

The Meadows

David Aichenbaum

If You Were Sixty Turkeys

Slim lives with his two children on a crumbling hill. When he walks down the hill, its dirt, and pebbles, and stones roll with him, and when he drives, even more so. He watches over his brown turkeys. He watches over all his fields, browned by the early frost. From his hill he watches over the town, Trial. Trial's a circle laid flat, people and houses, their crumbling lives. Slim's missing sixty turkeys.

Slim and his children and hill and turkeys live on the southernmost arc of the circle. His porch faces north. He stands there now with a bruised right heel.

He rocks slowly back. His bruised heel feels mushy, plump and thick like mud. He looks down on Trial. The small town fits almost in his gaze when he stretches his stare at the corners. Main Street to the northwest. The meadows at the center of everything, they're still called the meadows, and at the center of the meadows the radio towers, six blinking, buzzing, steel-rung monsters. Houses are east and north and south of the towers. Victor's mansion's in the southeast, neighbor to Slim.

Victor bribes the town each Thanksgiving. One turkey per family. Victor, when he materialized some Septembers ago, conjured up towers from the public meadows. No one was happy. With conciliatory turkeys, Slim's turkeys, Victor made from the old unhappy Trial a close-to-happy Trial of his own. He's meant good business for Slim ever since. Missing sixty turkeys. Where do turkeys go?

Slim likes his farming life and likes to think he makes a good job of it, cooping the turkeys at night, loosing the turkeys each morning. There are fences around the fields and troops of sunflowers for shade in the summer. Slim likes to see his turkeys happy. He keeps twelve

coops with sixty turkeys apiece. Each night, he wrenches down twelve sliding steel doors. One by one, the doors lock with a clack. The sound, the clack, means the day's all gone. There weren't any turkeys in Coop D this morning. The door was down and locked.

It's time to drive Amanda and Pat. School's to the north. He loops around the center and the towers, keeping west, avoiding Main Street. Amanda sits in back, looking queasy. Her eyes are closed. She's a pretty girl. In a few months, she'll get her license and he'll see her less and less. She's older than Pat. She could've sat in front, should've, but never does. Slim and Margaret used to drive the kids together. Margaret always sat in front. Pat sits in front now, looking proud and young, his shoulders sharp and proud like his mother, Margaret.

With Margaret, Slim had problems being strong. He worked like a man but couldn't be strong in the house. He had to go out to be strong, and when he went out, he cheated like the man he knew he was. Margaret was sharp and proud. She was a doctor who knew the right way to live. It was hard for Slim to be strong and carefree around someone so sure, someone who thought he was wrong when he didn't know it himself. He gave in to evade her sharpness. She left him for better people.

Turkeys can see everything. Turkeys can straddle a hill with their blond-tint spurs and their major caruncles dangling, fleshy and engorged with blood, and because their eyes are set to the side they can process all things important with nothing but a glance. Today, Slim's missing sixty turkeys. It's strange to be missing so many. To wake up, sip brown coffee, lose a whole coop, and how, and why, and whereto? It isn't the morning he wanted.

His children kiss his cheek. Bye, Dad. Bye, Dad. Ask good questions, he says.

Home again, on the porch again, Slim misses Margaret. It'd be nice to hear Margaret

behind him. He misses in the abstract. It'd be nice to sense her around. To see her and touch her, less nice, because it's possible he'd touch her wrong, and she'd let him know. The sun's higher, maybe too high, cold air. He decides to track down his turkeys. He'll track them down. He'll drive them home. First, he dresses. He straps on denim jeans and a belt to keep them up. He zips up his light fall jacket. He steps into a pair of boots, bruisingly new. He ties the laces snug.

Slim's ready. He walks out, down the hill. The grass is cold and hard and crackling. His bruised right heel feels mushy and plump in the damn bruising boot he bought to feel like a TV man in a commercial for jeans. But the boot turns his foot into two separate things, the bruised back half and the healthy front. The healthy heel--it's missing like sixty turkeys. Walking feels like walking with three feet. Having a missing heel adds on a foot instead of taking away. It's like when they take out a tooth and your life gets harder and heavier but the truth is you're lighter. Everything's missing, everything's adding on--the heel, Margaret, the turkeys. He has to track them down.

The road's unpaved. There's tire tracks deep in the dirt where cars and trucks came through. There's only one lane. Fall colors are out and pleasant for now. The colors are crisp and clean. The leaves will have to fall soon. Slim hates to look at an empty tree. To look at an empty tree is to remember the falling leaves. How they fall just the once to be watched, forgotten.

His father farmed Christmas trees. One year, his father shipped Christmas trees, evergreens, out to Oklahoma. In Oklahoma, shrubs were Christmas trees. Bare-branched shrubs were Christmas trees in Oklahoma. No one bought his father's Christmas trees. No one in Oklahoma believed his father's evergreens were proper Christmas trees. Oklahoma was missing

Christmas trees and no one cared and only his father knew it. Slim worked with his father after college, he wanted to help, but the business was failing, and his mother, she told him, get out before it hurts you too.

There's a turkey feather in the road, crossing the tire track, a plank. It's large, striped and wild. Slim picks it up, gently. Not so long ago it had a life to protect. Slim smells it. It's got some turkey smell, still, but not a lot. Turkeys have empty-happy heads, and that's exactly how they smell, Slim swears it, but the smell doesn't last. It gets filled in. This feather smells like ice cream. Slim's got a good nose for smelling. His mother had a good nose for smelling. He's his mother in many ways. Growing up, he was always with her, but then he left the business like she told him, and his father, feelings hurt, would see him only on holidays, and his mother, a wife longer than a mother, followed her husband's lead. When she died, there was more of her for Slim than there had been just before. There was no way to find and touch her to make her less.

Slim walks faster now. Left, healthy, missing, he pounds. Left, healthy, missing. The dirt's packed tight and hard. The walk's a short walk. Most walks are short in Trial. He can ice the heel tonight.

There's an ice cream shop on Main Street. B&M's Ice Cream. *B* stands for Becca and *M* stands for Michael. There's always talk in the town that Michael's too much of a problem husband to keep. He's only warming the bed for Becca. He's only keeping place because *B&* isn't much of a sign on its own. But Becca should find a respectable letter. Everyone knows what Michael is and everyone knows that Michael's clueless about ice cream and keeping a shop and being a good husband. Everyone knows Becca and Michael's son, Martin, and Martin's a cripple, and it's got to be Michael's fault, not Becca's. She's always making things so right. She

crafts the cones like you wouldn't believe, the ice cream roundly rolled, perfectly stacked.

Michael's to blame for most that goes wrong in Trial. The flu--it's Michael sneezing into Becca's good ice cream. School parking lot under ice--it's Michael they find with skates, waiting for dark. Fresh brick walls blocking the entrance and exit to the corn maze--it's Michael, laughing, mortar on his jeans.

Slim pounds down Main Street. B&M's at the end. It's almost noon and life's looking quiet and still. There's an American flag swishing up high on the pole in the square. Before the towers came, everyone knew the flagpole, a landmark. You could see it from far away, the glinting gash of silver and sun, its wide, rippling colors. In class, children could see it. They'd pledge their daily allegiance, flat hands and flat voices. Now, the towers, they're so much taller. They're always blinking for attention.

Becca's behind the counter. She's small but stands straight. She never touches the counter, that's how straight she stands, and behind the counter she stands straight and sells ice cream and waits to sell ice cream unblinking. She's a level, loyal thinking woman, so different from Michael. Slim and Becca were once very good together.

Inside, there's a sweet, salty ice cream smell. It's heavy in Slim's nostrils and on his tongue when he breathes in. Photographs of cows, carvings of cows, kindergarten sketches of cows. Black and white wallpaper with circles and ovals are made irregular and cowish with slow, swishing lines. It's Slim and Becca there. It's Slim, Becca, and two turkeys gazing out from the far-left corner, like the corner's a sun-shading sunflower. Plumes, soft and brown, motherly. Big birds. Dumb, sweet birds. Feeling safe. They'll learn to keep happy wherever you leave them.

"Slim," Becca says, "are these turkeys for me?"

“How’s Martin?”

“It’s a nice thought. I guess. I don’t know.”□

“They’re not for you.”

“Oh,” Becca says. The cow-clock above the counter dryly ticks.

Slim’s very straight with Becca. They were strong together once. Slim could be strong with Becca when he couldn’t with Margaret. Becca, too, was sure of what she wanted, but she told him softly, and there was more than one way to be right about getting it. With Margaret, there was only her way. But Slim and Becca were sometimes weak together. They stopped being strong and right. This was a different kind of strength, the strength to not do what shouldn’t be done. They acted together like weak people do. They were weak together after he married Margaret and before Amanda was born. Amanda made Slim and Becca stop what they never should’ve started, and Martin came next, and Pat came after. But then the children grew up. Slim and Becca started again. Margaret saw them and left. He ended it there. Becca wanted more, but he couldn’t give it. Margaret was gone. Michael, if they stopped, would never need to know.

“Where’s Michael?” Slim says.

“Upstairs,” Becca says.

“I need to talk to Michael.”

“That’s fine,” Becca says. “About me?”

“About business.”

The back stairs are small ascending faces of wood curving up. Slim’s boots are big and the steps are narrow. Slim feels the weirdness of his good and healthy toes, of his plump and muddy heel. It’s strange that Becca and Michael and Martin all live above their shop. Their

lives are stacked, kept vertical, like Becca standing straight behind her counter. Slim's life is spread over fields, acres. It stretches and yawns unchecked. It crosses the brown fields, goes all the way up to the fences, three rows of wood planks. The planks are wired together, interlocking chain-link chinks with gaps in between just large enough for a turkey head to poke through, inspect, retreat. They're domestic turkeys, too fat to fly. They're brown this year. It's prettier to eat a white one. Brown pigment from the feathers leaves a blemish. Margaret loved her brown hair. Margaret had dandruff. Slim could never bring himself to tell her. Three rows of wood planks weren't enough to stop Margaret from leaving.

Michael's sitting at the kitchen table. It's a clean apartment and the counters are clear and uncluttered. The floor's a pretty light-grain wood. The chairs, table, and couch all rest on anti-scratch pads. The furniture seems to float just a little. Sitting, Michael almost floats at the kitchen table. He's a thin-armed man with a sad, full belly, drooping and loose and shaking full of crumbs. He ran the half-mile in high school. He ran the mile too. He loved the half-mile best. One race, he ran so fast he crossed the finish and his feet kept whirling on. They whirled off the track and down the hill. He whirled with his feet and rose above the earth, just a little. Slim ran on the team with Michael, one year behind. He could never go so fast.

"Have a seat," Michael says. "I stole your turkeys."

Slim sits at the round table across from Michael. It's a small, white table. It'd be good for a family of three. Good for cereal breakfasts, easy lunches, quick-fix dinners.

"Where are they?"

Michael shakes his head. "I stole your turkeys and I'll tell you why. Do you want to know why?"

"I'd like to know."

“Margaret left you for a reason. I know the reason. I’d take her to get even but she’s already gone. I can’t take your daughter. I’m not that bad. She’s a friend to Martin. Anyway, you won’t tell Crowley, Police Chief Crowley. You aren’t the type to tell.”

“How’d you get them all out?”

“U-haul. It took me seven trips.”

“You think I won’t go to Crowley?”

“You won’t tell.”

“Where are they?”

“They’re around. You can start with the two downstairs.”

Slim goes downstairs. He goes back behind the counter. He touches Becca’s hand in a signaling way. He calls Crowley. Crowley comes and flips on the sirens when he parks for half a second. Crowley’s not very useful. His job, summed up, is to keep an eye on Michael, but he’s always missing something. He likes Slim. Slim can’t say why. Crowley brings Michael down. “Turkeys?” Michael says, “What turkeys?” Crowley loads Michael into the back of the squad car. Crowley sits in front. Crowley flips on the sirens for half a second, and then the tires spin and cough, and gravel spits out, and then the tires catch gravel and push off. Crowley drives Michael away.

“What’s all that?” Becca says.

“I’m missing sixty turkeys.”

Becca never moves from behind the counter. They share butter pecan ice cream in a waffle cone. Becca seems all right, not confused, not upset. If she loves Michael, she doesn’t know to feel it now. But maybe later she’ll miss Michael, miss him always, and if she does, she could make his absence into a presence, invariable, his presence not sitting upstairs, but with her

always, never moving.

