

# WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A GENERAL

LINDA WAS INSIDE, ON HER PHONE—TO WHO, THIS EARLY? From the hot tub, John watched her pace in her robe and an old swimsuit in a faded tropical print that probably belonged to one of the girls. It was nice to drift a little in the water, to glide to the other side of the tub, holding his coffee above the waterline, the jets churning away. The fig tree was bare, had been for a month now, but the persimmon trees were full. The kids should bake cookies when they get here, he thought, persimmon cookies. Wasn't that what Linda used to make, when the kids were little? Or what else—jam, maybe? All this fruit going to waste, it was disgusting. He'd get the yard guy to pick a few crates of persimmons before the kids came, so that all they'd have to do was bake them. Linda would know where to find the recipe.

The screen door banged. Linda folded her robe, climbed into the hot tub.

“Sasha’s flight’s delayed.”

“Till?”

“Probably won’t land until four or five.”

Holiday traffic would be a nightmare then, coming back from the airport—an hour there, then two hours back, if not more. Sasha didn’t have her license, couldn’t rent a car, not that she would think to offer.

“And she said Andrew’s not coming,” Linda said, making a face. Linda was convinced that Sasha’s boyfriend was married, though she’d never brought it up with Sasha.

Linda fished a leaf out of the water and flicked it into the yard, then settled in with the book she’d brought. Linda read a lot: She read books about angels and saints and rich white women from the past with eccentric habits. She read books by the mothers of school shooters and books by healers who said that cancer was really a self-love problem. Now it was a memoir by a girl who’d been kidnapped at the age of eleven. Held in a backyard shed for almost ten years.

“Her teeth were in good shape,” Linda said. “Considering. She says she scraped her teeth every night with her fingernails. Then he finally gave her a toothbrush.”

“Jesus,” John said, what seemed like the right response, but Linda was already back to her book, bobbing peacefully. When the jets turned off, John waded over in silence to turn them on again.

Sam was the first of the kids to arrive, driving up from Milpitas in the certified pre-owned sedan he had purchased the summer before. He had called multiple times before

buying the car to weigh the pros and cons—the mileage on this used model versus leasing a newer one and how soon Audis needed servicing—and it amazed John that Linda had time for this, their thirty-year-old son’s car frettings, but she always took his calls, going into the other room and leaving John wherever he was, alone with whatever he was doing. Lately John had started watching a television show about two older women living together, one uptight, the other a free spirit. The good thing was that there seemed to be an infinite number of episodes, an endless accounting of their mild travails in an unnamed beach town. Time didn’t seem to apply to these women, as if they were already dead, though he supposed the show was meant to take place in Santa Barbara.

Chloe arrived next, down from Sacramento, and she had driven, she said, at least half an hour with the gas light on. Maybe longer. She was doing an internship. Unpaid, naturally. They still covered her rent; she was the youngest.

“Where’d you fill up?”

“I didn’t yet,” she said. “I’ll do it later.”

“You should’ve stopped,” John said. “It’s dangerous to drive on empty. And your front tire is almost flat,” he went on, but Chloe wasn’t listening. She was already on her knees in the gravel driveway, clutching tight to the dog.

“Oh, my little honey,” she said, her glasses fogged up, holding Zero to her chest. “Little dear.”

Zero was always shivering, which one of the kids had looked up and said was normal for Jack Russells, but it still

unnerved John.

LINDA WENT TO PICK UP Sasha because John wasn't supposed to drive long distances with his back—sitting made it spasm—and, anyway, Linda said she was happy to do it. Happy to get a little time alone with Sasha. Zero tried to follow Linda to the car, bumping against her legs.

“He can't be out without a leash,” Linda said. “Be gentle with him, okay?”

John found the leash, careful, when he clipped it to the harness, to avoid touching Zero's raised stitches. They looked spidery, sinister. Zero was breathing hard. For another five weeks, they were supposed to make sure he didn't roll over, didn't jump, didn't run. He had to be on a leash whenever he went outside, had to be accompanied at all times. Otherwise the pacemaker might get knocked loose. John hadn't known dogs could get pacemakers, didn't even like dogs inside the house. Now here he was, shuffling after Zero while he sniffed one tree, then another.

