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Where the Animals Go: Connected Stories

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ABSTRACT

Where the Animals Go, a collection of four short stories inspired by nature, displays the influence of the natural world on the creation of written art. The collection contains connected stories linked by the life of the central character, Nathan Alcon, from his childhood to old age, while depicting his relationship to nature at the major events in his life. Each story features a different animal in these pivotal moments in Nathan's life. This collection weds the elements of the human condition—love, grief, mortality—and nature by integrating the characters' conflicts with the natural environment. The characters in these stories make sense of their human relationships through the lens of the natural world: the turtle that crosses the forest-lined country road, the caterpillar that morphs from vulnerable sluggishness to flight, the bat that hunts in the dark without sight, and the animals that weather the winter months in burrows and secret tunnels.

KEY WORDS animals, fiction, nature in words, nature writing, short story

“Where the Animals Go” depicts characters across several short stories inspired by nature. I designed the project to combine the study of the natural world with the art and craft of fiction to increase both an understanding of the human's place in the environment as well as a refinement of my writing style.

METHODS

Because nature influenced the creation of the short stories, I spent a portion of my day on the trails at Pierce Cedar Creek. Sometimes strolling leisurely, sometimes jogging with a friend, or sometimes sprinting from a cloud of black flies, I spent time immersed in the natural environment. I searched for animals and plants that would excite my curiosity; as it turns out, there is no shortage of such life. I observed the ways organisms interact with their environments. The congregation of fireflies after a sunset over the meadow caught my breath. I was delighted to find a community of skunk cabbage at the base of a stream, exotic with their broad, prehistoric leaves. The way a muskrat paddles through the reeds to gather for its nest, picking and choosing as discriminately as an American at a buffet, fascinated me. These observations became the fuel for creative writing, the backbone of every story.

Perhaps the greatest inspiration I received resulted from conversations with fellow researchers. I spoke with fellow students about their projects and developed an understanding of ecological concepts, plant and animal identifications, and, most important of all, nature's significance to different individuals. At the heart of every story lies a character, and a writer hopes to capture the essence of real, breathing humans in the characters he or she creates. We discussed the value of the natural world and the value of the research projects in preserving the natural world. I asked questions. I learned more about real people, which translated into the creation of believable fictional people.

I supplemented my writing with studying the works of published authors, focusing on their methods of style, concision, and implementation of the natural world in their writing. Reading devoured a portion of every day. I studied poetry books such as Joe Wilkins's *Notes from the Journey Westward* and Kathleen McGookey's *Whatever Shines*. Angela Pelster's book of essays, *Limber*, focused on the importance of certain trees throughout human history. Books

of short stories such as Elizabeth Strout's *Olive Kitteridge*, Jennifer Egan's *A Visit from the Goon Squad*, Tim O'Brien's *The Things They Carried*, David James Poissant's *The Heaven of Animals*, and Amy Bloom's *Where the God of Love Hangs Out* taught me how to write effective prose and revealed how a short story ought to read.

I wrote every day. I wrote with a laptop, a Moleskine journal and a pen, a text to myself on my phone, on the back of a receipt in my car at a red light. I wrote in the Education Building each morning and some nights. I wrote on the porch of Meadow Lodge accompanied by the moos of cows in the distance. In the afternoon I wrote in The Local Grind, a coffee shop in downtown Delton. I wrote when I woke late at night, a thought nagging me, prodding me to get up and write it down before the idea could escape. I wrote in my head while I walked the trails and fields of Pierce Cedar Creek. I wrote many stories down. In some, I found something salvageable and interesting enough to proceed with.

I met weekly with my mentor, Dr. Susanna Childress, who provided both necessary encouragement and suggestions for how to improve each draft of the stories. I wrote draft after draft in the revision process to winnow the stories down to what must be called the final product, though I struggle to accept that any of these stories have reached their final form. Revision is an ongoing process and will continue long after my stay at Pierce Cedar Creek Institute.

RESULTS

The project produced four connected stories inspired by nature that equal 59 pages of prose. The stories include elements of nature, whether through a different animal featured in each piece or an abiotic environmental factor (the weather, the lake) that influences human life. The stories wove the concepts of the human condition with nature. They successfully linked the complicated events of Nathan Alcon's life, spanning from young age to old. Writing the stories caused me to think more actively about nature than I previously might have, allowing my relationship with nature to deepen. Now, I feel comfortable incorporating the natural environment in my stories in various physical and metaphorical ways.

DISCUSSION

The project expanded my understanding of how to create a short story. Because the stories must incorporate nature, I had to nurture a better understanding of what nature includes—plants, animals, and human nature, sure, but nature consists of other factors as well: the ecological relationships between different species of plants and animals, the impact of weather on the environment, and the influence of human activity on the natural world. Of course, not every inspiring fact or organism made it into the stories. For example, my experience with the searching for snakes in the wetlands inspired me to want to feature an eastern massasauga rattlesnake in a story; however, when I began to write the story, it proved a tricky story to write for several reasons, and it did not fit into the overall story of Nathan Alcon as much as I desired, so I did not include it into the collection. Art, like science, does not always work the way we wish it.

“The Cottage” : The main events of this story occur at a cottage by a lake in northern Michigan, but one scene, arguably the most nature-related scene in the story, occurs on a woodsy country road. Nathan is an anxious child, and he fears that the car will run over a turtle that happens to cross the road. The turtle does not appear in the story in a physical sense, but serves as a metaphor for his parents’ strained relationship. If they do not pay attention to the road before them, they may run over what they have worked hard to build. At a later moment in the story, Norah (Nathan’s mother, the protagonist) mulls over this turtle, which harkens back to her worries about her marriage. The turtle symbolizes this struggle throughout.

In this story, I feature another major element of nature, the clouds. In a conversation with two other researchers, Jacob Swets and Nico Simon, I learned that the average cumulus cloud weighs about one million pounds. In “The Cottage,” Norah learns this fact as well, and it serves as a symbol of the pressures of her marriage—all that weight hangs overhead at all times, pressing in. The thought can overwhelm a person. The clouds as a symbol demonstrate the abiotic qualities of nature that can influence a story.

“Assertiveness Training” : Nathan’s uncle, Kevin, is the protagonist of this story. He works in an industrial complex, a concept I played with to show how the absence of nature can highlight nature when it appears. The staff spends an afternoon in the back of the industrial complex where the company has sectioned off a small portion of land as a “nature place” for employees. During the seminar, Kevin bonds with a caterpillar that crawls on his shoe. The caterpillar represents the transformation that Kevin undergoes from the story’s beginning to its end. The caterpillar’s metamorphosis parallels Kevin’s need to change from submissive to independent.

“Even in the Dark, We Could Find Each Other” : Nathan, an adult, takes the lead role in this story. His relationships are either fractured or are projecting in that direction. He loves his wife, but he believes he may love another woman as well. He has not spoken to his father since childhood, and now they must reunite. I featured the bat in this story because of its mystical qualities. A bat’s life hangs upside down, in a sense, especially when one considers how it sleeps. A bat hunts without sight. It flits through the dark sky, blind, but it manages to find its way around. This is the kind of metaphor I searched for in this story. The idea originated with a conversation I had with my own father in our yard one summer night. Unlike Nathan’s situation, I have a positive relationship with my father, but like Nathan, my father and I spoke on a deep level, our conversation occasionally interrupted by the clicking of bats overhead. The idea snared me, so I stuck with it.

“Where the Animals Go” : The finale of the collection does not feature any one animal in particular; rather, it comments on animals in a general sense. Nathan, an old man now, struggles with the existential reality of his own mortality. He has survived the death of his friend, a heart attack, and a serious car accident. He feels detached from his family members even when he is among them.

In this story, Nathan lives in suburbia, just as I did as a child. I remember how, when winter arrived each year, I noticed the animals seemed to disappear entirely. I no longer saw the squirrels in my yard, the robins in the trees, or the insects crawling on the sidewalk. Everywhere I looked I could only see the snow and feel the biting air. It was as if the animals vanished to some other plane, leaving us humans alone to survive the winter. Now that I am older, I know that the animals remain among us—burrowed away in their holes, nestled within the tree tops. Still, they are not so readily tangible in this place, and I like to think of this as a time when the

animals slip off to some in-between state. Nathan feels as if he dwells in this “place” where the animals go, an in-between stage of life and death, as if he lives among his family, near to them, but not quite tangible to them. I have never known how it feels to be an old man, but I have known what separation feels like, an inability to connect with those closest to me.

Literature Cited

I read the following texts throughout my stay at Pierce Cedar Creek. Whether they provided necessary examples of incorporating nature in the story or simply offered that insatiable desire to create something as beautiful as the story read, I owe these publications acknowledgement.

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Appendices

The following appendices provide the stories mentioned in the Discussion section.

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Appendix B “Assertiveness Training” pg. 25

Appendix C “Even in the Dark, We Could Find Each Other” pg. 38

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Appendix A

The Cottage

Norah smooths the map against her thigh so she can read the name written in the crease: Willow Road. “Take the next right,” she says to her husband sitting in the driver’s seat.

“I know where I’m going,” Benjamin says, but he doesn’t say it in a mean way, and he doesn’t sound irritated. What hurts Norah most is that he says this without emotion, as he says most things these days. She stares at him while he rounds the turn, but he doesn’t look her way.

She has to twist in her seat to look at their son, Nathan, a stoic six-year-old who sits forward in his seat, trying to see over the dashboard. He watches the road with a furrowed brow. As soon as they’d exited the freeway and entered the country roads, surrounded by cultivated pastures and wild woodland in turns, Norah had told Nathan to look for turtles crossing the road. Rather than excite the boy, the thought gave him anxiety. Now that Nathan knew turtles might cross the road, it occurred to him that they might also run one over. Norah should’ve known Nathan would think the worst, and she can only imagine what he’s thinking: a painted turtle shell splintering like a log under the tires, splattering blood and scaly green flesh all over the pavement. His concern is so genuine that Norah imagines she can picture what her son will look like when he’s an old man. She sees him in overalls—she doesn’t know why, she expects they’ll be outdated by then—and wearing the same expression, staring at something else to worry about, a news report about some bombing. The image is comical, but Norah doesn’t laugh. She says, “We’re almost there, sweetie,” and faces the road ahead.

They are driving to a cottage in northern Michigan owned by the Hudsons. Norah and Jodi Hudson have adjacent chairs at a hair salon; that’s what they do: cut hair. Besides cut and

style hair, there's nothing to do in the salon except sweep hair from the floor and talk to the clients. And when there are no clients around, there is nothing to do but talk to the other stylists, so Norah and Jodi got to know each other quickly.

Norah and Jodi talk outside of work, too. Norah sometimes brings Nathan to Jodi's house so he can play with the Hudson's son, Harrison, while Norah and Jodi sip daiquiris and lean against the Hudsons' granite countertops. Jodi's husband is an ophthalmologist, which is the technical term for an eye doctor, so it's no surprise his house is so large, so luxuriantly furnished. Norah wonders how someone ends up as an eye doctor. Does one go into medical school because of an intense desire to understand vision? Norah plans to ask Dr. Hudson when she meets him. She hasn't met him yet because she usually takes Nathan home before Brian returns from work, which is funny to Norah. Why would a doctor who makes so much money need to work so much? She has a lot of questions for the man. When she imagines him, she pictures a beer-and-porterhouse-steak gut, a pair of glasses (shouldn't an eye doctor have vision problems?), and a loud voice, used to demanding attention from a room.

Jodi invited Norah and her family to the Hudsons' cottage for the weekend. Norah knows Benjamin would rather not go, but she doesn't know why he agreed. He watches the road in silence, one hand firmly gripping the wheel, the other holding it loosely, as if unsure of itself. Lately, Benjamin is changed. He used to be wild with life, walking in the door from work in a flurry of motion, sweeping Nathan off the ground and bringing laughter to spill from the serious child's lips. And they had never had problems in their marriage before. After setting Nathan down, Benjamin would pull Norah into his arms and always, always kiss her. She can feel those kisses now, even feel the sun that pressed on her face through the kitchen window, see Benjamin's eyebrows illuminated by the stark light. These days, Benjamin comes home from

work quietly, brushing a hand through Nathan's hair as he passes his son on the couch, and usually says hi to Norah before heading to the bedroom to change out of his shirt and tie. Sometimes, he doesn't say anything to her at all. Within the last year, Benjamin was promoted to the department manager position at work, and with the increased salary, Norah would've thought he'd be more chipper. But it isn't so.