They sit for a while. It feels mostly empty. Slim starts missing Margaret. It's a strange thing. To be in company with Becca, the woman he missed when Margaret was his, and now to miss Margaret. When he touched Becca behind the counter to give her the signal, to signal her into him, he really meant to make her his. But now he's missing Margaret. It's almost three. Becca says she'll close now and pick up Martin and Amanda and Pat all together. Then she'll drive and drop Amanda and Pat off at Slim's. Then she'll stay, and Martin will stay, and they'll all eat dinner together.

Slim leads his two turkeys home. It's not a long walk. They're slow walkers but they make good companions. They're domestic turkeys and too fat to fly. Slim's right heel feels mushy. He loads the two turkeys back into Coop D. It's a big, empty coop for two turkeys to be in alone. Repopulating the coop, it's a big, empty task. It's a fresh, sour start to get back to nothing new, nothing that hasn't already been.

Slim's very tired. He sits on the porch and looks out. His stare gets smaller until there's nothing but just ahead. He closes down and locks his eyes and imagines in the shade of his jutting down vision the final dropping clack of a too-long day. Missing fifty-eight turkeys. He waits on the hum of her tires.

Through the glass turning into his driveway, Slim sees Amanda driving and Becca smiling, teaching, and Martin and Pat sitting in back. Amanda will drive very soon. But this is too soon, and she's driving too many, and once she starts she'll leave him for good. But Martin can never drive a car. He's not a bad cripple though. He can walk and seem almost normal. His depth perception's very bad. Throw a football at Martin and hit him everywhere but the hands.

No, Martin can never drive. Becca and Amanda aren't often together to learn to drive or anything else. They see one another at the ice cream shop where everyone is. Slim takes Amanda and Pat on Thursday nights and Becca's always nice about it, kind to Amanda, treats her like a daughter.

Amanda parks too crooked and she's laughing through the glass and through the glass Becca's laughing, no no no, back it up back it up. Then they're all inside, still happy. Slim, in the cabinet, finds a box of fruit roll ups. Who wants? Slim says, and everyone does. Then the kids are away to the back. Slim's on one side of the counter, Becca the other. He's by the sink full of un-stacked and un-scrubbed dishes. Becca looks around. Slim senses her thinking it's dirty. It's cluttered. It's not the way it should be.

It all feels strange to have Becca here. Everything feels wrong now that Margaret's away. Seeing, images are blurry or bright or too big. Talking, words budge too slowly or slip too quickly, rush out like butter kernels through fingers pinching down. Missing strains his thinking. Think only of me, missing says, and seeing's obstructed, and speaking's obstructed. Nothing feels the right way, the way he remembers it felt once, it must have.

"What did you tell them?" Slim says.

"Let me do those," Becca says.

She comes close and faces the sink. She runs water and adds dish soap. White water brims in the sink, her arms deep in doing work. If Becca were Margaret, Slim might have held her sides and dropped his hands under her shirt to the soft hipbone grip. He might have pulled her back, a suggestion, and driven forward his own hipbones until all their right parts were suggesting together. But Becca's no Margaret to him. For her to be here, he realizes now, adds on like missing turkeys. Slim could do all these things with Becca, but it wouldn't be right. That

feeling of missing in him, growing, would brim the wrong way. She'd always feel the size of it. She'd try to erase the missing feeling. She'd always try and never manage.

And what if she started missing Michael the way he misses Margaret. Then they'd each be rough to the other. Then a scab from scratching, red and bitter. Then picking the scab, peeling it off, erasing one another for having failed. There'd only be more to miss. There's already more of Margaret than there was before she left. There'd be more of Becca than there was before. There'd be more of knowing what he might have had, twice, and what he'll never have again.

"I have to coop up all the turkeys," Slim says.

"How long will that take?"

"An hour or two."

"Do you have anything in the fridge? I'll make us some dinner."

Becca washing his dishes, making his dinner. Slim sees her thinking, sees the notion growing, here's a fresh family for her to have. Here, there're fresh people to move about herself, always around to be moved, and always around, she'll be free to remember or ignore each one, or all collected as one. There'll be another time to reach out and touch them if she doesn't want to now. They aren't going anywhere.

"You don't have to do that," Slim says.

"I can make something tasty."

"I'm feeling like you shouldn't be here."

"You invited me."

"It was my mistake."

"Go get your turkeys." She's still washing the dishes. She's doing the same work with

the same tight circles, waxing. Soapy spots creep high up her forearms.

Outside, leaves are red and falling bloody. Separate forgotten things. Slim's fields are more hilly than flat. One acre swells up into the next, then crumbles down into a third. Waves of rolling land gained and lost. There's high green land in the close-by distance. There's a fence between each plot. Slim comes from behind the fat brown turkeys and talks them home. That way, turkeys. That way, turkeys. Sometimes they listen, hop ahead, skip to the side he wants. When each plot's clear, he latches the fence to the plot behind. He counts the turkeys into their coops. It's dark. He wrenches down the steel sliding doors, hears twelve steel clacks.

Did Becca finish dinner? She might've left with Martin, but no. It's still in her mind to be with him. It always has been. Isn't it so that Michael followed Margaret and Martin Amanda? Not the other way, no. There'll be chicken, all he has. There'll be chicken and potatoes. There'll be breadcrumbs on the chicken, eggs and flour. There'll be placemats, forks, spoons, knives, all arranged and ordered. Maybe she put on music to keep the cooking bubbly. Maybe she put on an apron. Are there any aprons left? Maybe she cleaned the kitchen. Maybe she put the dishes in the cabinets.

The kitchen's dark, a note on the island--took the kids out to eat, call if you need to. Slim tears off a stream of paper from the paper roll. He wraps it around an ice pack. He sits on the porch and ices his heel. A bruised heel takes its time. It'll be with him long enough. The rising, slinking smell of skunk. The dim porch light. Distant shapes of fences behind fences. Something brown moving toward him, larger, happy and fat, waddling home. Iced heel would wait. Fifty-seven more.

Fence

Six radio towers, high, unearthly. They seem to rise slanting. The eye, Martin thinks, can only see straight so much. Long, taut wires truss each tower to the ground. The sign's powerfully white hanging from the high barb-tipped fence, the towers on one side, Martin and Joe on the other. NO ENTRANCE BEYOND THIS POINT: Radio frequency fields at this site may exceed FCC rates for harmful exposure. Martin draws back a few steps. Crisp cold frost, crackling underfoot grass. The air's all imagined humming, quivering cancerous waves. Joe presses up close, nose to the sign.

"Ha Ha Ha," Joe says. "Look at this. Harmful exposure, it says. Ha Ha Ha." Joe laughs like someone hammering. Each Ha drives Martin down, hammering, and then a pause to lift and reaffirm its grip before the next.

Joe takes out his phone. It's a fancy phone, touch screen, sleek, shiny black. His father bought it for him. They've a strained relationship with two ways in, money and shouting. These are Joe's father's towers. Martin's jealous. Flipped horizontally a keyboard materializes, flipped vertically a keypad with numbers.

"Deserves a picture." Joe leans back, frames, squints, clicks. "We have a winner." He sizes up Martin. "Let's get closer. We should get closer. Can you climb this thing?"

"Barbed wire," Martin says. Cerebral palsy. It means he walks with unsure feet, a jerking newborn toddle. The difference, his he won't grow out of. Winter weekends, Martin plays wheelchair basketball in a league. A three-hour drive to Pittsburgh. Summer weekends he runs the mile. He runs a slow steady mile. He holds a special record.

"Just a bunch of little prickers. You'd do it well enough." Joe raises the phone. A healthy looking specimen, Joe, brawny and broad, never dull. "You think I could throw it to the

top?” Black and compact. Joe tosses it hand to hand. Weight turning over, the surface flings back an instant gloss of sunlight.

“You break it and no kidding I’ll cry,” Martin says

“You see that big one? I’ll climb it before I leave.”

The towers are of all different sizes and shapes. Martin likes to think that life was different and better before they came. People threw Frisbees and brought blankets and made blades of grass whistle by blowing. He remembers his father making blades of grass whistle at the end of a day on a blanket and the neck he hugged when walking home was too long. Now, the largest tower swaggers, in the middle of the pack, heads taller than the rest. It ends in a barbell dock extending over the sides. Martin sees Joe sitting on the dock a mile high. Flashing his teeth. Swinging his legs. He’ll start at the boarding school after Christmas. Choate in Connecticut. Joe, there, would learn to be smart. Joe’s father would pay. Joe in Choate. In-choate? In-cho-ate? Meaning something like lacking order? Malformed. Martin keeps a journal of words, back pocket.

“You know what in-choate means?” Martin says.

“Hmm?”

“Inchoate.”

“Yeah. That’s the place.”

Joe’s eyes are on the tower. Does he see it slanting? Maybe he sees it as it stands in truth. Strong. Straight. Is there anything weak in his life?

Joe clenches the phone at his side. His white fingers clasp the sleek, shiny face. Strong white fingers. Blood bullied back. His father, the bully, inside and out. The watching, bossing blood of his father. Everywhere he goes, it follows. Is that what he’s clenching? This phone,

his father's gift to him, holding him? His father's fenced off towers visible from miles off, off in the background, quivering always. Then the white subsides, relaxes. A decision in Joe.

Something different.

"I'll teach you how to climb a fence," Joe says. "I know a good fence. Ha Ha Ha."

Of course, it's the Jenner fence Joe chooses. Amanda's not home. She's still at dance. Back soon. Thick brown turkeys waddle past, eyes scanning. A small one stays close to watch. It's not a good turkey for eating. It still has some time though. Light leaving behind cold. The radio towers blinking distant red. Mercury beads shine red at points along the sides, steady and blinking, fending off planes. Cancer waves. Safer back here. How many chain-link fences between you and them before waves keep their hands to themselves? The turkey rolls its neck, blinks, shakes its head.

"Don't mind him," Joe says. He leans against the fence. His eyes check the driveway. "What you have to do is get a grip. Wedge your foot in good. Yeah, put your foot in. Hold on to the top first."

The upper fence comes equal to Martin's shoulders. He grips the top board and works to wedge his foot into the open diamond chink, his left on the ground. The earth's hard under the grass, stony if he falls. Scattered turkey shit too. He's used to falling. Go limp. Go limp and no reaching to land on impact. The open diamond chink stays unmoving, an easy target. He sends his foot forward but offline somehow. He lands it feebly to the right. Then high. Touches high again, feeble. It's a failure to adjust. The chatter-gossip of metal chains sounds against him at each missed mark. The diamond chink shudders, in and out, no longer still.

"Take a breath," Joe said. "Go in slow. Don't rush it."

Martin slows himself. This is the slow-struggling work he knows. There's sometimes something strong--he makes himself believe--in the everyday work of his no-fix body. Each complete step. Never consider what he might accomplish with his better-spent time, his effort and concentration. Never compare. Not a contest. Only keep doing. Teach his pencil to run with the letter shapes he envisions. Teach his eyes and then the key to enter deep into the lock. His feet, somehow much less a part of him, are always the hardest to train.

Finally, his wedged-in sneaker touches down in the diamond chink.

“Now swing up and do the same with your other.”

Joe demonstrates. A swift, fluid swinging up. A moment of weightlessness crossing the top beam. The hurdling of his strong legs. Then, swiftly, Joe's over the fence, dusting his hands. The turkey, excited, hops forward and back.

“I'll stay on this side to help you down. Do what I did. Try not to think yourself out of it.” Joe faces the driveway. “Hold up, here they come.”

A Taurus approaches flatly, slows, wheels past them and parks. Martin turns to look over his shoulder. The fence holds hostage his wedged-in sneaker. Out pops his foot, the sneaker wedged in. Cold creeps through the sock, cold grass, poking. Two doors open, first Slim and then Amanda dressed for dance in black tights and a green puffy coat. Slim's still limping and barefoot. He's been all around town the past few weeks, naked feet, collecting stray turkeys. Phone rings. Turkey in the post office, eating stamps, help, quick. Barefoot, running, comes Slim to the rescue. Slim's Amanda's father. Martin's father's out on bail. Innocent till proven. No proof, he says. Turkeys? What Turkeys?

Joe waves. “Hey, Mr. Jenner. You got them all yet? Hope they get bigger.” The small turkey rolls its neck. Joe hops the fence and, dusting off, offers to shake.

“What’re you doing, Martin?” Slim says. Slim’s a hard man to figure. He has a thin, dry voice. He’s rarely warm or cold to anyone. Eccentric without realizing he is. It’s not a bad thing. It saves him from boring.