Zero limped slowly to the fence line, stood still for a moment, then kept going. It was two acres, the backyard, big enough that you felt insulated from the neighbors, though one of them had called the police once, because of the dog's barking. These people, up in one another's business, trying to control barking dogs. Zero stopped to consider a deflated soccer ball, so old it looked fossilized, then kept moving. Finally he squatted, miserable, looking back at

John as he took a creamy little shit. It was a startling, unnatural green.

Inside the animal was some unseen machinery keeping him alive, keeping his animal heart pumping. Robot dog, John crooned to himself, kicking dirt over the shit.

Four o'clock. Sasha's plane would just be landing, Linda circling arrivals. It was not too early for a glass of wine.

"Chloe? Are you interested?"

She was not. "I'm applying to jobs," she said, cross-legged on her bed. "See?" She turned the laptop toward him for a moment, some document up on the screen, though he heard a TV show playing in the background. She still seemed like a teenager, though she'd graduated college almost two years ago. At her age, John had already been working for Mike, had his own crew by the time he was thirty. He was thirty when Sam was born. Now kids got a whole extra decade to do—what? Float around, do these internships.

He tried again. "Are you sure? We can sit outside, it's not bad."

Chloe didn't look up from the laptop. "Can you close the door," she said, tonelessly.

Sometimes their rudeness left him breathless.

He put together a snack for himself. Shards of cheese, cutting around the mold. Salami. The last of the olives, shriveled in their brine. He took his paper plate outside and sat in one of the patio chairs. The cushions felt damp, probably rotting from the inside. He wore his jeans, his white

socks, his white sneakers, a knitted sweater—Linda’s—that seemed laughably and obviously a woman’s. He didn’t worry about that anymore, how silly he might look. Who would care? Zero came to sniff his hand; he fed him a piece of salami. When the dog was calm, quiet, he wasn’t so bad. He should put Zero’s leash on, but it was inside, and, anyway, Zero seemed mellow, no danger of him running around. The backyard was green, winter green. There was a fire pit under the big oak tree which one of the kids had dug in high school and ringed with rocks, but now it was filled with leaves and trash. Probably Sam, he thought, and shouldn’t Sam clean it up, clean all this up? Anger lit him up suddenly, then passed just as quickly. What was he going to do, yell at him? The kids just laughed now if he got angry. Another piece of salami for Zero, a piece for himself. It was cold and tasted like the refrigerator, like the plastic tray it had come on. Zero stared at him with those marble eyes, exhaling his hungry, meaty breath until John shooed him away.

Even accounting for holiday traffic, Linda and Sasha got back later than he expected. He went out onto the porch when he heard their car. He’d had the yard guy put up holiday lights along the fence, along the roof, around the windows. They were these new LED ones, chilly strands of white light dripping off the eaves. It looked nice now, in the first blue dark, but he still missed the colored lights of his childhood, those cartoonish bulbs. Red, blue, orange, green. Probably they were toxic.

Sasha opened the passenger door, a purse and an empty water bottle on her lap.

“The airline lost my suitcase,” she said. “Sorry, I’m just annoyed. Hi, Dad.”

She hugged him with one arm. She looked a little sad, a little fatter than the last time he’d seen her. She was wearing some unflattering style of pant, wide at the legs, and her cheeks were sweating under too much makeup.

“Did you talk to someone?”

“It’s fine,” she said. “I mean, yeah, I left my information and stuff. I got a claim number, some website. They’re never going to find it, I’m sure.”

“We’ll see,” Linda said. “They reimburse you, you know.”

“How was traffic?” John asked.

“Backed up all the way to 101,” Linda said. “Ridiculous.”

If there were luggage, at least he would have something to do with his hands. He gestured in the direction of the driveway, the darkness beyond the porch light.

“Well,” he said, “now everyone’s here.”

“IT’S BETTER THIS WAY,” Sam said. “Isn’t it better?”

Sam was in the kitchen, connecting Linda’s iPad to a speaker he’d brought. “Now you can play any music you want.”

“But isn’t it broken?” Linda said from the stove. “The iPad? Ask your dad, he knows.”

“It’s just out of batteries,” Sam said. “See? Just plug it in

like this.”

