push away thoughts of breastfeeding Olaf. Then Charlie opens me with his fingers, a slow steady pulsing, and the worry recedes. I release my weight into the blankets. I have snuck away to see him, to do this. A swirl of vertigo as I realize how much I'm willing to lose.

I guide him with my hand. He looks into my eyes as he nudges himself into my body. When he fills me, I gasp, and we're rocking together. His hands in my hair. He pounds harder. He tugs my lip with his teeth. We are inching toward the wall of the tent. We could bring the whole thing down. But he slows, pressing deep and holding it, stays still, there, right there, his hips against mine, then he begins again. Flinching, he thrusts himself out and shoots onto my stomach. I massage his liquid into my scar.

"You're taking no chances."

"You're my chance, Eva."

AAAA

Thorvald is a man who finds his stories in tattered Western paperbacks and doesn't look too closely elsewhere. His trust in me is as sturdy as cedar.

One afternoon I come home with Olaf and find him balanced on the roof, waving his hammer to greet us. The roof is naked in the patches where he's torn away some of the shingles. The discarded squares of wood lie scattered on the ground like pieces from one of Olaf's puzzles. The slanted roof looks as if it will tilt Thorvald from its surface. But he bounces along the edge, confident he won't fall.

"Sunshine for you, Eva," he shouts. "Another beautiful day! You see that eagle?"

He shades his eyes with his palm and peers down to examine my features. He announces I am getting my colour back.

We haven't embraced since I lost the child, and so he finds nothing suspicious these last weeks when I return from Charlie, his smell on my skin. In bed I cup my body away from Thorvald, not wanting his fingers to touch me. He tries to stroke my hair and I pull the strands from his grasp and twist my hair into a knot.

"How long," he asks me in the morning, "did the doctor say we should wait?"

AAAA

I announce to Charlie that I'm strong enough now to swim to the island across the inlet. We are stretched out on his blankets, but haven't yet managed to touch each other, our desire strained taut, Olaf all jacked-up energy in this small warm space. He tears through Charlie's supplies. Finds a jar of dried peas he uses as a rattle. What will a toddler ever remember? I prop my feet up against the tent wall and feel how the canvas takes their shape.

"Distances on water can deceive you," Charlie says.

"It's a mile," I say. "I can swim a mile."

"A mile one way, Eva. That means you'd be stuck there. And I'd be left with him."

But I wear Charlie down. We walk with Olaf toward the water, then he says no, come this way. He directs me past the pier. He saunters beside Olaf, aware of him but not corralling him, letting him wander away to explore, and then return, the way you'd relax beside a dog you have learned to trust. We reach a jagged ridge of boulders. Charlie points to a carpet, waterlogged, grey with burgundy swirls. You never know what sort of riff-raff the ocean will spit onshore. It must be from one of the ships, meant to arrive somewhere else. I ask Charlie if he is intending to ride it.

"It's camouflage," he says.

"That thing is more likely to call attention to itself. "

"Exactly. Who would hide something underneath?"

He yanks up the carpet and a sheet of water slides off its soaked surface. Crabs and beach hoppers scatter frantically in search of new darkness. Charlie brushes sand and seaweed away from a long narrow boat. The boat is well kept, not a chip in the sleek finish. A starfish rests in the hollow that I presume is where Charlie will sit.

He says he'll travel beside me, in case I get tired.

"Where did you get this?"

"You thought all I owned was a tent?"

I point the starfish out to Olaf, its purple five-pointed beauty. It is one of those creatures that grow back limbs when they lose them. I touch it, the wet rough texture, and it responds to my touch, pulsing, withdrawing. Charlie plucks it carefully by one limb and carries it to where the water laps the shore. Then he slides out the boat and climbs into it. I'm familiar with a canoe, but this boat is flatter, pointed front and back—and covered, it is all one piece. It sits low, holding Charlie at the same level as the waves. His movement appears effortless. He glides with the water—not on it, not in it. The boat is an extension of his body. He is using a two-headed paddle that he dips on one side, then the other. His muscled arms flexing and releasing.

"There's only room for one."

"You said you'd swim."

"You'll have an unfair advantage."

“The kid will fit in here with me. He’s my handicap.”

He makes a circle out into the ocean and then returns. He stays in the water and tells me to pass him Olaf.

Olaf is so fascinated by the boat that he doesn’t fight me lifting him up. He sits in Charlie’s lap, facing him, and he pats the cover excitedly as they glide away.

“You look like a mermaid.”

“I’d make one ugly mermaid.”

I kick off my boots and slip off my patchwork skirt. Barnacles and broken shells dig into my sole. The wound on my foot has healed over, but still I wince at the sensation. I splash and holler, making a great show for Olaf, and then I dunk myself inside the cold ocean that wakes my skin. I swim as far as I can without cresting the surface, the water a membrane around me. When I look up through the diamonds of light, the hull of the boat is nowhere.

I break upwards, thrashing to find them. There—on the right. Not far. Charlie points out my location to Olaf who starts to wave.

I wave back, treading water, then disappear again, diving below. The only thing I can touch now is water, the only thing real. When I emerge again to the surface, I demonstrate my free stroke, backstroke, showing off. I veer off at an angle and have to correct myself. The sky offers no direction. I am anonymous, in the thickness of

water, a moving force of tired limbs and rhythmic breathing. I'm wearing the shirt I cut off at the sleeves, but it is still dragging, and I'm tempted to slip it off and let it sink.

On Saturdays the ferry shuttles through this channel. But the cargo ships don't keep to a schedule. This is their territory. They push driftwood to the shore in frothy waves that leave the eddies marbled with oil. Those vessels wouldn't see my floating limbs.

The nose of an otter crests through the water. He swims alongside my strokes. Then we are a hundred feet from the island and he torques and is gone. I touch rocks with my hands. The shore is ragged with mussels. I pluck at the seaweed striping my shins. Charlie tugs the boat across the rocks, Olaf swinging a bull kelp at him. Here we are.

Charlie slips his jackknife out of his pocket to puncture a can of salmon he found in the hull of the boat. We eat with our fingers, licking them clean. He toasts me with the can. I'm cold now, shivering. Clouds have begun to crowd the sky. Olaf is lying with his blond head on my legs and his feet on Charlie's. For a moment I wish that he were a darker child. He would be evidence of our connection. The three of us could stay on this island where no one lives.

From here the clear cut looks like nothing more than the shaved hide of an animal. The logging camp is another bare patch, the train track crossing it. It is a strange thing to see a straight line running alongside a mountain. The Indian reservation is up coast—not much to see, just a row of faded shacks hugging the shore.



The paper mill is beside the reservation, where the stink of sulphur rests in the air. Sometimes you catch it on the breeze—no wonder Charlie keeps to his tent. Down coast is where the Chinese are busy shingle bolting, which isn't as well paid as real logging. And the Japanese are living on their boats or near them. From this island we can see the whole coast divided piecemeal like my patchwork skirt.

Beside us is a blue heron and three harlequin ducks, black and white. They'll be migrating soon. Two of the ducks are babies, and the mother squawks at them and nudges them with her beak. They hardly seem large enough to cope with the kind of distance the coming season will demand of them. Olaf doesn't rush toward the birds. He seems afraid. Their claws make a clicking sound on the rocks.

I tell Charlie it's been three months.

I try to imagine her—I'd hold one of those clam shells in front of her eyes and her unfocused gaze would try to catch the white shape. But I know the baby wouldn't be on this island. I would never have been able to swim with her strapped to me. In this way, I've swum away from her, the possibility. I can't even see our house, hidden in the trees.

"They call it a *stillborn*." I've never said the word aloud. "But it wasn't a birth, nothing like it. I think sometimes that if...if the baby never lived, then she didn't really die. She didn't get a chance. She was inside me, and I was alive and—so what do you call that? It seems now she's in a kind of limbo, and that I need to pull her to the surface. That I could almost do it if I think about her enough."

We listen to the surf rise and stretch away. Olaf chases it. Charlie tells me about the noise of ice breaking apart in the spring, when he lived further north. The strange moaning like someone in pain. “Nothing like the Northern Lights,” he says. “That sound is music compared to the ice. The fissures and pressure, it can be horrible. You don’t want to be alone with it. You’d think someone is dying, or giving birth. But it’s just the ice. Cracking apart. I think sometimes that it expresses something that humans can’t. What you feel, or lose...what you can’t name.”

Charlie leads us into the island. There is no path—we have to push through the underbrush and branches. My shirt is clammy and cold, my underwear a boggy mess, and I wish I had my shoes. In any case, nothing would be left on me long—he’ll find an open patch where I can lie down and he can lie on top of me and give me something I can push against. He likes to tell me what he is doing when he is doing it. Sometimes he stops his hand and keeps talking, the way he did the first time. He asks me what I want next. What should I do? Say it.

I find a stone, smooth and long, round at one end and tapered at the other.

“I could use this on you, Charlie.”

He points at Olaf, shushes me, as if the boy would understand.

I’ve said Charlie’s name—that’s the taboo. We don’t want Olaf repeating it when I get home. Between us anything else is fair game. I pull Charlie toward me and slide the stone into his pocket.

“Chuck.”

He ignores me.

“Chuck, I’ll call you chuck. That way, if Olaf learns to repeat it, no one would be the wiser. Right Olaf? How much wood could a woodchuck chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood.”

As we walk deeper into the trees, the temperature shifts. August is going to close up quick. The moss grows deep and dark and cushions my steps. Charlie slips his hand inside the bark of a Doug fir. We move into a clearing of sword ferns and low brush. A fallen tree lies diagonally across the ground—a log, sawed off at one end, limbless, debarked. Charlie leans down and drags his hand over the wood, then reaches for my hand, tracing my fingers along it.

“Feel that?”

The wood has been crumbling in on itself, too soft and old to give me splinters. Under my fingers is a ridge, the shape of someone’s carving.

“I thought no one lived on this island.”

“They used to fish here. It’s a way to say thank you.

No one is around to thank. I have seen totem poles in the towns served by the ferry, but those are painted, and standing upright, beside a store that sells souvenirs.

It gives me a bad feeling to find one like this, with no one to see it, left to rot. The faces have all but disappeared. Indians, they don't know how to take care of anything.

Charlie says it's supposed to be allowed to fall over and decay. The whites, he says, are the ones who worry about keeping a totem pole standing like an all-season Christmas tree.

"Still," I say. "It's a shame."

It must be a hundred feet tall. I walk toward the top, where the carving is more distinct. A frog, I think that is.

"Or is it a turtle?"

"Hard to tell. You should ask an Indian."

"That's what I'm doing."

"You're doing what?"

"I'm talking to you."

"You think I'm an Indian? What gave you that idea?"

"You did."

"I did. When did I say that?"

"You gave me that impression."

“Well, then, let me take it back.” Laughing, he walks along the totem pole, his bare feet gripping the crumbling wood, arms akimbo. “I take it back. That makes me an Indian giver.”

I try to remember what he ever said about his home. All I recall is the sanatorium. He said it changed him. But then he never did say what he was at the start.

I pull Charlie down from his perch. And I do the simple things. I unbuckle his pants. With a deft rub I have him hard. He is standing up, looking at me. “See,” I say, “I do know you.”

“Jesus,” he says. “Alright. Eskimo.”

Olaf echoes what Charlie announced, just the rhythm of the sounds, nonsense in a toddler mouth, nothing anyone would ever be able to recognize.

Charlie takes me back in the boat, Olaf in my lap and me in Charlie’s, three in that tight space meant for one. “Kayak,” he says. “Stop calling it a boat.”

“*Kayak*...is that your mother tongue?”

He pats the hull loudly. “Sure.”

“I thought you....I heard you once, at the camp, with the Indians. But it was...I’m sure it was their language.”

“Oh,” he says. “The hospital was full of them. And parents from the area, they used to come and visit their kids. I was young. I picked it up.” He laughs. “I remember they took me out once, to a picnic. They’d ask me questions in Indian, Salish is what it is, what they call it, and I knew enough to answer. They laughed. I could talk like a real little Indian.”

I reach out to hold the paddle and he lets me try it, adjusting my arms so that the blade skims the surface, propelling us forward.

“When I came home, my mother couldn’t understand me. I couldn’t understand her. I could talk White, I could talk Indian. But I didn’t remember Eskimo.”

“Is your mother still alive?”

“She’s tough.”

I continue to grapple with the paddle. Water all around us. The sky wide open. I’m snug between Charlie’s legs, leaning my back on his chest. We are mid-way between the island and the shore. With his arms around me, Olaf tucked between my own legs, I feel content and secure, the three of us linked like those figures on the totem pole. I slow down, letting the kayak float. I don’t want to reach the shore.

“And yours, Eva?”

“My mother? She died.”

We are shifting south as the current takes us, and I have to stroke one paddle to correct our journey.

“Was she like you?”

“Someone put lipstick on her, for the wake. And that’s what I see, when I try to remember her face. I hated how it made her mouth seem separate, unreal. But I think they were trying to capture... She had a grace about her.”

“Grace.”

“It was...I don’t think I have that.”

“Oh you have something.”

“I was supposed to stay home and take care of my father.”

Suddenly Charlie grabs my arm to stop the paddle. At the far southern tip of the beach there’s a small figure, standing near the water. If we can see him, he can see us. The sky and ocean become a large canvas on which we are exposed.

The man is looking down at the rocks. Which one is he? Wearing a white hat. I can’t catch his face.

“Should we go back?” I ask Charlie, whispering, though our voices wouldn’t travel from here.

“I think it’s too late.”

The man has sighted us. We are trapped. He waves, just a tip of the hand hello. Then a more vibrant gesture—one arm sweeps an arc across the sky. We stay completely still in the kayak as if maybe this moment can be taken back. Water laps the sides. The glare hurts my eyes. We have nowhere to escape. I'll let Charlie do the paddling. I'll let him do the talking too.

I try to recall which man from the camp wears a hat like that. I don't recognize him. Tanned skin, short. He's not a faller.

I want to slip into the water and disappear. If Olaf weren't with us, I could do it. But I brought Olaf. I curse myself, feel a wave of nausea, the sun radiating above us and capturing that white hat like a flag someone would wave to signal surrender. Except we are the ones who are caught.

As we approach the beach, I realize he's a stranger. Oriental. He's not going to be returning to the camp with any secrets. A reprieve, but I sense it's temporary. We shouldn't be taking these kinds of risks.

The bottom of the kayak scrapes rocks.

Charlie reaches around me to lift Olaf out first. Raising him above the edge of the kayak. Olaf crawls down confidently from there. Then it's my turn.

"There's no graceful way of getting out, Eva."

I lurch forward, ass up, and drag my body from the kayak, skinning my knees. The air cools a wet spot on my back. Charlie's body disappears from mine.



The man on the beach is walking over to us, swinging a bucket. Shells crackle under his bare feet.

“Charwie,” he says. So they know each other.

“Doug. What did you catch?”

“Oysters today, Charwie. Wife likes oysters. You have wife now?”

“You could say that.” He doesn’t introduce me.

The man looks from Olaf to me. “I won’t say nothing.”

I kneel down to reach my arms around Olaf, as if he’s my alibi. The men start talking about fishing. Doug gestures to where he’s anchored his boat, around the bend in the cove next to us. He’s proud of his boat. He’s one of the Japanese fishermen living with his family down the coast. On occasion they supply the camp, although I know the men prefer meat. Doug says it’s been a good season. Good, good, good. He is a compact man, handsome in his floppy white hat. When he talks, he gestures animatedly with his arms and rises up on his feet.

Charlie seems more relaxed with him than he is with the loggers—he always keeps his distance when he’s in the camp. But he teases Doug like he teases me, asking him if his wife hopes he’s going to be eating plenty of oysters tonight.

“Oh plenty. Look like you don’t need oysters.” Then, appearing to realize he’s gone too far, Doug starts telling me about the time he put a shucking knife through his

hand. They were together that day, he and Charlie. It's strange to think of Charlie sharing time with anyone else, and so comfortably, the two of them working together on this same beach, slurping oyster from the shell. Doug says he pierced the knife right through his palm. "It was spurting blood. Like a fountain." He demonstrates, making explosion noises to accompany the spray of his hands. "Blood shooting up in air. Charwie, he stop it. Bandage it up."

I look at Charlie. "You're quite the nurse. I'm surprised you have any t-shirts left."

Doug holds his palm up so I can see the scar. "See? I'm like Jesus!"

Charlie shakes his head. "I'm not sure I want credit for that."

Olaf is shy with the stranger—he's not yelling or jumping or hitting, just staring with a fierce expression on his face. I notice Olaf has had too much sun. I tell Charlie we need to get him under cover.

"He embarrassed?" Doug says, laughing.

The men seem reluctant to leave each other. Charlie drags the kayak back to where he'd hidden it, pulling the carpet back on top, Doug helping him, making exaggerated groaning noises as if the exercise were a drain on his strength. He gives Olaf two oysters, which he holds as we walk to the tent.

Once we get inside, Charlie puts his hands on my cheeks. My warm skin. I want to stay like this for a while.

“Eva, you’re burnt too.”

“Is it bad?” I try to see what I look like by looking in his face.

“We should have been more careful.”

^ ^ ^ ^

Olaf and I will be alright walking in the shade. The trees thicken as we near home. And the light is at a low angle—it must be past seven. Thorvald will be wondering where I am. I’ve explained to him that I can’t keep to the house, not now. He seems to understand. I’m usually buoyant when I return from my time on the beach. A good walk? He’s just happy to see me doing so well. Tonight the surprise of that man sighting us in the kayak has left me jagged. I startle at the sound of a twig breaking—a deer, behind the trees. Birds clattering up ahead. A chipmunk skitters its nervous way across the trail. I think of the cougar, but remind myself they are elusive animals, covering enormous distances in their search for prey, and never remain in one place for long. At the creek I splash water on Olaf’s face, hoping to cool it. His cheeks are bright red and the skin feels swollen. That’s going to blister.

The man on the beach could have been Thorvald. That’s what has me shaken. Who’s to say he wouldn’t wander down to the beach, if I’m out so late? We used to walk to the ocean together, on Sundays when we first met, and then when I was

pregnant with Olaf. He swam to the island, while I waited on the sand. The memory of that feat gave me the idea to try it myself. I admired his regular strokes, the steady pinwheel sweep of his arms in the sky. And the way he kept a straight course. He didn't get tired. He was a small speck in the ocean and then I couldn't see him at all.

When we reach the yard, he's sitting on the steps. Olaf runs to him and I cringe inwardly as I wait for Thorvald to catch his face. He glances up at me, holds Olaf's chin, examines the extent of the burn.

"How long was he out in the sun?"

"A couple hours. We were collecting shells. I lost track of time."

"That's going to hurt him, Eva."

"I know."

"And he wasn't wearing a hat."

"I wasn't thinking."

"How much thought does it take?"

I can feel my own face red and tingly. I tell him that I sprinkled water on Olaf, at the creek.

"That's not enough. We have to get his body temperature down." He carries Olaf toward the rain barrel, and lets him sink into the coolness. He dunks his entire body, holds him there, just his head bobbing. Olaf starts to cry. Thorvald doesn't bring

him up. It seems some kind of punishment, but he's not punishing Olaf. His arm muscles tremble as he braces our boy. Olaf is screaming now. The noise a crescendo. His mouth stretches wide open, Thorvald's jaw fixed in place as his elbows begin to shake. Finally he lets Olaf out of the barrel, water dripping on dirt. Pine needles fleck his skin. Thorvald doesn't towel him off. He walks Olaf to the shed where I know he'll stroke some ointment on his cheeks. From outside I can hear him speaking in Norwegian.

When he comes back into the sunlight, he has a dollop of ointment on his finger that he offers to me, wiping it onto my palm. I spread it over my face. He shakes his head. He won't look me in the eye.

We eat in silence, canned green beans and boiled eggs, the steam rising from the stove like a menace. I don't want to eat at all, just lie down on the sheets and let my skin feel the night air. But I chew, the runny egg turning my stomach. I tickle Olaf's foot as if everything is fine. When I try to lift him out of the highchair, Thorvald says that he'll do it. But I struggle to get a grip on Olaf, and he shudders and vomits forcefully onto my shoulder, his chest heaving, then another spume of vomit, another, then nothing but bile.

Olaf weeps, empty and exhausted. A rush comes up in my chest that forces my eyes to water, but I fight it back.