Benjamin seems disinterested in all things: his life at home, his work, even the hobbies he used to love to do, like going on ski trips to Gaylord, or woodworking in the workshop he'd set up in their basement, building chairs and tables and nightstands for their friends and relatives. He's developed a far-off look in his eyes as if he's always staring at a movie screen; he loses his gaze into the running faucet when he washes his hands, into the pot of water as it boils on the stove. Norah's first thought was depression, and she still considers this a possibility. Or guilt, she muses, but guilt over what? An affair? She stares at her husband in the seat beside her, wondering if he is capable of such a thing, and with whom. She wishes things were the way they were before; she wishes she had her Benjamin back, but she is losing him to something.

Nathan squirms in the back seat, and Norah turns back to face him. "What's wrong, sweetie?"

The boy wrestles with the seat belt, which holds him firmly against the back rest as he tries to gain a better view of the road in front of them. "I'm okay," he says, and for a moment Norah thinks he sounds like his father in the way he says this, the way he's said it to her for the last few months. "I'm okay," Benjamin has said every time she asked. She wonders at how a child can pick up so much. She stares at Nathan longer than she means to, then she starts digging through her purse for a stick of lip balm.

“Mom?” her son says, and she looks at the lines worrying at the boy’s eyes. “You have to watch the road for turtles.”

Norah smiles. “Of course,” she says before facing forward at the pavement rushing toward them.

“I should’ve been an eye doctor,” Norah says when they pull up to the Hudsons’ place. It’s something Benjamin might have joked about before, and she says it to get some kind of reaction out of him—a laugh, a smile, even a glance—but he doesn’t say anything as he throws the car into park and climbs out.

Jodi calls the place a *cottage*, and this word conjures images of quaint, one- or two-roomed homes, with close walls and window shutters, shag carpet floors and old wood-burning stoves to heat the entire house. The Hudsons’ place cannot, in good faith, be called a cottage. It’s even larger than Benjamin and Norah’s actual house. It has two levels with a massive cobblestone fireplace in the great room, hardwood floors, and air conditioning. There are four bedrooms on the first floor alone.

The Hudsons greet them and bring them inside. Harrison sits in a corner of the great room pushing a toy rhinoceros across the floor, growling bestial noises. Nathan runs over to him and immediately grabs a plastic dinosaur, which Norah thinks is a triceratops, but she isn’t sure. All of the toys seem to be great horned things. The Hudsons’ nine-year-old daughter Annie sits on the sectional sofa with a coloring book and crayons. She politely says, “Hi, Mr. and Mrs. Cunningham,” before returning to her work.

Norah’s attention is most drawn to Brian Hudson, the doctor whom she’s heard so much about. To her surprise, Brian does *not* have the rotund belly she’d expect of a man who could

afford to eat out every night, and, even more startling, he doesn't even wear glasses. Contacts, then, Norah thinks as she shakes his hand. And it's not the soft, gentle hand she'd expect of a doctor that squeezes her hand back either—she feels firm calluses on the pads of his palm and a reserved strength in his fingers. “We're so excited to have you,” Brian says. “It's almost time for dinner. Can I get anyone a drink?”

Brian leads Benjamin to the front deck while Jodi hands Norah a glass of wine and leads her on a tour through the house. As the women walk toward the hallway, Norah cranes her neck to view her husband through the kitchen window. Jodi sees Norah looking back and smiles. “Don't worry about the children,” she says. “My little Annie will watch them. I swear, I've never seen a little girl so composed. She could be something political when she grows up. Probably a senator, or the Speaker of the House, or something. Hell, even the President. Look—these are the light fixtures I showed you in the catalogue. I'm so glad you picked them, don't they go with the wallpaper?”

Norah allows Jodi to show her through the hallway to the bedrooms, pointing out bedspreads and nightstands, ceiling fans and drapery. Norah nods politely and admits, honestly, that the rooms are beautiful. But her mind is on Benjamin, hoping he's enjoying himself. Her husband has been so taciturn these days she wonders if he's even making conversation with Brian. She imagines the two men standing in silence, awkwardly staring out over the lake and sipping beer.

“This nightstand looks like the one Benjamin made for Nathan's room two Christmases ago,” Norah says.

“You've got a talented husband, then. Think I could get him to make one for the upstairs bedroom?”

Norah laughs, but it is a forced sound, and as she hears it reflect off the walls in that bedroom, she is surprised it came from her. “He wouldn’t take your money,” she says. “But he hasn’t made any furniture in a while, anyway.”

Jodi nods and waits, listening for more, but when Norah doesn’t follow up, she says, “Well, I can show you the upstairs, or should we help with dinner?”

As she helps Jodi chop vegetables and wash the lettuce, Norah glances out the front windows at the men. Brian stands at the grill, waving his arms emphatically between flips of the burger patties, and gesturing with the tongs at some unseen person while, to her astonishment, Benjamin laughs. She sees that it’s genuine, too—sees the familiar glimmer in his eyes, the curl of his upper lip, the heave of his chest as he tries to wrestle the laughter down like a fit of hiccups. The kind of reaction she’s wanted to see from her husband for months, tried to achieve ruthlessly, and Brian has him going within an hour of meeting him. A warm lump spreads in the pit of her stomach like an ache, not unlike jealousy.

When the men come in with the burgers on a plate, juice running from them in brown rivulets, Benjamin’s smile lingers. The two couples and the three children sit around the table. Norah has changed into a sundress that, she believes, fits her figure marvelously. She believes the yoga she does twice a week has helped keep the weight off, and she considers herself a fairly attractive woman. She leans over Nathan’s head to cut his burger in half, and in doing so knows the upper part of her breasts are revealed—not too scandalously, just enough that it appears accidental—and she glances at her husband. Benjamin is too busy topping his burger with pickles and onions to notice. Out of the corner of her eye, Norah sees Brian looking her way, and

when she turns to him, he quickly reaches for the salad tongs. Norah sits back down, her cheeks burning.

After dinner, the boys return to their toys in the great room, and Annie opens a book of Sudoku and scratches numbers into the boxes with a pencil. The adults sit around the kitchen table while Brian pours everyone a glass of wine and sets the bottle in the center of the table. Jodi tells Norah about her plans to remodel the kitchen back home (“There just isn’t enough storage for all the pots and pans I’ve gotten over the years”), but Norah can’t help but overhear the conversation beside her. The men talk baseball, and though Norah is sure that she’s never seen Benjamin watch a single Tigers game, he talks about player batting averages, lists stats, and predicts how Detroit will do in the playoffs. If she didn’t know better, she’d think he was a commentator for ESPN. But she starts to think that perhaps she doesn’t know better. How distant has Benjamin become in the last year? Perhaps his old interests have been replaced by new ones. She has the feeling of something slippery escaping from her grasp, like a wet potato after it’s peeled, something that can’t be held with tightness, because that only encourages its escape. Benjamin has become a different person under her watch, or lives a secret life she’s only just become aware of. Not for the first time does she consider his having an affair. Norah raises the wine glass to her lips and drinks.

“What do you think of those pots and pan holders—they sort of look like a rack—that hang over the counter?” Jodi says.

“They’re nice,” Norah says, but keeps watching the men. Benjamin says something about someone’s homerun last Tuesday against the White Sox, and Brian claps his hands together. Norah’s amazed at how charming her husband behaves. When Benjamin glances at her, his smile

vanishes for a moment, but as soon as he turns back to Brian it's there. Norah's stomach throbs as though she were been punched.

Nathan and Harrison want to sleep in the same room, so they share Harrison's room for the night, leaving Norah and Benjamin to have the upstairs alone. Benjamin brushes his teeth in silence, and Norah rubs soap onto her cheeks and massages it into her pores ferociously. "So you can talk to Brian," she says, her voice as taut as a cord about to snap. "At least we know you can still talk."

Benjamin stares at her in the mirror, spits toothpaste, and rinses his mouth with the faucet.

Norah says, "Baseball? Since when do you know a thing about baseball?"

What surprises her most is that he has an answer prepared. "It's on the radio in the car. On the way home from work."

Norah lets the faucet water pool in her cupped hands and splashes her face. Some soap stings her eyes, and it makes her raise her voice even more. She reaches blindly out for the towel and Benjamin hands it to her. She wipes herself dry and pushes past him out the door and into the bedroom. Benjamin follows.

"When are you going to tell me what's going on here?" she says. "I feel like shit, thinking something's wrong with you. But now I see it's not you, it's just you when you're with me. Is that it?" Benjamin closes the bedroom door and sits on the edge of the bed. Norah slides her dress down to pool around her ankles and stands in her underwear. Benjamin stares at the carpet, flexing and unflexing his toes. He does not speak.

Norah slips into a T-shirt and lifts the covers open like a mouth to receive her as she lies on the bed. The air is thick with the swirling of their thoughts, which feel as if they've escaped their skulls and are swimming through the air, bouncing off the walls, making it harder and harder to think straight. She waits for him to say something, but fears that at any moment he'll break the silence with a confession that he's having an affair. But even the truth would make her feel better than this silence. She closes her eyes, wishing he'd talk to her. Just the right words. That's all it would take.

"I'm sorry, Norah," he says. The wrong words.

After he shuts off the lights and lies on the bed, she waits for a few minutes before tiptoeing through the darkness to the door. In the hallway outside the room is a window, and through this window she sees the dirt road leading away from here, lit by the moon. She leans her forehead against the windowpane, and despite everything else, despite her problems with Benjamin, she can only think of Nathan's concern over the turtles on the road. She wonders if, somewhere out on those roads, the crossing turtles are making it safely to the other side. She closes her eyes and hopes they are well.

The next morning, she doesn't look at Benjamin. And she avoids his eye contact while the group talks over breakfast. Brian and Benjamin speak emphatically about watersports, and while Benjamin admits he's never waterskied, he's skied on snow since he was a child. "That's a good enough foundation for me to work with," Brian says. "I'll get you up on the water, you'll see."

In the afternoon, as the men pack the boat and Jodi fits life jackets on the children, Norah thinks she can't bear to see Benjamin behave the way he is for a moment longer or she will break into tears. She sits on the front deck, staring over the water and letting the sun warm her bare

legs, when Brian walks over to her, his shirt off, and though she doesn't stare, she notices the tough cords of muscle on his arms, the shadows of his abdomen. She hasn't seen a body like this except on younger men. The others are down the slope of the lawn at the boat, the giggles of the children carrying through the air to where she sits. "Ready to go out?" he says.

"I'm not feeling to well," she says, and it's not untrue.

Brian leans over her and places his palm on her forehead. At first she is startled by his touch. But then, for a moment, she feels glad to have it there.

"You don't seem to have a fever," he says, pulling his hand away.

"What would an eye doctor know about fevers, anyway?" she says.

This makes him laugh. "Well, you'll be missed out there." As he walks away—does she imagine it?—his gaze lingers on her legs, and then he's gone.

A moment later, Nathan comes running onto the deck and wraps his arms around Norah's leg. "Harrison said there's leeches in the water," her boy says. "There aren't any leeches," she starts to say, but realizes there's nothing she can do to sway his mind now that the idea's set in. Jodi appears, saying she's sorry about what Harrison said, but Norah shakes her head, explaining that Nathan doesn't want to go.

"Well, Harrison can stay with you two here, since he scared his friend away from the boat," Jodi says.

Norah's thoughts seem to escape the confines of her skull again. She decides a yoga workout will do her good, and she sets a towel on the lawn. She breathes in deeply through her nose, fills her lungs with air like gulps of water, and keeps inhaling beyond that, filling and filling her lungs

until it hurts, until her body begs her to exhale, craves the release. When she can stand it no longer, she lets the breath out. Rather than bring immediate relief, however, the ache lingers.

The boys are building a sandcastle. She watches as she rises to a standing position, sees Nathan standing at the shoreline. He doesn't let his toes touch the water, probably fearing a leech will cling to him the moment his skin touches the lake, but still he leans forward, letting a plastic bucket dip beneath the surface and fill with water. He half carries, half drags the bucket onto the beach, pulling with all the might his six-year-old body can muster. Water sloshes from the swinging bucket and spills onto the sand. Nathan drains the bucket at Harrison's feet and they begin packing the sand tightly between their palms.