The counter was cluttered—John’s secretary, Margaret, had dropped off a plate of Rocky Road fudge covered in Saran wrap, and old clients had sent a tin of macadamia nuts and a basket of fig spreads that would join the fig spreads from years past, dusty and unopened in the pantry. Lemons in a basket from the trees along the fence line, so many lemons. They should do something with the lemons. At least give some to the yard guy to take home. Chloe was sitting on one of the stools, opening Christmas cards, Zero at her feet.

“Who are these people, anyway?” Chloe held up a card. A photograph of three smiling blond boys in jeans and denim shirts. “They look religious.”

“That’s your cousin’s kids,” John said, taking the card. “Haley’s boys. They’re very nice.”

“I didn’t say they weren’t *nice*.”

“Very smart kids.” They had been good boys, the afternoon they visited, the youngest laughing in a crazy way when John dangled him upside down by his ankles.

Linda said that John was being too rough, her voice getting high, whiny. She got worried so easily. He loves it, John said. And it was true: when he righted the boy, his cheeks red, his eyes wild, he’d asked to go again.

Sasha came downstairs: her face was wet from washing, some sulfurous lotion dabbed on her chin. She looked sleepy, unhappy in borrowed sweatpants and a sweatshirt from the college Chloe had gone to. Linda talked to Sam



every day, Chloe, too, and saw them often enough, but Sasha hadn't been home since March. Linda was happy, John could tell, happy to have the kids there, everyone in one place.

John announced that it was time for a drink. "Everyone? Yes?" he said. "I think let's do a white."

"What do you want to listen to?" Sam said, controlling the iPad with a finger. "Mom? Any song."

"Christmas songs," Chloe said. "Put on a Christmas station."

Sam ignored her. "Mom?"

"I liked the CD player," Linda said. "I knew how to use it."

"But you can have everything that was on your CDs, and even more," Sam said. "Anything."

"Just pick something and play it," Sasha said. "Christ."

A commercial blared.

"If you subscribe," Sam said, "then there won't be any commercials."

"Come on," Sasha said. "They don't want to deal with that stuff."

Sam, wounded, turned the volume down, studied the iPad in silence. Linda said that she loved the speaker, thank you for setting it up, wasn't it nice how it freed up all this counter space, and dinner was ready anyway so they could just turn the music off.

CHLOE SET THE TABLE: paper napkins, the cloudy drinking glasses. John had to call someone to look at the dishwasher. It wasn't draining properly, and seemed only to marinate the dishes in a stew of warm water and food scraps. Linda sat at the head of the table, the kids in their usual spots. John finished his wine. Linda had stopped drinking, just to try it out, she said, just for a while, and since then he had drunk more, or maybe it only felt that way.

Sasha pinched a leaf of lettuce from the salad bowl and started chewing.

"Excuse you," he said.

"What?"

"We have to say grace."

Sasha made a face.

"I'll say it," Sam said. He closed his eyes, bowed his head.

When John opened his eyes, he saw Sasha on her phone. The impulse to grab the phone, smash it. But best not to get mad, or Linda would get mad at him, they would all get mad. How easily things got ruined. He refilled his wine, served himself some pasta. Chloe kept reaching down to feed Zero scraps of rotisserie chicken.

Sasha poked at the pasta. "Is there cheese in this?" She made a show of not taking any. There was only wet lettuce and some shreds of chicken on her plate. She sniffed her water glass. "It smells weird."

Linda blinked. "Well, get another glass then."

"Smell," Sasha said, tipping it at Chloe. "See?"

“Get a new glass,” Linda said, and snatched it away. “I’ll get it.”

“Stop, stop, I’ll do it, it’s fine.”

When the kids were little, dinner was hot dogs or spaghetti, the kids with their glasses of milk, Linda drinking white wine with ice cubes, John with his wine, too, tuning in and out. The kids fought. Chloe kicked Sam. Sasha thought Sam was breathing on her—*Mom, tell Sam to stop breathing on me. Tell. Sam. To. Stop. Breathing. On. Me.* How easily a veil dropped between him and this group of people who were his family. They fuzzed out, pleasantly, became vague enough that he could love them.

“We’re sorry Andrew couldn’t make it,” Linda said.