“Climbing a fence,” Martin says.

“It’s all about technique,” Joe says. “Given proper technique, there’s no reason Martin shouldn’t be able.”

“Oh?” Slim says. Shoulders hunched, feet naked, he looks at Martin’s white-socked foot. Martin and Joe follow, looking down. Slim’s toes are deep in ankle tickling grass. Lifting his bare right foot, he raises it knee high and rubs gruffly his instep, heel and toes. He does the same with the left. “Come in a minute, Joe. I’d like to show you ... kitchen sink ... something going on, sink-related. You’re good with sinks?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Doesn’t matter. Come in.”

Slim leads Joe trekking upfield to the house. The turkey follows. It hops as far as it can. Amanda wriggles Martin’s wedged-in sneaker side-to-side. It comes free.

“They’re talking about me. Don’t let the cripple climb the fence,” Martin says.

“He won’t say it like that.” Amanda looks cold and pretty. Her tights are very black. Her brown leather knapsack--she carries it with her always--rides her back like something holding on.

“Where’s Pat?” Martin says.

“I don’t know.”

“Shouldn’t you?”

“He’s always with friends.”

“Joe wants to climb that tower.” Martin points. “The big one. He’ll do it before he goes.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Climbability? Could be an issue.” Martin scans the grass. He sits and aligns his sneaker and foot. Slides in.

“Joe’s leaving for sure?” Amanda kneels, her knees together. Her black tights stretch. The fabric, spread thin, shows skin at the knees. She evenly crossed his laces, tight jerk, double knot.

“What’s-its-name agreed to take him. Choate in Connecticut.”

“Some people talk like they’re leaving but never do. Some people talk like they’re leaving just to hear you tell them no.”

They’re quiet at that. Martin’s father talks about leaving more often than not, but still, here he is, stealing turkeys. Amanda’s mother’s gone. It’s not clear why. Amanda wants out, Martin knows. That’s the reason for the knapsack. Wearing it, she feels closer to that day, her last day here, up and away.

Ducks in a V butting south through the headwind cut over the blinking towers. They’ll return next year as mutant ducks. Neon beaks. Neon beaks to match neon flicker-in-and-out signs. OPEN, flicker, OPEN, flicker, Peking Duck. Duck has a brown fatty taste. Nice meat. Too expensive.

The return of Slim and Joe. They come downhill in an easy half-jog followed by the jerking, toddling turkey. Joe has long strides. Slim has quick bare feet, quick off the ground. Who would win in a foot race? Give Slim some shoes, lay down a finish line. Slim was a runner once. And he’s still young. He married young, had Amanda young. He’s winning the genes

race. Amanda's pretty. She'll go quick too.

"All better," Slim says. "I thought it was worse."

"It turns out I'm handy," Joe says.

Joe's very strong. Anyone can tell. Hard muscles deflecting eyes. Muscles shaping his shirt. Joe would win easy in a fight if not a race. And maybe boarding school can make him smart. His father's smart enough to make his money and keep it. That's something to build on. Inchoate. Had Joe ever answered? No. No, he hadn't.

"I have to take in the turkeys," Slim says. "Want to help?"

"We've got places to be," Joe says. "Amanda's coming too."

"I still have to shower. It'll be awhile," Amanda says.

Joe's got no answer for that. The picture of Amanda showering, dance sweat washing down.

"Well?" Amanda says.

"Come over to Joe's place when you're done," Martin says. Amanda won't say no, she never does. It's her way of living un-scared.

"Yeah," Joe says. "My place."

The walk to Joe's. Downhill's a problem. Martin walks with Joe's shoulder. When Joe leaves, he'll have to find another shoulder for downhill walks like these. Shoulders come and go. Sunlight fading. New ducks shuddering high in the headwind, an inchoate V. When was the last time he ate duck? New York City with his grandparents, cherry confit. Mother's parents, in and out of his life. That taste, still with him when he wants it back, bound and brown, thick brownish cherries, whole and warm.

Boarding school in Connecticut. Joe never answered. Doesn't know. It's just a word.

There are words in Martin's back pocket, some he knows, some he pretends to know. It's a musty, brown notebook with a sloppy, loose spine, snug in his jeans' cheek pocket. Then downward he misses, wrong step, too steep and sudden to catch himself. Saved, shoulder. Joe's house looms large and bright just ahead, flickering lanterns, a slate gray gate.

"Want to know?" Joe says. "In case you need to get in sometime? One, two, four, eight. Doubling is how I remember. Try it. That's the side entrance anyway. I only use the side."

Be fruitful and multiply. Martin punches in the key code, mute keys, no beep, just the gluey click and release. A moment. Computing. The high gate whirrs open.

Too much house to keep track of. Martin hears music, jazz, faintly ringing. Wide russet hallways, high chandeliers. Also a movie theatre, an arcade, a bowling alley. The throaty stirring saxophone call, faintly ringing, the 1-2-3-brush-brush-brush, sifting cymbals. But these are the back hallways where living happens, where maid Margo rules vacuum pushing and laundry laundering and disciplining sheets.

"Of course, he didn't tell me, my father," Joe says. "For the senator-to-be, probably. Bet you there's hors d'oeuvres in the kitchen."

"I'll be in your room."

"You want me to bring up a plate?"

"Only if you want."

Joe has a big, soft bed, nine pillows in plump rows of three. His first night over, Martin slept in the bed. Joe took the floor and eight of the nine pillows. He likes two to prop his head, one to hug, one to clench mid-thigh. He uses the rest when the others turn warm and flat. Joe likes the face-feel of a fresh, cool pillow.

Walk-in closet. The light comes on of its own. Hanging striped shirts. Sweaters are folded and stacked. Red and blue ties. Shoes are in cubicles. There's a punch-code safe. One, two, four, eight. Inside, there's a leather case, and inside the case, a watch with a crisscross-print leather strap. Martin tries it on. Limp, loose, it hangs off his small-sized wrist. He puts it back. Papers stand flat against the safe's dark side. One's folded, sharp, on edge. Martin unfolds it and reads and reads and folds it again. Joe won't be going to Choate. He pulls his notebook from his back pocket and opens it. He claps the notebook on the paper's sharp fold, slips it in his jeans' back pocket. Away from the closet, he sits on the window ledge and waits, on edge, senses the bulge of the many stacked pages, bound cover and back, beneath him, the sharp folded paper.

Joe enters led by a silver platter, spread like a book wide open in front. He reads off to Martin the hors d'oeuvres. "We've got mushroom caps stuffed with something over here. Kobe sliders. Crab cakes in the middle. Cranberry potato cake with dipping sauce. Flaky thing with spinach. No mini hot dogs."

"I'll pass."

"Yeah? That's more for me." Joe rests the silver platter on the bed. He downs a slider in one chin-thrown-high bite. "Have a spinach thing at least. Grow big and strong." Joe raises and tightens an exemplary bicep. His shirtsleeve swells.

"Big strong Joe toughens fence-stymied Martin. Muscle man Joe. You know your shirts don't fit?"

"Don't they?" Joe the shirt stretch as one.

"They come a size larger. I promise you."

"Let's take these out back," Joe says, silver platter. "It's feeling like a hot tub night."

In the hot tub, his back to the jet, fast, frenzied bubbles climb Martin's spindly spine. Joe across from him, gulp, demolishes a crab cake. Joe flicks water bubbles. One pops. Ha Ha Ha, he laughs. The hot tub's on the patio over the pool and the lawn. Looking out, there's a stretch of black, bending woods.

"Amanda isn't here yet," Joe says.

"You want Amanda," Martin says.

"I do."

"Soon you'll be gone."

"Oh," Joe says. "I'll always be around. No school can contain me."

The hot tub bubbles switch to quiet and off. Martin sits listening, quiet. Car sounds leaving. Party pulling away. In the kitchen, stacked silver platters. Servers lax and loose in kitchen corners with black, lapsed bow ties, black and dangling. Their backs un-straight, not serving, realer now. Pretence untied.

"You're definitely going?"

"Hmm. Pretty certain." Joe starts the jets again. Surfacing bubbles storming.

"Was it hard to get in? Probably not so hard if your dad helped out. Did they send an acceptance letter? I wouldn't mind getting an acceptance letter from somewhere."

Joe flicks a bubble. He eats a spinach puff. He works his tense chewing slowly, muscle-tightened cheeks. "No, you know. They just said come if you want to. That's what they said at the interview. It's my choice, basically. Whatever's the best thing for me is what they said."

"That was nice of them."

Only mushroom caps are left. Behind Martin, a door opens. It sounds sure of itself. Not Amanda. Joe downs the mushroom whole, chews once, eyes bug, leans from the hot tub and

spits, in one spurt, the mouthed-clump to the pavement. He looks past Martin, face daring.

“Did you have a nice party? Thanks for inviting me,” Joe says.

“Slob.” The voice is Joe’s father’s. Legs follow the voice, storm close, strong behind and above Martin. No acknowledgment. No looking or greeting. The man never does.

“Your mother and I are coming in. We don’t need your dirt.”

“You could say hello to my friend,” Joe says. “Hi, Martin. Nice to see you.”

Joe’s father flicks air with a fresh, fast towel. He drapes its crisp-folded lines over a lawn chair. “Clean up and get out.”

Martin, spindly legs, climbs lukewarm and feeble from the hot tub, slipping past and inside alone. He watches through the pane. Joe says something he shouldn’t. Father and son butt strong, unsettled bodies. One kicks the silver platter. It tumbles, strikes frothing water, sightlessly sinks. Mushroom caps, uneaten, stud the water’s surface, seething.

Martin goes to Joe’s room. He’s dripping. His clothes are still outside. He puts on Joe’s shirt and Joe’s pants and balls heavily his now-off boxers, wet in the sink. The gate opens at his approach. It’s dark, cluttered climbing, lit dimly by distant red, blinking. He’ll never top the tower, not Joe. He has to stay. Nowhere to leave for.

Martin remembers his notebook. The sharp, folded paper. In his pants. His pants by the hot tub. Safe enough. Joe won’t think to look.

Martin meets Amanda halfway. Knapsack. He turns her around and explains, walking, with his hand flatly on her shoulder. She’s wearing her good jeans. Not in Choate, not accepted, but that just means no rush. None at all. Means Joe can take his time with her. They walk back the way she came. He, her shoulder. She’s very careful with him. She’s never careful with herself. He feels her caution very strongly. He feels all the ways that he’s always blocked, and

all the ways that Joe has it open. He'll never have anyone who's more than a shoulder.

Martin sees Slim sitting in the distant yellow porch light. Slim, alone, rubs his bare, brown feet. The turkey fields are empty.

Blood Drive

Blood drive as scheduled but what's to keep watch over? School gym? Nice hardwood court? Get on out, scuffer, no leather-soled shoes! Say it in a last-word voice. Well, here I am so there's a need for me. It follows. Now, he, Link, wears the security guard coat out, about, for the very first time, starchy black pants, rubber black boots. Coat has a scratchy neck. He hasn't noticed, practicing at home. Maybe if he snips the tag. There's a wood-top table and an Asian woman sitting by, clipboard in hand. She has a clipboard flat chest. There's a second table opposite. On it are juice boxes in neat-freak lines. On it are blueberry muffins. A bandaged donor, sitting, squeezes her box. Weak purple juice, upswings, upsurges, purpling the straw.

Asian women are all way doable--so Danny says. Here's one not doable even a little. The lone undoable Asian. A sour skin look. Looks as if some grey sluggish blood is slogging round her veins, her capillaries, whatever tube it is, cycling blood. There's a good question. Someone here would be sure to know. Or one of these pamphlets could tell. I'll have the sweet and sour chicken, hold the sour. Danny at Shangri-La. Funny. How Danny could twist up language, lemons from lemon juice. Not quite it. Something lemon. Lemon something.

Link feels very sorry for the poor undoable Asian. To do the undoable. Danny would like that. Maybe Danny would like that. So what if Danny does or doesn't. Too much time thinking of Danny liking this, liking that. Link, really, is doing her, the undoable, right now, practically. Imagine all the space out there. Consider Pennsylvania. Six hours to drive across. Yes, time too. Just imagine the drive from home to here. Then think of how close, now, this moment, his is to hers. Ten feet? A zipper or two? Shouldn't that count? In his big black watch boots, accomplished, he feels his face feel friendly. Approach.