I let Thorvald settle him in his crib while I change my clothes and try to wipe the vomit from my hair. I throw out the leftovers, scrub the dishes. I try not to inhale the

dank smell of egg. When Thorvald comes downstairs, he doesn't walk out to the shed like he usually would after an argument, doesn't pick up one of his novels and diligently turn the page. He sits on the chesterfield and stares in front of him. I've begun to shiver. Maybe he suspects where I have been going. I putter in the kitchen, dizzy with fear. My thoughts race. Has he been keeping tabs on Charlie? Does he notice the change in me? The room begins to spin and I have to sit down. He doesn't ask how I am. He doesn't move. Stares into blankness. His hands on his legs, still as a statue. I don't know how long I can wait.

He finally rises and says he is going to sleep. I follow him up the stairs, the whiff of vomit still on me. But then I tell him I don't want to get in the bed, not until I've washed. He nods. I go downstairs and pull out Olaf's tin basin, and fill it with water, carrying it to the table. I strip off my clothes, leave them in a lump. I begin to sponge my body clumsily. Face, neck, armpits, crotch. I don't want to touch myself. I wring out the sponge with a sense of release that it's done. We could have washed Olaf in this basin tonight, the two of us together, like we used to do. Instead his stiff expression as he held Olaf upright in the rain barrel. Sadness wrenches through me. I can't go to our bedroom, not yet. I decide to wash my hair too, leaning at the basin edge, the hard metal digging into my belly. I welcome the pain. The water is coated with scum but I don't bother to dump it and refill the basin. This will do. I'm bending over when I hear his footsteps on the stairs. I reach for a towel to cover my belly. Suds in my eyes. When I rub them, the stinging gets worse. He'll think I've been crying. The

towel is small and I know he can see the back of me. I feel caught once more, shameful.

“Eva, we should leave.”

“Leave?” I turn around, gripping the towel.

“There is work, I heard this today. They need men in the city to take down the trees.”

“But Thorvald...”

“You need to be away from here. You said this house—”

“This house is our home.”

“You are never home.”

His face is stricken. He looks down at the floor. He has said what he needs to say. I wait for him to go upstairs before I dress. I leave the water in the basin, puddles on the floor like when Olaf is playing. I remember when my blood fell onto this same floor, and Thorvald came toward me with his hands outstretched.

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We agree to take turns sitting up with Olaf. There is the threat he could vomit in his sleep and choke. Thorvald takes the first shift. But after lying fitfully awake, I walk to Olaf's room and nudge Thorvald's shoulder to tell him I should do the rest of the night.

"I don't want you rigging when you are tired."

"Don't worry, Eva."

He gazes at Olaf before he leaves, Olaf's bright face pressed into the mattress, his diapered bottom in the air. Thorvald walks to our bedroom and lies down. The springs tweak under his weight. I sit and watch for any change in Olaf. The blankets are cramped at the bottom of his crib, away from his hot skin. He rolls on his side, coughs, and I brace myself for another bout of vomiting, but he settles again. A layer of sweat on him. I continue to sit, my behind growing numb. I'm doing penance for the pain I've inflicted. On the floor are tracks from the train-set Thorvald built him. Grooves line the wood—the train won't lose its way. I begin to nod off. Flickers of dream thoughts. A spider, or some kind of dark claw, then the colour red. I stand up to keep myself awake. I grip the crib rungs, peering at Olaf. He's tucked his thumb in his mouth. The window is open, air flowing through the room. That will help him. I'm cold myself. The change from the day's heat. I think maybe he needs a blanket, just a light one, and pull a cotton throw across his back, but then decide he's better without. His eyelids twitch. He doesn't open them. Such an intimacy, to watch someone dream. What does he see? I've never slept beside Charlie, never witnessed his slack



face or the shift of energy as his body surrenders. I can't let myself think of Charlie. I pace the hall. Slowly, so as not to make a sound. Still the boards creak. Thorvald has left the door open and I can see him lying on his back. He has his arms behind his head. He opens his eyes and then shuts them again. He's just pretending to be asleep.

I return to Olaf's room, remembering the times I would breastfeed him and then snuggle against Thorvald's warmth. He'd put his arm around me, without waking. We turned together through the night. My limbs wrapped around him like a vine growing up a stalk.

Sometimes he'd shudder and I'd think he was dreaming about falling. He never tells me about these dreams.

When I first saw him climb to the top of a spar tree, just the leather belt to keep him strapped to the trunk, his spiked boots digging higher and higher, I couldn't believe the risk he was willing to take. He seemed to me such a practical man. I watched him soar to the tip, sawing the branches as he rose, each one falling until the trunk was without limbs, just his body protruding. He made it seem effortless, as if a tree wanted to shed its branches. Then he sawed through the tip of the tree and it too crashed to the ground. Ten feet long or more, falling. The release of that weight swayed the trunk in the sky. He was attached to it, riding the tree, his rope belt stretched taut to hold him.

When the swaying finally ceased, he sat on top. I was already breathless. Then he stood. He had become the tree's tip. He waved—I think to me.

“Watch this, Eva,” one of the men said, just before Thorvald began his descent. He was dropping down the length of the tree—and he was twirling, skipping around and around the trunk, the patter of his boots fast as my heart.

I asked him if he was ever frightened. He seemed confused by the question. “I’m prepared,” he said.

What he looks for, he told me, is any evidence of rot. Before he climbs, he examines the roots, sniffs the tree. The danger is that as it sways, the tree will split in two. Vertically, up the core. He’ll be belted to it. And the two sides will heave apart. The force crushing him, right into the trunk.

No man wants to be attached to a rotting tree.

Olaf is snorting slightly as he breathes, and I get up to nudge him onto his back. His body warm. The trace of vomit emanating from his breath. When he was born, the smell of his skull made me want to bite him. I still want to nibble his plump thighs, slip his fingers in my mouth. I’ll keep him close to me today. We’ll stay out of the sun.

I try to remember how often Thorvald has mentioned Charlie, and when. Did I make a slip? My pulse always quickens at the name. We spoke of him after the fire. Thorvald had been concerned. Charlie has since returned to hooking, and I don’t think Thorvald has mentioned him since.

I realize that doesn’t prove anything.

I won't be taking Olaf anywhere for a while. Charlie and I didn't make plans for the next time we will meet, so he won't be expecting me. I wonder what he hopes for. He's never said. I want to enjoy you. We haven't talked about what will happen in the future. Our summer is unconnected to other seasons.

Then I recall that he asked about my birthday. It's in the winter, I told him. January. The question filled me with hope. I would see him then. It seemed a long way off. The day hanging suspended like the bone I was trying to reach with my kick.

I hear shuffling in our bedroom—Thorvald rising to get ready for work. I keep to my perch near Olaf. Thorvald comes to check, putting his hand on Olaf's forehead.

"It's coming down."

I offer to make Thorvald breakfast, but he says no. "Don't leave him," he says.

I tell him I won't.

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I feed Olaf crackers softened in condensed milk. I want to get something into his stomach that won't come back up. He swallows diligently, his face noncommittal. He has used all his resources. It worries me that he seems content to sit in his highchair, isn't squirming to get out like he usually does. The skin on his cheek has

started to swell and he reaches his hands to his face, uncertain about the new sensation.

The men will soon be pausing for lunch. Eating their sandwiches one-handed. They'll keep moving, shuffling their feet and swinging their arms—the black flies will get them if they stay still too long. I've seen them balancing back and forth on a fallen log, the flies clouding each end, where a man pivots. A few of the loggers will settle in the shade of the crummy. They'll argue for the front seat. I don't think Thorvald will let himself sit down or close his eyes or reveal any signs of exhaustion. He'll stand and chew his sandwiches with the rest of them. The loggers won't let another man work when he's sick or drunk or hung-over—it's too much of a risk. He'd be a danger not just to himself, but to anyone he's working near. But Thorvald won't reveal any signs of distraction. They won't know a thing.

I wonder now if it would have been possible for me to stop him this morning, if I could have kept him from climbing his spar tree, just this once. I wasn't in a position to ask for favours.

One slip of his boot, that's all it would take. He could out-step the safety belt, and there would be nothing to catch him. He once stood on the kitchen stool and asked me if I was worried he would fall off.

"So Eva, why would it be any different?"

"But you are in the sky."

He did a little jig, in his giant boots, on the stool. I was laughing then, with a rosy trepidation I was trying to hide. I told him he looked like a lion dancing on the head of a pin.

I remember the night he stumbled when he was walking across the creek. He was tired then. Today he'll be vigilant, I'm sure, knowing the danger.

I'm tired this morning, but fear keeps me awake. I lift Olaf out of his chair and busy his hands with my ball of wool so he won't be touching his face. My own burn isn't as bad. I wish I were the one suffering. In the hours after he was born, I was already willing to lay down my life for this baby I'd only just met.

We play on the floor with his blocks, his train-set, the wooden truck, familiar things that still fascinate him. He babbles to me, leaves a pause for my response, and we talk back and forth like this. He frowns at my words or nods thoughtfully and I wish Thorvald could see his serious face. Olaf pats my shoulder just as he's seen his father do.

When Thorvald said we should leave, the tone of his voice was soft, not angry, not anymore. He stood with head bowed, shoulders slumped—defeated. I've never seen him like that. It is strange now to think of his words in the daylight. Surely the sun will make them disappear, the way a nightmare scatters and fades.

I can't imagine his tall body cramped in a city. His broad strides. It would be like trying to place him on a board game. He was built for this forest where the trees

dwarf him. And how would I exist among women with their tea cups and curled hair? The looks I'd get. The kindly advice. No, he knows where we belong. I can hear the gurgle of the creek now, and if I walked outside the air would be fragrant with pine. I know the bears and coyotes, the squirrels—how their habits clock the day. And the trees waving slightly in a breeze so you can see the air. The men talk to me as if they expect to find nothing but what I am. This place is real, not Thorvald's plan to leave it.

How could I abandon this house, the ground that holds my child's bones? She needs me. When I talked about the baby with Charlie, I felt a bit of the joy I experienced carrying her. That sense of purpose. I could almost believe that if I just kept speaking, remembering, a part of her would remain alive. Charlie lets me do it. He seems to understand.

If we left here, I would never again touch Charlie, hear him laugh, feel his chest under my hand. The beat of his heart. My palm outstretched like I am taking an oath.

Charlie works at the cold deck pile, where all the logs are gathered, pulled along the ground by giant cables. The men say *colddeckpile*, as if even the words have been stacked together. All the labour on the mountain culminates there. Cables starring out from that centre. The chokermen and the chasers racing back and forth. The rigging slinger tells them what to do, and Charlie is in charge of the rigging slinger, Charlie is in charge of them all. The hook tender is the one who shouts the orders. The donkey operator, the whistle punk—they all listen to Charlie. It gives me a thrill to think of the men running at his command. Go ahead slow. Slack the line. Come back fast. Their

movements an extension of the cables that all lead back to his voice. The men run the minute he says go.

Thorvald won't be working anywhere near him, and this reassures me. He doesn't have to do what Charlie says. He will be higher up the mountain, with the fallers and the buckers. They are clearing the new quarter. He works alone. He'll be climbing the spar. He might be on the top right now, perched high as hope, ready to make his twirling descent. Whenever I watched him, I held my breath as if that would keep him safe.

He won't stay at the camp after his shift is done, not today. He will want to see Olaf. And he will let me know he didn't injure himself, despite the lack of sleep. He will hold Olaf and I will put my arms around them both. He will tell me he didn't mean what he said. It was all a mistake.

I lead Olaf to the shed where I find the ointment Thorvald used. Olaf flinches as I spread it over his swollen skin. I tell him I'm sorry, I am so sorry. I lean down to kiss him, the medicinal taste of the ointment on my lips. I hand him a glass jar full of bolts, and he shakes it. He seems happy with his new toy. He holds the jar above his head and I swing to the rhythm. Then I'm dancing for him, my limbs loose as a puppet, and he's giggling, looking at his silly mother. His trusting eyes. His face will peel in a few days, the new skin pink and raw. He doesn't understand that it was my fault. And he won't remember what happened this summer, none of it.

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By the afternoon Olaf has regained the force of his usual energy and I almost welcome his tantrum—flailing arms and legs, how he holds his breath and then expels it like a punch of air. Every part of his body is bound with rage. When Thorvald walks into the house, I don't hear his approach. He's there, beside me. We stand together caught in Olaf's noise.

"He just started," I say.

"Let him get it out of his system."

"I don't want him to bang his head."

Thorvald lifts Olaf and plunks him down on the chesterfield, fencing him with his long body. Olaf continues to throw his limbs, but the chesterfield absorbs his blows and soon he tires, whimpering in the way he does when he's finished.

"I guess I deserve it."

Thorvald doesn't say I don't. He bounces Olaf in his lap. Tears glistening on the boy's red cheeks. He tells Olaf that Dada is giving him a horsey ride.

"What is Dada doing?" I join in. "Are you a horsey, Olaf? Are you a little horsey?"

"Dadum, dadum, dadum," says Thorvald.



I pick up the broom and start sweeping, glad to have Thorvald home uninjured, not a nick on him. I'll make sure they both get their sleep tonight. Something light for dinner, easy to digest. Salad with cheese. Fresh biscuits. I'm running through possibilities in my mind when suddenly I recognize a pattern in Olaf's babble that hadn't been there before.

"Did you hear that? Thorvald? He said *Dada*. Say it again, Olaf."

"Is he saying it to me?"

"Oh he is. He is. Listen."

Thorvald says *Dada* and Olaf smiles and says it back. His voice adamant now, the sounds distinct. Something inside me cracks open. I want to clap but I don't want to distract him. He looks first at Thorvald then at me, delighted at the attention. Thorvald too is beaming. I kneel in front of them, and point to his father, saying those two perfect syllables, just as Olaf pronounced them.

"Who is that, Olaf? Is that *Dada*?"

He laughs and says it once more.

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Thorvald doesn't mention his plans to move us to the city. But the threat hovers. When I'm with Olaf during the day, I can keep my mind from what he said, though I sleep fitfully, dreams skating along the surface. One night Charlie surrounds me soft as water, and when I try to touch him, he's gone. It's the kind of dream you want to crawl back inside. There was sunlight in the water, like the diamonds flickering on the ocean when I swam next to his kayak. I lie in the dark beside Thorvald and recall Charlie's lips on my lips, his hand caressing my inner thigh.

Dreams of broken things—fractured teeth and lost pieces of toys. I see Thorvald's safety belt tear apart. But he doesn't fall. He floats, grey curtains of wind lifting his body away from me.

I will my eyes to open—and then I'm staring at the bedroom ceiling. Thorvald's solid body next to mine. But the feelings linger. I can't fall back asleep. Then I don't want to. I'll just lie here and wait for the morning. I list the objects in the cookhouse. I run through the men's nicknames. I see the loggers standing on the wooden sidewalk with their tools. The crummy swoops them uphill, past the cedars and firs. I try to trace every part of these woods that we would have to leave behind.

Then I'm sinking again. Simple has got his hands on the wax picture I made with Olaf. The colours are running into each other, melting, becoming muddied, like the muck at the bottom of the creek, and there is a smear of white, which makes me think of the cornstarch and water mixture I sometimes give Olaf so he can drag his fingers through it, making swirls on the black space of a cookie sheet. I realize the

white liquid is coming from Simple. His semen. He's rubbing it into the colours. He is making an ugly mess. He's laughing and singing, his face stretching, eyes rolling, and now he's covered himself in blue and yellow, garish and glistening. Ashamed I try to wrestle the ruined picture away from him, and he becomes the doctor, his hands dipping into my blood.

When I wake up, I am sweating, and the images from the dream cling to the air. Thorvald is not in bed. The blankets are at the bottom of the mattress and I remember my clothes lying with Charlie's, how the arms were twisted together. A fly has got trapped somewhere behind the curtain, and taps its wings frantically against the window. I get up to open it and let the fly out, but it buzzes back into the bedroom, lands on the bed. Still as death. Just that dark speck on the white. The dream about Simple has left a residue, so that everything in this room seems like it could expand or contract, even this fly, with its four feet covered with that sticky substance that allows the damned thing to climb walls, glass, to climb now up my pillow like it will take the place of my head. Punishment, the dream, the fly. Skunk, I can smell skunk. The animals have been digging in the yard and the bitter stink is wafting through the window and into the house. For a moment I worry they'll spray me. Get that reek into my nightgown and I'll never get it out. But of course they can't reach me inside the house. I realize I'm not quite awake.

I sit on Thorvald's side of the bed. The fly doesn't move. Last night Thorvald nestled around the curve of my spine. These days he usually stretches out on his back, and I don't know what to make of the change.

I've got maybe an hour before Olaf will wake. I let my mind fill with memories of Charlie. I'd walk home with his smell on my skin, determined not to wash him off.

If he tossed a pebble against that window, I'd step downstairs and let him in.

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Olaf manages to yank his hat off his head even though I've sewn a strap to it. It's a white sailor hat, like the one Charlie's friend was wearing. I wish the brim were a bit wider, but it's past five in the afternoon so the sun won't harm him now. Even Thorvald doesn't seem worried when Olaf tugs the hat off and tosses it to the ground. I pick it up and do my best to wipe it clean, pocketing it for next time. We're almost at the camp, in any case. Olaf has to stop to whack a tree with a stick. Then the next tree. At this rate we're going to be late for the movie. But when we reach the camp, the loggers are still outside. They sprawl on the cookhouse steps, lean against its walls. Most of them smoking. Coffee mugs in their hands. They must have just finished supper—an early meal this evening because they've got two movies to watch.

"Hello Stranger," Seaball says.

I'm grinning. It can't remember the last time I saw him. The men in their undershirts with their slack suspenders, the tables set up for card games, all of it.

Olaf climbs onto his lap and Seaball links his arm around him, then Olaf has tugged himself free and is knocking the cookhouse steps with his stick. The men on the porch watch him without much engagement. Flypaper twirls above their heads, thick with black flecks.

As soon as Cook comes outside to greet us, I take Olaf by the hand and walk him to Thorvald.

"Who is that, Olaf?" He looks anxiously around at the men. "Is that Dada? Olaf? Dada?"

A couple of the men chuckle. I guess it's funny hearing Thorvald called anything but his name.

Thorvald doesn't seem to mind. He leans down and says *Da-da*, slowly, in his deep voice, pointing at his barrel chest. Olaf won't cooperate for him either.

"He can say *Dada*," I tell Cook finally. "And *Mama*. His latest is *ball*."

"What else does a boy need?"

Cook leans down at Olaf and tries to get him to say *Cook*. The men love this. *Cookcookcook*. But Olaf pinches his mouth shut and stares at him with great determination, wrinkling his forehead.

"I don't think it's going to work," I say.

"Oh he'll get there. I'm the one with the cake."

Olaf gets his hands in the icing anyway. We feed him a giant piece of chocolate cake before settling in for the movie. I've got to wipe the smears from his face and fingers and by the time we've prodded him into the dining hall, we've missed the newsreel, and there's nothing playing for a moment while Gravy fiddles with the film. Thorvald and I plan to keep Olaf sitting with us tonight, for as long as he lasts. Gravy apologizes for the wait. The men start grumbling. In front of us, Pope unpeels a mint candy, the paper crackling, and I poke him and ask who he's planning to kiss. Olaf squirms in Thorvald's lap and I think I'll need to take him outside, but as soon as the cartoon flickers across the wall, he's rapturous. Mouth and eyes open wide, he looks at me then back at the screen, as if this creation were my doing.

I notice they've put Simple near the door, in case he causes any trouble, but he's calm so far.

I was hoping Charlie would be here. I want to set eyes on him. There'd be no way I could signal the reason I haven't been to the tent. I shouldn't even dare look in his direction, not for long. I've come to believe that Thorvald hasn't cultivated any suspicions—that was my fear. But I wouldn't want to be seen talking to Charlie.

It's a silent movie, and the men groan with disappointment. Then Garbo makes her appearance and they shift in their seats to get a better view.

If I left now, I'd have at least three hours, maybe four, before Thorvald would return home with Olaf. The thought pricks me. I can't get rid of it. I wonder where Charlie is and what he is doing. The movie continues, the images move in front of me, and I am left sitting here. It would be easy enough to tell Thorvald I want to go home—I did that once when I was pregnant. He insisted on coming with me. So tonight I can't tell him I'm feeling sick.

The Eiffel Tower—and Paris streets. Small cars and people scurrying. Women with nipped-in waists.

There isn't any noise coming from the speakers to detract from my voice. Even though I am whispering to Thorvald, a couple of the men turn to look.

Thorvald nods. He adjusts Olaf on his lap.

I squeeze past the men as they lift their knees to let me. I go through the door that leads to the kitchen, and out that way, so I don't have to confront Simple. On the porch I stop and breathe, as if I've made a dangerous escape. Thorvald will soon think I'm at home, indulging myself with a quiet night. I wish I were wearing a watch.