Sasha shrugged. “He would have had to fly back on Christmas anyway. He has his son the next day.”

“Still, we would’ve liked to see him.”

“Zero’s being weird,” Chloe said. “Look.”

There was chicken on the floor in front of the dog but he wasn’t eating it.

“He’s cyborg now,” Sasha said.

“Maybe he can’t see?” Chloe said. “Do you know if he’s blind?”

“Don’t feed him from the table,” John said.

“Not like it really matters at this point.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Can you imagine being a dog?” Sasha said. “Being ready to die and then just, like, no, you’re cut open and they put something inside you, and you’re still alive? Maybe he

hates it.”

John had had a similar thought out on one of Zero’s shit walks. Zero had looked so mournful, so ill at ease in his harness, hobbling in the wet grass with his pale-pink belly, and it seemed awful, what people did to animals, pressing them into emotional servitude, keeping them alive for one last Christmas. The kids didn’t even care about the dog, not really.

“He likes it,” Sam said, bending to pet Zero roughly under the chin. “He’s happy.”

“Gentle, Sammy, gentle.”

“Stop, you’re hurting him,” Chloe said.

“God,” Sam said. “Calm down.” He sat back hard in his chair so that it scraped the floor.

“You made him mad, look,” Chloe said. Zero circled back to the grimy beanbag they used as his bed. The dog settled down in the lump of fake fur, shivering, staring at them.

“He hates us,” Sasha said. “So much.”

THEY WATCHED THE SAME movie every year. John opened a bottle of red and brought it into the living room, though only he and Sasha were still drinking. Linda made popcorn on the stove, a touch burnt. He felt for the unpopped kernels on the bottom of the bowl, rolled them around his mouth to suck the salt.

“Let’s go,” he said. “Let’s get a move on.”

“Are we ready? Where’s Sasha?”

Chloe shrugged from the floor. “Talking to Andrew.”

The front door opened. When Sasha came into the living room, she looked as if she’d been crying. “I told you guys to start without me.”

“You know, Sash, we can take you to get some clothes tomorrow,” Linda said. “The mall is still open.”

“Maybe,” she said. “Yeah.” She went to lie next to Chloe on the carpet. Her face was lit by her phone, her fingers tapping away.

The movie was longer than he remembered. He’d forgotten the whole first section, down in Florida, the train escape. That one actor was a faggot, that seemed obvious now. The retired general, the inn, snowy, snowy Vermont—John fell into a lull, all this East Coast hale and heartiness, everyone in ruddy good health. Why had he and Linda stayed in California? Maybe that was the problem, raising kids in this temperate place where they didn’t know the seasons. How much better off they’d have been in Vermont or New Hampshire or one of those states where the cost of living was cheap, where the kids could have done 4-H and gone to community college and got used to the idea of a small, good life, which was all he had ever wanted for his children.

The kids used to love movies like this when they were little, those old, live-action Walt Disney movies, *Pollyanna*; *The One and Only, Genuine, Original Family Band*; *The Happiest Millionaire*. Movies where the fathers were basi-

cally Jesus, the kids crowding around whenever the dad came into a room, hanging off his neck, kissing him, oh Pa-paw, the little girls said, almost swooning. Such great faces, those old actors. Fred MacMurray, the one from *The Music Man*. Or was he thinking of the actor from *Little House on the Prairie*, the boxed set that they'd watched in its entirety? Pa was always shirtless at least once an episode, his feathery hair so deeply seventies. John had read the girls those books when they were young. The Little House books and the book about the boy running away to live in the mountains, the boy running away to live in the woods, books about young people out in holy, unspoiled nature, fording clear brooks, sleeping in beds made of tree boughs.

Onscreen, Danny Kaye was singing, the blonde in her pink dress dancing, her great legs, and John hummed along, off key, the dog in the room, he could tell, the harness jangling though he couldn't see the dog, but someone else could take Zero out, one of the kids. That's why Zero was alive, anyway. For them.