"I'm the guard," Link says. "I'm new"

The Asian woman sniffs. Her nose is raw-red and crusty. Rapid fire sniffing. An empty tissue box loiters, lightweight, litter at her side. She lays the clipboard flat on the table. Clipped on is a schedule with only one name scrawled large at a slant.

“The guards always seem to stand by that door,” she says, signaling. A cinderblock props it open. Outside, surly, red-gold leaves scuttle past.

“I can do that,” Link says. He adjusts his broad black duty belt. Hard metal buckle, deep snug fit.

“Here’s a walk-in now,” she says. She readies a second clipboard, a pen. “Just stand by the door.”

By the door, Link stands. To stand inside or outside. It’s warmer in the gym than out. But inside he feels very large, ungainly in his big-foot boots. He feels all eyes watching. Feeling eyes, he checks. The woman isn’t looking, is prepping clipboards, sniffing. Though really there are, speaking practically, a number of eyes in the gym eyeing him, all of them, even when they aren’t. The gym is, what, a hundred by sixty? And eyes don’t look up much. Monsters and murderers and spies always striking, down, swooping unseen from above. Take height out of account. Think of all the time and space in Pennsylvania compared to here and now. Eyes watching him a whole lot more than they’re watching all that. Asian eyes, white coat eyes, bandaged donor eyes. What exactly is he guarding? He wouldn’t mind eyes watching if he knew. He’d put on a guarding clinic. Eyes would surely blink.

Got to be he’s guarding the blood drive. Maybe the donors. They get so weak losing all that blood. If he were a good donor guard he wouldn’t allow it. Not worth the risk to give. Say they can’t get the needle out and you just keep giving. Wind up a dry squeezed rind, lemon. Lemonade from lemons, that’s better. Or say they just nick the vein going in the first time, or

capillary, which is it, and then they have to keep poking that needle around, keep nicking the vein, or capillary, until they've nicked whatever's there into nothingness, chipping away, and then what have you got to show for it? Massive chunk of your tube driftwooding off. Bleed out. Never liked the bleeding inside problem. Underneath seeping. Bleeding life through without knowing.

Could be he's guarding the gym. Could be he's guarding the gym, yes, blood drive the antagonist. Say they scratch up the floor, lots of tables, always a problem. Get on out, blood drive table, no leather soled legs! He should keep inside if so.

But could be he's guarding the gym from the outside in. Could be protestors. Might not like the idea, leaching out blood, pumping it in somewhere else. Like vaccinations. Like Frankenstein. Alien bits stitched ragged together. Question of race. White blood going brown and vice versa. They say it's pretty bad that way, Pennsylvania. They say that. Bad that it's happening, some say. Bad that they say it shouldn't, some say. Could be he's meant to guard from the outside in. There'd be fewer watching eyes so close in any case.

He steps out. Across the street is a softball field. A high school girl stands flexing knees at home plate. She faces the backstop. She tosses up a ball and coils and swings. The ball clanks high metal then drops, limp, rolls homeward back a few feet. She repeats with another. Doesn't make much sense, though, acting guard where no one is to guard or guard against. Gym could withstand a softball swatted astray. Backstop doing the job in any case.

The girl, swinging, missing, swings herself around, sees him watching. She pauses, shakes her head and hair. He makes to look past her. Keeps her in sight. She gathers the balls now, he sees, restocks, glancing back his way, leaning low to pick each up. Shorts in the cold. Nice fit. Very doable. Too young but doable. Pretty face. Mother loved his face. If the grass is

green, fuck it. Not quite. Something to do with grass and fucking, something grass, grass something. Yes--if there's grass on the field, play ball. That's what Danny says. Green's got nothing to do with it. Makes more sense without the green. Have to be something wrong if you bend down to her grass and it's green in the real. Doable. Doesn't seem to count as much outside as inside, doing. Inside, you're doing even when you're not. Outside, not doing even when you are. Could be standing right next to her but outside seems like it should hardly count. Could be doing her on the pitcher's mound, no mound, softball, clipboard flat pitcher's ground, but outside, open, so much open-ended space. Have to fight your way through. Need a real real big one. Eight inches.

Approach. She's still leaning, picking.

"Mind if I hit a few," he says, behind.

She glances back, still leaning. This girl is very fresh to see. Some girls are so fresh. Good she isn't giving blood. Best to keep in all that freshness. Though say she wanted to. Could do his guarding duty then, dissuade her. Might be too young to give. If there's grass on the field, mow it. Version of the first. Danny would like it. Maybe he would. The point being it's better shaved. That'd be nice. Less grass. Tickle your nose off, some grass could. Junior High from Steven, how Steven's brother's friend's brother went down there, first time, and what a patch of weeds, sharp too, sprang out pouncing, a thorny bush jack-in-the-box. Not even kidding. Scratched his white eye red.

Funny how terrible things like eyes poked out are always waiting ahead. All got terrible things waiting. Day will come. And as soon as you meet it another day gets growing. Could work backwards. Could be there's this terrible thing, has to happen. Has to happen so it switches everything we think of as coming before it to work out in some certain way. Could

flow backwards. Or could be that the normal things following the terrible things cause the terrible things. Like how after Mom finished herself in the garage he was good for nothing. Could be had he acted good for something she couldn't possibly have done it. How could she have done it if afterwards he acted like she hadn't? Should have acted good for something. And isn't that more how they think of it anyway? If only he'd been a better ... gift on Mother's Day ... and so on.

What'd he ever do for her? Guess his pretty face did something. She loved his pretty face. Said she knew from the day he was growing inside. Knew just how he'd shape out. The face he'd fit. Saw all of him, she said, how he would grow and eventually not grow. And every year, growing and not growing, prettier than ever.

The girl's nose is spanked-bottom-red. In shorts. Her thighs are pinkly cold.

"I've seen you before," she says. She straightens.

"Yeah?"

"You're always with that other one."

Danny always saying she should have done it better. No imagination to end in a garage. Everyone who ends it ends in a garage. Or if it has to be a garage, leave the car out of it. Use a power tool. Something like that. Hates his name. Same name as everyone. Wants to be Link. In name only.

Such a small thing to do. Basically done so many times before. All the times she was in the garage. All the times the car was running. All the times the windows were down. All these times so close to each other, happening. So little was different. Just the three bunched together. Not Dad's fault. Everyone knows. Everything he gave to keep her all right. That leaves Danny. That leaves him.

“My brother,” Link says. “Not always. Not today.”

“I can see that.”

The girl bounces a softball but it doesn't bounce. It thuds dirt and rolls. Rolls to Link, Link's now.

“Hey, let me try that bat,” Link says.

“You should be guarding something.”

“I am. I'm guarding. Let me ask you a few questions.” Link sets his jaw in a guardful pose. “Are you a protester or anything?”

“No.”

“Mean any harm to this gymnasium?”

“No.”

“The people inside?”

“No.”

“You work for the blood drive?”

“No.”

“Thinking of donating blood?”

“Not this year.”

Too young to give? How to be sure? Check her for grass. Too late once you're down there. Guess you just assume it. Terrible things out waiting for all. A fact. Some terrible thing bound to get him later. Means something he does now will give him away, gift to the terrible. Maybe if after the terrible he acts all right then it won't have meant a thing. Means he can do it now, pay for it later, later act like he hadn't and then the paying won't have counted.

“Your shoes have leather soles?”

“Look for yourself.”

She slow-turns. Her back to his front raises one white shoe. Sole spread, spread for him, alone. In his grip, he takes her foot. He scratches the sole. Rubbery white. Holds on. Half grounded, she stays as is, face to the field. A sunless sweep of cold, surprising, lifts her shoulders.

“So,” Link says, “can I hit a ball?”

Very close, inches between them. He rises breathing. The fall winds scatter softball dirt, grassless, driven dryly one way then back. Can’t figure which way to fly. Dizzy dirt. Direction no matter. Best wait for the end to grow and settle. Pretend that all went right when it does. Right where he wanted. Her foot is in his hands.

She’s a good kind of girl to let him have a swing. Doesn’t laugh much when he misses. But surely sees his power. Amanda does. Says her name is Amanda. Amanda Amanda Amanda. Try to remember. Sees his potential. And seeing, desiring, says yes straight off, yes when he asks, yes she wants to walk.

She opens the flap-gullet of a brown leather knapsack. Like feeding a beast, an underhand offering, she flips the softballs mouthward. Then up she comes with the full bag cradled, something precious. She puts it on her back. Rests the bat on her shoulder.

“I know where to go,” Link says. “I know a secret spot.”

“Close by?”

“Kind of close by.”

“Let’s stay around here.”

“All right. We’ll sweep the perimeter.”

They circle the gym. It makes for poor sight seeing. The building, concrete, feels nothing. Not the breeze that dizzies dirt, not the veins inside spiked for bleeding. Hills he sees are green and brown as always. Danny would hate it. Hates everything not new. Hates everything not said or done in some new way. Say Link took this girl. Danny would hate it. Not to say this girl's been had. But other girls, by other men. And then there's the fact that she's almost a woman, and women even more than girls are bound to be had. And every time in just the same way, the out sliding in, the in sliding out.

"It's funny we never met," Link says. "Around here is a small world." All the space in Pennsylvania compared to here and now. Yes, all their lives they met, meeting without meeting. "It seems to me we've almost met."

"You either meet or you don't."

"We wouldn't have except I'm trying to be better. I'm trying to, you know, greet people. Be more friendly."

"Aren't you usually?"

She taps a marching beat, wearing shorts, lightly slapping her left-right-left-right thighs. Lucky. They're there for her whenever she wants. He can touch his own but what's the use? Thick and hairy. Shaved them once, years ago, but Danny came in. Danny saw his leg up foamy white. Sweeps of cleared new skin. Danny called Mom. Mom called Dad. All had their laugh. The hair grew back. There was the time she ended in the garage. Who knows why, but his hair quit growing. It was strange to be smooth. Smooth again. Lasted a couple of weeks.

"I'm friendly inside," Link says. "You wouldn't believe. The friendly bits of me got packed away somehow, wrinkled deep. Hard to unpack it all."

"I've been packing for years but that's because I'm getting ready. I'm leaving after

school ends.”

“Where to?”

“London. If I can get there.”

“You look like a traveler, the knapsack.”

“I’ll take it with me when I go. Two more years.” She wriggles her back under the bag. She adjusts against something digging in. “I’ll leave the softballs here.”

Means she’s what? Sixteen. Funny how when you’re sixteen sixteen’s allowed. Now he’s ten years ahead and that sort of thing won’t stand. Wouldn’t it be better for a young girl to be with a guy who knows a thing? Some experience. Ten years. Years should count for something. Life supposed to get better with age. Make your mistakes own up. But years of growing and now he can’t do what he could have years before. Should have done it then. Can hardly remember what he thought like. Younger. Suppose he must have been scared to try to ask.

“This is a nice walk,” Link says. They pass the propped open door, again, third time. Link glances. Juice box, muffins, Asian, sniffing. All’s well. “Walking with you. You’re good to be around.”

Link keeps his hands wrapped up. Keeps them riding his backbone like someone important. He’d hate for her to think they’re the type to take advantage. Hate for her to think he has brushing hands. Brushing to gain. He’s not the gaining type. He should tell her. He’d be satisfied with one for life.

When his hair came back, it came back angry. First time in a life he had to shave each day. He decided then that for every grown girl he knew, he would ask. Marry me? You? You? I’m not kidding. His asking was angry. No one knew how to take him. They thought it was

grief. They thought it was his way to beat himself through. They said to take some time. He would have done it though. Been happy to. Been happy at seventeen with any girl for life. His hair outgrew it. He shaved every other. Got used to the idea. That his mother was where she was, downside underground, or upside somewhere floating, but outside either way. And he was here. Just here.

“What’s this secret place you know?” the girl says.

“It’s not far.”

“In the woods?”

“Kind of in the woods. Kind of not in the woods. Ten minutes that way.” He points north.

The town lies to the south. Those towers to the south. They tell you where you are. Wonder how people got around before they came. And what would happen if the towers came down? Directionless heads set adrift. Forget which way is which. Like people all wrote cursive with feathers and now they write like monkeys, like monkeys with sticks, with sticks if they write at all.

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-six.” □

“Which makes you really thirty-four.”

“I’m twenty-six.”

“Take me to your secret place.”