Norah tries not to imagine what's happening on the boat, tries to banish the images from her mind with every exhale. Still, she pictures Benjamin floating in the water, holding the rope that's attached to the boat, the skis sticking straight out of the water like the thin legs of a heron—and then, Brian, his shirt off, his corded arms guiding the stick, getting the boat moving, trying to bring Benjamin to his feet. And Jodi, with Annie nestled on her lap, watching in case Benjamin falls.

Her chest hurts. Her temples throb. The exercise does nothing for her rampant thoughts. She can only think of Benjamin with some faceless, nameless woman, hands crawling over each other's bodies. And then she begins to imagine the woman's face, though she would have no idea who that woman might be—who Benjamin would commit the unspeakable with—and she imagines the woman looks different than Norah, because in this scenario Benjamin needs someone who looks different in every way than his wife. This nameless woman has long blonde hair that curls down to her bare shoulders. She is heavier than Norah, who is thin to begin with, and this woman's ribs do not lift at her skin when she removes her shirt, as Norah's ribs do.

Norah closes her eyes and shakes her head, which pulses in pain. She wants to scream, as if that might release these thoughts from her head.

She returns to the deck, finds a magazine that someone left lying on the patio table. She lies down on the recliner again and watches the boys. They have built the foundation of the sandcastle, a broad and short base of wet sand. She hears Harrison giving the orders, but not unkindly. The boy's voice is soft, perhaps because he feels regret for scaring Nathan away from the boat. The image spreads warmth through her chest; Norah is grateful for Nathan's having Harrison as a friend. Especially since she feels so uncertain about Benjamin.

She flips the magazine open to the table of contents and scans it for anything that might distract her from her thoughts. A page titled "Freaky Facts" catches her eye, and she turns to this page. She reads that the average weight of a cumulus cloud is over a million pounds. Norah leans the back of her head against the recliner and stares into the sky. The whites of the clouds against the blue sky. She tries to grasp the concept: A million pounds of water floating over her head at this very moment. To have all that weight hanging over her at all times seems unbelievable, and as this sinks in, she needs to get away, so she stands and walks inside, just to have something between her head and all that open, menacingly loaded sky. She stands at the kitchen window and watches the boys play. They look so innocent to her now, so oblivious to life outside the sand box, so unaware of all that water weight suspended overhead. She envies them fiercely. Watches Nathan scoop a handful of wet sand into his hands. Place it onto the base of the sand castle, which grows taller.

When the boat returns and everyone climbs out onto the dock, Jodi finds Norah in the kitchen, sitting by the window, watching the boys. "Feeling any better?" Jodie says, placing a hand on

Norah's shoulder. Norah nods, but when she looks out the window she sees Brian laughing while Benjamin reenacts his falling over on the skis. She can make out some of the words, how Benjamin says he must've swallowed a gallon of lake water on that last fall. The men stand by the sand box and watch the boys build the sand castle, and Norah's head only begins to throb more. What changed? she asks herself, thinking of every moment she can within the last year. But she can't think straight right now—she can only think about the names of the objects before her now, as if the names of these objects occupy her entire brain. *Window. Table. Magazine.*

Later, sitting around the dinner table, Norah chews a bite of steak, but finds that when she tries to swallow, her throat has closed up; it does not want to allow anything to pass through. So she chews and chews, listening to Jodi talk about the renovations she wants to do with the front deck. "Wouldn't a gazebo look stellar out there?"

During the meal, Brian watches Norah, frowning. He doesn't ask her how she's feeling, doesn't draw attention to it, and Norah could hug him for that. If anyone were to ask her how she felt, she didn't think she could keep her tears inside.

At dusk, Brian starts a campfire for the children. Everyone sits in a circle of plastic chairs around the fire, and Norah watches how Annie helps her brother and Nathan roast marshmallows over the flames. Norah smiles. Sees how gently Annie speaks to the younger children, even though she's only a child herself. For a while, Norah feels at peace again. The pain in her head lessens. She helps herself to a s'more. Takes care to eat hold the snack with only her index finger and thumb to limit the spread of the sticky marshmallow.

*

When everyone goes to bed that night, and Benjamin climbs the stairs, saying how he'll sleep like a baby after waterskiing in the sun all day, Norah doesn't think she can bear to go to the bedroom just yet. She sits at the kitchen table by herself, the only light coming from the microwave over the stove, scattering shadows all over the room. She might just sit here all night, alone, waiting for the sun to peer over the horizon. In the morning, after breakfast, they'll pack the car for the drive home, and she doesn't want to be trapped in the car with Benjamin, knowing that she knows nothing about him anymore.

She hears footsteps coming down the hallway, and then Brian comes into the kitchen. He doesn't seem surprised at seeing her sitting alone in the quiet dark. He's wearing a pair of glasses, and Norah thinks, Of course. An eye doctor.

"Can I sit?" he says, and when Norah nods, he slides into the seat across from her. "Just sitting up? Do you want something to drink, maybe some water? Tea?"

She shakes her head, but he gets up anyway and goes to the refrigerator, and returns to the table with a bowl of sliced cantaloupe, watermelon, and strawberries. "You hardly ate at dinner, and I know that s'more isn't going to hold you over through the night."

He sets the bowl before her, but she doesn't eat.

"I'm not going to tell you about it," Norah says.

"I didn't ask to know." Brian sets his elbows on the table, leans forward, his face closer. In the shadows of the dark kitchen, she realizes she was wrong about his features. In the daylight, his skin was smooth and his face looked clean-shaven, but with the light on only one side of his face, she notices the lines that pull at the sides of his eyes, under his chin. The shadows of stubble cover his jaw. Behind his glasses, his sharp eyes lose their edge, and he looks chubbier than she thought when he stood over her on the deck earlier that day. And despite all this,

perhaps because of all this, Norah suddenly feels as though she can tell him everything—her fears over Benjamin’s affair, his strange behavior when he is alone with her, the pain in her head that harries her when she thinks about how they’ll probably have to get a divorce, and what will happen to little Nathan? She knows her eyes are red, and she rubs her knuckles into them to avoid his stare, for something to do.

“God, my head hurts,” Norah says. “You’re a doctor, aren’t you? Do something.”

“What do I know?” Brian says. “Eat some fruit.”

Norah picks at the cantaloupe and finally, reluctantly, puts one in her mouth. They sit in silence for a while, but Norah doesn’t feel uncomfortable, even though she hardly knows this man. She feels like she’s known him for a long time, however. Jodie has told her so much about him, and though the information about him is secondhand, she feels comfortable sitting here, across from him, while he watches her eat cantaloupe.

“Did you know,” she says, “the average cloud weighs over a million pounds?” Brian shakes his head. “It’s true,” she says. “All that weight’s just moving around up there.”

“Is that what’s keeping you up nights?” he says, and Norah laughs. Imagines that this little fact that she’d read in a magazine could be the sole cause of her sleepless nights. How absurd. She laughs and hears a cough from one of the bedrooms down the hall, and she realizes she’s being too loud, but this makes her want to laugh harder, so she does. Brian doesn’t laugh, doesn’t understand what’s funny, but he smiles as he watches her. He lets her have this moment. In the morning, she will have to get in the car and assure her anxious son that the turtles that may or may not cross the road will be alright. In the morning, she will sit beside her husband, who may or may not be having an affair, who may or may not be the same person she married, who may or may not even love his wife anymore. In the morning, she will drive in a car under miles

and miles of open sky, with nothing between her head and the crushing weight of an infinite number of clouds—but for now, she sits in the dark of the kitchen and laughs.

Appendix B

Assertiveness Training

I wanted to listen to the speaker, but I couldn't stop myself from glancing at my phone. The screen lit up with a text from the girl I was seeing. It read: *A man is staring at me. So creepy!* I didn't know in what context a creepy man might be staring at Valerie; the previous evening, before I left her apartment, she mentioned she wanted to get a mole on her lower back checked out. I took this remark seriously, as my aunt had died from melanoma, but in hindsight I think she just wanted me to take her shirt off. Women were always difficult for me to read, and more often than not I think I messed up my interactions with them through bad communication alone.

We were sitting in the empty lot beside our office building. We were sitting out here for two reasons: 1) The corporate bosses made everyone attend a monthly seminar to promote a "healthier work environment" and "employee satisfaction," and 2) Our branch manager, Marissa, would rather have us suffer the seminar in the sunny, green outdoors than in a stuffy, bland conference room indoors.

Don't make the mistake of thinking Marissa is the "cool" type of boss even though she lets us have the seminars outside. You'd think Marissa was one of those cool, laid-back bosses because she's vegan, because she drives one of those cars that runs on electricity and has bumper stickers that say things like "Tree-Hugging Dirt Worshipper," because she sets an alarm every fifteen minutes to remind her to stand up and do jumping jacks. But she isn't laid-back at all when it comes to managing our branch. Marissa patrols our workspaces like a prison guard, except if Marissa were a prison guard, she wouldn't be the kind of prison guard that smuggles in the cigarettes and cocaine and *Maxim* magazines for the inmates, she'd be the kind of prison

guard that beats the inmates with a nightstick just for fun. Okay, perhaps this is a harsh judgment of Marissa's character, but I've feared her ever since she yelled at me—that's right, literally *yelled* at me—for failing to respond to one of her emails the first week I started the job. She yelled at me in front of all my co-workers, all her employees, which was a move I found utterly unprofessional. Charlene, the woman who works at the desk near mine, said Marissa was going through a divorce, to not take it personally. And I might not have taken it personally except for the fact that I'd never received a warm smile from Marissa, never a "good job," or even a "thank you." Thank you, Charlene, but I think I'll take this very personally.

The leader of the seminar, a woman wearing a bright yellow sundress and looking like a flower child from the seventies, asked us all to sit in a circle in the grass while she spoke. That month, the seminar was titled "Assertiveness Training for Women." Marissa made me attend even though the title clearly delineated the seminar for women, and I am not a woman. I am a man. I was the only man who worked in the office, however, and I was also probably the least assertive person in the office overall, and everyone knew it. It was hard being assertive when you thought your boss hated you. That's why I wanted to pay close attention to the woman leading the seminar.

The woman leading the seminar began to talk about what it means to be an assertive woman in the workplace. Or a man, she added, smiling at me, and I felt a glare in my peripherals from Marissa. I swear, her hatred of me transcended time and space. If we were born in the same hospital on the same day and Marissa were in the crib next to mine, she would have yelled at me for my incompetent manner of crying in front of all the other babies in the room.

The woman leading the seminar was named Lorelai. Her job was to lead every seminar the company required. She'd already led our seminars the last two months called "Stress

Management Exercises” and “Step-parenting for the Win.” I wasn’t sure why we were required to attend the latter seminar, since the only step-parent in our office was Donna, but I felt that if I ever became a step-parent I’d be prepared having attended that seminar.

Looking at Lorelai fill that bright yellow dress with her incessant joy, I thought about her job, having to travel to every branch of the company to motivate people to better themselves. I wondered how somebody could wake up every morning and prepare to inspire others. When *I* wake up in the morning, I can barely inspire myself to use the bathroom. I spend at least ten minutes lying in bed until that crucial point when you know you’ll either piss your pants or develop some kind of urinary tract infection, whichever comes first, and then I finally head to the toilet—not because I’m too dignified to piss my pants, but because I’m afraid the pain of a urinary tract infection will be too much for me to bear. This Lorelai, on the other hand, probably springs out of bed the moment she wakes up and has no problem motivating herself to walk to the bathroom. She probably even *skips* to the bathroom. With a sprightly, beautiful name like Lorelai, it’s probably a lot easier to be happy. The name Lorelai makes people think of something delicate, like a blanket of trilliums covering a forest floor. My name is Kevin, which makes people think of a drywall in someone’s basement. No, it makes people think of a hole in the drywall of someone’s basement. No, actually it makes people think of a hole that someone punched in the drywall of someone’s basement, with a small pile chalky drywall dust stuck in the junction where the wall meets the carpet at a place where it’s impossible to ever vacuum the chalky drywall dust. People can’t help but say “Kevin” in a dull voice, like the voice of the person that speaks through the drive-thru microphone at Wendy’s. People can’t help but say the name “Lorelai” in a sing-song voice. We were destined to have opposite personalities, Lorelai and I, the moment our names were set on our birth certificates.