He had fallen asleep. The movie was over, but no one had turned the television off. His wineglass was empty. Everyone was gone. They had left him alone. The room was dark but the holiday lights were still on outside, casting a peculiar glow through the windows, an eerie, alien brightness. It occurred suddenly to him that something was wrong. He sat, unmoving, the wineglass in his hand. He remembered this feeling from childhood, the nights he lay paralyzed in his bottom bunk, hardly breathing from fear,

convinced that some evil was gathering itself in the silence, gliding soundlessly toward him. And here it was, he thought, finally, it had come for him. As he had always known it would.

A spasm in his back, and the room reoriented itself: the couch, the carpet, the television. Ordinary. He stood up. He put his wineglass on the coffee table, turned out the hallway lights, the kitchen lights, went upstairs where everyone, his family, was sleeping.

THE NEXT DAY WAS Christmas Eve. John carried two cups of coffee up to the bedroom. It was sunny outside, the fog burning off, but the bedroom was dark, Colonial dark, anachronistically dark. Linda had picked the dark wallpaper and the dark curtains and the four-poster bed, and it's not as if John had some vision of what he would have preferred. On the nightstand on his side of the bed: a wooden tray of pennies in the drawer; a shoehorn still in its plastic package; a chubby anthology of crime stories. In the closet, a broken-down device that he had used to hang upside down for twenty minutes a day, good for his back, until Linda said the sight was too frightening.

Linda sat up in bed and took the mug, her sleep shirt twisted up around her neck, her face rumpled. She blinked a few times, groping for her glasses.

“Sasha’s awake,” he said.

“Was she nasty?”

John shrugged. “She’s fine.”

“I’m afraid to go downstairs. She was so upset yesterday. About her bag. It really unnerved me.”

“She seems fine to me.”

Was that true? He didn’t know. Sasha saw a therapist, which John was aware of only because Linda paid the health insurance and Sasha was still on their plan. In high school, Sasha had also gone to a therapist, someone who was supposed to help her stop scratching her legs up with tweezers and nail scissors. It didn’t seem to do anything but give her new words to describe how awful her parents were.

When the kids were young, Linda had gone to a ranch in Arizona for a week or so, a health place. He guessed it would have been after one of the bad periods, when she sometimes ended up locking him out of the house, or taking the kids to her mother’s. One night, Sasha, nine years old, had called the police on him. When they arrived at the house, Linda told them it was an accident, cleared everything up. It was years ago, he told Linda when she brought it up. And things had changed after that. Linda came back from the health retreat with a book of low-fat recipes that all seemed to use mango salsa, and a conviction that she had communed with the ghost of her childhood dog during a guided meditation in a sweat lodge. And she’d decided that John needed to see a therapist. It was, he supposed, an ultimatum.

He’d gone twice. The man had prescribed him antidepressants and a mood stabilizer, and given him a handout of



breathing exercises for impulse control. That first day on the pills he'd felt something like mania, his thoughts a bright crumple of tinfoil—he'd cleaned both cars, taken boxes down from the attic, decided he would have the crew turn the space into a painting studio for Linda. He had climbed out Chloe's nursery window to empty the gutters, clawing out wet clumps of leaves and bird shit with his bare hands, hands gone blue and bloodless from the cold. When he'd wiped his cheek with his shirtsleeve, it came back damp. His whole face was wet. Even though he was crying, it was not unpleasant, like those times he'd taken mushrooms in high school and sat out in the nature preserve by Salt Point, tears streaming down his face when he felt the wave start to hit, his mouth filling with drool. On the roof he had leaned back on the shingles, considered the drop to the yard below. What had the calculation even been? Not high enough. He had not taken the pills again.

And how had it happened, the eventual neutering of his anger? He was too tired to knock things over. What had Sasha said, the last time they'd got in a fight? She'd been crying, on a trip about how he used to throw food at her when she didn't eat it. These things seemed so far away, and then eventually they got farther away, and then nobody talked about them anymore.

When he brought the empty mugs down to the kitchen, Sasha was holding up a white package, a cardboard box opened in front of her.

“What are these?” she said.

“Where did you get that?”

“The box was on the counter. I just opened it, sorry.”

He snatched it away. “Was it addressed to you?”

“Sorry,” she said.

“You just do whatever you want?” He was aware that he was almost yelling.

“I said sorry.” She looked scared in a way that made him angrier.

“You might as well have it,” he said. “It doesn’t matter anymore.”