They cross the softball field, jog down a hill, hop two fences, cut through three yards. In the last, a beagle’s baying and then not baying and then licking the girl’s ankles and up on its back legs sniffing the girl’s middle and her pushing it down, not a fan of dogs, it seems. A good

guard, he steps in, plucks up the beagle, tells her to get clear and she hops the next fence directly and he puts down the beagle and follows her, it following, baying, baying behind the fence, he hops.

“You don’t like dogs,” Link says.

“I like little dogs all right.”

“Beagles are little.”

“I’ve never had a dog. You learn to like a dog when you’ve had one yourself. I have turkeys, my family. I learned to like turkeys.”

“You’re the turkey farmer’s daughter?”

“Yes.”

The year his mother ended in the garage, the turkey farmer, Thanksgiving morning, delivered a turkey, massive, twenty pounds at least, all cooked. Dad took it, and thankless, thanked. Behind the closed door, Dad wasn’t happy. How can he tell I didn’t cook my own? I could have cooked my own. What would we have done with two cooked turkeys?

“My dad knows your dad,” Link says.

“How?”

“Yours gave us a turkey once. Cooked and everything”

She stops at that. She rubs her elbow. They’re in the woods now. Half-buried tree roots, wormy. They break up the earth. Dark. In a halo of peeled-bark dogwoods. Lost leaves and bark flayed. And not just once but everywhere on every tree, the pain like scabs hanging off.

“I’m sorry whatever happened happened,” she says.

“Who says something happened?”

“Dad doesn’t give away turkeys for anything good.”

Link, against dogwood, tears bark from the tree. Could tear it in his teeth, animal teeth. He feels toothy. Tearing, he leaves a cleared strip behind where weak bark grew. Maybe now it won't grow back. But it will. It will. It will cover itself with new grown bark, pretend this time never was. He never came to rip it with toothy fingers snatching away.

“It was my mother who died but it's been awhile now.”

“That's a terrible thing.”

“It's been awhile.”

“I'm sorry. It must have been terrible.”

Girl was some very young age. Minus nine equals seven. That's why she doesn't know. Around here, everyone old enough knows how it happened. Garage. No one forgets. But she's young and can't know because she wasn't told then, protected from death talk, protected on her turkey farm, protected and sent of course to some grandma the next town over the days the turkeys lost their heads until she grew to learn, and so she was protected from news, dying news, and who would tell her now? Who would tell her something so old it doesn't matter?

There's no telling what you'll do and what you won't until the way is open. Mom liked to say. Mom was beating batter, Link on one side, Danny the other. They were small. Link hugged her leg. You find a wallet outside the market. Five hundred and an ID. Will you return it? Yes, Link said. Yes, there was a clear right answer, an answer his mother wanted, so yes, he said, yes, I know I know, I'll give it back. But you can't know, Danny said. You can't know until you do it. And even once you do it you can't know. Maybe the next time you'll do it different. She bent and kissed them both. Her mouth pressed big on Link's cheek. Her mouth knew everything. Yes, I think that's right, she said. You never can know, can you? Then she thought so long she missed Danny dipping a finger, sucking down batter, raw.

“It must still be terrible,” the girl says.

What you know lives inside. You have all of what you know. Some other has some of what you don't. Meet them, and they put some of the some of what you don't know into what you do know and now it's inside. It's yours now. He can put it into her, this girl, what she doesn't know. He can do that for her. They can trade. Trade his insides for hers. Even young, she has something he doesn't. They can swap into the spaces they're missing things the things they're missing.

“My brother found her,” Link says. “In the garage. He told me what he saw.”

“What did he see?”

There's sky above the dogwoods. It keeps going, lighted, like there's something big behind.

“There was a chemical smell and he thought it came from her eyes. Her pupils were blue like polished toenails. They looked so strange. There was nothing left beneath.”

Old now. Girl knows about the turkeys. Her grandma the next town over, probably dead. Died somewhere. Not a garage but somewhere. In bed, say, with brown blankets tucked tight to hold her body holding nothing. Girl probably saw her dead grandma's face full of nothing. Or if not the grandma, an uncle, an aunt. She knows about the turkeys. Can't live on a turkey farm and not. Stay locked up all day, shades drawn, and still you'd get the sense. You'd hear the machine that takes their heads. The quiet when it's done. And sure enough, she's against him. And he's against a dogwood. Her hand is between his thighs, lifting. Her lips are open. What will he do to her? She wants to know. Is this his secret place? Is this?

Garage

Danny walks his father, Grant, to work at Barney's Auto Repair. Grant likes to say he's second in-charge, but let the truth be known, there's only him and Barney. That makes him last in-charge. There's no room for moving up in the workplace. Danny hates to work minus a workable next step. He's had a few jobs that took him nowhere. He left them where he started. Barney uses his father but his father doesn't see it. Half the world uses the other half. Half the time the used-half doesn't notice.

There are days so nice that Danny can't take it. He gets jealous. There's people living the niceness better than him. They're making picnics with bread and cheese they bought with money they earned. They're making talk with people they want to talk to. Today's nice and unpleasant, both at once. There's a strong breeze. It just started with spring and already spring's moving on to summer. Of all the four seasons, spring moves the fastest. March means it's cold and May means it's hot. Spring, just waiting, springs forward out of April. That's all it needs. It economizes.

"Link's doing good, don't you think?" Grant says.

"He's Link," Danny says.

"It helps for a person to have a job."

Danny packs his chewed gum in an old receipt from his pocket. He drops it behind him. He starts chewing a fresh stick. "I'd like to use the garage."

"What for?"

"Some office space to make it official. Sure, I can meet clients wherever. I could use a place for files though, set up a computer, a phone, you know. Hang a calendar on the wall."

“Building up from nothing is hard. You could find yourself a regular job. Link says he has a girl. You could find yourself a girl.”

Link won't tell them who. Danny plans on knowing. It's a small town. He'll find her soon. He almost steps on a bird, a little brown one, plum-sized body. It darts to weeds and safety. Not all there. No healthy bird would let you step so close. “It's all right if I use the garage then?”

“I didn't say. Not yet.”

“You really think you need it?”

They stop outside the auto shop. Dead cars in the lot. One's missing its grille and bumper, another its hood. They're awfully self-aware-looking, sad, these cars. They have reflecting headlight eyes. For the son of a mechanic, Danny knows very little. He can fill a gas tank. This always seemed enough. He doesn't have a gas tank to fill and the same goes for Grant and Link. They're strictly a by-the-foot family. For business, need be, he'll ride a bike. Through the window, he sees Barney checking his watch. Barney, as always, wears a grease-streaked bandana-hat.

When Danny's mother died, friends, acquaintances, strangers brought cheer-me-ups. They brought cakes and casseroles and flowers. Barney brought a power buffer for polishing car exteriors. Thank you, his father said, said it to one and all, thank you, really, thank you. The callers brought gifts to use Danny, Link, and Grant for cheering up their own worries, to settle their guilt. Giving, they made sure they weren't in need. They stationed themselves above, and Danny, below, had no choice but to slice the cake, to microwave the casseroles, to notice, one day, that the flowers were dying. Try out the buffer, Barney said. It's nice, isn't it? You see. It imitates the polishing motion of your natural buffing hand.

Danny's father sold the car. He switched jobs and found work as painter that didn't pay. Barney took him back. His father liked to be alone. He liked to stay away from the parts of her death, and Danny and Link were two. Danny saw it. He was being used through disuse. His father built a space away from Danny and Link who were too much a part of her story.

"We'll continue this later," Grant says. "Want to meet for the walk back? Around five?"

"I do."

At home, Danny sets up the garage office. There are leaves, more and less intact, from a series of Octobers swept to the corners. The garage smells like leaves. There are webs without spiders. Danny wraps his hands in trash bags. He slashes webs and moves dirt around. The power garage door is dead so he hoists it up. Lighted, the space looks not half-bad. He'll make a rugged can-do business out of it, like the restaurants that never finish their ceilings. All their pipes run uncovered to the places they're going, out in the open. He can center a desk in the back, put a nice chair behind it, something leather. He'll get an old lamp with a shade. He'll get a few file cabinets. He'll find two chairs for his clients, non-leather. He'll roll out a circle rug.

There's an ad in the Tribune, Nancy Reiter selling a desk, and another, Bob Brightly selling a tall standing fan. Danny likes the way Bob advertises. He spaces his words, uses a confident font. Danny can advertise in the paper once his office is all set up. For a price, he'll offer any service a client can think of, walk a dog, watch a kid, mow a lawn, sure, but also the funny stuff that people need done but won't do for themselves or don't know how. Deliver bad news, scratch a back-itch, make a non-stick omelet. Danny's full of small skills. He can juggle. He can ride a unicycle. He won a macramé contest in high school. There's a market for miscellanea.

Danny calls Nancy and then Bob. Delivery included, prices talked down, it comes to forty for the desk, fifteen for the fan. Danny finds eighty in his father's sock drawer. He takes the calendar from his room and a thumbtack. Each month pictures a natural disaster--fire, flood, volcano. In the garage, he tacks it to the pegboard above the hanging hammers.

Bob and the fan show first. Bob doesn't have a five. He has a ten and three ones. Danny pays twenty and settles for the three, for now. He plugs the fan into an extension and holds its head to the floor, whirring, and walks from corner to corner, blowing leaves and webs and dirt out the front. Then comes Nancy in her Civic. She opens the trunk, calls for Danny to help. Danny signs one second. He stands the fan, still on, in the corner. Years ago, Nancy babysat for Danny and Link. She was thirteen and Danny was seven and Link was five. They, the brothers, wrestled in superhero underwear. Nancy stood on the couch and officiated.

"I've got the drawers," Nancy says.

"And the desk?"

"I could only fit the drawers. I didn't have delivery in mind. You'll notice the advertisements nothing about delivery."

Danny and Nancy carry a drawer each to the garage. They stand them on their ends by the fan. Nancy's tall--she played shooting guard in college. She liked to plan out her future when she was thirteen and babysitting. She microwaved popcorn and Link and Danny stepped back and opened their mouths, and fading away she shot the popped corn, and sometimes she made them, and Danny and Link chewed, and she talked out her future--where basketball would take her. She was one of those girls who planned to play with the boys at every level. Junior high, high school, college, professionally. These days, she coaches the girls-team at the school. Danny had a crush. For her, he wrestled in underwear, underwear he selected to charm. And for

her, he couldn't lose. He was older. It always upset him when she sided with Link, cheered him on, the underdog. She liked Link better. Link was little and cute. Who would she cheer for now? They're all different people. But what matters most is what happened first--it turns on and off the rest. Danny could use some sandpaper to file her down, scratch away the growth and the new skin and the fat in certain places, rub until she's thirteen again. She could do the same for him. She could rub him back to seven. She could take his side the way she always should've.

"Do you like the drawers?" Nancy says.

"I have mixed feelings," Danny says.

"You're upset about the desk. I'm upset too, believe me, and I don't know how we'll get it here. I could have used the money.

"I could have used the desk."

"Yes, but my debit card was compromised. I called the bank and they said it was compromised. I asked since when, and they said the sixteenth. I asked who did it, and they said they couldn't say. I asked what the compromiser used it for, how much, and they said their knowledge in that arena was limited. Do you want to pay me half?"

"Twenty for two drawers?"

"I'll owe you one."

"What kind of one?"

"A big one."

Danny gives her the money. This, he thinks, is sound enough business. It's about systemizing give and take. A system, cycling, keeps people on track. She'll owe him the desk, maybe more. A truck pulls into the driveway. It stops short of the garage. It's an old Chevy pickup. The front metal's a shaky brown and its gray-blue body sags low. If it's painted one

color, it's debatable which. It beeps twice, wants to come in, and Danny knocks on the driver side window. Link rolls it down.

"You like her?" Link says.

"Who?" Danny says.

"My truck. We can name her. I was thinking Elmira."

"You don't have a truck."

"Hi, Link," Nancy says.

"Tell my brother he doesn't have a truck," Danny says.

"He might," Nancy says.

"Carl, the bus driver at the school, he was getting rid of it," Link says. "He's always driving that bus, he says. He hates driving. He couldn't find a buyer. I thought, here I am, truckless, might as well. Five hundred. That's all she came to, so I can make that up in a week, and just like that I bought her. Give me a second."

Link parks the truck in the garage. The door swings open and hangs down, the metal too heavy for the hinges. Link's black boots step out first, and then the rest of him. He wiggles the door back into its frame. He checks the tires for pressure. He pats the fuel tank. He licks his thumb and rubs the side-view mirror to wipe out a smudge. Link's doing better, it's true. He wanders less. He combs his hair back. The job's one part of it, and the girlfriend he won't let them meet, she's another.