When I cross the wooden sidewalk, I hear a whistle. I turn around, hoping it might be Charlie. No one's there. The bunkhouse doors are all shut, except for the one on the end that has swayed open. The camp has the look of a ghost town. Then I hear laughter, coming from the dining hall. The sound is a relief. As I walk into the

trail, I recall that Garbo is no comic. One of the men must have said something to get them going.

The mossy earth is soft under my boots. The Doug firs are as wide as rooms. This trail runs straight from the camp to the ocean, on steep ground. Without Olaf to slow my pace, I relish the momentum of walking downhill, pumping my arms, feeling the blood rush through my legs. Beside me runs the river where the men scrub their clothes, water bounding loudly over the rocks. I've come across them in their underwear and they don't bother to hide.

Through the trees I spot that mangy bear. I slow my gait. I don't want her to chase me. She is nosing around the river, pine needles and twigs still hanging on her coat. Then all her focus darts to one sparkling patch of water. She dashes her paw into it to loop out a fish. Rainbows shatter inside the splash. That'll be dinner for her cub. It must be hiding in the underbrush somewhere on the other side or she'd have braced at my smell.

The air above the river flickers with darting dragonflies.

When I reach the hemlock where Charlie and I played the kicking game, I see he's removed the bone, or an animal has somehow reached it, just the rope left hanging. I catch a glimpse of salmon, propped in the branches. Bulging eyes and glistening skin. The tree has started to bear fish.



It seems too much to hope for, to have Charlie waiting in his tent on such a beautiful evening, and sure enough when I call him, I get no response. I wander the length of the beach, thinking he might be shucking oysters or digging for clams, but there's no sign of him. I sit down with my back to a log. Pull my knees up, shifting in place to feel that roughness nudge the knobs of my spine. At the far left of the inlet, the sea smashes against the base of cliffs soaring above me so high and rocky they could be broken pieces of the moon. If I look hard and long enough at those cliffs, I can find eyes and a mouth.

Coyotes call out. They are skittery animals, but this evening their call is enough to chill my skin. I wrap my arms around my belly as if I still had something to protect.

The coyotes grow quiet. A wave rises and drags water back along the shore.

No telling how long Charlie will be. I wonder if he went to the camp after all. The sun is moving west. It's setting earlier in the day now, but there is still an hour at least of daylight. I wait a bit longer, worrying I'll fall asleep here, with the sound of the surf.

Before I leave I write my name in the sand with a stick, large letters in front of his tent, so that Charlie knows I've been. It seems I will have a quiet night at home.

The coyotes are yipping now—I can see them on the cliff stretching their throats. I decide to give him a bit more time.

The first movie will soon be over. There will be a break while the men stretch and fart, Gravy setting up the next show. Thorvald could decide to come home with Olaf. But the second movie's a Western, and that's the one he wanted to see.

There's a shape on the ocean. The kayak. Almost a trick of light, a wave's shadow. I'm sure that's the kayak. Yes, Charlie is in it, a small nub. It takes a long time for him to come closer.

It seems he's travelled a distance—he'll be tired. For a moment I wonder if he'll want me here. But he's seen me. He's raising the paddle in the air. I walk down to the shore to meet him. He climbs out of the kayak and encircles my waist, lifts me up like I don't weigh a thing. Then he drops me back to the sand, his hands gripping my head. He kisses me hard.

I take the front of the kayak and he takes the back. We cover it with the heavy carpet and walk hand in hand across the beach. When we reach the tent, he turns me so I'm facing the ocean, the soaring blue sky ribboned with white clouds. He's behind me, his arms around my chest. I sway slightly just to feel him brace by body.

"You know, the trees are growing salmon."

"The bears put them there," he says.

"I figured."

"You staying the night?"

“Charlie.”

We climb inside. I breathe the smell of propane and canvas. Somehow I feared I wouldn’t be back. Charlie unloads his satchel—smoked salmon, the deep pink flesh.

“That from the bear?”

“The Indians. They are having a feast.”

“You paddled from the reservation?”

“Like I said, feast. It’ll be going all night.”

“Why’d you leave?”

He cuts through the salmon and offers me a slice. I can taste the alder wood they use to smoke it. I realize I’m hungry. We eat with our fingers, the oil slicking our lips, each of us nudging bits into the other’s mouth, laughing when it falls out.

When I ask him again why he left, he says it was getting sad.

“Sad?”

“I don’t like goodbyes.”

“Who was saying goodbye?”

“School starts next week.”

“But that’s exciting, for the kids.”

“No.”

“No?”

“They take the children away.”

“What do you mean?”

“All of them. Put them in these... I know what’s going to happen to them. You’d travel for a day and still not find those kids. The parents aren’t even allowed to visit. September the men come for the youngest ones, the last of them. It’s...it’s what they do.”

“The teachers?”

“Priests. The whole... I know how they think, the bastards. They don’t trust the Indians to take care of their own.”

“Did you...did you go to one of those schools?”

““The thing is, some of those kids, they won’t see their parents again, not for years. If they see them. And the kids, they...”

He takes out a handkerchief and wipes his face. “Me, I got some of it. I got schooled for a year. But I was thirteen. So it didn’t affect me like the others. Need to get them young.”

“Thirteen is still—“

“Oh I stood my ground. I can land anywhere.”

“Yes, I imagine that.”

“The Indians, they plan to do something this time.”

“Tonight, was it—”

“At school those kids are going to have some hungry bellies. Go to bed hungry, get up hungry.” He scoops up another piece of salmon and chews the skin thoughtfully. “Anyway. Why you here? Not to talk.”

“The men are watching Garbo.”

He shrugs. “Garbo. You wouldn’t see the likes of that lady ever hike to this beach, not in her heels.”

“They’d have to carry her.”

“There’d be volunteers.”

“At least she’d be quiet.”

Before he can tell me I could take a cue from her, I kiss him, the lightest pressure, the top lip, the bottom, and he responds and I push his mouth open with my tongue. He removes my clothes, tosses them aside, lays me on the blankets, says we’ll have no interruptions.

I tell him wish I could stay all night. Already I sense that I'll soon long for this moment.

He's fully clothed and I tell him this isn't fair. But he's stroking me, my shoulders, arms, slowly, like he's memorizing my shape. I sigh, my mind surrenders, and I feel my energy dissipate then rise. I'm coming to exist, now, under his hand, skin tingling where he's touched.

He's never released himself inside me, always sliding out in the last second, leaving my body aching for him, suddenly lonely.

Shirt, undershirt, the rough fabric of his trousers—I strip everything to the ground and he's naked and hard in my hands. I lay him out, like he did me, caressing the length of him. The stone I tucked in his pocket has tumbled onto the blankets. I'm surprised he's still carrying it. Slim as my finger. I roll him over.

He lies still. His eyes follow my hands. Spit should do the job, though he's got lard somewhere—next to his propane stove. I reach for that, rub enough on the stone that it's shining. It slips in him easy. Just the tip at first. His buttocks quiver, the muscle tensing then softening. I turn him onto his hip. I lie down to take him in my mouth, sliding the stone deeper, both of us rocking, in and out. He shoots off with such intensity that I gag, my teeth gracing the skin. Then I swallow him. I slide the stone out and toss it aside.

I tell him I have to go. He sits up to kiss me, still eager. We gather our clothes, not looking at each other. Then he catches my glance and laughs. He kisses me again.

“You’ve got a lot of joy in you.”

“Is that what you call it?”

“Not just the sadness, Eva. Joy too. Joy of life.”

“How can you tell?”

He laughs again.

From outside the tent, we hear shells crackling underfoot. Someone is coming this way. We freeze in place. I don’t even breathe. The blankets, the propane stove—there’s nowhere for me to hide. But whoever is approaching won’t just barge in. Charlie moves toward the flap, gestures for me to step farther back. Then the side of the tent shudders—like someone has punched it. Thump, and again thump. They are going to knock the tent over. Charlie points, smiles—the shape of a giant paw pushes against the canvas.

I can smell it. The musty stink of bear.

“The salmon,” he says. “He smells the salmon.” Charlie gathers the remains in his hands and barges out the tent to toss the fish far from us. Through the open flap I catch the bear scurry after it like a happy dog. We laugh, a nervous release.

Standing beside each other on the beach, Charlie's arm draped around me, we watch the bear eat its lazy meal under the sky that has bloomed as pink as the salmon.

"Don't say goodbye," he says. "Just go."

"You'll be alright?"

"She's fed. My foot wouldn't be as tender."

AAAA

I choose the trail that leads to the logging camp. It's less meandering—up ahead there will be a giant stump, and I'll turn there to regain the path to our house. Trudging uphill is sweaty work, and I'm soon panting from the effort to be as quick as I can. I'm sure the shade of the trees makes it seem darker than it is. I look to the sky, hoping to see some brightness. A spider web stretches between branches like spun light.

The Indian children must run away from those schools, some of them. Hearts pounding, they chase each other feral through the trees. Ten year olds. Six year olds. Brothers, sisters. They hope to reach their parents—but how long do they need to run? The initial excitement of a night outdoors, scampering for berries, no idea where



they are, how far away. Come dawn they'd be found, of course, hungry and afraid.  
Curled like possums.

This fall the parents might be planning to hide them somehow. But then the parents would be the ones taken.

The river roars beside me, an urgent tumbling. A raccoon waddles to the edge and dips something into the water, in that tidy way they do, as if every morsel of food has to be thoroughly washed before they can eat it.

Olaf will be asleep on Thorvald's lap. Or maybe Thorvald settled him in the kitchen before the Western started. He'll soon carry him through the night, the boy's head collapsed on his shoulder. When I reach home, I'll wash up quick, get under the sheets. I can keep my eyes closed and act startled when Thorvald comes in the room. Then I'll get up, groggily, and go watch Olaf slumped in his crib, just for a little while. I wonder if the Indian mothers are doing that tonight.

I didn't tell Charlie that Olaf said his first words. It feels strange to have a secret from him. Tonight I'll be with my son and husband in our sturdy house with its cake tins, curtains, paperbacks, wooden toys, crayons and balls, and he'll sleep in the tent alone.

The trees are somber. Where the trail curves, it seems to disappear.

A man—just ahead of me. Walking this way. Dark hair, ruddy face. I don't know him. If I'd heard his steps, I could have slipped into the trees to let him pass. I

still have the urge to do so, letting the branches shield me. He's carrying a lantern in one hand, unlit, and a gun in the other.

Then I recognize his beak nose. A greenhorn. He was the one who cursed at Olaf, when we brought him for one of the Sunday suppers—not loudly, just under his breath, but with a mean-spiritedness that made me scoop up my boy.

"You're Eva." He walks right up to me. "Late to be out."

I wonder if he senses where I've been. My tangled hair, the smell of Charlie.

"I...I couldn't sleep."

"Funny. I couldn't either." He fiddles with the lantern to flick it on, and holds it up to me. The glow sweeps into my face. I cross my hands to shield my eyes and he lowers the lantern, slowly. "What helps you sleep, Eva?"

"The men call me Twig."

"The men call you all sorts of things." He lets his eyes drop down my body, rocking the lantern.

I can't remember his name. Something about a bird. Hawk? Crow? I think, absurdly, that if I can call him by his name he'll shrink in front of me like a schoolboy. But he's not one of the kitchen staff.

"You a faller?"

"I could fall for you, couldn't I? Eva."

Blood courses in my ears. I could race through the trails that wind through the woods like a circuitry of veins. But he'd catch me, scramble my flailing limbs, yanking my patchwork skirt. If I tried to escape, he wouldn't even need to run. He could turn, raise the rifle, find me in its cross-hairs, and pull the trigger. Even a shot above my head, to give me a scare, would stop me in my tracks. He's standing close to me now, too close. I can smell his body odor and the stagnant whiff of booze. My back is arched with fear. If he touches me, Thorvald will kill him. It cracks through my mind like a strike of lightning, and my brain fissures as I try to catch the terrifying electricity and bind it back into the dark.

"You want I walk you home?"

"No. No."

Then my legs bolt, and I'm charging past him and through the woods, toward the camp, where the men will be, where Thorvald will be. I've got my skirt fisted, trees scratching my arms, my boots stutter-stepping over fallen branches. I reach the wooden sidewalk before I realize that he isn't behind me.

The dining hall windows are blind with blankets. One seam of light. A cool light, flickering—the movie must still be playing. Thorvald will have no idea yet where I am, what has happened. He can't find out. I should never have run to the camp. I have to walk home now, along the narrow dark trail. I take one last glance at the dining hall, and start my journey, trying not to make a sound, which is impossible, twigs breaking under each step. Does that man know where I live? But they all do. Then I

remember his name—Blue Jay. A pesky bird. Noisy. No harm meant. The house seems small, frail, with the trees looming around its triangular peak. A doll's house. And I feel like a doll, walking through the door and into the empty kitchen—a china doll with glass eyes and rigid limbs. Nothing is alive in me but the heart that beats and beats and flushes blood to every part of a body that stands fixed at the window. I could be picked up and shattered.

^ ^ ^ ^

I'm tucked in bed when Thorvald returns. I'm wearing a nightgown with long sleeves to hide the scratches. There's nothing I can do about my hands. He moves methodically so as not to wake me. I don't rise to see Olaf. I don't trust my legs, my face. I could give myself away. I wonder if that man was back in the camp when Thorvald left. Blue Jay. Now I don't want the intimacy of knowing his name. He might have stood near Thorvald in the kitchen, the men slurping coffee and talking about the movie. Thorvald might have glanced at him. That ugly ruddy face. But he wouldn't know what the man said to me. He won't know.

Charlie is the one I'll tell.

^ ^ ^ ^

But when Olaf and I ramble to the beach I can't find Charlie. I tap on the canvas and nothing. I scan the shore. He's nowhere along the line of water. I don't go into his tent. Sex has established this new privacy.

I wait in the breeze from the ocean, entertaining Olaf with seashells, angry at my own fidgety energy and reckless need. At least Olaf has accepted wearing the hat, and the sky was veiled with cloud when we left, although the haze has started to clear. This morning I reported to Thorvald that on the way home from the movie I had a fright. I came between a bear and her cub, I said. The only thing I could do was run. So that explained the scratches.

They are stinging now, but I try not to think about what really happened.

I tramp home to spoon chicken stew into Olaf, unpeel his dirtied diaper and wipe him clean, his small penis flopping. No tantrum today—perhaps he senses my disappointment. We play with a wooden puzzle, and he grows frustrated as he tries to force a wrong piece to fit.

Unusual for Thorvald not to be home for supper. He stays later at the camp than Charlie usually does, tinkering away with the men for company, giving me this grace of a few private hours. Too often he's been back before Olaf and I return from the tent. I'm glad that didn't happen today.

I put Olaf down to sleep with his toys propped around him, and sit in his bedroom for a while, enjoying the peace. Then I climb to the attic. The wooden cradle

lies under the eaves and I rock it. I lie down beside it, my back on the floor. There is that one small window full of blue.

Thorvald might have hiked down to the beach himself, to find me, and encountered Charlie instead. But Charlie wouldn't say anything to give me away.

My heart skips a beat when I hear the front door open.

Did I hear it? Yes, he's home. He doesn't call my name. He has grown used to returning to a quiet house. There is one floor between us. Perhaps he's in the kitchen opening the ice box, or running the sink for a glass of water. I listen to the walls shift around him.

It could be an animal, a coyote or bear—even a cougar—that has managed to nudge open the door. But there's a creak on the stairs, then another, his steps careful so he doesn't wake Olaf, if we have returned. Thorvald does not know what to expect, walking past our bedroom where I am not.

When I lift open the trap door, I find him standing in the hall, his body truncated by my view so he looks shorter than he is, his face lurching momentarily into fear when he glances up. It's only my face looking back at him. His body relaxes.

"Where were you?"

"Oh," he says, his voice weary. "One of the men was hurt bad."

My heart drops in my chest and I pull away from the trap door.

“One of the chokermen,” Thorvald says.

Not a hooker, then. Not Charlie. But Thorvald is reluctant to say who has been injured. I make a wish that it’s a new man, a recent arrival from the city, some hobo I don’t yet know, and immediately I feel guilty. Someone will know him, if I don’t, someone will call him by his real name.

“Simple,” Thorvald says.

Hurt, bad. I see Simple’s face, the stupid trusting ignorance of his eyes.

“He was sliding the choker on one log when another crashed against him. He got caught between the two of them. He went and mangled his arm.”

Thorvald tells me what happened in the way he always does when a man is injured, just the facts with the faintest suggestion that the accident could have been avoided if the man had given any thought to what he was doing. That it was Simple who was hurt makes this seem especially the case, although he’s obsessive in his work, the best of the chokermen, running the cables and the chokers with a concentration other men can’t mimic, his mental limitations giving him this rare gift of singular focus. I’ve seen him working, his tongue between his teeth, eyes only on metal and logs. No confusion then, no flailing with his arms. He follows orders.

“We took him down on the railway speeder,” Thorvald says.

The men would surround Simple on the speeder open to the air, the rails making that whining metal noise. He'd lie down. He'd look at his flaccid arm, this thing now other than his own.

"Is he alright?"

"He'll lose that arm," Thorvald says. He glances into Olaf's room as if our boy is the one who has been damaged.

"Choking is the only thing he knows how to do."

"I know," Thorvald says. "Well," he says, "well."

He looks up at my face. His fists clenching and unclenching. I start to climb down the ladder and he reaches out, as if to catch a child on a slide.

"No," I say, changing my mind. "You come here."

He climbs to join me, his big feet on the narrow rungs. His solemn face emerges, his wide shoulders, and he boosts himself through the opening, crouching then standing. Under the sloping roof he grips my back with his big hands. He takes deep breaths. His chest expands against mine and I can feel the steady thud of his heart. We haven't held each other since the doctor sliced me open.

Simple will be alright, I tell him. "It's alright," I say, "alright." I am talking into his neck, the vibration of my voice. When he kisses me, I feel life surge inside him. He presses my body hard against his, lowers me to the floor. I could reach out and touch



the cradle and for a moment I sense it rocking, but it is only our movements, my spine grinding into wood. He pauses, bracing his weight above me with both arms, asks me if it still hurts.

AAAA

I haven't heard yet which arm Simple lost. As soon as I glimpse him sitting in the centre of the logging camp, perched in a chair on the wooden sidewalk, I see that his right is gone. I've never known him to pick up a pen, not Simple. He is his name. Almost mute, guttural sounds for words. But he eats with his right. He chokes logs with his right. In its place hangs a cut-off sleeve. Blue plaid, a small flag. His whole face is covered in shaving cream and he's giggling in that childlike way I find unnerving. You'd think the missing arm was part of the joke.

The pie was Thorvald's idea. Simple always loved my pies. I don't expect it can do much good, but I filled a shell with blackberries and made an S from leftover pastry and draped it across the top and I'm holding the pie in the glass dish still warm from the oven. Thorvald has Olaf on his shoulders, legs bobbing. I reach up to touch Olaf's shoe.

"Going to lose your head next, aren't you Simple?" Snowball is the one shaving him. He runs his hands through Simple's hair.

Usually Simple will clap if he likes something one of the men says. Now he whacks his left hand on his knee.

When he notices the pie, he lurches for it, as if that side of his body could still reach me.

The rows of bunkhouses face each other, white-washed wood, blank and peeling in the heat, and they seem today to be looking at him, with their square windows, open doors. The cedars and firs surrounding the camp stand there innocent enough, tall and green and alive. I wonder where the logs went, the ones that snapped together to crush his arm. They'll soon be someone's house or maybe a table, and some man will sit down to a meal with both his hands to grip his knife and fork.

I'd have those logs pulped, if I had any say in the matter, but men don't think like me. One log's as good as the next, dollars per board feet, no matter what damage it's done.

I know the men are only humouring Simple, giving the poor fellow a bit of attention to distract him from the pain, but he looks vulnerable, sitting on his chair, a towel around his neck like a bib. The accident happened Friday and the stitches at his stump must still be aching. The pain can stretch down to the hand even though there's no hand left to feel it.

Snowball waves the razor around Simple's head, the blade glinting in the sunlight. Four chairs have been set up in a row, with four men playing barber. Two

other men are getting their chins stroked with a blade and Gravy is having his hair cut, revealing a border of skin around his new hairline that is whiter than his neck. He waves, smiles embarrassed. I don't usually come to camp on a Sunday, when the men share the morning with bars of soap. Even the air has a fresher quality than it does during the week, like they've managed to give it a wash.