I wanted to listen to Lorelai speaking about how I could be more assertive, but I could not, because Valerie sent me another text. It read: *Seriously, this man is SO creepy!* I still didn't know where Valerie was or in what context a creepy man would be staring at her, but because she'd mentioned wanting to get her mole checked out, I pictured her sitting in a doctor's office, in a waiting room. Valerie and I had been dating only a few weeks, so I wasn't sure what kind of magazine she'd be reading, but she'd once baked some magnificent red velvet cupcakes for me, so I imagined she had *Food Network Magazine* opened on her lap, and I could see her crossing her legs tightly to ward off the creepy man's obtrusive eyes. And I thought about the type of man this creepy man would be. He'd be the type of man who had no shame staring at a woman in public, probably the type of man who had no shame in observing a woman's ass as she walked away, probably the type of man who had no shame catcalling a woman as she high-heeled the crosswalk in front of his pickup truck at a red light. So, instead of listening to the speaker, I shifted uncomfortably in the grass as my appetite, which had made my stomach groan as lunchtime drew nearer, vanished entirely.

I thought about how I ought to respond to Valerie's text. I'd spent so much time thinking about how I ought to respond to Valerie's text that I ended up not responding all. I'm truly awful at communication. That's what Stephanie told me after she broke up with me last year, anyway. You're terrible at communication, she'd said, and maybe she was right. I was always misinterpreting her words, like when she said it was okay for me to go to my brother's bachelor party even though I knew his friends had hired a stripper. I'd asked her permission, told her the whole truth. It's your brother's bachelor party, she'd said, and Of course I trust you, she said, but I was too stupid to know that what she really meant was, If there's a stripper at this party we're done. When I returned to our apartment that night, Stephanie had been waiting up for me in the

living room, wearing the fiery lamplight on her bare shoulders like porcupine quills. Was there a stripper or not? she'd asked, and though I could sense her distress, I was too surprised, and a bit too tipsy, to lie.

That night, she'd slept on the couch and refused to come to bed, refused to hear any of my apologies. In the morning, she evicted all her belongings from the cupboards, the dresser drawers, the closet; I'd never realized how much space her stuff took up in the apartment, but as she loaded it all into her Grand Am, the apartment looked emptier and emptier, until it hardly looked like anyone lived there at all. She'd decorated the walls with pictures, bought the curtains on the windows, filled the kitchen drawers with silverware and measuring cups, even replaced my tattered bedspread with her own plush blanket; she took all these things with her when she left that day last December, and my apartment hadn't recovered since. *I* hadn't recovered since. My apartment looked the way my chest felt: hollowed out, like the rind of a coconut after it's been drained of its milk. I wasn't sure if I was ready to date anyone else yet, but when I met Valerie at the bar down the street from my apartment, she'd taken a real interest in me. We'd only been on a few dates since then, and she often texted me during the day until we'd meet for dinner after work, and this constant communication—to be honest—freaked me out. The more communication we had, the more chances I had at miscommunication, and I knew it was only a matter of time before Valerie said, *You're terrible at communication. And then she'd leave me.* I hadn't brought Valerie to see my apartment yet. It was in much too sad of a state, and it would reveal far too much about my life.

Lorelai finished introducing the concept of assertiveness in the workplace, and she said, *Now we're going to practice some assertiveness techniques.* I had not been able to focus on what Lorelai had said. I'd found a furry black caterpillar in the grass and had watched it crawl onto my

shoe. I could never remember the difference between the caterpillars that turned into butterflies and the caterpillars that turned into moths. I'd read an article in the newspaper about the gypsy moths that attack trees in my neighborhood in southeast Michigan. The writer of the article didn't explicitly say, but the manner in which she talked about the damage the gypsy moths caused convinced me that she advocated the genocide of the entire species. I watched the small caterpillar climb my shoe towards my ankle, and I wondered whether this would transform into a graceful, lovely butterfly or a vicious, tree-killing moth. Then I realized that it didn't matter what this caterpillar should become because it was probably going to die before it could fulfill that transformation. There were probably robins or sparrows hiding in the grass nearby, waiting for me to leave the caterpillar alone, and as soon as I did, their beaks would rip it to shreds. That's when I felt intense sympathy for the little bug. Regardless of what it might become, it seemed innocent to me, like a human baby. Just because a human baby might become a serial killer, or an abusive mother, or a man that drives drunk at night, doesn't mean one should kill every baby, right? At least, that's what I thought as I placed my finger in front of the caterpillar's path and let it climb onto my finger.

Lorelai asked us to find a partner, and I knew that I wasn't going to enjoy this part of the seminar, even though I really did want to improve my assertiveness. The problem was that I had a lump in my throat from thinking about Valerie sitting in that waiting room, getting ogled by some filthy man, and partner activities in these seminars always involve speaking roles, and I wasn't sure I'd have the ability to speak through the lump in my throat.

The other reason I didn't think I'd enjoy this part of the seminar was that most of the women didn't want to partner with me. It wasn't something they would've confessed to openly if I confronted them about it, but it was an unspoken law of our workplace. I'd always imagined

that when there is only one man who works in an office of women, he would climb the ladder quickly. I don't want to sound misogynistic, I'm not making this up—there's a sociological term for this called the *glass elevator*, or something like that. But that was not the case with me in this office. For lack of a better word, I was a peon. If you want to bring aesthetics into this conversation, I should tell you that they didn't mistreat because I was unattractive because, frankly, I was not. Valerie was a model for department store catalogues, she was a stunner, with long black hair and these unbelievable, jungle-green eyes. She was a far more beautiful woman than I'd ever have expected to be attracted to me, and therefore I'd decided I was not completely repulsive. I thought the women in this office were afraid to do things like partner with me because of how much Marissa hated me. People didn't want to be on the boss's bad side, and I couldn't blame them.

As per usual, I ended up paired with Charlene, the woman whose desk was near mine. Charlene was a single mother of four, and you could tell this simply by glancing at her face. She had stringy black hair and thick glasses that made her eyes look miniature, like little dots on her face. She always wore thick gobs of mascara as if to obscure her sadness, but this only served to emphasize her droopy expression. She had the kind of face you wanted to stare at even though it made you sad, mostly because it made you feel sad for her but a little bit better about your own situation. Because even though the girl I was seeing was so stunning that men couldn't lift their eyes from her, and I constantly wondered when she'd leave me for someone famous like an actor or a billionaire listed in *Forbes*, at least I hadn't gone through whatever happened to Charlene.

Charlene's was a sad story about which I'd gathered snippets of information from overhearing others' conversations. One evening, late in the night, she'd caught her husband trying to drown their youngest child in the bathtub, and when she tried to stop him, he'd thrown

her down the stairs. The crashing sound had woken the other children up, and when they came out of their rooms and saw what their father had done, her husband ran out the door. When the police showed up minutes later, they found the husband had hung himself in the garage with an extension cord. This was the story people whispered to one another, and apparently it had made the news, but nobody brought it up around Charlene. I found the news article online, and it appeared that everything had actually happened. Most people around the office spoke to Charlene in a soft voice, as if her fragile spirit might shatter like glass under high volumes. People often stared at her at the office as if they wanted to know what effect a domestic tragedy and years of intense therapy could have on the human face.

Lorelai said we were going to try the “broken record” technique, which involved repeating your requests or objections whenever you were met with resistance. Between our partners, she had one of us ask for something, like a thirty-minute lunch break instead of a fifteen-minute one because a fifteen-minute one wasn’t enough time to eat our tuna melt, and then she had the other partner refuse the request, and then the first partner was supposed to repeat the question. The person requesting was supposed to imitate a broken record that repeats the same thing over and over again.

Charlene and I stood facing each other, but I stared at her midsection because the sun was far too bright and I could feel a headache coming on from being outside too long. I could also feel the caterpillar tickling my wrist as it moved under my shirt sleeve and up my arm. Lorelai flitted back and forth among the groups like a hummingbird, incredibly active but never staying in one spot for too long. Great job, my broken records! she said in her loud, confident voice. Let me hear you, broken records!

It was my turn to be the broken record. I'd been trying to ask Charlene for a longer lunchtime because fifteen minutes was not enough time to eat my tuna melt. I never brought a tuna melt to work in real life because I never had the motivation to make anything more extravagant than a salami sandwich at seven in the morning, but I had seen someone eating a tuna melt on a TV commercial the night before and it was all I could think to say.

I didn't think I'd be able to get the most out of this exercise while I kept thinking about Valerie at the doctor's office. I still didn't know if she was actually at the doctor's office, but I'd spent so much time visualizing her that the scenario became real to me. While I was supposed to be acting like a broken record, I took out my phone and read Valerie's newest text. It read: *The creep just asked me to get a drink with him. S.O.S.!* I felt the lump in my throat shift like a rock lodged in my epiglottis. Charlene asked, Is everything alright? I was about to tell her that I didn't think I could do the exercise, but Lorelai suddenly appeared at our sides and said, Let me hear you loud and clear, my broken record!

I would've excused myself from the exercise if I hadn't seen Marissa staring at me from behind another group of partners, her eyes narrowed. I quickly stashed my phone in my pocket like a schoolboy caught holding something he shouldn't hold, like a Ziploc bag of marijuana. Marissa made me feel like a child again, fearful of being caught acting out from the teacher.

I turned to Charlene, but I still had to look down because the sun was so bright above her head.

I need more time to eat my tuna melt, I said to Charlene's midsection.

Be more specific in your request, my broken record! Lorelai said.

I need twenty minutes to eat my tuna melt instead of the ten minutes you allow, I said, hoping that was specific enough.

I think ten minutes is enough time to eat lunch, Charlene said, and her voice had become something it never sounded like before, something with authority. I realized, with a sudden lurch in my stomach, that her voice had the quality to it that Stephanie's voice used to have—stern, demanding, obstinate. It was the voice that I'd submitted to for the duration of our fourteen-month relationship. I wouldn't have been surprised if Charlene had started to say things like, Why can't you ever say the right thing? Or, Was there a stripper or not?

And then I couldn't respond to Charlene because I started thinking about how Stephanie used to talk about her ex-boyfriends. She used to openly compare them to me. Victor was so adventurous, she'd said. We made love in his car during his lunch break, she'd said. Why won't you try anything adventurous? she'd said. I think she meant to inspire me to change my ways with these statements, but instead I froze. I could never speak to her after she said these things, not because I didn't want to, but because I was afraid that if I'd opened my mouth I would vomit. That's how upset I'd become.

Stephanie used to even show me pictures on her phone of the boys she used to date. Although she never said it, I think she knew they were more attractive than I was. I don't know why she showed me those pictures, but I always felt as if it were a threat. She'd find small imperfections in their appearances and point them out to me under the guise of making me feel better. Look at Victor's butt chin, she once said, pointing to what I thought looked like a very masculine dimple, but what she really meant was, Look who I'm capable of having.

I felt my phone vibrate in my pocket again. I didn't want to even look at the message this time. I knew it would be another message about some guy staring at Valerie. This time, though, I imagined the man staring at her was gorgeous, wearing a fitted dress shirt, a sleek, narrow tie, and a gleaming white smile. And she wasn't creeped out so much as she was flattered, and she

was going to accept his offer to get a drink, and she was going to leave me for this man, who was good at communication and even better at understanding what Valerie needs and wants.

I stood quietly for so long after hearing the tone of Charlene's voice that Lorelai interpreted my silence for stupidity. Remember how a broken record works? she asked in her loud voice. I could see people turning their heads to watch us. Marissa stared at me, smiling, relishing in my embarrassment. Repeat yourself, my broken record! Lorelai said.

I felt the lump in my throat shift just enough for my voice to slip passed.

I know you said ten minutes is enough time to eat, I said. But I need twenty minutes to eat.

And then, hoping to be as specific as I could, I added, To eat my tuna melt.

Ten minutes is plenty of time to eat, Charlene's midsection said, and God, how she sounded like Stephanie.

