

I LOOKED UP because of the laughter, and kept looking because of the girls.

I noticed their hair first, long and uncombed. Then their jewelry catching the sun. The three of them were far enough away that I saw only the periphery of their features, but it didn't matter—I knew they were different from everyone else in the park. Families milling in a vague line, waiting for sausages and burgers from the open grill. Women in checked blouses scooting into their boyfriends' sides, kids tossing eucalyptus buttons at the feral-looking chickens that overran the strip. These long-haired girls seemed to glide above all that was happening around them, tragic and separate. Like royalty in exile.

I studied the girls with a shameless, blatant gape: it

didn't seem possible that they might look over and notice me. My hamburger was forgotten in my lap, the breeze blowing in minnow stink from the river. It was an age when I'd immediately scan and rank other girls, keeping up a constant tally of how I fell short, and I saw right away that the black-haired one was the prettiest. I had expected this, even before I'd been able to make out their faces. There was a suggestion of otherworldliness hovering around her, a dirty smock dress barely covering her ass. She was flanked by a skinny redhead and an older girl, dressed with the same shabby afterthought. As if dredged from a lake. All their cheap rings like a second set of knuckles. They were messing with an uneasy threshold, prettiness and ugliness at the same time, and a ripple of awareness followed them through the park. Mothers glancing around for their children, moved by some feeling they couldn't name. Women reaching for their boyfriends' hands. The sun spiked through the trees, like always—the drowsy willows, the hot wind gusting over the picnic blankets—but the familiarity of the day was disturbed by the path the girls cut across the regular world. Sleek and thoughtless as sharks breaching the water.

PART ONE



IT BEGINS WITH THE FORD idling up the narrow drive, the sweet drone of honeysuckle thickening the August air. The girls in the backseat holding hands, the car windows down to let in the seep of night. The radio playing until the driver, suddenly jittery, snaps it off.

They scale the gate, still strung with Christmas lights. Encountering, first, the dumb quiet of the caretaker's cottage; the caretaker taking an evening nap on the couch, his bare feet tucked side by side like loaves. His girlfriend in the bathroom, wiping away the hazy crescents of eye makeup.

Then the main house, where they startle the woman reading in the guest bedroom. The glass of water quivering on the nightstand, the damp cotton of her under-

pants. Her five-year-old son by her side, murmuring cryptic nonsense to fight sleep.

They herd everyone into the living room. The moment the frightened people understand the sweet dailiness of their lives—the swallow of morning orange juice, the tilting curve taken on a bicycle—is already gone. Their faces change like a shutter opening; the unlocking behind the eyes.

I had imagined that night so often. The dark mountain road, the sunless sea. A woman felled on the night lawn. And though the details had receded over the years, grown their second and third skins, when I heard the lock jamming open near midnight, it was my first thought.

The stranger at the door.

I waited for the sound to reveal its source. A neighbor's kid bumping a trash can onto the sidewalk. A deer thrashing through the brush. That's all it could be, I told myself, this far-off rattle in the other part of the house, and I tried to picture how harmless the space would seem again in daylight, how cool and beyond danger.

But the noise went on, passing starkly into real life. There was now laughter in the other room. Voices. The pressurized *swish* of the refrigerator. I trawled for explanations but kept catching on the worst thought. After everything, this was how it would end. Trapped in someone else's house, among the facts and habits of someone else's life. My bare legs, jotted with

varicose veins—how weak I'd appear when they came for me, a middle-aged woman scrabbling for the corners.

I lay in bed, my breath shallow as I stared at the closed door. Waiting for the intruders, the horrors I imagined taking human shape and populating the room—there would be no heroics, I understood. Just the dull terror, the physical pain that would have to be suffered through. I wouldn't try to run.

I only got out of bed after I heard the girl. Her voice was high and innocuous. Though it shouldn't have been comforting—Suzanne and the others had been girls, and that hadn't helped anybody.

I was staying in a borrowed house. The dark maritime cypress packed tight outside the window, the twitch of salt air. I ate in the blunt way I had as a child—a glut of spaghetti, mossed with cheese. The nothing jump of soda in my throat. I watered Dan's plants once a week, ferrying each one to the bathtub, running the pot under the faucet until the soil burbled with wet. More than once I'd showered with a litter of dead leaves in the tub.

The inheritance that had been the leftovers of my grandmother's movies—hours of her smiling her hawkish smile on film, her tidy cap of curls—I'd spent ten years ago. I tended to the in-between spaces of other people's

existences, working as a live-in aide. Cultivating a genteel invisibility in sexless clothes, my face blurred with the pleasant, ambiguous expression of a lawn ornament. The pleasant part was important, the magic trick of invisibility only possible when it seemed to fulfill the correct order of things. As if it were something I wanted, too. My charges were varied. A kid with special needs, frightened of electrical outlets and traffic lights. An elderly woman who watched talk shows while I counted out a saucerful of pills, the pale pink capsules like subtle candy.