Thorvald swings our son to the ground and Olaf grips my legs while he eyes the men. Snowball comes running at Olaf with the shaving cream, leans down to place a dollop on his nose. The men glance over to watch the two of them, Runaway smiling. Maybe he has a toddler of his own somewhere in the city, whether he knows it or not, an eager dirty face he'll never see.

Olaf pulls away from me and flings himself into the crowd. Olaf is safe with them, and the men are safe themselves until they start work tomorrow. But I keep him in my sights. And I catch myself looking for the gaps in their hands where their fingers used to be. One of the men, who they call Bluebeard, lost his left arm years ago, and he works as a whistle punk—a boy's job, or an old man's—beeping the long and short blasts up and down the mountain, the forest's own Morse code. I've seen the men race to the logs when they hear the orders, each code telling them what to do next. "Slack the hall back," "Go ahead slow," "Man injured" is a series of beeps all the same length. "Man dead" is one long beep.

Bluebeard is keeping clear of Simple—he's on the other side of the camp having a smoke, and I wonder if he was the one to make the signal that Simple was injured. Wouldn't the two of them make a pair? Their bodies like bookends.

A couple of the men have folded paper airplanes from newsprint and are shooting these in front of Simple's face, his eyes all agog. Snowball manages to catch one and shoot it back so that two paper airplanes career into each other in the sky and drop to the ground. Simple shouts his gargling noises, ecstatic. He leaps from his chair, clean-shaved, to collect both planes with one hand, the paper crushing in his fist.

There's this thing he does whenever it starts to storm outside. I've seen it in the cookhouse, when the branches sway and the trunks make that cracking sound and you'd think a tree would split in half, twigs and leaves and pine cones lifted and carried in the wind—he'll get more and more excited, standing at the window. The trees are waving at him. He'll grin and rock his body back and forth. Wind is the only kind of weather that will stop a logger, not rain or snow or hail, so it has a kind of power over the other men as well. They'll hush in the cookhouse and listen. They respect it, but then they'll be outside playing in it too, tossing sticks into the bustling air, letting the wind sweep a hat up to the roof. Their coats billow behind them like wings. Simple always stays indoors. He will moan and press his face to the cool surface of the glass, his mouth open.

Today the usual ruckus as the men seat themselves in the cookhouse. Thorvald and I are smack in the middle of a table, elbows all around us, Olaf squirming between

our laps. When Blue Jay walks in, his eyes turn toward me, but he won't dare say a thing. I ignore him. Something smells burnt—a few men are already complaining. But then the flunkies bring out the roast and platters full of boiled red potatoes. Soft biscuits that break apart with a sigh of steam. Piles of peas and carrots the men cover in slabs of butter. Bitter coffee that most of them slurp black but some sweeten with enough cream and sugar to leave fuzz on your teeth. Simple's potatoes roll on the plate away from his knife. We peek at him, quickly, pretending we're not doing it. He's a messy eater at the best of times, enthusiastically bobbing his head as if this were a more efficient way to reach the spoon than just lifting it to his mouth. But today he eats with more concentration. He watches the fork. He lifts his left hand and it trembles and peas drop to the plate and he tries again and they drop again, and he looks down at the disappointment. Smokey, next to him, says he can swipe those up with his biscuit. "Watch me," he says, "do like me." He shows Simple how to mash his peas into a green smear.

The men don't talk much when they eat. There will be two or three plates of food for each man to get down and the mouth can only do so much. The ones who are missing thumbs hold the fork with four fingers and shovel.

I was here the day Step-and-a-Half mangled his leg but that was the middle of the week, a Wednesday, three days in and another three days before a rest, so the men didn't stop to mark the occasion. They just changed his nickname from whatever

it had been before and they left him to recover and got up the next day and did the same work. Now I don't even know what he used to be called.

There's grit in this meat. It chews like sand, but at least the flavour's good. At the beginning of the summer the flunkies made the mistake of treating the wood in the freezer with creosote. The ham and the beef took the scent and the men had to eat it anyway, no point letting it go to waste.

I remember sitting here with my belly pushing up against the table when I was pregnant with the second child. The men got a kick out of balancing a biscuit on the bump, like I was the table. They gave me names for the baby—*Silver*, that was one of them, a name you'd give a horse.

Thorvald and I could never decide. We thought we'd wait. Sometimes I wonder if a name would have sutured the child to this world.

An accident is what Thorvald reported this week, when he came to me with the news about Simple. But these accidents just seem to be included with the work. No one gets paid for a lost limb, and what could it be worth?

When Cook appears with the pie, it's got candles on top and he brings it right to Simple. "Hap Hap," Simple sputters, and some of the men begin singing "Happy Birthday," though their heart isn't in it. Their voices trail off. None of us knows Simple's real birthday and I doubt he's ever had a celebration.

He'll work in the kitchen, I suppose, from now on. He'll carry plates or push a broom. I'm not sure how much use he'll be to Cook, but he's got nowhere else to go. He's been here since he was a boy and I've never heard of a mother or a father who'd ask after him. He stays behind when the men go to the city to visit the prostitutes. The men give him their girly magazines and he gets as rattled with those pictures as any man with the real thing.

He's looking at me timidly now, not with that hungry bug-eyed gaze of his. He ran away, that day I stumbled to the ground. Hid himself somewhere. Ashamed I hope, after the way he flapped and leered at me, grabbing my swollen breasts. I doubt he understands I lost the baby or remembers that he was the one who caused me to fall. But that was an accident too.

The men didn't comment when I finally returned to the camp with my belly gone. I guess it's just as well.

After lunch the men lope back to their bunkhouses for a nap. Thorvald corrals Olaf and we walk the logging road that smells of tar. We lean over and pluck rocks for Olaf to toss into the bush.

I tell Thorvald it feels good to get away from the camp. He takes my hand. His palm is calloused and warm.

There's a pond up the mountain where I can wash Olaf and change him and we hike toward it, lifting our faces to the cooling air. The ground is tangled with roots and the tree branches don't want to let us pass, but we push through. A haze of mosquitoes veils the surface of the water. I smack one on Olaf's little ham legs and he looks at me surprised and starts to cry.

At the far end, a lone bear sniffs a beaver lodge. The bear fumbles on one of the fallen trees and ambles back into the woods. We take off our socks and shoes and let the water circle our ankles. I've already pared away Olaf's clothing and I pull him through the water, letting his legs float. Thorvald slips out of his trousers, yanks off his shirt, tosses them to the shore, stands in his underwear and then he thumbs these off too. With his eyes in the distance, still shy in front of me, he sinks to his waist and cups water to his chest and over his head. The muscles moving under his skin.

The warm pond smells of mud. I undress, crossing my arms over my belly, and wade forward. It's only a few feet deep but I can't see the bottom, the silt soft in my toes, weeds reaching up to snag my shins. A possum noses past me and then dives below.

Thorvald lifts Olaf from the pond and tosses him into the sky. Olaf's compact body splashes the water in a white explosion. Thorvald reaches for him under the surface and brings the boy's sputtering face back to the air. Olaf is elated. His watery eyes blink on the safe edge of danger. He climbs back onto Thorvald so they can play this game again.



The sun is starting to slant much earlier than it did just a few weeks ago and there's that yellow tired haze in the air to let you know that summer is turning the corner to fall. The days are beginning to shrink.

We wade to the shore and collect our clothes and I think of how my brothers used piles of their shirts for goalposts or finish lines. I'm glad to button my blouse over my slackened skin. I used to have a stomach on me like a man. I pin a fresh diaper on Olaf, let him waddle unclothed for a bit before I force his stubborn head through the opening of his t-shirt. Thorvald slides a round plum from his pocket and offers it to me.

I would have chewed the baby's food, as I did for Olaf, passing a sweet paste from my mouth to hers. But she'd be an infant now, a small bundle so light to carry, all she'd need would be my breast. I'd be enough.

I try to hold Olaf, tangling my arms through his. He wriggles away and pedals his legs to the water. Thorvald runs after him, tugs him back. He rests on Thorvald's chest and we rest in the sun, Thorvald sighing, relishing the chance to stretch his giant body out on the ground.

When we walk back, our shadows stretch behind us. Olaf dawdling, picking up rocks. On the right side of the trail there's an abandoned steam donkey, an old one, the kind with a metal roof like a tin hat. It's all rusted now, defeated, a monster left in the midst of the trees. Olaf pats it eagerly and great chips of metal come off in his hands and he holds up his palms to me like they are hurt and I tell him he's fine.

*Tree*, we point to Olaf as we walk, hoping he'll echo us. Sky, bee, bird—we name each one. His tongue struggles with the words he is coming to recognize. The things in these woods, large and small, are emerging for him newly colourful and distinct. He discovers a parade of ants and squats on the trail and we keep walking, patiently. “Ma-ma,” he shouts, and scrambles to grip my hand. Here’s my little boy, calling me.

I’ll never hear those sounds from the other child. I won’t become that name to her.

We reach the camp, the men already shuffling into the cookhouse. Clatter of plates, the wooden benches scraping across the floor. Supper is lunch’s roast beef served cold with hot gravy, and a side of yesterday’s greasy chicken, and pans full of fresh scalloped potatoes that the men fight over, scraping greedily at the browned cheese on top. Poker gives Simple a wind-up toy, a red-coated soldier with a little drum. He must have brought it back from the Christmas trip to the city. He has to wind it up for him, and looks flustered, as if he hadn’t thought that far. Now he’s going to have to keep doing it for him until Simple learns how to work it with one hand. The toy rattles its way down the middle of the table and butts into a plate and still it tries to move, drumming. A rattling sound against the plate you can feel in your teeth. Above our heads, millers flap at the light bulb with the same tinny belligerence.

Outside the light stretches grey. It can’t be past seven. The men tell Thorvald and me to stay in the camp until dark and now the evening has the feel of a secret,

whatever they are planning for Simple. They scratch matches to light their roll-your-owns and the smoke fingers its way to the ceiling. Snowball passes me one that he's rolled fat with extra tobacco and I take it and inhale the heady scent and stand up to flick the ashes on his bald head. When he realizes what I'm doing, he makes a lunge for me, but I skirt away, laughing.

Through the steamed window I catch a glimpse of Charlie—a flash of his black hair as he disappears into a group of fallers who have sauntered outdoors. My heart starts its familiar purr.

Someone props open the cookhouse door to the porch so the smoke leaks through it and we follow its path, standing in our boots on the wooden slats that sway a bit under our weight. A couple of the men bounce on one of the slats until it snaps. "You'll have to fix that yourself," yells the bullcook. I yank Olaf away from the damage. I scan the crowd for Charlie and just when I've given up, I hear a few of the men shout his name. There is a roar like you'd hear when someone scores a goal. I can't see what they are cheering. Charlie removes the bandana knotted around his neck.

Then his eyes catch mine. His rakish grin, quick as a wink.

He walks with music in his step, and even the men flock around him. He's got some plan they want to hear. One of the greenhorns whose name I don't know is holding something wrapped in newsprint. Maybe a chicken to be roasted in the fire—I can smell wood smoke, and hear the crackle of flames. They must have lit a bonfire behind the cookhouse.

Or maybe the newsprint wraps a gift for Simple. Charlie ties his bandana around it, like a red ribbon. But Simple's staying away from the crowd. He's leaning against the cookhouse. He has to be nudged forward.

Olaf makes a run for Charlie, who hides behind a wooden chair and Olaf is delighted to find him, patting his legs. I glance over at Thorvald. He's just watching this entertainment with that contented gaze he gets after a good meal. Still, when Charlie lifts Olaf and plants him on his shoulders, I fear he looks too comfortable with the boy, or that Olaf looks too comfortable with him.

I've got the roll-your-own in my hand and I take another drag, calm and cocky as if I have nothing to hide.

It's Gravy who looks over at me, just a second too long, as Charlie walks Olaf back to Thorvald. I glance away, my heart thumping, grateful there's not another woman around these parts, someone ready to make a story out of what she sees tonight. An affair, but that's a word for the city, where ladies wear lipstick and gentlemen polish their shoes.

We always meet outside, when I wander down to his tent on the beach, Olaf in tow if I haven't managed to slip away on my own. Charlie appeared in camp just this summer. And I wouldn't have known him, not like that, if I hadn't lost the child. But that's a bargain I didn't make.

He never saw me when I was pregnant. Only the scar, his tongue along the numbed skin.

“You coming to the fire, Twig?” Charlie calls me *Twig* like the other men do, like he never does when we are alone.

Thorvald and I are in the crowd stepping over rocks and weeds to reach the lump of earth behind the cookhouse. The bonfire is on the other side, away from the buildings, deep in a crevice. We stand on higher ground and peer down to the smoking flames that roll on top of each other. Shadows flicker across the men’s glowing faces.

At least this is a fire they can control, not like the forest fire. But it’s already so large, taller than the men. Even from here the heat works its way through the leather of my boots. Sweat running between my breasts. Someone sends a cap flying and it drops into the fire. Above us the sky is purple and bits of flaming ash float and vanish. Gravy has salvaged a couple of paper airplanes and he sends them in a nose dive, flames leaping up to lick the newsprint. Snowball asks me if it’s hot enough yet. “It’s plenty hot,” I shout. He shakes his head. Says we need to give it some more wood. The cedar cords pop and crackle and spray orange specks onto the men’s hair and shirts, and the men do a little dance to clap them away.

Simple has joined us. Snowball reaches his arm around his shoulder, and Simple makes a distressed noise, a kind of squeaking in his throat. He knows enough not to reach out to the fire. Charlie walks up to shake his hand, offering his left, like Simple. A couple of loggers follow him, one of the chasers, a choker. Then the fallers

start. All reaching across to shake Simple's hand with their left. A row forms and it seems they are congratulating Simple, rather than giving him their condolences. They pump his hand up and down. Simple loves this game. He starts again at the top of the row. And that's when I realize what is wrapped in the newsprint and tied with Charlie's bandana. It's Simple's arm. The men are going to burn it.

Someone passes it to Gravy, who braces it the way you would a child.

Olaf is crawling around the men's boots and I'm suddenly aware I've got nothing to hold. I catch Charlie gazing at me and feel for a moment he can read my thoughts.

I've never witnessed a burial for the men out here, certainly no cremation. I've never even heard the men talk about a funeral. The coffins get shipped to the city and that's the end of it. Thorvald put our baby in a wooden box large enough for a loaf of bread and he sunk it into the earth on the other side of the creek and he walked back to our house empty-handed. I don't call it a grave, not out loud. We had no ceremony. But here they are going to burn this arm and I don't know if the ritual is for Simple's benefit or for theirs.

Gravy sets down his parcel. He toes the arm into the flames with his boot. A few of the men take off their hats. Simple isn't wearing one, and I'm not sure he grasps what is happening. The newspaper catches first, arcing up in an angry flame. The bandana spits and coils and before we get a chance to see what lies underneath, Whisker gives the arm a shove with a long stick. We watch the arm that is burning now

as the men's voices murmur and then grow quiet. Simple is silent too and I think he knows.

I gag at a smell like singed air, but I can't step away. Even Olaf is standing now, perfectly still, mesmerized by the fire. Charlie is on the other side, invisible through the flames. My hand finds Thorvald's. A few of the men at the back of the crowd start singing in their gruff voices, the lyrics in French, and I'm glad I can't trace the words so all I can do is stand here and feel the sad foreign rhythms rise up inside me and then fall.

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## Appendices



## Note on Appendices

I originally envisioned *Hook Tender* to be one book composed of three perspectives—Eva’s, her son Olaf’s, and that of a choral voice representing the collective consciousness of the loggers. The main body of the work would take place in the 1940s, beginning with Charlie’s accidental death, and with an extended flashback to the 1930s when Eva first becomes romantically involved with Charlie after losing a child to stillbirth. But as you can see in the excerpt I’ve enclosed for the thesis, Eva’s story became quite substantial on its own. At sixty-thousand words I have recounted one half of it—Charlie has yet to be killed, in this version, and we have yet to explore the causes and consequences of this loss.

So as I was completing the PhD, I realized that I was already thick inside what appears to be a trilogy. *Hook Tender*, the first work in the series, will be entirely from Eva’s perspective. Olaf’s own story will be told in a separate novel. And the loggers will get their full say in a story collection that shifts between the choral voice and tales of individual men. Because my vision for this trilogy is fairly new, and because I expect plans for publication might arise in the viva, I’ve included a project synopsis—which still imagines the work as one entire—and several excerpts from the other voices that I’ve developed.

Early versions of some of these works—“The Chorus,” “Desolation Sound,” “Tin Men,” and “Surge”—appeared in my MFA thesis at Columbia University. I include

them here to give you a sense of the direction of the larger project and because I reference them in my introduction to the thesis.

“The Chorus” was produced for the CBC (Canadian Broadcasting Corporation) and appeared in *enRoute Magazine*, as well as the anthologies *The Mind’s Eye*, *Grandmother, Girl, Wolf, and Other Stories* and *The Robert Olen Butler Prize Stories 2008*. “Tin Men” appeared in *Short Fiction*, “Logging Camp B” in *Indiana Review*; “The Moon, The Cat, and the Donkey” was produced for the BBC and appeared in *West Coast Line*, and the pieces collected as “Morning is Vertical” were included together in the CVC *Short Fiction Anthology—Book Four* and in the journal *Exile: The Literary Quarterly*. Finally, “Surge” was produced for the BBC and appeared in *The Iowa Review*, the anthologies *The Robert Olen Butler Prize Stories 2009* and *The BBC National Short Story Award 2008*, and was excerpted in *Rock, Paper, Fire: The Best of Wilderness and Mountain Writing*.

## Appendix One

### Hook Tender — Synopsis of Novel as Originally Conceived

My novel's title, *Hook Tender*, refers to a key job in the logging industry and suggests both tenderness and violence. The story follows immigrant workers through one year, 1944 to 1945, in a logging camp on British Columbia's mountainous West Coast. The opening scene depicts the violent death of a logger—Charlie, an Inuit man who works as a hook tender and yet is not truly considered part of the camp community—and the story explores both the troubling effects of his death and the hidden circumstances behind it. The plot moves in two directions: forward, through the year following his death and backward through the memories of the characters as they piece together what happened. In this way, the novel dramatizes the complexities of individual betrayal and shared guilt. The death was an accident, not a murder, yet the strands of cause and effect are complicated: the intertwining drama of chance, environment and politics reveals how personal responsibility can transcend conscious intent.

Structured like a mosaic, the book will include self-contained stories, vignettes, photographs, fragments. The tension builds as we shift between three points-of-view: the first-person perspective of Eva, who is the sole woman living in the camp; the third-person perspective of her son, Olaf, who acts as a go-between for his mother and his

deaf sister; and the first-person choral voice of the community of loggers. Charlie is at the centre of the narrative—we watch his secret love affair with Eva; learn of his home in Arctic Canada; witness his sharing of the traditional games, songs and stories; and discover the tensions and tragedies that led him to leave the Arctic for an immigrant logging camp—yet we never directly hear his voice. Instead readers encounter his stories only through the other characters’ memories—and so become complicit in his creation.

### Synopses of the Three Perspectives

#### Eva

As the story reveals Eva’s reaction to Charlie’s death, the narrative shifts back a decade to explore the taut and secret intimacy these two characters forged across cultures. Eva gives Charlie an insight into her struggles as a woman, and he in turn shares his understanding of the colonial experiences of his Inuvialuit community in the North and the Native peoples on the West Coast, including forced relocation and abduction of children.

Yet Charlie is a trickster figure, always eliding the intimacy he seems to create. His charged banter with Eva subverts historical tensions and reveals the characters’ shared wit, love of irony, delight in performance—while readers are left waiting for the next slight of hand.

When Charlie leaves for the Arctic, he returns with his Inuit wife and young son. Eva had been unaware he had a family of his own. Although she and Charlie do not reinitiate their romance, they forge a friendship that they keep hidden over the years. When he dies, Eva visits his widow who returns Eva's letters, claiming he never read them because he was illiterate. This statement forces Eva to re-evaluate a pivotal exchange with Charlie, which she now fears she misconstrued. In the end, how readers come to understand Eva's bond with Charlie—and therefore the plot of the novel—will depend on whether or not they believe he knew how to read

As Eva tries to reconcile with this indeterminacy and the chain of events that led to his death, she is forced to grapple with the damaging effect of her own romanticized vision of Charlie. Under these conflicting pressures and faced with an isolating, illegitimate grief, her mental health begins to deteriorate in terrifying ways. Newspapers and radios report the liberation of the concentration camps in Europe: Eva begins to fear that similar atrocities are taking place against the Native peoples of her surrounding community. There is no evidence of equivalent horrors. Yet the novel is haunted by the factual absence of the Japanese families who have been removed to internment camps in Vancouver—Eva's son and daughter play in the abandoned houses; the loggers scavenge abandoned boats. The novel is haunted too by the absence of First Nation children, all of whom have been forcibly removed from their families and re-educated in residential 'schools' where they are beaten if they speak their own nation's tongues. So while Eva's specific apprehensions are delusional, they do communicate a disturbing insight. People have gone missing on the BC coast. Her

fears escalate into visual hallucinations—a trauma-induced psychosis that paradoxically communicates what Eva could not otherwise speak.