I know you said—I began to say, but Lorelai leaned her head down to Charlene's midsection, placed her face directly where my gaze lingered so that our eyes met. My face had never been this close to Lorelai's, nor any stranger's. From this distance and this angle, with the harsh sunlight over her face, I could see she had a patch of dark hair connecting her eyebrows. For some reason this made her more terrifying, probably because, despite her horrific unibrow, she still had the inspiration to spring from her bed in the morning, pee in the toilet, and go to work to inspire employees. I could feel the caterpillar under my sleeve, tickling the crook where the upper arm meets the lower arm, and it made me want to scratch that spot on my arm, which I couldn't do because Lorelai's face was so close to mine that I didn't want to make any sudden movements.

Look your boss in the eyes with confidence, my broken record! she said, and I knew how a new army recruit might feel when being yelled at by a drill sergeant at boot camp. If only I could look Marissa in the eyes with confidence. This was such a simple exercise, but I'd somehow been the one to mess it up.

I forced myself to look at Charlene's face despite the blinding sunlight. As per usual, the heavy mascara she dolloped on each morning had splotched on the bags under her eyes, making them look more shadowed than they usually appeared. That, coupled with the eternal sadness in the black depths of her pupils, should have made it easy to stand up to her. But I didn't feel that way. I felt that, staring into her aching eyes, that Charlene deserved to have her way in this life just once, even if it came from resisting my fake request in a fake exercise at our employee wellness seminar. Out of this entire day, one of us should win, and I thought Charlene deserved it more.

So I walked away.

I turned and walked away from the other employees, away from our seminar in the empty lot beside our office building. Is he alright? I heard Lorelai ask, but I didn't turn around. Marissa called my name, her voice taut as the plastic wrap that sealed the broken part of my driver's side window, and still I walked away. I crossed the field to the parking lot and checked my phone. *The creep is trying to kiss me!* I realized there was no way this could be happening in real life. How could she send me that information if the man was right beside her? I still didn't know where Valerie was, and I didn't care. I was going to call her and tell her how her texts made me feel, and if she was making the creepy man up to keep my attention, well, I wasn't going to let that stand.

I dialed her number and leaned against my car while the line rang. I could feel the caterpillar crawling over my shoulder and towards my chest, and I imagined how it must feel for the little organism in the cavern of my shirt, moving through the warm nest of my chest hair, the safety in the dark space from the robins and the sparrows that sought to eat it. I didn't mind that the caterpillar crawled under my shirt, didn't care what sort of winged creature it would become. For now, it was safe.

The line kept ringing. It rang on and on and on, the pause between each ring hanging in the air like the pregnant silence of a held breath.

Appendix C

Even in the Dark, We Could Find Each Other

That summer I spent most of my time in the car. I was almost always driving somewhere, but it's funny how driving somewhere can feel so much like running away from something. After dinner I'd tell Annie I was going to the gym. She would smile at me in my sweatpants and grey tee and tell me to pick up butter on the way home. Sweet, darling Annie. For all she knew I really *was* going to the gym; I became skinny that summer, skinnier than I already was, and my ribs threatened to poke out of my skin. My secret wasn't the treadmill, though, it was a lack of appetite, and besides, Annie would've baked her foot with the pot roast before telling me exercise was unhealthy. I couldn't explain my vanishing appetite except to say that it went when I met Grace Leone. Those afternoons I backed out the driveway, nearly turned all the way around in my seat, looking for any kids riding past on bicycles, or the neighbor's damn beagle that always slipped beneath the gate to crap in my yard. We often dog-sat the beagle for the Caldwells, and the dog had become conditioned to use our lawn for business. In the street I'd throw the gear into drive and look up at my house. My daughters Clare and Isabelle, five and three years old, kneeled on the driveway by the ceramic pot of violets, hunched over with a bucket of chalk. Sometimes they waved to me as I drove away. Sometimes the sun, setting over the garage, filled my eyes with golden light and forced me to turn away and drive without a glimpse of my girls.

I never once went to the gym that summer. In May and June the membership bills came in the mail, and each time Annie passed them to me across the dinner table I wrote the checks. If I saw a treadmill or weight machine that summer, it was through the wide windows of the Rec

Center as I drove past it on my way out of town. Where did I go most evenings for an hour that summer? Usually I just drove. I'd drive to the next town over, drive through the subdivisions and watch other people's children play on other people's lawns. I'd look at other people's houses, see the bluish-white glow of their TVs through their front windows, and I'd wonder what went on in other people's homes. I always tried to find new streets I hadn't yet explored, finding new subdivisions with new houses to wonder about. Mostly I marveled at the sheer number of subdivisions and houses there were. I'd see all sorts of homes, countless numbers, and sometimes the very thought amazed me—people *live* here. I loved to feel amazed. It amazed me that some people still air-dried their laundry in the suburbs. It amazed me that no matter where I drove I'd find a house where people lived. The sheer quantity of life I could find just driving around. Everywhere I went, I'd drive with the windows up and the AC off, so that by the time I pulled back onto the driveway at dusk my pits would be damp and the sweat would show through my shirt, and Annie would say, God, do *not* sit on my couch in those clothes.

All of this driving around began in April when Grace Leone started working at the dealership. On the first day of the job Grace mentioned to someone that she didn't own a car, but she was staying at her brother's house, which happened to be in the same town as mine. Someone referred her to me, and when she approached me in the break room while I stirred a packet of sugar into my coffee with a popsicle stick. Grace was eight years younger than me at twenty-three, and I could feel her youthful energy radiating from her like sunlight. She had long, natural red hair, and freckles on her cheeks and nose. I wondered if she had freckles on her small round shoulders beneath her blouse. She seemed far too shy for such a beautiful woman. When she told me about her transportation dilemma, I offered to give her rides. "I don't want to be anyone's trouble," Grace said.

Each morning I'd pull up to her brother's house and watch her come out the porch door. When she sat in the passenger seat I was always stunned from the clean smell of her, the smell of coconut shampoo and some kind of flowery perfume. On the way to work we'd talk about little things that didn't seem to matter in our usual lives, like what our favorite snacks were as a child, or how many times we'd made the drive to Detroit to watch a Tigers baseball game—but these things seemed somehow more important when we told them to each other. I told her about my little girls, how Clare was five and Isabelle was three, and how their favorite thing to do was dress identical to one another, whether they wore blue jeans or a summer dress. “You'd just love those girls,” I said, and then I wondered what had made me say that. Grace told me about her brother, who kept trying to have a baby with his wife but they couldn't, and though they put on a happy face for Grace, sometimes she'd walk into the room when one of them didn't expect to see her, and they'd discreetly wipe their eyes. Often we glanced at each other's faces while we talked, and for the second of eye contact the glance afforded, I couldn't help but feel that some intimate connection had been made. Sometimes I watched Grace's hands while she talked. They would do all sorts of funny things like clasp together, or lie flat on her lap, or she'd hold the pointer finger of one hand with the other. I got the impression that Grace was nervous talking to me because her hands were always moving about, and this gave me a kind of satisfaction. I sometimes marveled at how small her hands were, and how delicate her wrists seemed. I wanted to hold her hands in mine just to see if they really were as delicate as they looked.

Each afternoon I'd drop her off at her brother's and watch her disappear through the same porch door with a smile and a nimble flick of her small, delicate wrist, a wave goodbye. While I drove home, her clean smell lingered in my car, and I breathed in deeply.

One morning Grace climbed into my car and I noticed that, when she tucked a loose strand of red hair behind her ear, her eyes were watered. “My parents are getting a divorce,” she said. “I guess thirty years of marriage doesn’t mean much anymore.”

I wanted to reach out and touch Grace in some way, like putting my hand on her small shoulder, or hugging her. Instead, I told her about how my father left when I was seven, how it had devastated my mother. I hadn’t spoken to him in twenty-four years. “Not that it should make you feel better,” I said. “I just want you to know that I understand.”

Grace lifted her small hand from her lap so slightly, as if she were reaching for me, and it hung in the air for a moment before she set it back down.

Whenever I spoke to Annie about Grace, I made my voice as uncharismatic as I could. Annie didn’t ask many questions, but I wondered how different that would be if she actually knew how pretty Grace was. “We should have her for dinner sometime,” Annie suggested. “I know if I was living with my brother I’d want to get out sometimes.”

I shrugged whenever Annie suggested asking Grace to dinner. “She seems to like her brother,” I said, hoping to sound casual. Strangely, I felt compelled to keep Grace away from my house. Still, Annie kept pushing for me to invite Grace to dinner, so one afternoon as I pulled up to her brother’s house, I said, “My wife and I would like to have you over for dinner.”

Grace’s face almost illuminated from excitement. “Oh, Nathan, I’d *love* to come. Will I be able to meet your little girls?”

I felt warmth spread like a wildfire beneath my ribcage. “How does Friday sound?”

The Friday of our scheduled dinner, I brought Grace straight to my house instead of taking her to her brother’s. When we pulled onto the driveway I saw the neighbor’s beagle squatting behind

the blue hydrangea bushes and I hoped Grace wouldn't notice. She did notice, though, and couldn't keep herself from smiling.

"Meet the neighbor's dog, Trumpet," I said.

"What dog?" she said as we watched Trumpet kick mulch over his dump and prance back to his owner's lawn. "I'm just admiring your lovely hydrangeas."

Inside, Annie had set the table and a tantalizing garlic smell filled the air. I kissed her on the cheek and introduced her to Grace. I noticed Annie's eyes flicker over Grace from head to toe, and it almost looked as if Annie had done a double-take. Of course she was surprised by Grace's quiet beauty. "It's a pleasure to meet you," Grace said in her shy way. The women shook hands. Annie was gracious as ever when she said, "It's so nice to finally welcome you to our home." When Grace turned to sit at the table, Annie gave me a funny look with her eyebrows partially raised.

Annie called the girls in from the backyard. Clare and Isabelle had insisted on wearing matching sundresses again. "Are these the darling angels you told me about, Nathan?" Grace said, and she rose from the table to kneel in front of the girls. Little Izzy hid behind Clare, but both girls smiled when Grace told them how pretty they looked in their dresses.

We sat at the table and passed around a dish of lasagna and garlic toast. Annie and Grace asked questions about each other that I already knew the answers to. They were both far more polite than I'd ever seen either of them, and I felt more uncomfortable than I'd expected, so I occupied myself with making sure Izzy didn't spill pasta sauce on her dress.

Annie asked how Grace liked her new job at the dealership and Grace replied that she was enjoying herself. "It's mostly thanks to the nice people I've met there," she said, turning her eyes on me. Annie raised her eyebrows. "I'll bet," my wife said.

When the phone rang I leapt out of my seat and hurried around the corner into the living room to answer it.

“Have I reached Nathan Alcon?” an older woman’s voice asked. She sounded uneasy asking the question, which I found peculiar for a telemarketer, as I assumed this call was meant to sell me something. I didn’t mind, though. It got me out of the kitchen for a while, at least.

“Yes.” I was half-listening, trying to hear what the women talked about in the kitchen.

“So you’re the son of Benjamin Alcon?”

I felt my body go numb. I hadn’t heard my father’s name in over a decade. I thought there could only be a few reasons for a call like this to be made. My father had never tried to reach me once after he left.

“Sir? Is this correct? Is Benjamin Alcon your father?”

“Yes,” I said. “Why are you calling me?”

“Sir, I’m calling to let you know that your father is very sick.”

“No. I mean, why are you calling *me*?” I realized my voice had risen, and it had gone quiet in the kitchen. “My father’s wanted nothing to do with me, so I want nothing to do with him. If he’s sick or needs money, he can talk to someone else.”

The woman sighed. I could tell she didn’t want to have this conversation any more than I did. She spoke gently. “Mr. Alcon, I just live down the street from your father. He’s dying. He asked me to tell you this, and to invite you to his house so he can say goodbye.”

I didn’t answer. I wanted nothing to do with this. I’d always hoped that he’d die someday and I wouldn’t hear about it until after the funeral. I’d always imagined some distant relative would call me and say, “Thought I’d let you know, your father’s dead,” and I would say, “Oh, that’s interesting,” as if he’d had just told me the chance of precipitation for the day. I certainly

didn't want to visit this old, sick man who'd abandoned me and my mother, especially if he wanted some kind of forgiveness from me.

"Mr. Alcon," the woman said. "Your father told me you would resist. I'm just going to give you his address. You can write it down, if you like, and then think it over."