When my last job ended and another didn't appear, Dan offered his vacation house—the concerned gesture of an old friend—like I was doing him a favor. The skylight filled the rooms with the hazy murk of an aquarium, the woodwork bloating and swelling in the damp. As if the house were breathing.

The beach wasn't popular. Too cold, no oysters. The single road through town was lined with trailers, built up into sprawling lots—pinwheels snapping in the wind, porches cluttered with bleached buoys and life preservers, the ornaments of humble people. Sometimes I smoked a little of the furry and pungent marijuana from my old landlord, then walked to the store in town. A task I could complete, as defined as washing a dish. It was either dirty or clean, and I welcomed those binaries, the way they shored up a day.

I rarely saw anyone outside. The only teenagers in town seemed to kill themselves in gruesomely rural ways—I heard about their pickups crashing at two in the

morning, the sleepover in the garage camper ending with carbon monoxide poisoning, a dead quarterback. I didn't know if this was a problem born of country living, the excess of time and boredom and recreational vehicles, or whether it was a California thing, a grain in the light urging risk and stupid cinematic stunts.

I hadn't been in the ocean at all. A waitress at the café told me this was a breeding ground for great whites.

They looked up from the bright wash of the kitchen lights like raccoons caught in the trash. The girl shrieked. The boy stood to his full, lanky height. There were only two of them. My heart was scudding hard, but they were so young—locals, I figured, breaking into vacation houses. I wasn't going to die.

“What the fuck?” The boy put down his beer bottle, the girl clinging to his side. The boy looked twenty or so, in cargo shorts. High white socks, rosy acne beneath a scrim of beard. But the girl was just a little thing. Fifteen, sixteen, her pale legs tinged with blue.

I tried to gather whatever authority I could, clutching the hem of my T-shirt to my thighs. When I said I'd call the cops, the boy snorted.

“Go ahead.” He huddled the girl closer. “Call the cops. You know what?” He pulled out his cellphone. “Fuck it, I'll call them.”

The pane of fear I'd been holding in my chest suddenly dissolved.

“Julian?”

I wanted to laugh—I’d last seen him when he was thirteen, skinny and unformed. Dan and Allison’s only son. Fussed over, driven to cello competitions all over the western United States. A Mandarin tutor on Thursdays, the brown bread and gummy vitamins, parental hedges against failure. That had all fizzled and he’d ended up at the CSU in Long Beach or Irvine. There’d been some trouble there, I remembered. Expulsion or maybe a milder version of that, a suggestion of a year at junior college. Julian had been a shy, irritable kid, cowering at car radios, unfamiliar foods. Now he had hard edges, the creep of tattoos under his shirt. He didn’t remember me, and why should he? I was a woman outside his range of erotic attentions.

“I’m staying here for a few weeks,” I said, aware of my exposed legs and embarrassed for the melodrama, the mention of police. “I’m a friend of your dad’s.”

I could see the effort he made to place me, to assign meaning.

“Evie,” I said.

Still nothing.

“I used to live in that apartment in Berkeley? By your cello teacher’s house?” Dan and Julian would come over sometimes after his lessons. Julian lustily drinking milk and scuffing my table legs with robotic kicks.

“Oh, shit,” Julian said. “Yeah.” I couldn’t tell whether he actually remembered me or if I had just invoked enough calming details.

The girl turned toward Julian, her face as blank as a spoon.

"It's fine, babe," he said, kissing her forehead—his gentleness unexpected.

Julian smiled at me and I realized he was drunk, or maybe just stoned. His features were smeary, an unhealthy dampness on his skin, though his upper-class upbringing kicked in like a first language.

"This is Sasha," he said, nudging the girl.

"Hi," she peeped, uncomfortable. I'd forgotten that dopey part of teenage girls: the desire for love flashing in her face so directly that it embarrassed me.

"And Sasha," Julian said, "this is—"

Julian's eyes struggled to focus on me.

"Evie," I reminded him.

"Right," he said, "Evie. Man."

He drank from his beer, the amber bottle catching the glare of the lights. He was staring past me. Glancing around at the furniture, the contents of the bookshelves, like this was my house and he was the outsider. "God, you must've thought we were like, breaking in or something."

"I thought you were locals."

"There was a break-in here once," Julian said. "When I was a kid. We weren't here. They just stole our wet suits and a bunch of abalone from the freezer." He took another drink.

Sasha kept her eyes on Julian. She was in cutoffs, all wrong for the cold coast, and an oversize sweatshirt that must have been his. The cuffs gnawed and wet looking.