## Olaf

When Eva's son Olaf turns twelve he becomes a whistle punk, a job in the logging industry that requires translating signals between one site of the mountain and another, using a language of short and long beeps similar to Morse code. He is also a translator in a larger sense—a link to the hearing world for his sister, with whom he creates a private sign language, and a go-between for his mother as her madness intensifies her isolation. Olaf's role becomes increasingly complicated as he begins to piece together his mother's involvement with Charlie and the events that led to his death. The mystery of this boy's psychological life is expressed through his varied adventures—he climbs a three-hundred foot surge tank; he finds an abandoned house; he explores an anchored warship—and through his rivalry with Charlie's son, whose reckless physicality is a foil to Olaf's more anxious and obsessive nature. Childhood conflicts reveal Olaf's emerging comprehension of adult crimes. *Hook Tender* concludes with Olaf's perspective: this boy's unusual connections to his community enable him to forge a new and difficult hope.

## Chorus

The Eva and Olaf sections are interrupted and interpreted by a choral voice that represents the loggers. As in a Classic Greek drama, this first-person plural narrator knows things that any individual or even group consciousness would not be able to grasp. While never stated explicitly, the ‘rule’ of the novel is that this choral voice can travel wherever the timber itself has reached—from a Canadian mill town to an Arctic settlement to a London barrack. The voice originates in the landscape and culture of high-lead logging as it was practiced in BC through the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a craft whose rituals and vocabulary are now unfamiliar to most. The men who came to the logging camps were primarily immigrants from Scandinavia, and they brought their myths and songs and the rhythm of their mother tongues. The language of logging is reminiscent of Anglo-Saxon kennings, yet possesses its own jagged and ribald poetry. Readers will be immersed in an unfamiliar and vivid vocabulary: *steam donkey, whistle punk, skyline, spar tree, nurse stump, widow maker, hook tender, bull cook, misery whip, cunt splice*. What arises is a tale told by loggers to a logger, from the ‘we’ of the logging camp to the ‘you’ of Charlie, the Inuit hook tender whose voice we never hear. Slowly the members of the community begin to understand how their perspective had elided Charlie’s own, and the tragic effect of this elision.

While the plot of *Hook Tender* is fictional, the atmosphere and circumstances of the story were inspired by two years of research in British Columbia— archival work and numerous interviews with retired loggers up and down the coast, including my

father, grandfather, and members of my extended family. The logging camps were isolated, yet they were directly affected by the political climate. Trees from these camps were used to build London barracks and Canadian Mosquito Bombers. Wood was shipped above Canada's tree-line to build homes in new colonial settlements in the Arctic. Pulp from the mill was pressed into the Canadian and US papers that changed how contemporary politics and national identity were understood. Coastal logging played a pivotal role in the Second World War, and the war in turn transformed the industry: the power saw was developed as part of the German war effort and first arrived on BC's coast in the mid-1940's. The first saw, christened "the Hitler," harbingered a radical change in the culture of the forest: hand logging—and with it the rituals and the poetic language shared among immigrants—quickly became obsolete. The men were exiled from the work that was their home. *Hook Tender* explores the complexity of one community's mourning—for a person, a time, and a trade.



## Appendix Two

### Excerpts from the Choral Voice

#### The Chorus

#### Original opening of *Hook Tender*

The sky was bending toward the mountain. June storms steal light and come on fast. A couple of men choked the last logs, and the rest of the hooking crew hurried with the rigging to get out of the clear cut before the thunder. When the rain started, it fell sharp as hail. Small rivers streaked down our faces. Water sucked cotton shirts to skin. Other than a few saplings, the left side of the ridge was plucked bare, and now water was sheeting the dirt. We were done for the day.

What you did, what we're sure you must have done, was flip the safety rap back too soon. The cable had been pulled taut from the bottom of the mountain to the top, the eye splice wrapped around a stump to keep the cable from snapping loose and pulling back downhill. And suddenly the eye was free. It whipped around in a circle thirty feet wide, a whirl of metal, jaggars sticking out of the cable, and it caught your body in its arc.

Charlie. We heard no scream, just the crack of the line across your chest, then the snap and crash of branches. By the time we turned to look, you were gone.

We dropped our tools. The skyline finally rested. It had dragged you three hundred feet. We'd heard the roots and stumps tearing through your body. We found your right leg spiked in the dirt as if someone had planted it there, the thigh bone split and sticking through the skin. Rain was already pooling in the gouge. Thorvald pulled the leg out of the dirt. The foot dragged like it was trying to walk. A hundred feet downhill we found your head still attached to your chest. Your face had been scratched off, the bones smashed into a fine spray so we couldn't tell the white from the red.

"Wife won't know him."

"No."

^ ^ ^ ^

The foreman pulled out his notebook. Tight black letters inside the columns: job, date, location. Then he handed over the pen so we could sign off that we'd identified the body. *Charlie* was no name for an Eskimo, but we'd never asked about that. You'd been a hook tender twenty years.

June 28th, 1944. We all signed.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

The logging camp was bright, or at least the cookhouse was bright, even at this hour, three a.m. The generator hummed steady against the encroaching evergreens. An oil lamp on the cookhouse porch cast a pale glow. The cook was up, the bullcook was up, slicing, sweeping. Rain spat mud on the stairs faster than the bullcook could sweep it away. Rain soaked the network of wooden sidewalks that ran through the centre of the camp and branched off to link each building to the next. Together the buildings formed a horseshoe: cookhouse at one end, and bunkhouses running down in two long lines. Each building was a cedar rectangle with a low pointed roof — plank walls thrown up in a day — and small windows covered inside by drying shirts.

The commissary was off to the left, behind the cookhouse. It was dark yet, shelves glinting in half-light, packed with toothpaste, shaving cream, tobacco tins. First aid supplies were crammed in the corner, a desk in the back for the timekeeper. He was still asleep, curled in a metal cot beside the foreman's, dreaming he was anywhere but here. Holding him in bed were the red, yellow and green stripes of Hudson Bay blankets. He'd bought the white sheets himself. And the throw rug on the floor, a stack of Western novels tidy against the whitewashed walls. Drops of rain spattered the beer bottles that lined the sidewalk by the cookhouse. In the bunkhouses the wooden bunks ran end to end with heads full of lice. We slept two or three to a bed, on

mattresses flattened and mottled with stains. We used our arms for pillows. Mattress buttons dug into our backs.

Tonight, those of us who found you, Charlie, were lying with our eyes on the rafters, head cradled in hands, or we curled on our side to watch the rise and fall of the next man's shoulder. It felt good, the warmth of a bunkmate's body. Breathe in, breathe out. Through the bunkhouse walls the rain released the wet pink scent of cedar.

^ ^ ^ ^

The next morning the skyline still lay on the ground. We walked over it the way children avoid cracks in the sidewalk. Soon the steam donkey would drag it down the hill, a thousand feet of steel cable, and we'd be done with it. We'd be able to walk away from this quarter, the logs gone. But the guylines and the strawlines were still rigged taut. We'd need to release those before we could get out of here, and that would be a good hour's work. Thorvald would sub for you. A new man would arrive in a week. A hook tender was never hard to replace.

The skyline we didn't want to touch. Not that we feared it. The line couldn't hurt a man now that it wasn't rigged tight from the stump to the spar. It lay on the ground lazy as a snake that's eaten its kill.

We've all held a man's photograph after he's gone, sad to see his smile that we'd never see again, or the way the scar on his brow sat like an umbrella for his eye. We've run our fingers along his cold forehead like we never did when he was alive. And we've touched their shirts like we touched yours, we've packed shirts and canvas pants and woollen socks and thought of the days and nights that wore them, good shoes, the shoes we never saw in the camp, shoes for walking on city streets, with city girls. What man can say he hasn't held those things? But this was different. This was no letter we found in a pocket and thought we shouldn't read.

Your body was still here though we'd done our best to remove it, bits of your skin and blood caught on the cragged rocks and stumps. A strand of hair like grass. The sun dried your blood until it turned to dirt, until the rains came down to make your blood run again.

We wanted to leave this hill. Enough of the fallen trees and the fresh stumps, enough of our caulk boots poking wet earth. Leave this hill alone and let the skyline rest.

AAAA

Spruce stretched two hundred feet high and eighteen feet thick, the hill was dark with branches and underbrush we had to fight back to reach the next quarter, no

space now to be thinking about a logger who wasn't here. It was Thorvald's job to rig the spar tree. His rope belt circled the tree, the Douglas fir soaring straight into a sky that was blank except for a long belt of cloud. We stepped safe away and watched him lean back against the rope, watched him ram his spurs into the wood and limb the tree on his way up, sawing off the branches so they fell and crashed, the sound of them cracking as he walked to the top.

^ ^ ^ ^

You were dead eighteen hours. We were back at work.

^ ^ ^ ^

No priest for the funeral, no write-up in the *Powell River Dispatch*, no mothers from the mill town making pies for the widow. You were an Eskimo and a logger. When you were alive you rode with the Indians in the listing heat of the ship's boiler room while we sat above and played cards. You sat with the Indians in the balcony in our mill town's proud theatre— *first cinema in the Dominion!* —where we went on special occasions to watch Indians be killed. But you died in pieces and so your eulogy would

come in pieces, in the torn bits of belief and conjecture blown from camp C to camp B to camp D, floating like burnt paper in the dark.

^ ^ ^ ^

We were not religious men. The only bibles we encountered were tucked in the night tables of Vancouver hotel rooms, small black witnesses to the white skin of women we paid. Each month we returned prodigal to these Doug Firs that dwarfed sin. What God was here? There was no watching presence in this thick green grave. When a man fell, the trees did not mourn.

We would bury you on Monday. Today was Sunday, day of haircuts. Day of moonshine and poker and rubbing our yellow-stained shirts against soap-slick rocks in the creek. Day when men crouched in their bunks to write letters — those of us who could write and who still had a lady somewhere who remembered our real names. We licked the envelopes and imagined our tongues in other places. We never wrote of the men who died or how their blood made us fear for our own crushable flesh.

Dawn came without you. Breakfast and lunch came without you. We were used to walking the camp on the days following a death, when a logger had been struck down by a branch or snapped in two by a rolling trunk. We were used to seeing him, the faller or buckler or boom-man, or thinking we saw him, sitting in his bunk or his

chair in the cookhouse as if his body wanted its damn Sunday after its last week of work. The mind does not let go of the shapes it expects to find, so we knew that these bodies we saw were not ghosts or restless souls but our own hopeful vision, the way the brim of a hat holds the head more noticeably after the hat has fallen off.

Slack-jawed, sand-eyed, we drank our coffee. There's a sharpness to the air when a man hasn't slept the night or has slept it poorly, nerves electric on his skin — his mind slows while his legs get ready to run. In the brittle light we startled at the blue jays darting our hands as we reached for a smoke, jumped at the clang of pots and pans in the cookhouse, pulled away from the raw stringent stink of ammonia poured into buckets to wipe the floor clean. Even if we snuck back into the bunkhouse after breakfast for a Sunday nap, you would not let us sleep.

"I'm dead tired," Jackpot said. Heads heavy we leaned forward to feel the razor carve away this week's hair. The soap woke us. We sat on wooden chairs on the wooden sidewalk, the chair legs tilting uneven so that we had to brace ourselves to keep our necks steady against the blade. There was no barber, just our bunkmates. We slumped in chairs, offered our necks. Four men sitting and four men cutting, reciprocal trust. Thumbs rough on the red tender skin. The hair fell into the sidewalk cracks. Then we stood up, sheep-shorn, our necks still wreathed in soap. We shook our bristled heads, new to the morning, and switched places.

Under our feet were the rolling papers that got caught in the same storm you did. They were still wet, torn by our boots and by the chair legs we tried to keep from



wobbling back and forth. We could see through the paper to the wood of the sidewalk. If we picked it up, the soggy mass would disintegrate in our hands.

A bear walked through the camp, the bottom of his coat matted with dried mud. He was just a black bear, already fat on the spring's berries. Uninterested in us. We stood beside our wooden chairs and let him pass. The musky warm breath of bear. He sniffed the door of the cookhouse, sniffed a beer bottle left on the porch. Then he sniffed the bunkhouse windows, pawing the glass, and we knew it was our rank undershirts he wanted, the smell like the stench of his fur. He moved along. His shoulders rolled as he lumbered close to the ground. And this seemed a less vulnerable way to walk, using both the front legs and the back, not standing like one of us on two caulk boots as if we needed the sharp pegs in our soles just to keep us nailed upright, our heads high, bodies waiting for a tree to strike us down.

^ ^ ^ ^ ^

Charlie, on the job you spoke only when something was wrong — *Tight the line!*  
*Slack the sky!* — and so we remembered that you had yelled out, when you died. As

the skyline dragged you downhill, we thought we heard you shout your last command.  
But that was just the skyline. It was the line that screamed.

You borrowed nothing. Drove up to camp with your own boots, your own axe,  
your own Swedish fiddle. Your death slipped through the camp without debt. The  
foreman ticked off your name in a book, wrote the balance of the upcoming paycheck  
out to your widow, and no one was sent to circle through the cookhouse calling out  
what you owed the company store.

AAAA

In the days after your death, it was our own bodies we feared. Scar tissue does  
not move as easily as the skin surrounding it. Thirst could wake us in the dark to our  
own stinking parched breath. We wanted to escape this flesh that needs to be washed  
and watered and fed. We hated the fragile openings of the eyes, the joints that ached  
in our boots, rubbing blistered against the leather to let us know that this tough skin  
we needed for our protection was not our own. Repelled by our own smell, we  
escaped the bunkhouse only to be caught by the reek of piss, creosote, old beer. We  
sat down in the cookhouse where the slab of meat on our plate was too raw. The cook  
dropped a sack of sugar heavy as a man's chest.

Alive, we touched our leather suspenders, our plates, the rough edge of a cookhouse bench, all the solid objects that told us we had not been torn to bits. We chewed tobacco and hucked the black splats on the sidewalks and when it was our turn on Sunday again we tipped back on our wooden chairs to feel the fresh coolness of our hair being cut. The chairs creaking under human weight.

Then we took a second sandwich, more tobacco, another nap so we could fall dumb into sleep that tempted us with the sweaty grunting rutting we wanted most of all. Against death we wanted a woman's skin to suck and rub and enter. We reached for her, and the dirty sheets caught the rush of our juice.

AAAA

## The Moon, the Cat, and the Donkey

### Self-Contained Excerpt from the Choral Voice

We call him Moon and Eight Ball and Pinball, his head so bald and shining that no name will stick.

He came to the BC coast with plans to make enough money to buy a house, the hardest working chokerman this camp ever saw.

The other loggers marvel at how much his head sweats when he works. His baldness sticks out of his blanket when he sleeps and we take a bit of charcoal to decorate it with a smiling face. When the steam donkey rolls over to crush him, all that escapes is his bald head and it is screaming. Moon's body is under the machine. Cradled by a hollowed rock, he lies in this natural grave deep enough to keep him from dying but not deep enough to keep him alive.

The donkey is three tons of metal pressing on his lungs. Together not a hundred men could lift it. We are twelve men; we are fifty-six total in the camp; we are an hour away from the closest bulldozer, the bright yellow Caterpillar that works the seaside boom. We wire for the Cat.

Moon moans and calls out for help as if he trusted that we could.

"Off me, " he says, "off me."

Please he cries in a voice smaller than a child's. He knows just as well as we do that our bodies would be as useless as sticks.

We try to help. Three men walk toward the donkey to press their hands to its hot black weight. They shove and swear and stop and tell Moon he is alright, he is alright, and then they start again with the strained apathy of a man running for a streetcar he knows he has missed.

"The Cat is coming. She's on her way"

We keep making promises about that damned bulldozer although we know she'll never make it before the donkey has pressed the air from his chest. There is nothing left to do but stand beside him and listen to him breathe.

He'll last a good half hour.

Moon of double plates of roast beef, Moon of card tricks, Moon of harmonica, Moon of farts.

Moon the chokerman.

Each of us is one-hundred and fifty to two-hundred and fifty pounds. Twelve men together with no use.

We wait.

We stand with our hats off like we would stand at a funeral.

Time presses on Moon's chest. The donkey sinks its weight slowly the way the season shrinks to winter, the day narrowing as the sky inches closer to the earth, and we can no more light the donkey than we could fight the growing dark.

Even after he stops breathing, we wait, standing around him, still dumb as sticks. Holding our hats we look at the hat fallen off his bald head, the way it lands upside down to collect rain or money or blood.

We blame the damned machine, we blame the woods, we blame Mac-Blo and all its dirty bloody cash that tempts us to this hill, but it is time itself that kills him. The slow weight of the donkey needs time to press the air from his lungs and the Cat's yellow optimism needs time to reach us. If we could toe a boot into time—that miserable cog of minutes—to stop it from rolling, rolling, if we could blink to freeze the frame just as a photograph stops a man mid-smile, mid-breath, holding him alive with his axe or his saw, if we had anything stronger than a man's power against time we could have kept the air in Moon's lungs.

Morning is Vertical

Self-Contained Excerpt from the Choral Voice

## Desolation Sound

There is no horizon in the woods. Morning is vertical. The sun does not rise or set but is a jagged flicker between trees. It shoots through cedars and firs two hundred feet tall, wide branches shattering the light until it smashes on the forest floor.

Night. Day. Yellow specks, the ground still dark between them.

If a man saw the dawn he could say it was spraying like a waterfall, he could say the branches cut teeth into it like the sharp edge of a Swedish fiddle, he could say it opens like a woman's fan, a narrow tip, the light rippling wide. Sun spends itself and still it cannot flood the green. Sword ferns curl in shadow. The trees are five hundred years old. The trees are one thousand years old. The trees are thick dark columns that remain dark. And time too is vertical, not rolling slowly forward on a path but branching up, rooting down. Black fat beetles tunnel eyeless under damp rocks and the flies wake, their blue-bottle eyes prehistoric.

Sitka spruce, western hemlock, western red cedar, Douglas fir—*Doug fir* we call it as if the tree were not large enough to kill us in its fall. Now dark moss hangs thick from its branches in great sheets that turn the air blue-green. Now pale moss hangs spindly and thin and fades to white. We call it Old Man's Beard, and we tug it off the bark and throw it over our heads and stomp through the forest veiling it behind us.

But the trees are not men; the trees are the trees and their trunks will grow for another five hundred years, one thousand years, each tree swelling wide enough to hold a coffin and shrink any man's death.



There is Tin Hat Mountain. It is not yet old. Unnecessary Mountain is not yet old. There is time buckling in the coastal forest, land butting up from the ocean long ago when sea plates crashed the shore, centuries unburied into this one. Rock meets rock and lifts, the way water forms waves under pressure. The mountains are fierce rough carvings, uneven and unfinished; these are not the volcanic spheres of Mount Ranier or Mount Shasta, their angelic symmetry peeking through clouds; these are not the soft scrubbed hills of Eastern Canada that a man can walk right over; these coastal mountains are ancient oceans folding up ten thousand feet to scrape the sky, peaks born anew in the haphazard violence of the West.

Before us came the glaciers cutting fresh scars into rock then retreating without softening these hills that are too steep to let anything rest. Long before us this old land had been folded and scraped new by the land's own force and now it attracts new men, immigrants from Iceland and Sweden and Norway, from Hungary and Wales, all of us from the Old World arriving as rough and unfinished as the land we've come to shape.

We came in waves as the glaciers came in waves, sweeping over this forest to tear it down.

*British Columbia.* There was nothing British about it.

We felled the spruce and the fir and the cedar and still we could not see the sun. We built a paper mill; we built a dam; we built a surge tank.

The surge tank is three hundred feet high, holding water to release pressure from the dam, a rush of water tumbling in a funnel down the mountain until it reaches

the tank where it cannot join the ocean, cannot reach that final vast release, and so the speed of the water can force it only up, up.

There is Suicide Cliff. There is Desolation Sound. We are not in the flat wide middle of this country; we are pressed to its edge.