I hung up the phone. I felt bad for the old woman, who certainly didn't ask for the duty she'd been given, but I wasn't about to let my father manipulate me through anyone else. When I returned to the kitchen, everyone looked at me, even the little girls. "Who was that?" Annie asked. I sat at the table and forced myself to take a bite of lasagna. "No one important," I said, and Annie gave me a strange look, but then she asked Grace if she'd like any chocolate ganache for dessert. Grace looked grateful for the change in subject. "I really would," she said, smiling.

When everyone had finished eating, I gathered the dishes and started to rinse them in the sink. Annie placed a hand on my shoulder. "Why don't you let me take care of that?" Annie said. "You drive Grace home." I shrugged, and Grace said to the girls, "It was so nice to meet you, little princesses." Clare smiled and Izzy covered her face with her hands. "They're just darling," Grace said.

When we started the drive I felt wound up. I felt the tension in my shoulders as I thought about the phone call. I was both surprised and relieved that Grace didn't ask about the call. Instead, she told me I was right, she did love my daughters, and that Annie was lovely, and my family was no less wonderful than she'd anticipated. Her voice was so soft, so tender, so sensitive to my mood. It felt as if her words slipped through my pores and wandered my body, loosening the tension. "Oh, please," I finally said, and I couldn't keep from blushing at her compliments. When I pulled up to her brother's curb, the sky was already dark. I turned in my seat to look at her. Grace smiled and stared at her hands on her lap, intertwining her fingers. The

poor girl loved me, I already knew. I told myself that what I felt was great affection, it was tenderness, but it couldn't be love, because I was still in love with Annie. Still, it felt like what I'd always called love. It felt like I could pick her up out of the passenger seat and carry her away to a different world. If there were two of me, one could be with Annie and one could be with Grace, and both would be in love and both would be happy. I wanted to cup her freckled cheek in my palm. I wanted to know if there were freckles on her small shoulders, the way I imagined there were.

When Grace lifted her eyes and met mine, I reached out and held her delicate hand in my own. Her hands immediately stopped shifting, and she gave my hand a squeeze. "Goodnight, Grace," I said. She smiled, and when she slipped out of my car into the dusk she left her sweet scent behind. I watched her silhouette move across the lawn in the glow of the porch light, so smooth and graceful she was almost skipping, until she disappeared through the front door.

In the days following the dinner, I continued to pretend I was going to the gym but actually went driving around the neighboring towns. I saw yellow lights go on within the houses as the sky turned into a dark blue. It felt like I was searching for something in those homes I drove past, in the man who stood spraying hose water over his garden bed, in the children who gathered around the anthills that grew through the cracks in the sidewalk, prodding the dirt mounds with gnarled tree limbs. I saw a little girl with brown hair and a white summer dress bend to pick up a tennis ball in the grass and I could've sworn it was my daughter Clare, but when I looked back I saw that I was mistaken.

I spent so much time trying to *not* think of my father that I ended up thinking about him more. I thought of questions I hadn't thought of since I was a boy. Mostly I wondered why he

left us in the first place. Had he fallen in love with someone else? I imagined what would happen if I left Annie for Grace; it was unthinkable, really, yet the thought of it made me excited at the same time as it made me sick. How could that be?

Perhaps my father had simply gotten sick of being bound to a group of people for the rest of his life? What confused me most was that he'd always been a decent father until the moment he left. All of my memories with the man are positive. I remember some nights when he'd let me come downstairs to his woodshop, and he'd let me hold the yardstick while he measured beams to saw. He showed me all the different kinds of wood he had and what they could be used for. He let me touch the hardwoods like the cherry, birch, and ash, and I loved to smell the pine and cedar beams. He never let me touch the table saw. A power tool isn't a toy, son, he'd told me. This saw can chop your arm off faster than a shark. I took his words to heart. I treated the basement woodshop like a menagerie for vicious animals, and despite my often overwhelming curiosity, I never went downstairs without my father.

After he left, there was a time when I'd asked my mother if he was coming back. "At this point, Nathan, let's hope not," she said to me. My mother put on a tough face about it, but sometimes, when we sat in the glow of the TV screen in the dark, I would glance over to her at the other end of the couch and see the way her eyes glistened with tears that couldn't fall. Once, when I came home from my little league baseball practice early, I came into the house quietly and found her in the kitchen. She hadn't heard me come in. My mother stood at the kitchen sink. She held the telephone pressed against her head, the cord dangling limply, rocking back and forth, gently slapping the cabinet door underneath the sink. I remember that, the sound the telephone cord made as it knocked against the cabinet. I remember how sunlight filled the room, how it didn't seem to come from any direction in particular, but it reflected off all the walls, the

cold linoleum tiled floor, the glass vase on the windowsill. Everything glimmered. The room was too bright for what had happened. I remember that, too, how the brightness didn't seem fitting, how it was indifferent to the suffering. Even from my distance across the kitchen, I could hear the dial tone ringing from the receiver pressed against my mother's ear. I could hear it ringing and ringing. I could hear my mother say, Where are you? She said it over and over to the phone, to herself, to no one at all. Where are you? Where are you?

I told Annie about the conversation I'd had with the old woman who said she was my father's neighbor. Annie thought I should visit him. "I'm not saying you have to forgive him," she said. "I'm just saying. He's still your father."

One afternoon, before I dropped Grace off at her brother's house, I told her about the phone conversation I'd had the night she visited. I had not touched Grace since the night I held her hand, but we often talked in the break room at work, and usually our lunchtimes coincided. Grace was silent for a long time after I told her. Finally, she turned to me, and I could've sworn the turn of her head mixed the air in the car so that all of her scent could fill my nostrils. "How do you feel about all that? You know, him wanting to talk to you?" I told her I thought he was being selfish. I told her what I'd never told anyone else, even Annie—that I'd always hoped he'd die before I had to see him again. Grace nodded. Her green eyes seemed to understand every word. "He doesn't deserve you," she said. "But maybe that's all the more reason to visit him."

After I dropped Grace off, I didn't go home right away. I sat in my car curbside her brother's house long after she went through the front door. I remembered the basement workshop lit by a single fluorescent light bulb. I remembered the smooth touch of the pine, the way it bent beneath my touch, bent further than I would have expected. I remembered the smell of the cedar,

and my father's big, firm hands as they sanded the wood, moving back and forth with a man's precision and care.

One evening, as I returned from a joyride, something about my house caught my eye. I parked at the curb opposite my house. I tried to see the house as I saw any of the other hundreds of houses I drove past each day. The lights were on and the windows were open. I could hear a child's laughter inside, and I thought it might be Clare. Trumpet was sniffing around the hydrangea bushes. These were all ordinary things, but as I looked at the house, I realized it could be anyone's house, with anyone's life going on inside, with any neighbor's beagle crapping in the hydrangea bush, and this realization somehow seemed significant.

Inside, I found Annie in the bedroom. She sat on the bed. I sat next to her and hugged her when I walked in, and she let me, even though I was still sweaty from the hot car ride. Somehow, since I'd met Grace, I felt tenderer toward Annie than usual. I kissed her forehead. "The old woman called again," Annie said. "I wrote down your father's address. It's on the kitchen table. Before you say anything," she said, grabbing my elbow as I started to scoot away from her, "I just want you to know that, whatever you decide to do, I support you." I looked into my wife's eyes. The mother of my girls.

I said I'd visit him that weekend.

I told Grace my plans to visit my father. On the Friday afternoon before I left, when I dropped Grace off at her brother's house, she leaned across the seat and kissed my cheek. Her coconut shampoo smell, the press of her lips on my skin as they lingered just a moment longer than what could be considered a friendly kiss—it was almost too much. I felt that familiar itch behind my navel—the sensation of falling as if I were on the fair ride that raises you up and drops you like a

broken elevator—and I didn't want the feeling to leave. I wanted to pull her out of her seat onto my lap, to kiss the freckles on her neck, to bury my nose into her beautiful red hair. Instead, I closed my eyes and laid my head against the backrest. "Grace," I said. I kept my eyes closed even after I heard her open and close the car door and didn't open them until I was sure she'd disappeared through the front door.

From the address Annie had written, I found out my father lived in Gladwin, a small lakeside town somewhere in the middle of the state. I didn't feel like driving all over Michigan to see the man that had abandoned me and broke my mother's heart, but I knew what I ought to do. I left early on Saturday afternoon, the roadmap riding beside me in the passenger seat. The Caldwell's beagle Trumpet sat in the backseat; they'd asked us to watch the dog while they were on vacation, and I couldn't leave it with Annie while she was watching the girls. The highway brought me north out of the metro-Detroit suburbs, which slowly vanished along the side of the road and became dense woodlands and expansive farmlands in turn. A few hours later I exited the highway onto a country road. I glided beyond the pastures with the bales of hay like slumbering bison, and the splintering-paint facades of the ancient barns, beyond the stench of the horses and cows and goats in their paddocks. I wondered how the hell my father had ended up in the countryside when he'd grown up in the city. Then again, I realized, I didn't really know my father that much at all, so how could I assume anything?

All the miles brought me to a lakeshore drive that followed the curves and bights at the water's edge. The sight of the lake and the smell of the water through the open window reminded me of the summers in my youth, after my father had left and my mother needed someone to watch after me while she worked, when I spent my days at the lake house where I'd eventually

fallen in love with Annie. The memories came flooding back like a dam had been opened. I could smell the willows, the freshwater bass, the water itself and all that it held. It was amazing that despite the years that separated me from those summer days, all the old emotions came back as fresh as the day I first felt them. I remembered Annie as a girl in her yellow bathing suit, kneeling on the beach, running her fingers through the sand to unearth the pink shells. I remembered the smell of the campfire and the feel of the grass cold on my feet after the sun had disappeared over the edge of the world. And, though it was an odd revelation, I figured that I never would have had those memories if my father hadn't left. I felt a peculiar dichotomy between animosity and gratitude for him in that moment.

The road led into a section of dense woods that broke away from the lakeshore. Eventually I found a mailbox that had my father's address on it, and I turned onto the long driveway that was lined on either side by trees. The drive led me to his house, a small cabin nestled in the patch of woods that overlooked the lake. I parked at the side of the cabin beside what I assumed was my father's pickup truck, a weathered and rusted vehicle. When I stepped out of my car, the smell of the wind off the water reminded me how much I missed this environment, away from the bustling suburbs with their thousands of houses that you could drive past and never know everyone inside. I let Trumpet out of the car to wander and find a bush to crap behind. In the fading light of the early evening, I approached my father's porch.

I didn't know what I expected to find when I knocked on the door. In my most dramatic imaginings, I pictured him lying in a bed, unconscious, with his mouth opened in a perfect O. There would be a monitor displaying his vitals by the bed, and a dangling IV bladder suspended nearby, dripping life-giving fluid into his veins. I imagined that whatever was killing him inside

was doing a damn good job, and I'd arrive while he could still speak, though barely, and in a rasping, breathless voice.

What I didn't expect, and what happened when I knocked, was my father answering the door with a bottle of beer in hand.

I wanted to speak but couldn't. I recognized the same face, though he'd aged significantly. He was wrinkled and tan and he needed a shave. I would've thought he looked perfectly healthy if the thinness of his arms and chest didn't betray him. He looked far too skinny. He stared at my face for a moment before his jaw went slack, as though it took time for his brain to make the connection to the face of the seven-year-old he'd left behind. We stood there, me on the porch, he in the doorway, staring at each other for what felt like minutes. Finally, he said, "You came, Nate."

I came prepared to scold him, to yell at him, to make him feel as worthless as he deserved. But my anger had numbed inside of my veins. Instead, I was too embarrassed to hold eye contact, and I couldn't find my voice, so I looked past him into the cabin. "Come in, come in," he said, standing aside.

He had no extravagant possessions. The cabin was so sparsely decorated and so lacking in personal belongings that you could've told me it was a rented lodge and I wouldn't have blinked. There was a single cot in one corner, the sheets neatly flattened and tucked. The kitchen counter had a drying rack with a few dishes set out. There was a refrigerator and an oven and a stove. He had no pictures set out, no evidence of ever having a family of any sort, whether it was me and my mother or another woman. The only things he seemed to keep in large quantities were his books, of all shapes and sizes, which he kept on a single shelf beside the cot. I noticed

some of the titles involved woodworking, others helped identify the different types of plants in Michigan.