"Look at the calendar," Danny says. "Look at the drawers. They belong in a desk. The desk's on its way. Also a desk chair, and a rug and a lamp and a phone. This is all my office. There's no room for a truck."

"What's the office for?"

“Business.”

“I talked to Mr. Upland. He needs a new guard. Me and you, we could guard together. The job’s half-stupid, it’s true, since as far as I can tell there’s not so much in need of guarding. That’s the problem. But making money is nice.”

“You call him Mr. Upland?”

“He’s my boss.”

Nancy says it’s time to go. Her dog needs food. Danny remembers the dog, a Shepard mix with only three legs. He met her once. It was a few years ago. People all over were misplacing their wallets. Danny wanted to market a wallet with a beeper. You can call a cell phone when you lose it. Why not your money, your credit cards, your ID? He made twenty out of duct tape and punched a hole through the top left corner of each. Making it beep on demand was a problem. He tied on twenty bright pink ribbons. He went door to door. You won’t have any trouble finding it--the ribbon, it’s very bright, he explained to Nancy. She wasn’t interested. She made him lunch and they sat out back by the creek. Her dog sniffed and hopped for fish. She loves fish, Nancy said, she likes to watch them, she likes to pounce and splash, I’ve never seen her catch one. Danny touched Nancy’s hand. She let him for half a minute. She didn’t respond very feelingly. He picked up his beer and she stowed the hand he’d been holding in her pocket.

“Nancy, you decide,” Danny says. “Who gets the garage, Link or me? That’s fair. You think it’s fair, Link, don’t you?”

“Fair enough.”

“Walk with me,” Nancy says. She heads to her Civic at the bottom of the driveway and Danny and Link follow. She hugs them. She hugs Link a little longer. She opens the car door.

“A garage seems like a sensible place for a truck,” she says. “Could you use it as an office? Yes, I suppose you could. Anyway, come visit me, you two, whenever you’re free. That’s an open invitation.”

She leaves. Danny packs his old gum in a leaf off the floor and drops it in the truck bed when Link isn’t looking. The truck doesn’t belong in the garage. It’s too big and the walls press together around it and the ceiling crushes down. His mother’s car was very small. It had only two doors. Holding his breath, he found her in the driver’s seat. It was down and back as far as it reclined. He leaned in to make sure, but it was, it was her, she was gone. He turned off the car and powered open the garage to clear out the fumes. Fumes rushed out, sunlight rushed in, and her wide-open eyes were deadly blue in the light, pretending life. She was always afraid of eyes. Danny and Link played zombies. They rolled their eyes to show the pink underneath. Stop it, she said, she hated the sight, and when they wouldn’t stop, she tricked them. Zombies can’t roll their eyes, she said, they’re dead that way. Death for Danny became the moment you couldn’t roll your eyes, and zombies became people with undead eyes they couldn’t close. In the sunlight, he closed his mother’s eyes because she couldn’t.

“I’ll give you the garage if you tell me,” Danny says. “Who’s your girlfriend?”

“I really can’t say.”

“Dad won’t let you keep it here, the truck, if he lets you keep it all, which he won’t. It’s more than a garage to him. I won’t give it up for nothing, and unless I talk to Dad he won’t give it up either.”

Link kneels and pinches the front right tire and listens up close. He moves his ear over the rubber to find the leak. “I think they’re losing air.”

“Is it Nancy?”

“You promise to talk to Dad?”

“I promise.”

“All right. It’s Nancy.”

“It’s not Nancy.”

Link lies on the floor, his ear to the downturn of the tire.

“I’ll find her,” Danny says. “When I do, I’ll talk to Dad.”

Danny walks to the auto shop. He’ll get there early but he needs to be somewhere. He’ll tell his father about the truck, prepare him. When Danny found his mother, he closed her eyes, and then he let her lie there. He let her lie where she was. He walked to get ice cream but didn’t want it once he bought it. At home, there were police lights flashing and an ambulance with no one to save. His father and Link were waiting outside to tell him before anyone else. They wouldn’t let him near the garage. Then the funeral, and cakes and casseroles and flowers, and one electric buffer, and his father sold the car, fresh-buffed, to a woman in Ohio. He couldn’t stand it in Pennsylvania. He hated to have it close.

Poultz

Grandma rattles her cup of tea and misses the saucer. She looks at Slim, son-in-law, his back to the walk-in cupboard and the handle of the cupboard. Can't be comfortable if it's digging in. She imagines his hand fiddling behind him. She settles her cup.

"A shelter for wayward girls?" she says. "Is that what I am?"

"You don't want her?"

"To visit, yes. To hug when she comes, to hug when she leaves, to hug these hugs in the matter of a day, of course."

"She'll go off with this man--I told you about him. She'll run away is what I'm saying."

The way Margaret ran from Slim, from them all. Now Grandma hears from Margaret, her daughter, next to never, and Amanda hears from Margaret, her mother, not much more. Desertion is all it amounts to. To desert and to be deserted, left empty on both ends. No knapsack on a stick. Not an adventure. Just silence replacing the people you love.

So Slim sends Amanda to Grandma for the summer for Grandma to fix. Grandma takes her in, the prospect of history repeating. She doubts it's necessary. Not like the time she fixed Cora, her niece. That was serious, so fond of eating and eating then flushing the masses of food coming up, pocking her teeth. These days they're whiter than not. Cora's problem as Grandma diagnosed it then was undigested thought. Never a good thing to be thinking too much. Better to weave yourself a pattern and live it unquestioned. Grandma was once very good at that.

Last Wednesday, outside picking tomatoes, she got to wondering. She was always wondering now, her mind wandering, seeing so many tomatoes she'd seeded once and loved, dropping and touching earth, prey to insects. Is that the best way to plant a tomato? So near to buggy ground? There must be a higher method, maybe a tree, maybe a way to hold up the vines

as an overhead garden, on a platform, and then there'd be more space, more tomatoes to harvest. You wouldn't have to worry over available footage at ground level, an overall surge in productivity, think of all the years I've been losing tomatoes and if only I'd known a better way, we make so many mistakes, just from misunderstanding, when the kids were kids I used to think Twizzlers and licorice were rivals, like Pepsi and Coke, remember how I always favored licorice, intensely loyal, one day I couldn't find it, I never could after, where did licorice go, only Twizzlers, I suppose there's no harm in that, but so many other things I've been thinking of wrong, I don't even know which, where to start, no, but geography, Holland and Denmark and Switzerland and Sweden and the Netherlands and Norway, Finland, oh, I'll never know, which is where, which means what. Oh God. Oh God.

"Let's coordinate our schedules," Grandma says, their first breakfast together. She sets a platter of silver dollar pancakes at the center of the table. She sprinkles powdered sugar on the pancakes, on the platter, on the table. The round wood table now resembles a pancake. It gets hard to flip a pancake when you spoon in too much batter. Silver dollars are nice that way. Easy to flip.

"I don't have a schedule," Amanda says.

"On Sunday I go the movies. Tuesday I twine my wicker baskets. Wednesday is tomato day. Thursday I read. Friday I do crosswords. Saturday I go to the market."

"What about Monday?"

"Monday, that's my personal day. Monday I keep for myself. I have to ask that you go off on your own on Mondays. I'll give you the car, go wherever, see anything you'd like. Come back, but not before six."

"I could lose my permit driving unsupervised."

“I drive alone and I’m legally blind.”

“That’s not so good either.”

“Keep on the lookout for trees.”

On Monday, Grandma waits, restless, as Amanda packs a lunch of cheese and crackers and a banana into a plastic grocery store bag. She knots the top.

“That’s all you’re taking?” Grandma says.

“It’s plenty.”

“I won’t ask where you’re going. It’s your private day as much as it’s mine.”

“I appreciate that.”

How strange it must seem to her, Amanda, Grandma thinks. Surely, she arrived expecting to be safeguarded, day and night, the project her father envisioned for her here. He didn’t account for Mondays. Amanda must be asking inside, who is this, my grandmother, a woman so irresponsible, so clueless, or perhaps she doesn’t ask at all, just takes what she’s given and moves her life along. Wonder where she’ll move it to today? Probably find the boy, man, whatever he is. Slim called him Link, what a name, in his twenties. I did that, I remember, it was so long ago, someone much much older. He said he wrote children’s books. Loving him was like living my future ahead of myself, like stepping into a preview I wasn’t meant to see. It was a good thing. It’s a thing that can be useful, honestly. It might even keep her close in the long run if she thinks this Link is worth her staying. No, it’s nothing like Cora. Cora needed a person to change her and fast.

“You can drive a manual?” Grandma says. She gives her the key. “Of course you can.”

Amanda looks broken. Her whole day turned backwards. Remember how she used to scream, threw fits you couldn’t bear, no end, until eventually they did. But yes, that proves it.

She plans to see him, Link, the one I'm meant to keep away. Imagine what they'll do. Pass the time. How many hours before mine comes? Bruce. Hope he remembers his pills, little blue. What would happen if I took one? End up hard in my toes, my fingers, my thumbs, stiff for hours, pent up, no release, have to twiddle it out, twiddle twiddle twiddle. There's not much of a memory on Bruce. All likelihood he'll forget, bring a rose instead, gardener that he is, sweet, but what you can do with a rose, put it in a vase, watch it wilt. I've watched roses wilt. Their smell gets big and sad.

"That was a joke," Grandma says. "The car's an automatic. I can't drive a manual either. Some things you never learn."

Amanda heads to Hawk Mountain. Hardly able to breathe, sweating, so frightened at the wheel, negotiating traffic, the occasional passing car, an inch left or right could end it all and then she'd never get to Link. It's more of a hill once she makes it, shaped bony. It looks like a thumb, up straight, hitching a ride. Parked, she sees them through the windshield, hawks. Thus, that half of the name. They're circling the hill's green tip like flies around a lamp. They're that small, that high. Everything's hot this summer. Amanda's shirt bunches against the seatback's beaded cover. Grandma's fond of ornaments, for cars, for gardens, for porches. She gets them in the mail out of various magazines. She gets fruit in the mail too. Who gets fruit in the mail? As if delivery by post does something secret and special to the pears. No grocery store could understand. She probably likes to imagine there's someone out there, sending gifts her way. Link's pickup pulls in and parks to the right. The engine shudders approval. Amanda gets out, happy to leave, to know of somewhere else.

They try to have sex in the bed of the truck. Link's afraid of the vultures, circling, what if they think we're dead, and Amanda remembers her English teacher, he liked girls in skirts and poems where death meant orgasm. We die and rise the same. Proof, he acted it out, gestured, his finger limp then firm--you see, to die, to rise, again. He paced lost in lecture. Poems, he said, are always phallic, he looked out from behind the desk, it's safe to assume. Those would be hawks, Amanda says. Link spreads a mattress of hay. They pretend to play rough. This was thinking ahead, reserving hay. He forgot to bring a condom. Need of one becomes apparent, her panties off but her shirt still on. The hay tickles and sticks. She waits to sense him in but nothing changes.

"We may have a problem," Link says.

He pats around. He pats pockets and non-pockets, the sides of his shirt, the hem of his shorts, as if either might be holding.

"You remembered hay. Hay's important too," Amanda says.

"We could do it anyway. I'll just pull out."

"That's dumb."

"I could do it."

"I'll stay here. You go and get some. Dad can't see me anywhere but Grandma's," Amanda says.

"People say if a girl's on top it's pretty safe. Like ninety-seven percent, I think."

"Where's my clothes?"

"I'll only go if you come with me."

They dig around in the hay. Link sneezes, then his head dips and you can tell he's thinking something through. He does this. Something starts him thinking, usually doubting, and

his face rushes in on itself like bad news getting worse. Amanda asks sometimes--what is it, what's happening?--and Link tries to remember, to call up his reasons. Usually it's nothing but a small embarrassment. Just thinking, he said, about that time with my piano teacher, told her my granddad had prostitute cancer, I meant to say prostate, you know, so I corrected myself, said no, no, I meant prostrate, I meant prostrate. Or--I think we were at a pretzel factory, I was little, on a tour where they show you all the machines and the dough and how it folds to make the pretzel shape, I ran and grabbed a leg thinking it was my dad's, it wasn't, it was just a leg, it was hairy and red, whenever I eat pretzels, soft pretzels I mean, it gets to me, that hair.