AAAA

### Crummy

The crummy is a flatbed truck, open-backed, with sides built from slats of cedar, a roof of corrugated steel. As the truck balances around the steep curves of the mountain road on a morning like this—dark, another hour yet before sunlight—it rumbles hollow although we are packed man-to-man inside. We sit on four cedar benches, one bench against each side and two together running down the middle, ten loggers to a bench—the lucky ones leaning against the shaking walls, the unlucky sitting in the middle, back to back, nodding off to snooze with only another man’s spine for support. The worst spot is next to the open end of the crummy where the air swirls with dust and exhaust. The seat next to the driver is prime territory, especially in winter, but even in summer it is prized for its leather cushion and its windows that keep out the weather and the dust. That seat is reserved for the high rigger, sometimes a hooker or a faller, never one of the chokers, chasers or buckers or any of

the young men who do not have the skill of the old ones. They know their place is here in the back of the truck.

This week we did not need the hazard stick to tell us we would be on early shift. We could feel it in the dryness of the air, static crackle of pinecones underfoot, that faded summer smell of woods like paper waiting to flame. Hazard is high. The high rigger announced the change yesterday while we stood trackside waiting for the crummy to bring us down. We would need to be back up the hill by four the next morning so we could finish our shift before the day's full heat turned the woods into kindling. This is government policy, not that of the camp, and we all suspect that the Mac-Blo company would just as soon keep us working on the mountain till we burned.

Last night the cook made roast beef and we ate enough to weight us to our chairs. We played poker and smoked and listened to Jack Benny and tried to squeeze as much time out of the evening as we could. Then we were up at three, in the crummy as soon as we'd had our fill. We will arrive trackside when dawn waits at the edge of the woods and then we will have to hike for another forty minutes in the glimmering light—fallers and buckers hefting their axes and saws while the chokers and hookers carry the choker cables and choker bells that are needed to replace the ones that broke—and by five we will reach the cold-deck pile where the logs are stacked and our paid work can begin.

But now we are invisible in the dark. No one is tracking our time. There is nothing yet to cut or choke and we can lean against another man's back and nod into whatever shallow sleep the bouncing truck will allow. We will have to be up at three

again tomorrow and the morning after that, eating stacks of flapjacks when we are too tired to chew. Then we sit in this crummy in a waking sleep that rocks with the rocking of the truck until it seems that night is not a time but a place we inhabit and that daylight lies so far from our bunks that we must all be woken and fed and trucked these dim hours up the mountain if we are ever to see the sun.

One man has a headache, another man's spine is rattled sore with each bump of the road, and the shaking of the crummy makes us all clench our teeth while the stinking exhaust gets sucked into the back of the truck, but we know that the morning beyond the crummy is grey-blue and sharp, not smoke-filled and angry with the summer's orange flames, and we are glad to be travelling to work not with hoses and buckets for water but with axes and saws. The space between the benches is so narrow that our knees tap against each other and we catch another man's eye and nod that the day has begun.

This morning we ride with the new hook tender. He is here to replace Charlie, our own sly Charlie Chaplin—the only one among us who named himself. His replacement sits in the middle of the truck straight as a tent pole. He arrives on early shift when the mountain is dressed for mourning, the sky dark as we sneak the new man past the trees. Forty men sit around him as if we could offer him the protection we failed to give the last one.

We all recall the wind and the rain of the day that took Charlie, and we all know there are times when we do not need a hazard stick to tell us that danger is near, just as there are mornings when a man wakes and feels dread not of today or tomorrow

but of a day that is already gone and he waits for what the light will bring that he cannot quite remember, but he knows, even in his sleep he knows, that he has done something wrong and he fears that the morning will let him see it. Any man has had dreams when he wants to run but his legs and arms cannot move and he wants to scream but his lips will not open and he wakes trembling with the failure of his will.

We read the hazard stick for the future, not the past. In the woods a day is new and death is erased like the chalk dust that billows up from the road and falls as soon as the crummy has passed. Charlie's replacement doesn't know this camp and its stories. His mind isn't chipped like the crummy's wooden floor worn into sawdust by the spikes of our boots.

An apple falls from someone's tin pail. We watch it bounce out the back of the truck. The crummy grinds up the last one hundred yards that pitch steep and unforgiving. Dust from the road swirls inside the crummy to cover us the colour of chalk so when we finally reach trackside and the engine stops—there it is, that sliver of a sun, the welcoming chatter of birds—we crawl stiff from the crummy into the morning's grey-blue light and we shake off this white dust like men carved new from stone.

AAAA

## Tin Men

In summer we call her the ice cream ship. She's the same vessel that comes up coast all the other seasons, a plume of steam dragging through the sky every two weeks bringing food, kerosene, men. From May Day to Labour Day she carries ice cream. Proper, store-bought, Vancouver ice cream. The furnace room walls are sweating, but on the second level the freezers are lined with vanilla as smooth and white as the hull.

The high rigger is the first to see her. Strapped to the peak of the spar tree he's just topped, its tip crashing to the ground like the face of a mountain, he wipes the glare from his eyes to peer out across the ocean and there she is.

Summer. Saturday. Cedar branches spread motionless in the stagnant air. "Coming in," the high rigger shouts, his hands a funnel around his mouth. "She's coming in!" The chaser and the chokers turn toward the sea.

From where the hooking crew stands, they see nothing but trees. Not the high rigger half a mile away, not the faller and buckler working uphill. The high rigger's voice crests then dips, amplified by the mountain that arches behind him. Unhooking his rope he sits on the spar's tip, a cylinder ten inches wide and two hundred feet high, his boots crossed at the ankle.

It's another hour before the ship nudges into the bay. Distances are deceptive in the woods. We have time to ride the crummy to the camp and then shave, smoke, before we catch the railway speeder the last six miles down. We are Camp B, up Tin

Hat Mountain. The loggers from the other camp are already standing restless by the water. We jump off the speeder where the rail line meets the shore. Without spikes our town boots feel new and slick on sand. We wear canvas pants, leather suspenders, clean cotton shirts. The Swedes and Norwegians are tanned bark-brown and the Scots are sunburned. We nod at the other loggers. We watch the ship dock.

The ship lowers a long metal limb. It stirs the air so that a hundred feet away the warm stench hits us. Rancid meat, although we know the smell isn't meat, and isn't coming from the ship. The air is thick with it. The greenhorns gag, tongues pressed to the roof of their mouths. We all cover our noses with fists or palms.

"Is it always this bad?"

The coffins are made of tin, and the sun reflects off each sharp angle.

"Jesus, they'll be fried in there like strips of bacon."

Two weeks the coffins have waited. They line the dock now in a tidy row: a high rigger, a faller, and four of a fire crew. The West Coast—White Rock to the panhandle—takes two loggers a day. The inlets of the province are studded with tin men.

Last night a group of boys dared each other to run up and down the dock, and to prove they'd done it they plunked rocks and driftwood on top of each tin box, as if the bodies were not heavy enough to weigh the coffins down.

None of us can see the names. We know the loggers in the tins, though not by what their mothers call them. We know the smell of their skin in the bunkhouse, who butters both sides of his bread and who gets quiet in thunder. Almost all the men are

rechristened the moment they set foot in the camp. Step-and-a-half because he limps. Tangoola because he has long monkey arms and the name sounds like the jungle. Seaball, no one knows why. Snowball, so Seaball would have a twin. One-eyed-Pete, who had one eye, we sometimes called One—*Hey One, hand me the Swede*. When a logger dies, the clerk announces his real name, both the front and the back—*Who has Rolf Jensen's boots now? He hasn't paid out*. His birth name is naked, how the clerk says it too loud.

The winch angles back and forth from ship to wharf like a steel elbow. A wooden box splits open, the cans spilling out and nudging against the coffins, as if the tin were magnetic, metal finding metal. Children from the mill town cheer as sailors roll the frozen tubs down the length of the wharf, the sailors' hands sticking to the frost. They run to meet the ice cream, then slow and back away when they meet that smell. A girl begins to cry.

The younger men always eat too fast, and the pain shoots through their sinuses. The first bite of ice cream—a double cone for each logger—and they can feel it in the back of their eyes.

The winch loads the coffins. The first one twirls slightly, hanging uneven, the head heavier than the feet. As each coffin is lifted, the driftwood and rocks on the lids fall and splash.

Boys stand knee-deep in the ocean, one spitting a mouthful of ice cream to see if it will float. The sailors drag the containers away from the wharf so the women are



clear of the smell. Ice-vapor rises in front of their dresses as they scoop deeper. We hide our stumped fingers, missing thumbs, behind the cones, so the ladies won't see.

Blackie has all his fingers. Cat's Paw lost four, but he still works the steam donkey. The thumb is the worst. Without one it is hard even to hold a cone. Any man would trade three fingers for a thumb.

In this way we know each other. How a hand holds an ice cream, how a nickname recalls a scar. If a man is injured on a hill, there'd be a couple loggers allowed to carry him down, but if a man dies, we drag the body to the cold-deck pile and keep falling the trees. Company policy. No point wasting the day. The logger stiffens and grows cold. Sometimes a branch falls across the body, and we are careful to lever it off.

At dinner in the cookhouse after a day like that, we are quiet. His sweat dries in his undershirt draped across the bunkhouse window. The curve of his spine dips the cot.

Two weeks later we meet the ice cream ship and pass his nickname to a new logger. *Hey, One-Eyed*, we call to a man who has two.

## Fall

The first drop of rain is quiet, tentative, falling like a question a man could convince himself he has not heard.

Autumn hovers. The sky rests heavy above us though we still walk on pine needles dry from the day's heat.

Rain on the donkey's metal skin.

Then rain darkens leather and swells our flannel pockets. Our wet wool socks blister our heels. Rain falls in eyes, on lips, on shoulders, in creeks down our backs now wet in that tender spot on the upper spine shivering a man's hands that grip a saw beaded with rain.

Each time the faller hacks his axe into the back cut, his face is sprayed with water that spits from the gouge. When the back cut is open, two fallers jam a piece of wood into it to direct the tree's lean. Then they start with a new cut on the reverse. They drop their axes and pick up a two-handled saw, one man on either end of the grey horizontal line. Their sawing shakes the branches so water dumps onto their hats and shoulders. Bark is slick. The moss that grows on the bark is sodden. The fallers balance on slippery springboards on either side of the trunk and they pull the misery whip back and forth, back and forth, its teeth stubborn against the wet wood. The spray of water paces each pull.

The tree splashes when it hits the ground.

Soon the rain will pockmark the roads and float pine needles to the sea. Soon water will bloat the earth, this soft crumbling shell of wet dirt lying between us and the sea that threatens to open under our boots.

Through the fall and winter and spring, it will rain. Twenty days in a row, forty days in a row, rain so constant that the air itself is rain. We wring our undershirts,

leaving puddles on the bunkhouse floor that steam in the stove's heat. Outside, fungus roots the trees. Inside, even our skin grows its own strange mould, darkening in brown patches on our chests, backs, armpits, groins, wherever the skin is welcoming and moist.

Daylight is too tired to rise. The sun sleeps its day under clouds grey as the dank blankets that tangle our cots. We rise. We work in rain with our pants hanging heavy at the knee. Our canvas shirts stiffen wet into tortoise shells. Any light that manages to struggle through the trees is lit green by branches the way light in the ocean shines green.

The summer's trees lie scattered on the ground—felled, bucked, waiting to be choked. We work where solid earth ends at the coast, where mist rises and rain falls until a man could believe there is no division between land and water, that even this last wet line on the map is gone.

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#### Roll of Bills

On the morning of Christmas Eve, the logging camp shuts down. The generator dies—quiet splits the year—and we are on the *Queen Mary* with our cards, with the booze we've smuggled on the ship, another brown-paper purchase each time the

motors slow and we run down the platform through the stink of oil and into a beer parlour and then back inside.

Drink up, it's Christmas! Drink up, we've escaped!

The camp is back in the woods, dim as a cataract. The bunkhouses, the wooden sidewalks, the cookhouse, the commissary, all quiet and dark and empty of men. There will be no falling for a week. No bucking, no donkey loading, no rigging. Seven days we are free. We sit inside the ship's smoky warmth and don't watch the mountains that pass us by. We toast the holiday with our bottles of whiskey and flick our cards and come to fisticuffs with all the pent-up energy of no work as the engines hum us to the city.

Our celebration has no need for a Christmas tree—who'd want the smell of pine if you're not being paid to cut it down? On the ship we review what we've bought and what we are going to buy—whiskey, rum, a cozy twelve-pack of beer to furnish our hotel room. A man needs something to wake up for in the morning. Those who don't talk about the booze are already drinking serious and can hardly let their lips off their bottlenecks to toast the day.

Vancouver. Port town, party town. Open up and let us in.

Through the ship's rain-streaked glass we see the red neon *W* twirling two hundred feet above the sea. *Woodward's* is another name for money, a twelve-storey building with windows row on row. But in the dark just this single letter shines to greet us: red legs stretched wide.

We're off the ship and on streets that cannot absorb the rain. It slides down brick buildings, down glass buildings higher than a Doug fir. We are used to ground that gives with moisture, water softening dirt until it welcomes our boots. We are used to branches that dump water on us as we pass, and the sound of wood as the saw chews its fibres. But not this slickness, hardness, the harsh rasp of metal as the streetcar squeals the shining corners, a noise so cold and hollow it sounds like the rain's own cry.

Then the yeasty smell of donuts steaming circles from the machine.

A crowd of black umbrellas walks toward us. The streets are cramped with high buildings pressing back the fog, the bustle of long-coated men and tight-waisted women—the men turtling their necks into their collars to keep out the wet, the ladies red-cheeked from their hours in the shops, gripping cranky children as they crush with a gust of warm air through the swinging doors. Everyone buying for someone.

A small boy bends over to pry at a wad of gum flattened into the sidewalk. His mother swats him, packages spilling out of her bag.

Beneath the lights and noise and the rainbows on the oil slicking water that eddies at the curb, there is the blank screen of this city. Merry Christmas! Merry Christmas! Walk on these streets too long and a man feels the pavement through his spine.

We scatter. To the beer parlours and the dance clubs, through Jap Town and Chinatown, past the neon signs for the Ovaltine Café and the White Lunch, past the neon sign—the giant happy glowing pig—for Save-On-Meats, its carcasses hanging like

red curtains in the glass, and on to the Harlem Nocturne and the Smiling Buddha, the streets shimmering and tipping in the rain.

Then we get a look at the ladies. Soft white narrow creatures, women sipping their drinks and slow-rocking their hips. Wall-to-wall mirrors make more and more women, make more of the curves of their bodies than even our eyes can caress. They stand on one side of the bar, men on the other. Crinkle of a cigarette package. Whine of a horn. The air in between the men and women is crackling with Players and brass.

We haven't been this close in months.

Through the smoke they glance at our plaid Macs and dirty fingernails, our jackets pregnant with bottles near on empty. Glenn Miller blares loud enough to lift our heavy boots. It's a pleasure just to watch a lady dab her lipstick and try not to sway, looking over her shoulder and then touching her shoulder as if to give a man permission to do the same.

We are numb and happy. Full of that soft-legged, heavy-tongued ease, we elbow the shy boys toward the prettiest ladies and then saunter outdoors to spit on streets where no spitting is allowed.

Tangoola chicken-walks down Hastings as he tries to find his way to another drink.

Frog raises his bottle to Charlie—*we miss your fiddle on the boat, here's to what tunes you play up there*—then he sells a case of beer to the Indians who lean against the door that says No Indians or Dogs.

Smokey guides his woman up the stairs inside the Patricia, hoping she doesn't catch sight of the crushed mouse on the hallway floor.

And Shakespeare has been rolled, but he doesn't know it yet.

Alone we are uncertain, as watery as the sea's reflection of the Woodward's neon W.

Christmas Eve means Jester will find himself a whore to offer a ring, just as he did last year and the year before that.

*Tell me, love, he asks, what do they call you at home?*

Christmas morning finds us on cots in the Patricia, without the women we've paid, with the bright glare of sun piercing through curtains thinner than cheesecloth. The city has been cleaned by the rain, but we are not clean, and there returns whatever we tried to drink away. Scratch at the bites around ankles. Rattle the twelve-pack of beer by the bed.

Drink makes wishes roll in our minds like the night rain that covers the buildings, each drop full of sheen from the lights, all that colour that is not the water's own. Hastings, Granville, Seymour, Burrard—the streets of this city are never named for the men built it. A man could walk these streets and never know of Desolation Sound or Suicide Cliff, could sleep in these buildings and never touch the trees that support the walls. Through the window of Oscar's are signed photographs of Greta Garbo and Rita Hayworth, their lipstick faces alone in empty booths. A few more days through our wads of cash and we're stealing lemon extract. Then we line our debts

under the sign for the Logger's Employment Agency, cursing and tipping our hats to its red neon light.

Seagull turd mottles the ship's plank. We kick at it and watch the town folk who do not watch us. They hold their packages and stare right ahead until it seems they are walking with their eyes and not their legs. The turd sticks to our boots like splotches of paint that someone hasn't bothered to spread. The turd stinks. First day of the year, the days not yet filled in.

Some of us sold our boots for booze and so when we board the ship we step up the plank in new boots, fresh laces that tie us in hock to the company store. New Year, new debt. Some of us won't live to make the trip next year, cheating Mac-Blo out of what we owe from our last drunk.

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### Logging Camp B

We carve our addresses on the slabs of wood that travel to London where soldiers and civilians stand shivering underground, inhaling the armpit closeness of their neighbours and waiting for the long slow whistle of the next bomb. They look up at the cedar walls of their shelters and there we are.

A woman's fingers reach up to rub the words we have carved, the wood splintering her skin just as it so often splinters ours.



The Londoners read the shelter walls and all around them the buildings collapse. In the cramped stinking air they write letters to Camp B as if they could tell their secrets to the alphabet itself. Sometimes their letters smell of talc, sometimes of smoke. An old man writes of his wife and how he misses the way her upper arms shook when she thumped the rolling pin back and forth across the dough. One boy wants us to send him a saw; another tells us his sister isn't a virgin. In the middle of a bombing raid, a woman aborted her child with the end of a broom handle and she writes this nameless fact in black spotty ink and sends it to Stillwater.

Each Sunday we read these letters, the edges darkened by the dirt from our hands, and then we step outside in the cool evening light cast by the camp generator. The air is sweet with pine. We play tug-rope, four men on one side of the knot, four men on the other. The coils twist painfully against our palms and we dig our boots into mud that offers no traction as we feel the rope slip.

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### Spring

Where the trees were, the white wake-robin is already blooming—scattered bits of paper. A bear paws the dirt, clumsy with sleep. Our smell is on the wind.

In this quarter, new logs lie on the ground, waiting to be bucked, choked, hooked to the cold-deck pile. We've left one tree standing—the highest and straightest—the spar tree, for the high rigger. He works alone. It's a Doug Fir, two hundred feet high, as tall as Woodward's neon sign that guards Vancouver's inlet, and our afternoon's entertainment will be to lean back our heads and watch him walk the trunk to the top.

We call him Thorvald, which is really his name. To call him a nickname would be sloppy. He'd just shrug off our attempts.

Today he swats a lazy hand toward our voices, his eyes only for the tree. Barrel-chested and thick-limbed, he's built like a trunk himself. He examines the roots, runs his palm over bark that is creviced deep enough to take his hand. He pulls at the bark, sniffs it, walks the tree's perimeter eyeing each crevice for the stains that warn of cat's face. At this point he could still walk away. A tree can appear healthy on the outside, the bark thick, branches green, and on the inside the cat's face has been rotting the wood through winter and summer, through season after season until the rings at the core disappear into moist crumbling fungus. No man wants to tie himself to a dying tree.

We can tell when Thorvald has made up his mind because he reaches up to press his hat tighter to his head. Then he wraps the high-rigging belt around the trunk and around his hips. He grips the belt, leans back to test its give. He steps forward to jab the spikes of his caulk boots into the bark, shifts his footing, feet splayed, breathing easy just to sense the solid base of the tree under his boots. In these adjustments

there is a stillness—he might tweak the belt or check his axe or nod as if to confirm his decision but for a moment it seems his legs are fixed to the tree, that he is growing out of the tree, and would be no more capable of walking away.

He runs. Not away from the tree but straight up the trunk, held by the belt he shares with it, bark spitting a trail beneath him. On the way up he axes off the branches so the tree narrows as he climbs fast as a zipper. We crane our necks, press our hats snug, rocking on solid ground. Some of us reach for chewing tobacco, our cheeks crammed tight, mouths slack in the same awed boredom of circus crowds who grow used to watching men climb into air.