“Can I get you a beer?”

When I didn't say anything, he opened the fridge, popped the cap off the bottle with his belt buckle, and handed me the beer. “I guess we have a lot to talk about,” he said, grabbing another beer from the fridge and heading out the door that faced the lake. I followed him onto the back deck. The sun had burst and melted over the trees in the west, a blend of pinks and oranges, surrounded by the darkening blue of the sky. There were only two chairs on the deck, and we sat side by side, gazing down the slope to the water's edge. I'd expected him to have a speed boat or a Skidoo, but all he had was a dinky rowboat tethered to a post he'd stuck in the grass near the shore. I sipped the beer. My brain still felt too numb to speak. I watched Trumpet bound to the calm water and stare beneath the surface.

“I can't believe you came,” my father said. “I didn't think you'd come.”

“Neither did I,” I said. “And what am I here for, anyway? Heart disease? Cancer?”

“Cancer. Stomach.”

We didn't look at each other, for which I was grateful. I swallowed, which was hard to do since my throat felt closed. “How long?”

“A month. Two months.”

We fell silent again. Somewhere across the water a firecracker went off. Trumpet's ears perked and he stared in the direction of the sound. A mosquito buzzed near my face and I waved it away. I found that I really had nothing to say. All my life since he'd been gone I'd thought about what I'd say to him, this man who'd done so much damage, and now that he was here before me I couldn't think of a thing. I told him so. “I don't even know what to say.”

“This all feels a bit surreal, doesn’t it?”

I nodded. I wondered what my mother would say about this, my sitting with this man on his deck, overlooking the lake in the dwindling evening light, drinking beers.

“Why’d you do it?” I said.

He didn’t need to ask what I meant. He sighed. “I don’t know how to answer that.”

“Goddammit.” I turned in the chair to face him. The anger had turned on like a switch inside me. I was nearly spitting. “Twenty-four years. That’s how long you’ve been out of my life. You mean to tell me you have nothing to say? You didn’t leave us for someone else?”

To his credit, he turned in his chair and met my eyes. His voice, when he spoke was not angry, or even defensive. He sounded weary, but he spoke with composure. “What can I say? There was no other woman.”

I thought of Grace. Her beautiful, freckled skin. The scent of her in my car. I could still feel the touch of her lips on my cheek. If there was any reason for him leaving my mother I would have believed it was for a Grace. “Then why?”

I could hear the dryness of his mouth when he spoke. This was as hard for him to say as it was for me to hear. “You go through life thinking things are working out. You think you have what you’ve been looking for. But one day you realize something’s wrong with your life—or maybe something’s just wrong with you. You feel like your brain doesn’t work right, you can’t think straight. You try to forget about it. You try to get past these thoughts, you wish with all your heart that you can, but it’s like a disease when it sets in. It just spreads. I tried to be better, Nathan. I wanted to be better for you. For your mother. But it didn’t get better, it just got worse, until one day I realized the only thing I could do was leave. It wouldn’t get better, son. I don’t expect you to understand, but I *had* to leave.”

My hands clenched the bottle. I stared up at the sky, which was the darkest shade of blue imaginable before it could be called black. I could see little dark shapes flitting through the air, squeaking and flapping. Bats. Tiny, blind creatures fumbling in the dark to survive. I watched the bats until the sky became too dark to see anything at all. I could barely see my father when I turned to look at him, but after a few seconds of staring I could just make out his silhouette hunched over in his chair, head bowed. His chest heaved. At first I thought that he was vomiting, or else having a seizure of sorts, and I moved to the edge of my seat, ready to get up and call for help. But then I heard a soft choke and realized that he was crying. He was bent over his knees, body shaking, crying almost in silence. In all my wildest imaginings, I never could have predicted this kind of frailness, this brittle man crumpled before me. It was almost pathetic to watch, but I suddenly felt inside me that I didn't want him to cry, that I didn't want him to suffer. I realized how much hurt this man had experienced, hurt of a kind that I couldn't quite put a name to, but it was a hurt that I could feel then in my chest, in my stomach, in the deepest hidden corners of my body. My father was just a man, after all. I'd always accused him of being less, but that was exactly all he'd ever been.

In that moment, I could only think of how unfair I'd been to Annie and the girls. The feelings I harbored for Grace, even if it could be called love, only detracted from the share that was supposed to be set aside for my family. My wife, my girls. I could picture them all on the front lawn of the house as I'd once seen them. Annie standing over Izzy's shoulder as she scribbled on the concrete with chalk. Clare, standing on the grass, letting the arc of the sprinkler water pass over her head. I could see it all—the way the sunlight over the house touched the sprinkler water, illuminating it, the shining water breaking into a million droplets to fall onto her

head. These were the girls I needed, the lives I needed to hold. I felt the need to confess. I almost reached out a hand to my father. I almost placed it on his back.

It was then that my father lifted his head. “Where’d that dog go?”

“Shit,” I said, standing up. “Trumpet!” I called. I couldn’t imagine what kind of trouble I’d get in if that damn dog was lost in these woods. I looked around us in the blackness.

“Trumpet!”

I heard my father stand and his footsteps traveled across the deck onto the grass. “Where are you going?” I said. I couldn’t even see a foot in front of my face. I forgot what kind of total darkness the world took on away from the city on a cloudy night. No stars glimmered overhead to provide light, no moon to illuminate the ground.

I couldn’t hear anything but the wind and the occasional click of a bat overhead. “Where are you?” I called into the dark. “Where are you?” There was no answer. I could feel my heart knocking against my ribcage. I thought of my father, an old, sick man, wandering in the dark by himself, lost. “Dad? Where are you?” I said it over and over to the wind, to myself to no one at all.

Appendix D

Where the Animals Go

Nathan Alcon feels brittle.

After seventy-three years of life, one heart attack, and having to watch not one, but two of his friends set in caskets and lowered six feet into the dirt at the Mount Avon cemetery, he might well expect to feel brittle or, at the very least, worn out. As he sits at the kitchen table and stares out the window at the grey autumn day, almost feeling the chilly wind that rustles the naked limbs of the trees, he tries to find the exact word to describe how he feels. He thinks *unsettled*, but that only begins to scratch the surface. *Loosened* comes a little closer, like a red brick from the crosswalk downtown between the coffee shop and the Greek pastry shop, where his wife buys the buttery koulourakia for Easter dinner. Something in him feels loosened, out of place, askew.

When Annie pops her head through the kitchen doorway and asks how he's doing, he doesn't tell her he feels loosened, though it's the truth. "I'm doing fine," he says instead, because it's convenient, because he doesn't know how to tell his wife of fifty-one years that his thoughts have dislodged from their routine course and he doesn't know how to set the brick snugly back in its place.

His answer satisfies, though, because the next moment he hears her shifting coasters on the coffee table in the living room.

It's Sunday, which means the girls will arrive from Grosse Pointe for dinner, bringing their husbands and the grandchildren. Something changes in the air on Sundays, Nathan thinks, in preparation of his family's visit. An apple cinnamon-scented candle flickers on the kitchen

table, the hardwood floor of the foyer is slick with the touch of Pinesol. But it's more than that. A vibe radiates from Annie, an energy that builds with Sunday's approach. She lives to have everyone gathered in one place, to hear about her daughters' lives, to surprise the grandchildren with a different dessert each week. Nathan is usually just as excited, but he can't help but feel he'd rather be alone today. It shames him to think this way. Doesn't this make him a terrible father?

Perhaps he'll feel better when everyone's here, he thinks. It's just that everything feels disjointed since the car accident the day before. He'd been driving along the winding Rochester roads into town, the November sky darkening fast. He remembers how the wet pavement glistened in the headlights, remembers the reflection of water on the leaves like the eyes of so many critters. His eyes closed before he'd realized what was happening. It must've only been a few seconds, but it was enough time for his car to glide over the center lane and clip the side of a passing minivan. Nathan had jerked awake, hands clenched to the steering wheel, helpless as the world spun in the windshield, until the car struck a roadside tree and came to a halt. Nathan had stepped out of the car, dizzy from the spin, but relieved when he discovered the other driver was alright. Aside from paying for the damages to the vehicles, Nathan figured no serious harm had been done. Still, as he thinks about it, his teeth close together and squeeze until his jaw aches. He's never before fallen asleep at the wheel. How easily his eyelids had lowered, how seamless the transition between awake and sleep. Is that how near he was to death—the seconds-long rest of his eyes?

This morning Nathan had flipped through the obituaries. "I don't know how you can do that," Annie said. At their age, more and more faces became familiar to them in that section of the paper, and Nathan didn't want to miss anyone he might know. Sure enough, as he skimmed

the names he came across Grace Leone. “Oh my God,” he’d said under his breath, then glanced up to make sure Annie hadn’t heard him. Grace Leone, who’d worked at the dealership with him for many years. Grace Leone, whom he’d once considered running away with. Though it was half a lifetime ago, her name shocked his senses as if he’d thrust his head into a bucket of ice water. Nathan had once wished that he could live two lives, one with Annie and one with Grace, both lives in which he knew he would be happy. Whatever might have come of his life with Grace, Nathan didn’t find out. He’d chosen to be with Annie, to be with his daughters. Still, seeing Grace’s name forced him to wonder, as terrible as he knew the thought was, what if he’d made the wrong choice?

The swing of the front door on its hinges and the footsteps of his family’s entrance force Nathan to try to shake off these thoughts. It doesn’t matter, he tells himself. What’s done is done. He closes his eyes and shakes his head slowly, as if that could rattle the discomfort out of his ears, but as he walks to foyer to find everyone pulling off their jackets, the foginess in his mind persists like chewing gum clinging to the bottom of his shoe.

“Hello, hello!” Annie says, scurrying to the children and giving them each a quick hug. Isabelle carries a fruit tray at arm’s length, trying to avoid stepping on the girls, who have sprawled on the floor as Annie tugs at their boots. “Straight to the kitchen table, Isabelle,” Annie says.

Nathan follows his daughter into the kitchen. “Izzy,” he says, when she sets the tray down, and pulls her into a hug.

Isabelle breaks from the hug to study her father’s face. “Hold still, Dad.”

Nathan figures she’s examining him for any scratches. “Oh, stop.” She’s heard about the accident, of course, despite Nathan’s pleas to his wife to hush up about the whole thing. The last

thing he wants is any kind of unnecessary attention. He already feels withdrawn into his own head as the house fills with noise. Izzy frowns. She's picked up on his mood. Nathan's always been closer with Isabelle than Clare, an unintentional development in raising his children, but it happened without planning in the same way one prefers dogs to cats, or vanilla to white chocolate—it's not so much a choice as it is something that just happens.

"I'm just worried about you, Dad," she says, and he knows she's thinking of the heart attack last winter, the accident yesterday, the absent drift of his gaze throughout the room.

"I know, kiddo." Nathan kisses her forehead, and she could be six years old again, standing on the kitchen table before her first day of school, where he set her after she cried all morning out of nervousness. He'd dug his fingers into her armpits and belly, and then kissed her forehead before sending her out the door, wanting laughter to be the last thing they both remembered before Izzy's first day away from home by herself. He wants to say something to her, wants to tell her something meaningful, but these are feelings words could only diminish.

Isabelle's husband, Vincent, enters the kitchen with their son, little Vinny, who immediately bounds for the candy bowl on the kitchen table. "Not so fast," Nathan says, grabbing Vinny and sitting at the table with the boy on his lap. Vinny squirms until he has a handful of chocolates in his hands, and he begins shedding the wrappers on the table.

"Easy on that candy," Isabelle says, and when Vinny grins, his teeth are smeared with chocolate. Clare comes into the kitchen with her daughters, Norah and Charlotte, who wear matching dresses from one of the numerous designers Clare always goes on about. Nathan waves to the little girls, who smile and try to crawl onto his lap to get at the candy bowl their cousin has conquered.

“Girls, girls, eat the fruit Aunt Izzy brought,” Clare says. The girls pick at the grapes on the fruit tray, watching Vinny scatter a graveyard of candy wrappers on the table.