And then there are the times when Link won't say, either can't recall or sets himself against it. Amanda wonders what her mother, who didn't like to talk about boys before she left, would think of her and Link. And Link's more than a boy. It doesn't matter, now, her mother. Link was good to Pat when they met, they shouldn't have, but Amanda forgot that elementary had a half-day, excited that her father was away doing fire drills, and Pat was home. Who the heck's this guy, Pat said. Link piggybacked Pat and the question away.

Amanda spots her panties, no luck with her shorts, straw colored and buried. It's decided she'll come along for the ride. She'll hide back in the truck's bed with the hay. She has Link cover her legs and arms and everything but her eyes so she can look up, lying flat, and watch the drive-by sky.

"I know you're right there hiding, and even I can't hardly see you," Link says.

"What were you thinking about just now?"

"Was I thinking?"

"You got that lost look."

"Maybe kicking myself for forgetting the pack."

“That’s it?”

“It’s been happening less. It’s like I’m where I should be a whole lot more. You’re good to be around.”

Under the hay, Amanda smiles.

Joe and Martin look at the candy. Joes gets mad at the Reese’s. The store is Joe’s store as the towers are Joe’s towers, his father responsible for both. It ended that little newspaper shack, called Benny’s, stocking no more than half your average conveniences, toothbrush but no toothpaste, women’s deodorant but no men’s, paper towels but no toilet paper. It was wood from top to bottom, the floors and the counter and the racks for food and whatever else they halfway stocked. Joe went in there once, everything dusty, and he ran his finger through, the dust came clear, and underneath was this shining, perfect wood. Joe’s been angry lately, a tough year, forced to admit that his leaving for boarding school was more fiction than fact, plus no headway with Amanda, he couldn’t figure why, and now the rumors with Link Doughty, security guard, twenty-six. No one knew the guy was alive even. How to compete with that?

“I liked Reese’s, once,” Joe says. “They used to be simple, chocolate and peanut butter. Simple I know how to work. Now there’s Caramel Reese’s, and Crispy Crunchy Reese’s, and White Chocolate Reese’s, and Reese’s Select Clusters. What would I do with a cluster?”

“I want one,” Martin says. “A cluster.”

They’re packaged in a sunny, caramel sort of wrapper. The picture on the front shows two chocolate lumps. They remind Joe of cookies, but they’re smaller and fatter in the middle. The leftmost cluster’s split in half to prove the toffee center.

“I will never,” Joe says, “under any circumstance, buy a Reese’s Cluster.”

“You would if Amanda asked.”

Joe picks up a package and flips it and reads what it has to say. “These things are made in Mexico.”

“You’d be like Speedy Gonzales. To Mexico and back. Fastest cluster retrieving mouse known to man.”

“You piss me off a lot more than you used to.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Are you feeling tired at all? You want to rest? We can sit for a while. We’re allowed in the office.”

“Like a backstage pass?”

The door opens. Every other store in town has a chime or a ding-dong when a door opens, but not here. Here, business is assumed, a steady stream of people in and out, no reason to mark every coming and going. That’s what Joe’s father would say. Benny’s had a bell, he’d say, and look what happened there--it isn’t about personality.

“That’s Link Doughty who just walked in,” Martin says.

Doughty’s an inch or so shorter than Joe and a few inches taller than Martin. He’s wearing jeans, stupid thing to do, hot today, and a white T-shirt. There’s hair on his chest where the neck of his shirt hangs stretched and low. It could have happened in a fight. He doesn’t look like a fighter. Maybe football. He has a strong enough body but not tough in the face, his eyes too open. He’s not sure he belongs. What do you fight for if you can’t feel that to start?

“He kind of looks like a kid,” Joe says.

“Kids don’t buy condoms.”

Martin's right. The store policy keeps them behind the counter. Doughty nods to the one he wants. Joe forgets the name of the guy behind the counter, graduated last year, and he gives Doughty the pack. Joe's yet to buy condoms, yet to use one. He did a girl at camp last summer, the great outdoors. There wasn't a condom in miles aside from the counselors'. They weren't about to share.

With the Clusters, Joe moves to the door and stands there in front, blocking the exit. Martin follows halfway. He hangs back by the Hallmark cards. He spins the rack and makes a selection but it isn't a real one and he puts it back. That's a part of Martin's character. He's never sure if he's sure. It leaves him watching. It leaves him looking like he's keeping busy but never really busy. Joe likes to be busy and always sure.

Doughty gets his change. You want these in a bag? the clerk asks. Doughty says all right. Doughty takes the bag and shakes it and looks inside. He heads for the door, for Joe. Joe makes himself bigger. He leans in an unfriendly way.

"Whoops," Doughty says.

"What's your name?" Joe says.

"Link." Doughty offers to shake. Joes doesn't. "Well, anyway, I'm Link."

"I know who you are. I know. What's in the bag?"

Doughty looks puzzled. "You know me?"

"Maybe I can guess."

Doughty waves to the clerk. "What's this?"

"That's Joe," the clerk says.

"I know who these are for," Joe says.

"You do?"

“You think it’s a good thing you’re doing? You think it’s all right?”

“I’m leaving now.”

Joe grabs the bag, drops the clusters. He leads with his shoulder and hits the door and sprints out.

“That’s Joe running away with your condoms,” the clerk says.

Link Doughty stands there. He sees another kid watching him, sneaking glances over a Happy Birthday Grandma! card. He’s the one with that disease, born wrong, too early maybe, has trouble with his balance--Amanda’s friend. How do you live with yourself like that? Link walks straight and looks normal and has trouble enough with nothing wrong but pieces of the past that turned out broken for no special reason. Also, things wrong in the present, but they’re smaller. His brother, Danny, finding out, always finding first, and this time telling Dad, and when Dad wouldn’t act on it, going straight to Amanda’s father, and her father hid her the best he could. Finding and hiding. Everything hidden comes out, always. The hidden dead part in his mother, always there, looking to surface, looking to end. It came out. Anyway, this kid seems happy enough. Link picks up the candy bag and walks to the greeting cards.

“You’re Martin, right?” he says.

“Yeah,” Martin says.

“You want the card?” Link says. “I can buy you the card.”

Martin says, thanks, no. Link takes the card and the candy to the counter.

“Give me another pack,” he says to the clerk.

“You want me to call the police? You paid for it. It’s your money. We’ve got it all on tape.”

Link puts the card on the counter and thinks about the candy. “I guess I’ll take these too.”

No sign of Link Doughty or Joe when Martin leaves the store. It’s a shame. He would have been happy to follow either one. Joe with the stolen condoms, no small interest. Or somehow sneak a ride, hop in the truck bed with Doughty looking down or away, probably lead to Amanda, supposed to be gone for the summer. Maybe not the case. Doughty did buy condoms.

That card. Guess he’ll send it to his grandmother. Her birthday not so long ago. He could still fit it in. Blame it on slow mail. He knows why Link bought it. Amanda must have told Link, pointed out Martin one day, something to say, to let him know the people she knew, maybe stumble on someone in common. That’s Martin, my friend, cerebral palsy.

Martin feels lonely. His mother’s at their store selling ice cream, hot day, so it’s got to be busy. She could use his help if he had any to offer. He screws up when he tries. He can never scoop ice cream round enough. He puts together lopsided cones or sticks his thumb through, squeezing harder than he means to. Sorry, he’d say, whatever went wrong, and stand the crippled cone upside down in a cup along with a spoon. The buyer never complains, just says thank you. An artificial thanks reserved for those special people who are what they are and can’t change it. Also, It’s his father’s day to help out. Requires supervision enough from his mother. His father’s even worse behind the counter. He likes to be bad. He likes to fail for fun.

From Martin’s angle by the cards it looked like Joe was sprinting to the right. What’s to the right? Martin’s house and store, mother with ice cream, cornfield maze if you keep going straight. If you take another right, it’ll get you to the towers eventually, could get there going

left just as easy though, maybe easier, and then a left after that should take you to the school. The towers are all right at night. They blink high and red, an invisible structure everyone sees as light suspended. Martin, seeing them, can imagine everyone looking and seeing earth-defying red, floating, with the same human eyes. But there's no light during the day. Too faint if there is. All you see is steel, rung over rung, ascending, competing, above and better than each that came before, and you want to compete but you know you can't win, and you can't avoid it. Left or right will take you there.

To the left, here, you've got the way to Joe's house, and Amanda's house, and all the baby turkeys that came last week. They've got a funny name, baby turkeys. Can't remember the name, but it's funny. Look it up when I'm home, write it down. Could be Amanda's there. Supposed to be out of town. But Doughty bought condoms. It follows she's somewhere. Where else would she be but home? Maybe with Doughty. Just 'cause he bought the condoms doesn't mean he'll use them right away. It's the middle of the day. It's early for that. She loves the baby turkeys.

Martin grabs a ride to Amanda's. It's always easy for Martin to find a ride. People offer before he asks because everyone knows who he is, and there's no harm in him, and they assume there's a genuine need. Sometimes, though, he likes to walk. It's a problem to convince people he only wants to go on his own. Turning down a ride can be harder than getting one. They won't give in. They won't give up a good deed just waiting to happen, a walking opportunity to make the day right for Martin, themselves, anyone watching. It makes Martin feel all over like a grubby donation box.

The offer, this time, comes from Police Chief Crowley. Crowley pulls over and pops the door open. This worries Martin and at first he wonders if there isn't another reason, like

questions about Joe and the condoms. Or it could be his father, something new. Drove off with a truckload of baby turkeys, as an example.

“Grab a seat,” Crowley says.

Martin buckles up. It’s his first time in the chief’s car, but it feels familiar. He’s seen his father loaded in back enough to believe his own body was there. The smell is the smell of Crowley. Crowley smells sweet. It’s talked about. “Mmm,” Mrs. Fox, dreamy-nosed, always says, “like planting your face in a cinnamon bun.” Crowley has a good handshake, talks when he’s got something to say, has something to say every now and then, keeps a nice smile when he doesn’t. As police chief, he’s fair enough, fairly passive. He never closes a case. There aren’t too many around to be closed. The next town over picks up everything big. They’ve got better equipment and some idea of what they’re doing. They’ve got a handful of deputies. Crowley’s got Glenn who never leaves the office, just stays in to work the phone. So the big cases run off and anything small isn’t much worth the trouble. Crowley’s a kind of disappointment to those who know him but don’t know him well.

“Where can I take you?” Crowley says.

“The Jenner’s.”

The police scanner hums some static. Crowley turns the dial but nothing changes. “I’ll save you the trip. She isn’t there.”

“So I hear. I’d like to make sure.”

“Trust me on this one.”

The scanner grumbles, words, but nothing clear.

“I’m wanted,” Crowley says. “It knows how to talk, this scanner, but it likes to keep me in suspense.”

“You can let me out here if you have to go.” Martin unbuckles. Scanner might be grumbling about Joe and the condoms. Best to get out. Accomplice to condom theft. Have to move from the front to the back, sit like his father. “I don’t want to be any trouble.”

“You’re no trouble,” Crowley says. “Put on your seatbelt.”

Martin runs the strap over his shoulder, diagonal, crossing his body to the buckle, the click. He used to hide the chest strap behind him when he sat in front, so that only the belt could hold him down before his mother made him put it right. He hated to feel the strap rubbing his neck. It required constant readjusting, stretching it out, realigning it lower, and it always rising up to touch him again. To ride with his father was something else--the same car, different rules. His father never wore a seatbelt. Martin knew that if he buckled up, next to his father unbuckled, it would chase him out of one seat’s meaning and into another. It would mean he belonged to his mother, not his father. It would mean he belonged to caution, and fear, and allowance of human error and inhuman consequence. It would mean he was weak, crippled, and in need of protection, and not only could his father, the driver, not provide it, he drove danger forward. Propelled the risk. He was the reason Martin needed a seatbelt and the reason he couldn’t have one.

“Do you know where she is? Amanda?” Martin says. “You were talking like you did.”

The scanner burps.

“Glenn?” Crowley says.

“Who’s that?” the scanner says.

“You have anything to tell me?”

Crowley waits. The scanner, Glenn, stay quiet.

“I’m listening,” Crowley says.

“This is how it happened,” Glenn says. “Holly Baker spots a trespasser. She calls it in, some kid hopping that fence around the radio towers.”

A pause. “That’s all?” Crowley says.

“That’s not all. Let it settle.”

“Tell me the rest.”