When he reaches the top, he trades his axe for his saw and begins to work away at the fir's wavering tip. It snaps from the trunk. It is twice the length of a man. As it falls, the trunk kicks back. This is the most dangerous part, more deadly than the climb. He's strapped to the tree while it sways back and forth twenty feet to draw a giant arc across the sky. If the core is cracked or weak or rotting, the force will cause the trunk to split in two, and he'll be crushed, boneless, into the tree. We know that high riggers fear this death more than they fear falling.

Today it takes a good ten minutes before the tree stills to vertical. When it does, the clouds keep moving behind it.

Now we can take out a roll-your-own or just roll back our shoulders and stretch. Above us, Thorvald slips off the belt. Easy as a man on a kitchen stool he sits on top of the tree, feet tucked behind him or crossed in front of him, his body tied to nothing.

He's having a smoke, or perhaps a sandwich, his satchel in his lap. It's hard to see him from the ground.

Only when he starts waving his hat do we realize he's not sitting but standing—a two-hundred-foot salute—and we know it's this gesture that enables Thorvald to be so quiet in the rest of his day.

We wait for what he does next. The *maypole*, we call this trick: no other man comes down the way he does.

He doesn't come straight down. Belted to the tree and dropping, his boots bouncing off the trunk, he twirls. He corkscrews around and around the tree as he descends, around and around, the bark spraying behind him, his feet wrapping a ribbon around a day's work.

We keep quiet. All we hear is the sound of his boots.

His body appears, then is behind the tree, then appears again, flickers like a zoetrope, the air around him a spiral of bark, his arms gripping the belt and then his hat is floating off and coming down more slowly than he is—he makes one last leap to reach the ground, lands with a grunt, looks up to check the sky, takes a few steps, then holds up his hand to catch the hat.

He lets his high-rigger's belt drop to the ground and jumps out of it two-footed, the way children hop from chalk circles. Then he walks slowly back to us.

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## Appendix Three

### Surge

#### Self-contained Excerpt from Olaf's Perspective

Note: Olaf is twelve years old here. Ralph is Charlie's son. Charlie has just died.

The bus windows rattled as the engine farted and sputtered to life. Olaf plunked down next to his sister, Greta. The leather seats smelled of old man. The big boys sat together in the back of the school bus where they were shouting now about how they were going to climb the surge tank all the way to the top, this time they wouldn't turn chicken and creep back down.

Olaf knew only one other boy who had climbed the surge tank. Now that boy was overseas, fighting in the war.

They called at Olaf. Someone tossed a roll of caps at his head. His friend Ralph was back there with the teenagers even though he only had six months on Olaf. Ralph was imitating the guttural noises Greta made when she was trying to talk. He got all the boys laughing. Olaf pretended he couldn't hear. The wet splat of a spit ball caught his neck. He pulled at the collar of his shirt, as if the fabric was scratching his skin, and then opened his book to stare at the lines of black on white. The bus was a cage full of noise. Greta stretched over his shoulder to look back at the older boys, but Olaf knew they'd be talking too fast for her to read their lips.

She slipped back into the seat. Each time the bus rounded a corner, her hip dug into his thigh.

He turned to face her, stretching his lips into huge ugly shapes. "What did you do at school today, Greta?" he asked, taunting her by exaggerating each word. Before she could respond he began to sign. This time he wasn't making words. He was

fluttering his fingers as fast as the wings of an insect. Greta stopped swinging her legs. Her mouth formed a small knot.

“It’s a bee,” he said, his voice warmer now, as if he’d been waiting all along to share this trick with his sister. “Just a bee. See Greta? The letter *B*.” He pinched her under the arm until she squealed and pulled away. She giggled. Even her laugh sounded wrong.

The driver soon dropped off most of the children, who lived near town. Only Ralph was left. The bus creaked and huffed up a hill and around the next bend. When the bus braked, its metal joints complaining, Ralph walked to the front, saluted the driver, then was gone. The bus rocked over gullies and bumps, deeper into the woods, Olaf and Greta its only passengers. They sat with their hands in their laps, surrounded by the rows of green seats.

Olaf stared out the window. Greta’s breath had clouded the glass so the trees were smeared into an unbroken green wall. *Skirt tree*, Olaf signed in his lap as they passed the giant red cedar that marked the halfway point to home, its base stretching out like the sweep of a lady’s skirt. His hands took the shape of what passed: the abandoned truck, the white pine burned black by lightning, the break in the woods that showed a slice of ocean, the pile of rocks where Greta scarred her knee. Each landmark he signed and Greta matched his sign.

Behind these trees, closer to the shore, were the houses the Japanese families had been forced to leave. Beside the busy stink of the mill town, beside their own lives

in the boisterous logging camp he knew so well, the woods were full of people who were gone. From here no one could see the empty buildings, but he still felt uneasy whenever he passed this part of the road, as if the houses themselves were what had made the families disappear.

Greta gestured in their sign language to ask him what was inside—beds and tables, like their own house? But Olaf just shook his head. He didn't want to imagine the rooms, each one dim as a shadow.

The houses were perched on the rocky bank right next to the ocean, where the air was damp and cold with sea spray—closer than any white person wanted to build. Each building was as small as a fishing boat, and the Japanese took small steps when they walked, or that's how he remembered them. The children were quieter than normal children, at least they were quiet when they were in the mill town with their parents, the summer before they were carted away. If a storekeeper shouted at them—*get off the railing, put that down*—they did what they were told. They didn't say a thing. Greta used to stare at them and smile and even wave, but without lifting her arm, like she didn't want her and Olaf's mother to see. Sometimes a child waved back.

The whole lot had lived near the beach, boys and girls and parents and grandparents all together in their own houses as if they were innocent—and yet at any moment one of them could have jumped onto a boat to take secret information out to a Japanese warship. That was the threat. Olaf was old enough to know all about it. They had been living right there, separate from the camp but so close. Any one of



them might betray the whole country. You couldn't tell but even the children might be dangerous, all of them with their shiny caps of black hair like matching helmets.

One of the houses was off on its own. By the door stood two small trees, round trees that lose their leaves, the kind people plant on purpose. He'd only seen those kinds of trees in schoolbooks. With Ralph he'd stood right outside that house and he told Greta to keep back, no telling what they might discover. It was no place for a girl. So she went to find a turtle on the beach while he and Ralph launched pinecones at the roof. The house had shutters—the white paint scabbed off—and matching chimneys on either end. It looked surprised. He was sure there would be guns in the rooms and maybe even battle plans written in code. But he and Ralph never went inside to look. Through the glass the kitchen was just a kitchen. One window was blocked by a white shirt. The mother must have washed and ironed it, and then it had hung there, waiting, tinged green with mildew, still neatly buttoned. The outside walls were growing moss and the shutters were loose so he and Ralph tugged a couple of shutters free and ran around holding them like shields, brandishing sticks for swords, and they shouted the metal sounds of Jap talk. For some reason they avoided breaking the windows. It seemed important to keep the glass intact.

Ralph wanted to go back to that house with matches and buckets of oil and set it on fire. They'd have to wait until the summer, Olaf said, when the wood would be dry as kindling. You're scared, Ralph said, you'd never. I dare you. Olaf said he'd do it. And maybe one day he would, and then the Japs couldn't return and frighten his

mother with more of their plans for war. Really it was Olaf's responsibility, since Ralph wasn't even from around here and he had straight black hair just like the Japanese children. Olaf planned to sneak out at night and leave Greta at home. It wouldn't be safe, for her. One of the Japs might still be there in hiding.

Before the families were taken away, Greta had given one of the Japanese boys a ball of red yarn, just like that, something she'd stolen from home. That boy could speak English, Olaf had heard him, but he'd just stood there grinning at Greta. Then he said a gruff word that Olaf couldn't understand. He said it again and Greta matched the shape of her lips to the boy's lips as if she knew what he meant when she didn't. Then they both nodded. What would he need yarn for, Olaf had asked her—a boy? The Japanese boy had held it tenderly, away from his body, the way one would balance a full bowl of soup. Olaf remembered his cupped hands, the knuckly fingers that were calloused from fishing like a man's would be, not just sweaty and dirty from games of Run-sheep-run.

Greta did that kind of thing. She did it without thinking who was the enemy.

Now Olaf didn't sign their word for house. He looked up the road to find something else he could name.

The road narrowed and branches scratched at the windows, trying to speak. Greta leaned her head on his shoulder. They rode higher for three miles, the trees getting closer, the road darker. Then the bus stopped, and they climbed out. The driver told Olaf to look after the little girl.

No buildings lined this road—it was just a strip of dirt splitting the forest in two. They rustled under the scrub where they'd left their bikes. The logging camp was two miles farther, up the mountain on a road too steep and rough for the school bus, a single lane used for empty trucks heading up and loaded trucks heading down, the vehicles blasting warnings with their air horns at each bend in the road. Greta couldn't hear their horns. His mother always warned him that Greta should never be left to do this stretch on her own. The children pushed their bikes a bit, then they got on to pedal, Olaf listening for oncoming trucks.

In the summertime, they stopped for huckleberries, squirting them between their teeth. They sat at the crib dam and spat the sour ones into the tumbling water. But today the cold air bit their knuckles. He needed to get Greta home. He tried to yank his sleeves down over his wrists. Greta followed him a few yards back, moaning at the wind. When they reached the hill, she climbed off her bike to walk.

"I'm not walking with you," Olaf twisted around to say. "You've got to pedal." He kept his grip tight.

She propped the bike against her hip so she could sign that she was tired.

"Keep going," he said. "Get back on."

He was not going to get off to push both their bikes, not this time. There was nothing wrong with her arms.

All the way to the crib dam she trailed behind him, walking her bike with one hand. He pedalled as slowly as he could. His bike rocked side to side, and he had to keep dropping one foot to the ground to keep it steady.

“It’s getting dark!” he shouted, turning back to her, even though she probably couldn’t see his lips in the dusk. Soon they wouldn’t be able to talk at all.

He crossed the crib dam ahead of her. The water clamoured far below. The concrete buttress was smooth under his tires and he could have race ahead if he were with one of the boys. By now they were all down at the beach. Even Ralph would be with them and he’d climb to the top of the surge tank and then tell Olaf about it, or maybe not tell him, just nod a bit if he asked, as if someone like Olaf wasn’t even worth the bother of the whole story.

He stopped to let Greta catch up. Then he ducked into the bush where she couldn’t see him. At first he planned to jump out and scare her. But as she trudged along he stayed where he was. When she passed him, she didn’t look up, just kept her gaze on the slow spin of her bicycle’s wheel. She started humming that deep-throated noise like a grouse.

She turned the bend. She must think he was up ahead. He had never left Greta on her own. But it was only another half-mile or so before she’d be safe home. Instead of following behind, he turned his bike around and pedalled back down the logging road, away from her, his legs spinning as furious as the sound of the water. He would be at the bottom of the hill by the time she turned around to look. The bike

picked up momentum as the wheels skidded over pebbles that flew into the brush. He was going too fast for the brakes to work and he knew he'd spin into whatever truck was coming his way. He soared past the last clump of trees, then with a quick shove, he pushed the bike out from under his body, the metal clanging and the handlebars twisting as he dove and landed on his chest.

His lungs clenched at nothing. He gasped for air, coughed, then rested his lips and forehead on the cold damp earth as he felt his wind return.

He rolled over, sat with his knees up. He brushed the rocks and dirt from his trousers and shook his feet—he was fine, not even a twisted ankle. Trembling, he got up to check the bike, straddled the frame to twist the handlebars into place. He got on, moving slowly to test it, then faster, turning south onto the main road. He wondered how close Greta was to their home.

When he reached the dirt bank, he found a tangle of bikes where the boys had tossed them aside. The twilight made the chrome glisten like a clump of metal bones. He dragged his bike up the bank and dropped it on top of the pile.

Olaf ran into the trail that led to the beach. Pine gave way to the stench of seaweed. He could see the tank, the metal tower rising three-hundred feet. Under the darkening clouds it was whiter than usual. Down by the boom the boys were tossing rocks into the ocean. Not skipping them—just lobbing handfuls of rocks into the air and letting them drop. The boys made bombing sounds.

“Hey,” Olaf called out as he ran to meet them.

At first the five didn’t move.

“Hey,” he called out again, relieved when Ralph gestured for Olaf to join the group. Ralph walked ahead and stood on his own, arms akimbo, surveying the shore. Ralph’s dad had died last spring and now he didn’t need anyone.

“Let’s go,” said Joel. The boys scrambled up the beach single file, each kicking rocks ahead, trying to hit the boy in front.

Ralph found a good flat stone, and they all waited for him to skip it. They counted as it bounced off the water.

“Nine,” Karl said, and whistled. They started walking again, crunch of mussel shells under their soles, none of them willing to try to beat Ralph. Olaf slipped his boots into the others’ footprints, his face hot against the cold air. He could see the surge tank clearly now. Against the night sky, the white paint glowed like phosphorescence.

“Climbed it before?” Ralph asked in a loud whisper. Olaf hated him for asking in front of the other boys. “With Greta? You climb with your little sis?” Even in the dark Olaf could tell he was smirking.

Olaf knew of only one boy who had climbed the surge tank. Now that boy was overseas fighting in the war.

The wind rose up from the ocean and twisted past the surge tank's slick surface, making the metal ring out. Sometimes the tank was full of the river. The men could stop the turbines at the dam by funnelling the water into this tank where gravity absorbed the surge. But now the tank was empty. A great blank dividing the sky.

Once last summer Olaf had walked up to the base of the tank with Greta, and they'd touched it to see if the metal was warm or cold, but they never even tried the ladder. It ran from the height of the tank and then stopped eight feet from the ground.

"To the very top?" Olaf asked.

"You climb the tank first, you get to drop out of school," Ralph said.

He bet Ralph had at least climbed part of the way. Maybe his father had taken him, before the accident. But Ralph was the kind of boy who could spring up that ladder without anyone urging him to do it.

"You can't look down," Igmar yelled. "That's what kills you."

The boys all jumped onto a line of rain-wet logs and walked along them, silent again, hands in their pockets to prove they didn't need arms to balance. The rotting wood crumbled under their steps. When they reached the tank, they crouched together and pulled a small log under the ladder. One by one they balanced on the log and pulled themselves up to the first rung, scurrying fast so the next boy could join them.

Ralph stood back, picking up rocks. Olaf nodded toward the tank. Ralph tossed a rock at it, a high ping. The boys above them stopped, looked down, then started again. Olaf and Ralph eyed each other awkwardly, Olaf tearing at a fingernail with his teeth, Ralph sliding his tongue along the cracks in his bottom lip.

Olaf was the youngest, so he should be the last. He cupped his palms together to offer a holster for Ralph's foot. With a grunt Ralph ignored the gesture and hoisted himself up onto the log, leaning over to grip the ladder. He started to climb.

Olaf wanted to shout something out to his friend. He scrambled until he had his own feet on the ladder. Salt air pushed open his lungs. Then he peered down. It was dark already, only the moon casting pale light across the beach where they'd left their prints in the sand just minutes ago.

He'd been up ladders before. The first forty feet were easy. He felt a burst of energy as his boots pattered from rung to rung with a hollow clang. Olaf knew his father could climb up this thing easier than walking into his own kitchen.

But halfway up, the surge tank flared like a goblet, the top wider than the bottom. The sides jutted out at a thirty-degree angle. Olaf had to climb not just up, but out. With his arms stretched above him, his back hung parallel to the dark sea that crashed on the shore a hundred feet below.

The weight of his body pulled at his hands. His fingers were raw. He glanced down at the water. The view swayed too fast, lurching forward then retreating as his



stomach turned. He clenched his eyes shut. His left foot slipped from the ladder and flailed. This leg suddenly felt longer than the other, heavier, the muscle pulling as the foot dangled in the air. He swung forward to hook the wayward heel over the rung, found his footing, pressed his face against the ladder's cold metal edge. He breathed. The rung of the ladder felt good under his boots.

If Greta were with him, she'd want to go down. But she was home by now, warm and safe.

Someone up above was laughing. At first Olaf thought one of the boys was laughing at him. Ralph had almost reached the section of the ladder where it ran vertical again. But he was clinging to the ladder without moving. It was Ralph who was laughing, only it didn't sound like Ralph. The laugh was high-pitched and fast, and it echoed off the surge tank's metal walls.

There was something wrong with Ralph. The laugh got sharper. He screeched like a crow. Olaf's arms started to shake, air rippling through his chest.

Olaf was not going to laugh.

Ralph's arms were going to loosen. Laughter slackened his muscles.

"Keep going," Knut shouted to them from somewhere above.

"I can't. It's not me," Olaf said. "Ralph stopped. It's not me."

Ralph had swung to the side of the ladder so Olaf could pass. Ralph was giggling quietly now. His feet were jammed tight together and he was hanging on with one arm. His body swayed out like a cupboard door.

Olaf clawed his fingers around the ladder's rungs, one hand over the next until he was sharing a rung with Ralph. He could keep only one boot on the ladder, tucking the other as close to the rung as possible. His left hand began to spasm. Just a few feet above, the ladder straightened and their ascent would become easier. Olaf opened his mouth to explain, but something about Ralph's laugh made him stop. He wanted to climb away from it.

"Wait here," Olaf said. "Wait and we'll get you on the way down."

He climbed ahead. Looking down, he saw that Ralph was gripping the ladder again with both hands. Olaf felt lighter. The laugh coming out of Ralph faded.

Olaf was stepping into the sky. The half-moon lit the edges of the surrounding clouds. Beside him a seagull rolled on the air.

He curved around the tank where the ladder straightened, his arms reaching ahead to find the rungs. When he got his grip, he had to let both feet hang out free before he could swing them back onto the ladder as he pulled himself up. His sweating palms squeaked on the metal. He climbed another eighty feet. A cobweb caught his cheek.

In the last stretch of the climb, the ladder narrowed, the rungs not rounded but flat. Their edges dug into his palms. Bits of rust stuck to his hands, flaked into his eyes. He tried to keep climbing with his eyelids clamped shut, but the surge tank started to tip.

The ladder seemed too narrow for a man. Olaf wondered who had to climb up here and why. A seagull swooped and cawed. Olaf waved at the too-close flap of its wings.

Above him the other boys had reached the top. Olaf couldn't hear Ralph at all. He grabbed the last rung, swung himself up and folded his body over the edge of the roof, his arms dipping into shallow, stagnant water.

The other boys watched him, Joel's face as white as the tank.

Three hundred feet. Olaf stood up.

The roof of the surge tank was flat and white and the boys scattered like five peas on a plate. Rain had pooled on the surface. The boys all kicked at it—small explosions of water. They whacked their boots into the metal to hear it clang.

Ralph would feel that from far below.

The wind answered. It sounded different than it had on the ladder, low and hollow, it didn't thud against the roof but whipped and whined across the surface as it tried to slide the boys right off.

Olaf leaned into this wall of wind pushing at his chest. Gusts fattened his jacket. He couldn't believe he was up here, a hundred feet taller than Ralph.

There were dead birds. A seagull, dark grey and rotting, its wings splayed out in a puddle. The feathers shimmied slightly as wind raked the water. And smaller birds, a blackbird, and what he thought were chickadees, although it was hard to tell in the dark. Their bodies were clumps. They reminded him of the mice trapped in the cookhouse, the cook walking to the woods with a dustpan full of eyeless tufts of fur. Did the birds fly here to die? Or was there something on the roof that killed them?

Olaf looked across the water at the lumps of islands, darker black than the black of the sky, each island rimmed in purple. He was higher than any tree. His father had never been this high.

The boys airplaned past him, arms stretching into wings, their lips whirring the buzz of a high-pitched motor. *Raven One*, they shouted, *come in Raven One*.

Olaf curved his hands into imaginary binoculars and scouted the landscape for signs of enemy invasion. Up the coast the electric glow of the Powell River mill cast an eerie light that was as yellow as the stink of sulphur. It lit the smoke pouring into the sky in four iridescent columns. Right now men wearing masks were scurrying inside that box. He could reach over and pluck it from the ground.

He turned to the south. A mile down the coast the moon caught the powerhouse's grey roof. That would be a good place for his air force to land. He

signalled and pointed it out to the older boys who were busy chasing each other and howling at the moon like coyotes.

From up here Olaf couldn't see more of that powerhouse than the roof, but he knew the entire front of the building had been painted like a huge picture to match the shore and trees, camouflage against attack. A warship could pass by and never know it was there. Every day the powerhouse greeted the ocean with this false face.

Karl started shouting cuss words upward into the wind and the other boys tried to be even louder. Igmar balanced near the edge and spat over it. He said his spit smacked Ralph right on the head, and they all knew it didn't.