Nathan feels overwhelmed, feels the room has become too full, feels surrounded by too many people at once. An itch has formed somewhere behind his Adam’s apple, and though he continues to swallow and press his tongue into the back of his throat, the itch cannot be removed. He feels the need to cough, or choke, so he extricates himself from beneath little Vinny and tries to walk calmly, though quickly, passed Vincent and through the foyer into the bathroom. Nathan closes the door behind him, runs the faucet, and kneels beside the toilet, waiting for something to happen. He hears the others’ voices in the kitchen.

“Where’d Dad go?” It’s Isabelle.

“I heard the bathroom door,” Vincent says.

“Someone check on him,” Annie says, and the last thing Nathan wants is for someone to look for him. He closes his eyes, feels the itch in his throat swell, press against the sides of his esophagus, and he wills them to stay away.

“Let the poor man pee, for God’s sake,” Clare says, and Nathan’s grateful for his younger daughter’s sensibility. He takes deep breaths, and the pressure in his throat slowly fades as if it were never there at all. He likes being behind the closed door, even though his loved ones are on the other side. He likes to hear their voices in this way, separate, but still near. Clare relays what Norah’s first grade teacher said about Norah’s prowess at spelling tests, and everyone coos with admiration. Nathan imagines he can see Annie run her hands through Norah’s curly blonde hair. He wants to be with them, to congratulate his granddaughter, but he doesn’t want to leave the bathroom sanctuary. The vent on the floor exhales warm air, and he inches nearer to it. Strange, he thinks, but the swelling in his throat and the panic that came with it had disappeared when he

left the crowded kitchen, and he can't help but think the solitude cured his discomfort. Still, he can't stay away for too long, and soon he closes his eyes, allows one last blast of warm air to rush over him, and then makes his way back to the kitchen.

As he approaches the corner to turn into the kitchen, he stops. They speak in hushed voices within. Nathan's hearing has weakened in the last few years, so he closes his eyes and strains to hear. Annie whispers.

"I know, Izzy, but he fell asleep. He could've killed someone."

"He doesn't look well, Mom," Izzy says. "I'm not saying you have to let him drive, I'm just saying you need to let him breathe."

"What am I supposed to do? I'm afraid to let him out of the house alone. His heart's weaker, especially since winter."

They fall silent in the kitchen for a moment. Blood thumps in his temples, and his face grows hot. Is this how Annie thinks of him—an aged machine with broken parts? His hearing was the first to weaken, and he recently noticed his eyesight dwindling. Now she thinks of his heart, the last vital piece of him, as the final part to break, the part that ends him.

Nathan stares at the wall opposite him where a mirror hangs, and he catches his reflection. He looks awful; he's practically crouching around the corner, bent at an awkward angle. The flesh around his neck droops like the deflating skin of a balloon. He thinks he resembles a vulture more than a human.

Maybe they're right, he thinks. Maybe his body's just like a machine running on its last charge. His heart wasn't built to pump forever. He stares at his reflection. Which heartbeat will be his last? Perhaps this one. Or the one after that.

When he returns to the kitchen, Annie straightens in her seat and says, “Clare, where’s Michael?” Nathan slips into his seat at the table, trying his best to appear ignorant of their whisperings. The aroma of garlic has filled the kitchen, a smell Nathan usually associates with a watering mouth and a rumbling stomach, but today the smell makes his abdomen clench. He tries to focus on the conversation.

Clare drops a slice of cantaloupe into her mouth. “It’s Michael’s weekend at the hospital,” she says. Her husband is a surgeon at St. John’s and works one weekend a month. Nathan suspects Clare likes the weekends without Michael; she’s more talkative on those Sundays, and he’s noticed she spends more time worrying over her daughters’ clothes. She sits at the table and calls Charlotte onto her lap, and she begins to braid her daughter’s hair. Nathan has also noticed how the girls behave around their father, bringing him a glass of water when he sits on the couch or passing cookies to him under the table when their mother isn’t looking. Daddy’s girls. Nathan believes Clare would never admit it, but she enjoys the time she spends with her girls without Michael.

Isabelle has to pick Vinny up and set him beside her on the counter to keep him from eating another chocolate. “How many of those have you had?” she says. “You’re going to get a belly ache.” The boy’s face starts to redden, and Nathan prepares for a tantrum. Isabelle’s face reddens too, but Nathan knows she’s less concerned about the actual tantrum than she is of the shame she’ll feel when her son begins to scream in front of everyone else, especially Clare. Somehow, Clare’s girls rarely complain when their mother regulates their sweets consumption, but Isabelle has always had to endure Vinny’s bouts of rebellion. Izzy has often told her father about this concern, and Nathan always shrugs. He’s never been good at comforting anyone else

their insecurities. Vinny could detonate at any moment, and Nathan watches him steadily, willing him to stay calm, for Izzy's sake more than anyone's.

"Food's ready," Annie announces.

Everyone sits around the table, and even as he scoops spaghetti onto his plate, Nathan wonders what it would be like if this were not his life with Annie, but rather his life with Grace Leone. Would they have flowery wallpaper instead of the solid maroon Annie chose? Who would be gathered around him then? Would his daughters have beautiful red hair like Grace had, rather than Annie's blonde hair? He tries to imagine everyone's faces speckled with freckles, but this, he feels, is crossing the line. Stop, he thinks. Stop it now.

"Smells good, Ma," Clare says, twirling her fork in a heap of noodles.

"Mommy, I don't feel good," little Vinny says, staring into his spaghetti.

"Don't worry, sweetie, Grandma has some medicine," Annie says, and stands to search the kitchen cabinet.

Nathan nibbles at a bit of pasta, but he finds that he can't even force himself to take a bite. He looks around at his daughters, the grandchildren, and even Vincent, who's shoveling garlic bread into his mouth as quickly and politely as he can manage, and something feels wrong in the pit of Nathan's stomach. Clare is talking about the new granite countertops she wants to install in her kitchen back home, and how she can't quite convince Michael on a January vacation to France instead of Mexico, where they usually go. "What's in France in January?" Isabelle says, and Clare looks at her sister with disbelief. "The Rue de Rivoli? Champs Elysées? Are you serious?" It takes Nathan a minute to realize she's talking about shopping centers, and by then he almost groans. He seems to feel the closeness of everyone else's bodies to him, pressing in on all sides, and it brings the itch back to his throat. He knows what's coming again,

the pressure building that makes him feel the need to vomit, and now he stands suddenly, and everyone turns to him. There's something overwhelming about all the faces turned towards him. Something profound. They all look alarmed to see him, as if he were the last person they expected to suddenly appear in their kitchen and interrupt their dinner. Even Annie looks startled, standing at the medicine cabinet.

“Nathan?” she says.

Little Vinny's throat gurgles and then he's bent over, vomiting onto his plate. The kitchen becomes a blur of motion. Vincent quickly lifts his son from the chair and waddles to the bathroom, holding Vinny away from him with outstretched arms. Norah and Charlotte, staring at the mess on their cousin's plate, clap their hands over their mouths. Clare jumps up to grab them, saying, “No, no, no,” and she knocks the bowl of candy off the table in her haste, scattering ceramic shards across the tile floor. Annie turns her head this way and that, unsure who to help first, or how.

In the midst of all the activity, nobody sees Nathan head to the front door. He opens it, stands in the doorway feeling the chilly autumn air, and though it forces him to hug his elbows, he steps outside and closes the door behind him, muffling the frantic noises of his family within. Houses line the suburban street on every side. There is no pressure for space between the front lawns and the curbside. The naked limbs of the maples and the oaks rattle in the wind.

The pressure in Nathan's throat fades as he walks down the street, and he's certain it has everything to do with escaping the confining walls of the house. What's happening to him? He recognizes this claustrophobia from his childhood. Once, during a summer visit to Harrison's lake house, while exploring Mr. Hudson's tool shed, they'd managed to lock themselves in the dark. Young Nathan's thoughts went to the spiders lurking in the darkness, descending from the

rafters on thin threads, landing in his hair to lay their eggs. He'd screamed and cried, wanting nothing more than to escape the confinement, his breath quickening with each passing moment. The need for open air above his head is familiar to him, and he wonders why, sixty-some years later, he's experiencing this suffering all over again.

In the fading light of the afternoon he sees lights on within most of the homes. He walks by what he's always known as Francis Murphy's house. Francis was one of Nathan's best friends, a weekly euchre partner at the church every Tuesday night. But Francis died last winter, and now a new family occupies the house, building their memories in the walls where Francis had built his. Nathan stares at the front window, which used to be obscured by a tree Francis had planted long ago, but the new owners had the tree removed. The new owners had changed the curtains in the window, too. It was the same shell of a house. Yet everything about it was somehow different.

"Can I help you?"

Nathan flinches. It is the voice of a man. Nathan sees him now, standing on the porch of Francis's old house, the orange glow of a cigarette at his lips. The man stares at Nathan, who's just realized he's halted on the sidewalk and has been staring at the house for longer than he intended. Their eye contact lingers. Nathan wants to say something to this man. Francis Murphy once lived here, he might say. One of my best friends. A good man.

Smoke streams from the man's mouth as he exhales, faint in the dark blue twilight. The sharp bark of a woman's laughter in the distance. The man waits, but Nathan doesn't say anything at all. He turns away and continues along the sidewalk. There's nothing he could say to this man that would make him feel better, he knows.

When he gets to the street corner, he stops. He doesn't want to go back home, but he's afraid to wander too far away. They'll be looking for him. And how can he explain what he feels, anyway? He sees Grace Leone as she was when he loved her, when he might have left Annie for her: Grace with her smooth red hair, Grace with her small, delicate hands, Grace with her coconut shampoo—a smell that, to this very day, makes Nathan's ribcage shrink around his heart until it yelps. How could they know what it feels like to have lived an entire life only to wonder if he'd been with the right woman? How can he tell them it makes him sick to observe the blooming motherhood of his daughters, the growing of his grandchildren? How could they know that, to him, it all means that he'll soon be gone?

Part of him wishes he could be gone already. He remembers how, in his childhood, he'd stare out his window in the winter and wonder where all the animals had gone. Where do all the animals go when the winds become arctic, the snow buries their food beneath its dense white hills, and the dirt hardens in a frozen embrace? They seem to disappear entirely, but Nathan knows this isn't true because when spring thaws the snows away, the animals are right there again in a flurry of life. The animals are still there, they're just out of sight. He imagines there's a place, somewhere just beyond the edge of his perception, where the animals go for shelter from the winter. What he would give to go to that place.

A car rolls by with its headlights on, and Nathan freezes—he has some animal instinct to not be seen, and only when the car turns out of sight does he relax. It's time to go home. By now, the mess on the kitchen table will have been cleaned, the kids will have settled down, the adults will have regained their appetites. Annie will have everything under control. Besides, the cold air numbs his nose, and he thinks wistfully of the vent in the bathroom breathing its warm air.

He retraces his path on the sidewalk, his slow steps scattering leaves aside. He passes Francis Murphy's old house again. The man smoking on the porch has withdrawn inside, and through the closed curtains on the front window Nathan sees the flickering white light of the television. Perhaps one day he'll have the courage to visit the house. Perhaps he'll sit in the living room that used to be Francis Murphy's and tell the new owners stories of the previous owner's life. Maybe this could feel right in some way for all of them.

When Nathan arrives at his front lawn, he comes to an abrupt halt. It's almost full dark now, but the sky is clear and the moon is bright. From where he stands, the window displays the kitchen like a diorama for the street outside. They haven't realized his absence just yet, or they might assume he's gone to the bathroom again and is taking a while, that old man. Lit from within, Nathan can see into the kitchen without anyone able to look back and see him. In this way, he watches.

Annie sits at the head of the table now, looking much older than when he married her, but God, how beautiful she is, the way she sweeps her gaze over the faces around her with tenderness. Isabelle turns to her husband, smiles, and leans her head on Vincent's shoulder. Little Vinny sits in his chair again, his place at the table cleaned, but here he goes to reach for another bit of chocolate while his parents aren't looking. Clare spoons more spaghetti onto her daughters' plates, and Nathan can almost read her lips as she tells them, with patience, that they can have their dessert if they eat up.

Nathan realizes now that he's already in that place where the animals go. He's near, close enough to observe, but just out of sight. He's among them, but separate. And isn't this alright? He thinks the view isn't so bad, after all.

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