“A few minutes pass. There’s a second call, this one from Ginger Levy. She says-- get this--that there’s someone climbing a radio tower. The big one. The one in the middle. She says maybe it’s a tower mechanic, if there is such a thing, she doesn’t know, she’s just calling to check in, to be safe. She says she’s afraid. Of what? She’s not sure. I’m thinking, well, that’s no tower mechanic, that’s got to be the trespasser. I’m thinking, well, I know a few things to be afraid of. The guy could be a sniper. That’s high ground up there. Or the guy could be a jumper. Maybe she’ll see him, bones and blood and intestines, you know. It’s a traumatic thing to see. So I keep this information to myself. I don’t want to make her nervous.”

Another pause. Crowley pulls a U-turn, heads for the towers. “Is that it?” he says.

“That’s all I’ve got.”

“Good. I’m driving there now.”

“You could thank me,” Glenn says.

“Thank you, Glenn. Nice work.” Crowley turns to Martin. “You want me to let you out?”

Martin knows it’s Joe. Martin knows it’s Joe and Link’s stolen condoms climbing the tower. He wants to see Joe at the top. He wants to see Joe blow into the condoms like balloons, tie knots one by one, float them down to the cluster below. Martin wants there to be a crowd. He wants to feel people packed around him, looking up, looking away, and he wants to look up

and away with them, all eyes on Joe. He wants to be forgotten in the crowd. He wants there to be mud from too many feet. He wants to drop the Grandma card. He wants no one to pick it up. He wants the earth to drink it down in the mud and swallow the card like wrong words taken back.

“I’ll go with you,” Martin says.

“You believe it’s a sniper?” Crowley says.

“No.”

“I like the way you think.”

They drive to the gate by the towers. Crowley parks under a tree for shade. They get out. The sun’s still high and white. It’s probably around two or three. Martin likes the silver ropes that tie the towers down. As if they need to be tied. As if without the ropes they’d all tip over, or bounce like pogo sticks, or like rockets blast off for the sun. He can’t see Joe from here. Glen said Joe was up the big one, in the middle. All but its tip is blocked from sight by the smaller. Have to wonder how high Joe can climb. Hope he keeps to the ladder.

“What do we do now?” Crowley says. “There’s a fence.”

“Joe climbed it,” Martin says.

“Who?”

Martin looks at his feet.

“That’s Joe in there?”

“I don’t know,” Martin says. “It’s hard to say.”

“You sounded sure.”

“Joe likes to climb things. That’s all.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“Maybe you know something I want to know. Maybe we could trade.”

“You think that’s fair?” Crowley says. “You know, Martin, I’ve got a sniper on my hands, could be Joe, could be anyone. My point being, who knows?”

Martin shrugs.

“Try to understand. There’s private-police-chief business, and then there’s public-everyone-else-type business.”

“That’s not how I see it.”

“All right, you go first. Tell me.”

“No, you go.”

Crowley spits like he’s trying for a gob but manages only a dribble. He steps and grinds where it landed. Boot bottom to spit. “Amanda’s out of town. Your turn.”

“That’s nothing new.”

“You tell me something I already know. We can go on from there.”

“Joe likes to climb things.”

“Good,” Crowley says. “Slim shipped Amanda to her grandma, mother’s mother. She’s gone for the summer.”

“Joe said he’d climb the tower awhile ago. It’s been on his mind. And he’s having a bad day too. He had kind of a run-in with Link Doughty. Link was buying condoms.”

“Don’t tell me that,” Crowley says.

“It’s what he was doing.”

“You know, we all feel bad,” Crowley says. “We didn’t want to get into this, what happened, Link’s history. So I talked to him. I let him know we knew, and we’d step in if it came to that.”

“Maybe he forgot.”

“There are rules,” Crowley says. “It’s my job, sure, but I don’t like it. I always feel bad in the end.”

“Joe stopped Link and said a few things and Link wasn’t having it so Joe stole the condoms and ran. Link just bought another pack.”

“It was good of Joe to try.” Crowley, wary, approaches the fence. He gives it a push. The fence stays put. “It’s the biggest fence I’ve even seen,” Crowley says. “Could see it from space. I’ll call the fire department. They’ve got ladders.”

“There’ll be another way in,” Martin says.

“Forget it. Fire department. Always call the fire department.”

“There’s some people over there.” Martin points. Hundred yards to the right. “They’re looking up. Maybe they can see him.”

Crowley votes to drive. Martin votes to walk. It’s walkable. You can see the people and you can count them. There’s three, one man, two women, and it’s clear that Ginger Levy’s one of them, she’s fat, only wears sweatpants, can’t be missed. It makes sense Holly Baker’s the other. She called in the trespasser first. The man, it’s hard to say, blocked by Ginger. Crowley wins. He likes his car, likes to know it’s near, so they drive the ten seconds it takes. They park under a smaller tree. This one shades only the back where it doesn’t matter.

“Lousy tree,” Crowley says. “That’s your father, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Martin says. Supposed to be helping his mother. Maybe she kicked him out. Too many complaints. He likes to tell people they chose the wrong flavor. He won’t serve them until they admit it. Chocolate? Wrong. Cake Batter? No. Guess again. You’re getting close.

“He always spots trouble first, your father,” Crowley says. “Even when he doesn’t make it. I’d hire him if I had any money.”

“You wouldn’t. Not him.”

“I suppose there’s that.”

They walk over. Ginger, Holly, Michael, they’re all looking up, passing binoculars one to the next. There’s a view of the tower.

Crowley greets in order. “Ginger, Holly, Michael.”

“Three for three.” Michael shakes Crowley’s hand. “Martin, your friend’s lost his mind.”

“Joe?” Crowley says.

“Picked the wrong time to lose it.” Michael hands Crowley the binoculars.

“You see where it starts to narrow?” Holly says. “Now move a few rungs down. He’s been there awhile, the same, just holding on. We think he’s frozen up.”

“Jesus.” Crowley gives back the binoculars, wipes his hands on his pants.

“I’m glad you’re here, Crowley,” Michael says. “Where you go, firemen follow.”

“They’re on their way,” Crowley says.

Crowley’s an odd choice for Police Chief, Martin thinks. He’d have the firemen take over and run the whole town. Yes, they’re coming. They have ladders. They’ll bring Joe down. The way it ought to be. When Martin was little, Michael brought him to the meadows. Michael brought some sort of makeshift grill, maybe an aluminum foil pan and a sack of charcoal and a metal rack out of the toaster oven, and Michael made sparks and a fire, and Martin leaned in, and blew, and he grew the fire with his father until it was hot for the hotdogs. The smoke came out of the ground, lazily, and split the sky, drifting up, higher than Martin could see.

“You know what firemen are?” Michael unbuttons his shirt. He has a white tank top underneath. His belly won’t be covered. It’s flabby and white out the bottom. “They’re men with shiny suits.”

“What’s your point?”

“Who’s going to come? Jack, right? And Owen, and Jimmy, and Lucas, and Slim. Half are volunteers. You think they’ll do better than me?”

“They’re firemen.”

“They sit around, they play cards, they eat chili. Now and then, they turn on a hose.”

Michael wraps his shirt around one hand and leaves some air for his fingers. He climbs the fence like someone who used to hop them with one grab and one swing but can’t anymore. Now he hurries, clumsy. He plays catch up to the kid he was.

“You’ll get in their way,” Martin says.

No chance this’ll end well. Say his father climbs the fence, climbs the tower, gets to Joe. Then what? He’ll get stuck up there too. Even if he doesn’t, how to get Joe down? The only reason he’s doing it is Slim. He can’t let Slim be the hero. His father screws with Slim more than anyone. This goes back to high school. The turkeys were just the latest. Doubt Slim did anything to deserve it. Like people ordering vanilla, they just want their ice cream, simple flavor, want to live a plain and ordered life. Slim’s had enough out of order. His wife gone. Amanda with Link. Slim probably worries she’ll be the next to go. Leave him before she’s supposed to. That’s why he sent her to the grandmother, safer there.

Michael looks back. He’s at the top of the fence. His padded hand keeps his balance on the barbed wire. “When there’s something you can do, you do it. Like Joe did just now. He saw the way up. He got there.”

“Joe’s stuck up a tower,” Martin says.

“You think you’ll end up better? You’ve been waiting all year. I’ve seen it. Wait for Amanda to smile like it means something. Wait for Joe to come over, take you out. He’ll stop coming, and she’ll never start, and then what? No one left but you. You ought to know it more than anyone.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Be nice,” Crowley says.

“It’s all him,” Martin says, “everything wrong around here.”

Michael falls forward off the fence, face first. The shirt around his hand catches barbed wire, jerks him straight, unravels, spins him, drops him the rest of the way. He lands on his side. He tries to stand. He makes it to his knees. His right arm dangles out of its socket. He groans his way back to the ground.

“I guess, better a fence than a tower,” Crowley says.

“You all right?” Martin says.

“Doing great.” Michael rolls over to his good side and faces away.

The fire truck comes and an ambulance follows. Crowley gives a report. There’s Slim and the others his father said there would be. A little ways down they open the gate to the towers. They drive in. That’s one way to do it, Crowley says. Ed Soto, back of the ambulance, tends to Michael and sets his arm in a sling. It isn’t Slim who goes up. It’s Lucas Buckley. He talks to Joe a bit and then they both come down, slow and cautious, without any trouble. Thank God, it’s a happy ending, Holly says, no, I wasn’t sure it would be, but it is, thank God. Ginger adjusts the band of her sweatpants. Joe, Martin says. He tries to get closer. Buckley blocks him. You still have them, Joe? Martin says. You leave them up there? Joe looks away. His shoulders

are shaking. He takes a step that his body can't hold, can't keep up, and Buckley rushes to grab him. He puts Joe in the ambulance with Michael. Joe coughs and can't stop and Soto calls for a bucket. Can I help? Martin says. Buckley closes the ambulance doors. Sirens on, it drives to the clinic. The fire truck stays.

It's strange to see Slim in his gear. Remember him running bruised and barefoot for his turkeys. Martin still thinks of him shoeless, his natural state. Slim's far from barefoot now, every inch of him covered and yellow, boots and pants and a coat and a hat. It's hard to believe he's the same underneath.

"We were coming to see you, Slim, back before all this happened," Crowley says.

"Why?" Slim says. He takes off the hat, sweating heavy. He looks at Martin. He turns with Crowley and lowers his voice. "What's wrong? I put her where we said. I saw her yesterday."

"It's not that," Crowley says.

"No?"

"Martin wanted to stop by, that's all. I offered him a ride."

"I hear there's baby turkeys," Martin says.

"Oh," Slim says. "The poults, sure, they're doing fine. I'm heading back to the station. I have to get changed. Why we wear this, I don't know, it's a mystery. You want to meet me at the fields? Crowley, you too?"

Crowley and Martin head back to the squad car. The seatbelt metal burns. It's the tree's fault. Crowley says they can give it five minutes. He won't drive until they're buckled.

"You didn't tell Slim what happened," Martin says.

"No," Crowley says, "I guess I didn't."

“Aren’t you going to? Link and the condoms?”

“I hate to cause trouble.”

“What do you think was the problem with Joe?”

“Don’t know. He looked a little shaken up.”

“I want to go and check.”

They drive to the clinic down the road from the school. There’s the hill between the two buildings that little kids sled down or roll down and bigger kids smoke on or sleep on. There’s the school gym and the softball field. Crowley parks in the clinic lot. Crowley talks to the lady at the desk. They have Michael in a backroom, she says. She’s confused about Joe. He isn’t on the list. Well, he’s here, Martin says, they came in the same ambulance. We don’t have any record, she says. Martin sees the towers through the window. I’d like to use your phone, he says. He dials Joe’s cell and then it’s ringing, ringing, voicemail. Martin hangs up at the beep.

At Slim’s, the baby turkeys--poults--are small and predictably cute. They’re by the fence he almost climbed with Joe, where the turkey, gone now, blinked like a person. Where Amanda, gone now, laced his shoes wearing tights after dance. When’s Amanda coming home? Martin says. Slim shakes his head.

The poults totter. They cluster. They look up and around. They ignore Martin. They’re jumpy. They move without knowing why. Slim gives Martin a bag of seed. Martin kneels and holds out a handful. He clucks his tongue. He has something to offer. It must be nice for Slim, having turkeys, having something to offer every day and having even a turkey to take it. It’s hard not to hope. It’s hard not to look at them, the poults, and guess his worth based on their looking back. He waits for one to come.