Her makeup looked terrible, but it was more of a symbol, I suppose. I could see she was nervous with my eyes on her. I understood the worry. When I was that age, I was uncertain of how to move, whether I was walking too fast, whether others could see the discomfort and stiffness in me. As if everyone were constantly gauging my performance and finding it lacking. It occurred to me that Sasha was very young. Too young to be here with Julian. She seemed to know what I was thinking, staring at me with surprising defiance.

“I’m sorry your dad didn’t tell you I’d be here,” I said. “I can sleep in the other room if you want the bigger bed. Or if you want to be here alone, I’ll figure something—”

“Nah,” Julian said. “Sasha and I can sleep anywhere, can’t we, babe? And we’re just passing through. On our way north. A weed run,” he said. “I make the drive, L.A. to Humboldt, at least once a month.”

It occurred to me that Julian thought I’d be impressed.

“I don’t sell it or anything,” Julian went on, backpedaling. “Just transport. All you really need is a couple Watershed bags and a police scanner.”

Sasha looked worried. Would I get them in trouble?

“How’d you know my dad again?” Julian said. Draining his beer and opening another. They’d brought a few six-packs. The other supplies in sight: the nutty gravel of trail mix. An unopened package of sour worms, the stale crumple of a fast-food bag.

“We met in L.A.,” I said. “We lived together for a while.”

Dan and I had shared an apartment in Venice Beach in the late seventies, Venice with its third world alleyways, the palm trees that hit the windows in the warm night winds. I was living off my grandmother's movie money while I worked toward my nursing certification. Dan was trying to be an actor. It was never going to happen for him, acting. Instead he'd married a woman with some family money and started a vegetarian frozen-food company. Now he owned a pre-earthquake house in Pacific Heights.

"Oh wait, his friend from Venice?" Julian seemed suddenly more responsive. "What's your name again?"

"Evie Boyd," I said, and the sudden look that came over his face surprised me: recognition, partly, but real interest.

"Wait," he said. He took his arm away from the girl and she looked drained by his absence. "You're that lady?"

Maybe Dan had told him how bad things had gotten for me. The thought embarrassed me, and I touched my face reflexively. An old, shameful habit from adolescence, how I'd cover up a pimple. A casual hand at my chin, fiddling with my mouth. As if that weren't drawing attention, making it worse.

Julian was excited now. "She was in this cult," he told the girl. "Right?" he said, turning to me.

A socket of dread opened in my stomach. Julian kept looking at me, tart with expectation. His breath hoppy and fractured.

I'd been fourteen that summer. Suzanne had been

nineteen. There was an incense the group burned sometimes that made us drowsy and yielding. Suzanne reading aloud from a back issue of *Playboy*. The obscene and luminous Polaroids we secreted away and traded like baseball cards.

I knew how easily it could happen, the past at hand, like the helpless cognitive slip of an optical illusion. The tone of a day linked to some particular item: my mother's chiffon scarf, the humidity of a cut pumpkin. Certain patterns of shade. Even the flash of sunlight on the hood of a white car could cause a momentary ripple in me, allowing a slim space of return. I'd seen old Yardley slickers—the makeup now just a waxy crumble—sell for almost one hundred dollars on the Internet. So grown women could smell it again, that chemical, flowery fug. That's how badly people wanted it—to know that their lives *had* happened, that the person they once had been still existed inside of them.

There were so many things that returned me. The tang of soy, smoke in someone's hair, the grassy hills turning blond in June. An arrangement of oaks and boulders could, seen out of the corner of my eye, crack open something in my chest, palms going suddenly slick with adrenaline.

I anticipated disgust from Julian, maybe even fear. That was the logical response. But I was confused by the way he was looking at me. With something like awe.

His father must have told him. The summer of the crumbling house, the sunburned toddlers. When I'd first

tried to tell Dan, on the night of a brownout in Venice that summoned a candlelit, apocalyptic intimacy, he had burst out laughing. Mistaking the hush in my voice for the drop of hilarity. Even after I convinced Dan I was telling the truth, he talked about the ranch with that same parodic goof. Like a horror movie with bad special effects, the boom microphone dipping into the frame and tinting the butchery into comedy. And it was a relief to exaggerate my distance, neatening my involvement into the orderly package of anecdote.

It helped that I wasn't mentioned in most of the books. Not the paperbacks with the title bloody and oozing, the glossed pages of crime scene photographs. Not the less popular but more accurate tome written by the lead prosecutor, gross with specifics, down to the undigested spaghetti they found in the little boy's stomach. The couple of lines that did mention me were buried in an out-of-print book by a former poet, and he'd gotten my name wrong and hadn't made any connection to my grandmother. The same poet also claimed that the CIA was producing porn films starring a drugged Marilyn Monroe, films sold to politicians and foreign heads of state.