For Christmas he had bought everyone those DNA kits. Linda, too. A pretty good present, he thought. He had been proud—he’d got everyone a DNA kit and an AAA membership. Who could ever say he didn’t think of his family?

Sam came into the kitchen, already dressed.

John slid a box toward him. “Here.”

“What?”

“It’s your Christmas present,” he said. “You just spit into these tubes. It’s all included. Send it off. It comes back and tells you exactly what your DNA is.”

“Cool,” Sam said, making a show of studying the package, turning it over in his hands.

“You know,” Sasha said, “this is basically just giving your DNA to the police.”

“But you guys can find your heritage,” John said. “Find relatives. Learn about the family.”

Sasha smirked. “This is how they found that man who killed everyone. The serial killer. Through some fourth

cousin.”

“They weren’t cheap,” he said, hearing his voice rise. Probably, he thought, his kids didn’t even know his own father’s name. Unbelievable. He took a breath. “I got one for everyone.”

Sasha looked at him, looked at Sam. “Sorry,” she said. “It’s great. Thank you.”

IN THE AFTERNOON, Chloe put on home movies. Sam had transferred all the tapes to DVDs as John and Linda’s Christmas present the year before. Zero sat quivering beside Chloe on the living room floor. The dog smelled, even from the doorway, faintly of urine. Chloe didn’t seem to notice, nuzzling into his neck. She was eating a microwave burrito off a paper towel. It looked damp and unpleasant, oozing beans.

“Want to watch with me?” she said.

He was tired. The living room was warm, the heat on. It was fine to sit in the big chair, to close his eyes, listen to the voices. It was his voice. He opened his eyes. The camera was jerky, handheld, John walking it down an empty hallway. *Let’s go say hi to everyone*, he said. *Let’s go find them*.

It was a house they had not lived in for at least twenty years. What an odd house it had been. So many levels and nooks, big dark beams. A row of pine trees whose branches the kids used to grab through the car windows as he drove past, the snow that covered the bedroom skylight. How

strange to see it again, conjured from nothing. Their old life. The camera caught his sneakers, the carpet, the flash of a tweed couch.

“Where is that?” Chloe asked.

“You were a baby. We only lived there a year or two.”

It was hard to remember when it would have been exactly, but they lived in that house before Linda’s father died, so it was probably ’96 or ’97. It looked like winter, and maybe it was the winter that bears kept breaking into the car, often enough that he had to leave it unlocked so that they wouldn’t smash the windows. Sam liked seeing the muddy paw prints, though Sasha was deathly afraid of bears, wouldn’t even come out to look at the tracks.

What else did he remember about the house—the stone fireplace, the collection of pig salt shakers, the cramped kitchen with its mustard-colored refrigerator that they packed with cubes of hot dogs, the freezer limping along, barely keeping the waffles solid. The girls had shared a room. Sam in that nook. They played Go Fish and War, they made houses of cards, they watched *Bedknobs and Broomsticks*. Linda’s brother came over all the time. George was still married to his first wife, Christine—she was beautiful then, hair that curled up at the ends, breasts that were always half out of whatever shirt she was wearing. John pulled her onto his lap, and Linda slapped his shoulder, *John*, Christine wriggling off but only after a few minutes. George and Christine got divorced, how many years after that? Christine fat from antipsychotics and claiming that

George had pushed her down the stairs.

“Look at Mom’s hair,” Chloe said. “It’s so funny.”

Linda was wearing glasses popular at that time, brown saucers that made her eyes a little goggled.

She waved the camera away. *John! Stop!* The video cut out. He closed his eyes again. He heard only static. Then:

*Sam, sit down.*

*It’s his birthday.*

*It was a nice present your grandpa got you.*

*The cake looks good.*

*Hold up how many fingers, how old?*

*It’s a special puppet. Be very gentle with it.*

*What do you want to be? You want to be a doctor?*

*No.*

*Lawyer.*

*No.*

*President? Sam?*

*John, don’t.*

*It wasn’t me. It was this guy.*

*Don’t touch the puppet. We’ll be very careful with it. It’s very expensive.*

*Sasha. The baby’s sleeping. Don’t touch.*

Sasha stood in the doorway. “What are you guys watching?”