But if the Japs attacked now, Olaf could watch the planes swoop down and the incendiary bombs fall. The vibrations would rattle the surge tank and shake Ralph off the ladder.

The Japs wouldn't bomb the ocean, he knew, they'd bomb the mill. And the camps. Olaf spun around and beeped his own made-up signal of Morse code. Tin Hat Mountain stretched out behind him. The mountain was a black mass, something inked out.

He imagined his mother and sister alone in the wooden house. They were sitting by the stove and worrying about where Olaf had gone. Across the table they passed his name back and forth. *What I'm going to do to that boy*, his mother said. She

couldn't see him, way up here. Greta couldn't watch his hands. He stretched them up in the air.

"What's that ball for?" Joel asked him, pointing at a metal ball the size of a crouching man. It lay on top of the tank like a giant's toy.

"Lightning," Olaf said right away, and the boys nodded. His words lifted in the dark wind. "It captures lightning. It protects the surge tank." Olaf wasn't sure if this was really what it did, but the boys looked convinced. He could say anything up here and it would become true.

The others were kicking the birds off the tank, waiting to hear the splat and not hearing the splat so shoving at each other and asking who was scared, who was scared now, until one of them finally marched toward the ladder.

Olaf watched each head disappear.

He wondered if another boy would help Ralph down or if he'd still be there, his body blocking the way. Olaf didn't want to have to stop.

He tried not to look at the smashed birds the boys had left lodged on the edge. He grabbed the ladder. It was trembling. The wind and all that space down to the ocean dragged him forward and urged him to fall. He backed away from the ladder. And since he was sure that the others couldn't see him, he got on his hands and knees and crawled. He turned to nudge his foot down until he could feel the third rung. The wind pulled at his clothes. If he let go now, he would float.

It was harder going down, his arms and legs awkward with each backward step. His hands were growing numb. He counted as he descended. The seagulls had gone. What time was it now? His mother would be furious. He kept his eyes on his hands, dizzy with the effort not to look below.

The rungs of the ladder thickened. He reached the bend where it began to run diagonal. He had to curl himself around the corner, boot searching for a rung. He hinged from the hips, kicking his feet forward so they could catch the ladder while he kept his right hand on the straight section above. With his left hand he grasped the lower part of the ladder. The rust made his grip slide. To continue down, he was going to have to let go of his upper hand. He hooked his feet, released his fingers, each one still frozen around the shape of the rung. He reached below for the ladder. His hand opened and closed on air.

He was falling backward. Then his fingers smacked the metal and he clasped the rung tight. His whole body began to shake.

Ralph was still there. As Olaf climbed slowly toward him, swaying his feet forward with each step so he could catch the next rung, he could see Ralph's arms rigid against the ladder. The laughing had stopped. Olaf swallowed a flake of rust and it tickled his throat.

Olaf coughed. It sounded like a laugh.

Ralph hooked one arm over the rung and one arm under it and leaned closer in.

“Ralph Forrest,” Olaf said. The name ricocheted off the surge tank.

The wind tugged at Ralph’s hair and flapped his jacket open. Olaf wondered if he had seen the birds the boys kicked off. Ralph squeezed to one side of the ladder so Olaf could pass.

Olaf stepped down until the two boys were perched on the same rung, boots cramped in a line. Ralph pressed his cheek against the ladder.

“Go on,” Olaf said. Below them there was the steady clatter of boots hitting metal. The other boys had climbed right past Ralph. Were they going for help? The wind whistled through the ladder and whipped Ralph’s hair across his eyes.

“Go on.”

Ralph didn’t move. The boys were nearing the bottom. Olaf dropped one foot to the next rung.

He waited. Ralph glanced down, snot running into his mouth. He wouldn’t let go of the ladder long enough to wipe it away. His sleeve slipped to the elbow. His arm was taut with muscle and veins.

Olaf could still reach out and rest his palm on the nape of Ralph’s neck to coax him down, but he didn’t want to touch Ralph.

“Say something. Ralph. Talk. It will make it better.” Bits of his words were torn by the wind.



Olaf waited.

Even the jaunty under-the-breath comments Ralph always made, even those he'd take.

"Come on."

"Go on."

Ralph was not going to move.

Olaf took another step down. He felt Ralph watch him. Three more steps, four, and he looked up through the black shapes of Ralph's boots. If Ralph let go without leaping free of the tank, his body could tear Olaf from the ladder and they both would drop to the earth.

He climbed more quickly, careful not to look down until he was close enough to jump. Three yards from the ground, he leapt free with a high-pitched yell. He cleared the logs, landed on the balls of his feet, then rolled into the familiar crunch of sand and shells. He lay there for a moment, feeling the moist sand flat between his shoulder blades. Above the clouds, the stars looked as if someone had thrown a handful of rocks across the sky.

Ralph was small, way up there on the surge tank. He hadn't moved. If Olaf hadn't known Ralph was there, he wouldn't have realized the dark speck was a boy.

Olaf scurried to his feet, rubbed shells and pebbles off his knees.

“You coming?” Karl yelled as he ran toward the water. The other boys ran too, jumping up and down on beach logs. The salt air was sharp on Olaf’s face. Down by the ocean, the boys began to shout.

“Dumplings and gravy! Right now a whole plateful of dumplings and gravy!”

“Roast beef!”

Olaf couldn’t tell who was saying what. His stomach spasmed. It was long past supper. Greta and his mother would eat without him. Greta would ask if she could have his portion and his mother would blow cigarette smoke across the table, then slide his plate to Greta.

“No, flapjacks. A foot-high stack of flapjacks!”

“And bacon!”

“And bacon! Hey Ralph! We’re going to have bacon!”

“Pork and beans!” one of them bellowed over the noise of the waves.

That’s what Olaf wanted. They could stay out here all night and sit around a bonfire like the men did in the summer, heat a can over the flames. Ralph would climb down, shoulder Olaf for a space, grab a spoon. They wouldn’t say how long he’d been up there.

Olaf missed his tin lunch box right now, its slim black handle. He’d unfold his mother’s wax paper and pass her bread pudding to the boys.

“Salmonberry pie!” Olaf heard his voice toss the words out into the wind. He was suddenly giddy. “Salmonberry pie!” He yelled up to Ralph as if he had a piece to offer. He could do this. He could just shout out what he wanted to eat.

The boys scampered back up from the ocean. Igmar said it was too bad they didn’t have a tarpaulin—then Ralph could just jump down and they could catch him. Knut said he was too high up for that. He’d need a parachute from up there. “That’s right, a parachute!” they shouted, “Hey, Ralph, you need a parachute!” Olaf said he knew how to get him down. You bunch are just making him nervous, he said. I’ll get him down, he said. You head on back. We’ll catch up.

Olaf waited until the boys were out of earshot then yelled up that Ralph’s mother was waiting for him at home.

“You don’t want to scare her. She’s alone now, Ralph. She’s kept dinner warm for you.”

But Ralph stayed where he was.

Olaf turned around to see how far the boys had got. Maybe they were going for help. They’d reached the trail that led to the road. If he didn’t go now, he’d lose them.

“Salmonberry pie!” he shouted at the surge tank before breaking into a run.

When he reached the road, the other boys were nowhere in sight. He grabbed his bike. Ralph’s bike was lying by itself. The tire was close to the road and Olaf nudged it into the trail.

The wind died down. Without Greta to slow him, he'd be home in no time.

When he flew through the logging camp, he lifted his hands off the handlebars. But the cookhouse was dark; the bunkhouses were dark. He wondered where everyone was. The men weren't sitting outside smoking or spitting tar. No one could see him.

He careered along the trail to his home. Without taking off his boots, he walked through the back door and across the linoleum, pleased with the mud tracks, the wet slap of his soles on the floor.

The kitchen was empty.

The air smelled of stale smoke. He checked the stove. The pots were full of food that hadn't been served.

Balls of wool sat on the chesterfield, pierced by knitting needles, and he wished for their comforting click, clack.

Olaf leaned against the airtight heater to feel its warmth. Someone must be home. It was dangerous to leave a roaring fire when no one was home.

He stopped to listen. The fire rustled in the airtight. The window pane tapped against the sill. The wind had started blowing again, but more gently. He could hear his own breath and his blood pounding in his ears. His boots were too loud as he walked slowly toward the stairs, heel to toe, arms stiff by his side as if he were trying to find his balance.

A house has a face—from outside, but even from inside he could tell that the two windows above the sink were blank as untelling eyes. When he was a small boy, he used to be afraid of the house—not the creak of the stairs or the wind in the attic or even his bedroom closet where someone, something, could hide—he was afraid of the windows themselves, the glass that held the glowing light from the lamp, and these wooden walls that were as thick as his father’s shoulders were broad. He thought the house could watch him, when he did something wrong, that it knew things that even his mother did not.

But the stairs tonight were reassuring to climb, each step wide enough for his boots, his hand holding this familiar cedar banister that his father had sanded smooth and round as a candle. He wondered if Ralph was still gripping the ladder’s slick rungs. When he reached the top of the stairs, he kept hold of the banister and clenched his eyes shut as if this would stop Ralph from letting go.

Now he wanted to make a noise, cough or call out, anything to fill the house. He thumped his hand on the doorframe as he marched into his parents’ room—dark. He went into Greta’s room, rapping first on the open door although she wouldn’t be able to hear. Moonlight caught a book splayed on the floor, a page lifting on its own. Beside the book was one of the *Red Ryder* comics Greta liked to sneak from Olaf.

He sat on the unmade bed. He would give Greta the comic book, to keep, when she came home. The promise tightened its grip on his thoughts the way tangled sheets bind sleep.

He could give one comic to Greta and one to Ralph. No—more than one. He would let them have as many as they wanted. Handing over his prized collection filled him with a sharp pleasing sense of loss.

The wind rattled the glass against the frame. Underneath him were Greta's heavy wool blankets. He could lie down, fall asleep, feel the rush of relief he always felt on waking up from a bad dream.

Outside, in the distance, his mother was calling him.

He pressed his boots firmly into the floor, hoping to hold her voice in place.

She called again. He scurried downstairs and out the front entrance. The air was colder now that he'd been inside. He left the door open and light spilled a jagged yellow triangle over the steps.

He ran through the trail. Up ahead, there was a thin white shimmer between the trees. His mother was standing alone outside in her nightgown, the bulk of her overcoat hanging awkwardly over it. When she saw Olaf, she ran toward him, almost tripping as she opened her arms.

"Greta!" she called out, "Greta!" He wanted to shrink into his sister's name.

His mother held him and he buried his face into the slick softness of the nightgown. "Greta—where is she? Is she back at the house? Olaf? Is she with you? Olaf? Where is your sister?" His eyelashes flickered against her warm chest. As long as

he didn't answer her questions, he could keep his arms around her. "Greta?" she asked again. Her body stiffened.

Greta had not come home. She was out there alone in the dark where she couldn't hear anyone call.

"Mom, I didn't..."

"What did you do?"

"Mom, she..."

She pushed past him to run up the trail. He watched the back of her overcoat.

"She ran away," he yelled.

His mother stopped. She turned to face him. Her coat swung open and again he could see the white flicker of her nightgown.

"Greta raced down the road on her bike, before I knew where she was going, before I could catch her, she wouldn't do what I said, she wouldn't look, she wouldn't stop, she went speeding on her bike down the logging road, I couldn't see where she went."

"Greta...Greta did?" She walked back, her feet careful over stones and broken branches.

"I've...I've been looking for her. I didn't come home. I've been looking for Greta for hours." The lie stretched out to his mother and pulled her toward him.

“Where did you look?” she asked. Her voice was softer now. “The men have split up. They’re all searching. Did you see your father?”

“The beach,” he blurted out. He felt as light as he did on top of the surge tank. He could say anything. “I looked for her at the beach.”

His mother nodded. She gazed out past his head. She pressed her hands together like she was praying, but she wasn’t praying. Olaf took her arm, the bone under her nightgown under her coat, and led her back to the house.

Not until he shuffled her to the table—slipped off her coat, pulled out the cups for tea, put the kettle on the stove, slid her tobacco in front of her so she could roll a cigarette—did he realize that he knew where his sister had gone.

He walked outside and grabbed his bike, turned to see his mother standing in the light of the doorway. She looked afraid.

“Olaf,” she cried. He liked her saying his name. He started to pedal down the path and she called it once more.

He pedalled to the main road that led to the surge tank. The ladder was on the other side of the tank, facing the ocean, so he couldn’t see Ralph even if he looked.

The men were combing the shore. Olaf strained to track their voices. The loggers called out for his sister, then for him. His father led each call then the other voices joined in. The shouts trailed off and all the men stood silent as they waited for a response. Their bodies were still, silhouetted like paper cut-outs against the ocean’s



tumble. The woods absorbed the echo. Then the men began calling again, sway of lanterns etching the trees. Olaf imagined running down to show them he was safe—he'd throw his arms wide and announce where Greta had gone, spill the news like light. His father's face would lift, smile, he'd nod as if Olaf had made her appear.

He jumped off and pushed his bike to where the woods thinned. The men were small, visible only between the dark columns of firs. In the mist rising from the ocean, their lanterns bobbed like small floating moons.

They were nearing the surge tank. Light swung up against its surface. Someone had begun to carry a lantern up the ladder. Olaf dropped his bike and pushed his way past the trees.

Ralph was still holding on.

Olaf wrapped his arms around his chest, rubbing his hands up and down to get the blood moving. He saw a man rising quickly up and up. He shivered when he realized the climbing man was his own father. It was strange to see him chart the same height that Olaf had climbed, his father's body so high and yet shrunken against the expanse of white—a man crouching down to join a boy's game. His father's strong steps would shake the rungs. Any remaining birds the boys had kicked to the edge were going to fall from the top of the tank.

The birds were dead already. Olaf was not responsible for the birds.

Ralph had managed to climb down to where the ladder ran vertical but now he had stopped. He was waiting for Olaf's father.

Olaf had seen his father climb this high many times before. His father could reach this high or higher each time he rigged a new spar tree, climbing it and then topping it and wrapping the guyline confidently around the tree's tip as tight as a noose. When he climbed a spar he'd wave down at Olaf from the top and then sit down to have a smoke. And even when he sat on the flat top of the tree without his belt roping him to it, even as he perched with nothing to hold him to the trunk's quivering height that ran straight down to the ground that lay solid under Olaf's feet, his father tipped his hat to Olaf and so his father was attached to him and would not fall.

Now his father was hatless. He did not turn to wave. He climbed hand over hand and reached another man's son.

His father was up there plucking the boy's fingers from their tight grip on the rungs and wrapping the boy's arms around his shoulders. From the ground Olaf could no longer see Ralph. His black shape had disappeared into the man's so that they moved as a single body.

His father used to hold Olaf like that, when Olaf was a little boy and had fallen asleep at the camp and his father had to carry him home. If Olaf woke up, he'd find his arms and legs wrapped around his father's chest like a baby possum's, and he'd pretend to still be asleep so that his father wouldn't put him down.

From the ground Olaf could no longer see Ralph, the boy's back scraping against the ladder as Olaf's father carried him down, the weight of his body awkward in the man's arms.

Ralph was going to be quiet when he got down, feeling his boots on the beach. He wouldn't say what Olaf had done to him, not right away. But there's a look a child gets when he has something good to tell, when he knows something valuable that an adult wants.

Olaf biked away. The woods swallowed him. He was heading toward the Jap houses, his bike rattling over branches and rough ground. Then he thought he heard music, something like a fiddle. Yes, a fiddle—and one high-pitched voice. He scanned the trees to see where the sound was emerging, but the forest offered no clues. No one lived out here, not anymore. He had no idea who could be playing music this far from the camp. It got louder as he neared the shore, rising up from the ocean with the wind.

He reached the face-house with two chimneys. Every window was lit. The building listed toward the ocean like a beached boat, squares of light doubled by a rippled reflection.

The tinny music was coming from a radio. No, it was a gramophone, because the tune warped slightly as the record spun. Someone had cranked the volume so high that the windowpanes shook. His heart was pounding against his chest. The house's slanting walls seemed too fragile to hold the sound.

Then he heard Greta's low rocking voice. Her singing slid left and right of the tune. She flitted by the glass. The flames of oil lanterns followed her wake. He dropped his bike and crept up to the house, watching as she swooped back and forth across his view, alone, a flash of blue that appeared, disappeared, dancing from one end of the kitchen to the other, her hair a swirl of light around her head as she leapt from a stool into the air.

He pressed his face to the glass and felt the beat of the music the way she would, the pulse vibrating his jaw.

She landed in a heap of blue satin. He had never seen anything like that dress. It was not hers. Lanterns flickered all around Greta, on the table, the counter, the floor. The robe covered her body like a tarp, spilled over her feet, shiny blue with red images of houses and people and enormous curving fish. She grasped the satin, then she was up again, swooping around the kitchen in this robe that skimmed over the jerky quickness of her limbs. As she brushed past the table, a sleeve caught at a rice bowl and dragged it to the table's edge.

The bowl didn't fall. Greta swayed her head back and forth to the vibrations of the record, her mouth slack. Her singing had no words, just those sounds that meant nothing, her low voice flooding this house where she didn't belong. The family that had lived here had been lined up with the others, bussed out, without a chance to pack their things.

Greta reached her arms up and spun in place. The robe twisted at her feet. Its long red tie whipped a lamp. The robe was going to catch on fire. He banged at the window. The latch was jammed shut.

She kept dancing. He ran around to the other side of the house to reach the door.

The night air rushed in as he entered the room. Greta stood still. She didn't jump or call out. She stood with her back to Olaf. He couldn't see her expression, couldn't tell if she knew it was him. The record kept turning. The robe had corkscrewed around Greta's legs.

He walked toward her. He thumbed the lantern to the middle of the table, the bowl away from the edge. There was another bowl lying mouth-down on the counter, the shards of a plate on the floor. The cupboard doors were open. Across the table she had shaped letters from grains of rice.

"Greta, it's me." He tugged at the robe. She signed something to him, but the sleeves covered her hands. He felt her fingers flicker against the satin.

She spun from his grasp, climbed onto the counter and tore open a box of crackers, waving it in front of his face like some toy she had stolen and wouldn't give back.

*You left me*, her lips shaped the words as she stuffed crackers into her mouth. She swayed her head side to side.

*I was there,* Olaf signed.

*Gone,* she signed back.

*I was there. It was you. You didn't see me.* But his hands were small and tight: even his fingers didn't believe him. The music stopped—vinyl crackle and static. The kitchen was white with silence. Then the roar of water as the ocean hit the shore.

She said something, but she kept eating and the crackers muffled the shape of her words. His stomach clenched at the sight of food, but he wouldn't take a thing left behind by the family. Through the bedroom door, he could see another lantern. She'd left records strewn across the bed. But the white shirt was still hanging in the bedroom window. He slipped a bowl from the counter and put it back on the table, slid the other bowl to meet it. The clink of china rang out as the two rims touched.

*Gone gone gone,* she signed, shimmied down from the cupboard and traipsed around the kitchen with her hands forming the words wider and wider. But she wasn't upset. She was grinning now. Olaf would like her to be upset. He would like her to sit down.

*We could stay gone all night. We could sleep here.*

"We have to go home." His voice cracked. "Mom is waiting for us."

*Gone gone gone.* She spun around as she signed.

She swooped past Olaf again and he grabbed her waist, expecting her to squirm against his grip. She collapsed into his chest. He held her leaning against him. He braced her weight—if he stepped away she'd slump to the floor. "I'm here," he whispered. He mouthed the words against her cheek. She was breathing fast from the dancing, but she let him hold her, the way one of the camp whiskey jacks will step forward to peck at a palm full of seeds. Under the slick satin he could feel the familiar rough nubs of her sweater.

When he released Greta, the warmth of her body fell away from his. She stepped free of the robe, letting it drop to the floor. He bent down to pick it up, walking into the back room to place it on the bed, folded on top of the records. Two of the records were chipped, another had been cracked. He hoped it wasn't Greta who did it. He couldn't tell which broken parts were new.

She watched him shut each cupboard door in the kitchen, the flat warm sound of wood on wood. One by one he blew out the lanterns. The rooms shrunk. Greta took his hand and swung it as they walked out the door. The music in her arms bothered him. When they reached his bike, he turned to check the house. The windows were dark. He let Greta sit on his seat and he stood up to pedal. When they had almost reached the logging road he began to get tired and he remembered that she must have ridden her own bike to the Jap house but it was too late now to go back. Her hands gripped his waist and the bike rocked with the effort of his legs as he followed the narrow track his wheels had left.