"It was a long time ago," I said to Sasha, but her expression was empty.

"Still," Julian said, brightening. "I always thought it was beautiful. Sick yet beautiful," he said. "A fucked-up expression, but an expression, you know. An artistic impulse. You've got to destroy to create, all that Hindu shit."

I could tell he was reading my bewildered shock as approval.

“God, I can’t even imagine,” Julian said. “Actually being in the middle of something like that.”

He waited for me to respond. I was woozy from the ambush of kitchen lights: didn’t they notice the room was too bright? I wondered if the girl was even beautiful. Her teeth had a cast of yellow.

Julian nudged her with his elbow. “Sasha doesn’t even know what we’re talking about.”

Most everyone knew at least one of the grisly details. College kids sometimes dressed as Russell for Halloween, hands splashed with ketchup cadged from the dining hall. A black metal band had used the heart on an album cover, the same craggy heart Suzanne had left on Mitch’s wall. In the woman’s blood. But Sasha seemed so young—why would she have ever heard of it? Why would she care? She was lost in that deep and certain sense that there was nothing beyond her own experience. As if there were only one way things could go, the years leading you down a corridor to the room where your inevitable self waited—embryonic, ready to be revealed. How sad it was to realize that sometimes you never got there. That sometimes you lived a whole life skittering across the surface as the years passed, unblessed.

Julian petted Sasha’s hair. “It was like a big fucking deal. Hippies killing these people out in Marin.”

The heat in his face was familiar. The same fervor as those people who populated the online forums that never

seemed to slow down or die. They jostled for ownership, adopting the same knowing tone, a veneer of scholarship masking the essential ghoulishness of the endeavor. What were they looking for among all the banalities? As though the weather on that day mattered. All of the scraps seemed important, when considered long enough: the station the radio was tuned to in Mitch's kitchen, the number and depth of the stab wounds. How the shadows might have flickered on that particular car driving up that particular road.

"I was only hanging around them for a few months," I said. "It wasn't a big thing."

Julian seemed disappointed. I imagined the woman he saw when he looked at me: her unkempt hair, the commas of worry around her eyes.

"But yeah," I said, "I stayed there a lot."

That answer returned me firmly to his realm of interest.

And so I let the moment pass.

I didn't tell him that I wished I'd never met Suzanne. That I wished I'd stayed safely in my bedroom in the dry hills near Petaluma, the bookshelves packed tight with the gold-foil spines of my childhood favorites. And I did wish that. But some nights, unable to sleep, I peeled an apple slowly at the sink, letting the curl lengthen under the glint of the knife. The house dark around me. Sometimes it didn't feel like regret. It felt like a missing.

Julian shooed Sasha into the other bedroom like a peaceable teenage goatherd. Asking if I needed anything before he said good night. I was taken aback—he reminded me of the boys in school who'd become more polite and high functioning on drugs. Dutifully washing the family dinner dishes while they were tripping, mesmerized by the psychedelic magic of soap.

"Sleep well," Julian said, giving a little geisha bow before closing the door.

The sheets on my bed were mussed, the pang of fear still lingering in the room. How ridiculous I'd been. Being so frightened. But even the surprise of harmless others in the house disturbed me. I didn't want my inner rot on display, even accidentally. Living alone was frightening in that way. No one to police the spill of yourself, the ways you betrayed your primitive desires. Like a cocoon built around you, made of your own naked proclivities and never tidied into the patterns of actual human life.

I was still alert, and it took effort to relax, to regulate my breath. The house was safe, I told myself, I was fine. Suddenly it seemed ridiculous, the bumbling encounter. Through the thin wall, I could hear the sounds of Sasha and Julian settling into the other room. The floor creaking, the closet doors being opened. They were probably putting sheets on the bare mattress. Shaking away years of accumulated dust. I imagined Sasha looking at the family photographs on the shelf, Julian as a toddler hold-

ing a giant red telephone. Julian at eleven or twelve, on a whale-watching boat, his face salt lashed and wondrous. She was probably projecting all that innocence and sweetness on the almost-adult man who eased off his shorts and patted the bed for her to join him. The blurry leavings of amateur tattoos rippling along his arms.

I heard the groan of mattress.

I wasn't surprised that they would fuck. But then there was Sasha's voice, whining like a porno. High and curdled. Didn't they know I was right next door? I turned my back to the wall, shutting my eyes.

Julian growling.

"Are you a cunt?" he said. The headboard jacking against the wall.

"Are you?"

I'd think, later, that Julian must have known I could hear everything.