“It’s so funny,” Chloe said. “You should watch. You were so cute. Wait, let me put on the one of you. It’s really cute.”

The camera shook, pointed at the carpet. Then tilted up to Sasha in a nightgown, sitting on the bottom step of a stair-

case.

*How old are you?*

*Five.*

*Who's that there?*

*Gecko.*

*Is that your Gecko? Is it Gecko? What are you doing?*

*Making a Flounder house.*

*Flounder?*

*Ariel and Flounder.*

*And who do you love? Do you love your daddy?*

*Yes.*

*Who do you love more, your daddy or your mommy? Do you love your daddy the most?*

John glanced at Sasha, but she was gone.

SHE WAS IN THE KITCHEN, ripping paper towels off the roll, square by square, floating them on a puddle under the table. "Zero pissed again," she said. "Jesus," she said, the roll of paper towels now empty. She was almost sputtering. Her eyes were puffy and red. "Why doesn't anyone clean up the piss? It's disgusting. The dog pisses all over this house and no one even notices."

"Your mom loves that dog," John said.

Sasha nudged the paper towels along the floor with the toe of her boot. He guessed that she would not actually take the step of picking up the towels, actually cleaning up.

"Any news about your bag?"

Sasha shook her head. “There’s this website to check, but it just says it’s still in transit,” she said. “I keep refreshing.”

“I can take you to the mall if you want,” he said.

“Okay. Yeah, thanks.”

He stood for a moment too long, expecting—what? Nothing. She didn’t pick up the paper towels.

SASHA WAS SILENT ON THE DRIVE, thirty minutes up Highway 12. Not much traffic.

“You see they’re still not done with the hotel?”

He’d been outbid on that job. Good thing, since it was all tied up with the city anyway, people writing letters to the editor, wanting traffic-impact reports.

Sasha kept checking her phone.

“Do you have a charger or something?” she said.

When he reached across her to get the one in the glove box, she flinched.

He forced himself not to say anything. He should have let Linda drive her, or one of the kids. He put on the radio, already tuned to Linda’s favorite station. It played Christmas music starting on Thanksgiving. Sam had told him that all radio was just programmed by computers now.

*Yet in thy dark streets shineth*

*The everlasting light.*

Hadn’t one of the kids’ classes done this song one year at a Christmas pageant? The kids dressed as angels in cut-up

bedsheets, Linda making them halos out of tinsel.

Sasha pulled down the sleeves of Chloe's sweatshirt and put her phone, now plugged into the charger, on the console between them. The background of her phone, John saw, was a photo of a family on the deck of a ferry. A woman, a man, a kid. The woman, he realized after a moment, was Sasha. She was in a bright blue anorak—beaming, wind-swept. A young boy was sitting in her lap, and a man, Andrew, smiled with his arm around them both. The thought came clearly to John that they missed her. This man and his child. She was here and not there and they missed her. Why should that be so strange? The screen went blank.

She'd had a boyfriend in high school, or maybe it was Chloe's boyfriend, a rangy kid with a dark bowl cut, a sharp nose, raw, red nostrils. The boy had been nice enough, except that he'd eventually snapped—was it drugs? Or maybe he was schizophrenic, John didn't remember. His parents had called John and Linda once to see if the boy was staying with them. This was years after they'd broken up. The boy hadn't been staying with them, of course, and his mother told John over the phone how the boy had put a dead bird in the coffee machine, how he thought his family was trying to kill him. How he'd disappeared and they had no idea where he was or how to find him. John had felt bad for the boy's mother, embarrassed, even, by her unselfconscious grief, and glad for his own children: healthy, normal, off living their lives.

“Maybe you and Chloe should make persimmon cook-



ies tonight?” he said.

“No one eats persimmon cookies. You don’t even like them.”

“I do like them,” he said. He felt hurt. Though he couldn’t remember what persimmons even tasted like. Astringent, maybe, soapy.

“All those persimmons are just going to rot if you don’t,” he said.

She didn’t care. She didn’t remember any of the good things. The night he’d woken them up, piled them into the back of his pickup with blankets, driven them to the reservoir, where they made a huge fire, where the kids sat on towels on the damp ground and ate burnt marshmallows off sticks. There was a photo from that night he used to keep on his desk, the three kids looking tired and happy and bundled in the bright, optimistic colors of that old clothing—and then how did that seem suddenly to mean nothing? Or the month all the kids had chicken pox and slept on sheets on the floor of his and Linda’s bedroom, nude and dotted with calamine lotion, the bathtub drain clogged from their oatmeal baths. So many illnesses and broken bones and sprained wrists and cracked skulls.

They didn’t care. As a girl, Sasha had watched *The Wizard of Oz* so many times that the tape had snapped.

“Do you remember that?” he said. “How much you liked *The Wizard of Oz*?”

“What?” She looked irritated.

“You loved it. You watched it twenty-five times, more. It

must have been more. You broke the tape.”

She didn't say anything.

“It's true,” he said.

“Sounds like Chloe.”

“It was you.”

“Pretty sure it was Chloe.”

He tried to feel kindness toward her.

Even on Christmas Eve, the parking lot at the mall was full. He guessed he shouldn't be surprised by that anymore, people wanting to shop instead of being home with their families. It used to be shameful, like being on your phone when someone was talking to you, but then everyone did it and you were just supposed to accept that this was how life was.

“You can drop me off here,” Sasha said, already opening her door. “This is good. You want to come back in, like, three hours or something? Meet back here?”

HE MIGHT AS WELL SWING by the office, just to check on things—no one was there, of course, no other cars in the office park, the heat turned off, but it was good to sit at his desk, turn on his computer, answer a few emails. He signed some checks. He liked the office when it was quiet. John drank room-temperature water, wobbling in a paper cone, from the water fountain. They should start ordering regular paper cups. Linda texted that the neighbor had called. Zero had got out somehow, made it a few houses before someone

found him.

*All ok now?*

*Fine*, she texted back.

She'd said she'd wait until after Christmas to put Zero down, but now, with the pacemaker, who knew. The dog would probably outlive John. Another hour before he had to get Sasha. He found a granola bar in his drawer that crumbled when he opened the wrapper. He tipped the pieces into his mouth, chewed hard. Margaret was with her son in Chicago: photos of her grandson were on her bulletin board, a tin of tea sat on her desk along with the tube of hand cream she used assiduously. Before she left, Margaret had turned the calendar—a freebie from the hardware store—to January. He checked the time. He knew he was going to have to get up, sooner or later, but there was no reason to leave until he had to.

HE CIRCLED THE PARKING LOT once before he saw Sasha, leaning against a post, her eyes closed. She looked peaceful, untroubled, her hair tucked behind her ears, her hands in the pocket of Chloe's sweatshirt. If he remembered correctly, Sasha had not got into that college. She had never been a lucky girl. He rolled down the passenger-side window.

"Sasha."

Nothing.

"Sasha," he said, louder.

“I kept calling for you,” he said, when she finally approached. “You didn’t hear?”

“Sorry,” she said, getting into the car.

“You didn’t buy anything?”

For a moment, she looked confused.

“I didn’t like anything,” she said.

He started to pull away. It had rained at some point without his noticing; the streets were wet. Other drivers had turned on their headlights.

“Actually,” Sasha said, “I didn’t even look for clothes. I saw a movie.”

“Oh?” he said. He couldn’t tell if she was trying to elicit some specific response. He kept his face empty, his hands on the wheel. “Was it good?”

She told him what had happened in the movie.

“Sounds sad,” he said.

“I guess,” Sasha said. “Everyone said it was supposed to be good. But I thought it was dumb.”

Sasha’s phone chimed on the seat between them.

“But why would people want to go see a movie that makes them sad?” John said.

Sasha didn’t answer him. She was busy typing, her face washed in the light from her screen. It had got dark so quickly. He turned on his own headlights. Her phone chimed again and Sasha smiled, a small, private smile.

“Is it okay if I call Andrew? Really quick. I’m just going to say good night,” she said. “It’s late there.”

He nodded, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Hi, sorry,” Sasha said, speaking low into her phone. “No,” she said, “I’m in the car.”

She laughed, softly, her voice dropping, her body relaxing into the seat, and at the stoplight John found himself tilting his head in her direction, straining to make out what she was saying, as if he might catch something in her words.