Life Drawing

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PICADOR

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In the days leading up to my husband Owen's death, he visited Alison's house every afternoon. I would watch him trudge over the small, snowy hill between our two properties, half the time away from me, half the time toward me. And I would wonder what he thought about as he went. Wonder too if Alison watched him from a window of her own, and whether the expression she saw on his face as he approached was very different from the one I saw as he came home.

In the weeks that followed his death, I would stare out the same window, the one in our living room, nearest the fireplace, for as much as an hour at a time. Sometimes even longer than that. There was a huge blizzard on the day after his funeral. I watched as nearly three feet of snow fell to the ground, staying all through January, then much of February, picking up a few more inches now and then, drifting against anything in its way, flattening the landscape so the hill wasn't quite so distinct anymore and the trees all looked shorter, their trunks buried deep.

It was, I imagine, very beautiful. But imagining and remembering are not quite the same thing. I don't remember thinking it anything but eerie at the time.

Owen wasn't buried. I had known practically since the day we met that he wanted to be cremated. We'd had the sort of courtship—though the word would have seemed old-fashioned to us both—that included a lot of talk about the meaning of life, the prospect of death. We were young, very young, and undoubtedly neither of us believed, not really, that we would ever die, which made that sort of discussion, often late at night, often just after sex, exhilarating. There was a beauty to be found in the transitory nature of existence, we would say. There was liberation in the acceptance of mortality. Religion was for fools. Religion, along with marriage ceremonies, Thanksgiving dinners, station wagons, procreation, and so on. Burial was a perverse notion if you really thought about it, without the assumptions of the culture blinding you. All those dead bodies, taking up all that land. A peculiar, fetishistic custom.

We were to be a cremation couple. It was established early on.

Except that we were never going to die.

I thought about so many things during those first snowy weeks, including the fact that I too was mortal, that I too would disappear one day, leaving behind such things as panes of glass through which other people could gaze, and cold that they could feel. Snow that had to be shoveled, not just contemplated. Practical issues for which I would no longer be a help or a hindrance. Relationships abandoned like unfinished thoughts.

It isn't that no one close to me had ever died before. I was forty-seven years old. Few reach that age unscathed and I hadn't made it past toddlerhood before a brain aneurism took my mother in a matter of hours; then my oldest sister, Charlotte, lost a filthy battle to cancer when she was forty-six; and my father was wandering his solitary, demented way toward a graceless, profoundly unjust kind of death.

But Owen was Owen. Owen was me. I was Owen. Anger and all. Betrayals and all. Owen would walk into a room and I might well want to kill him—so to speak—but at the same time, for much of my life, I couldn't really have told you where I left off and he began. And then he died. Leaving me standing at a window, staring into a landscape as though, well, as though he might just reappear one day. Of course.

I was certain about cremation, but in fact a lot of our other opinions had softened over the years. That is what happens. There was a marriage ceremony, eventually. There were attempts to procreate, which led to discovering that Owen could not, so when we bought the minivan we had sworn we never would, it was for hauling my paintings, not children. We never did get religion, either of us, but we started to value the idea of ritual. Still, no celebration of Thanksgiving with its intimations of smallpox-infected blankets and European domination, but on the second Saturday of April we threw a big party, invited old friends out to the country, cooked an insane amount of food, drank too much, and talked appreciatively of pagan celebrations of spring. And back when we were city dwellers, we went through a phase of lighting candles every Wednesday night. *"Ain't nobody's Sabbath but our own,"* Owen sang the first time that we did, so we played Billie Holiday every Wednesday after that.

But *softened* isn't really the right word. Our opinions didn't soften. More accurately, we reacted to life. And we reacted, time and again, to threats. To us. To us being us. Why did we finally get married? Because I had broken the promise that we had never made. Owen forgave me, or anyway, we moved forward, but we did it with a vow this time. Why did we try to have children? Because there was a period in there when the possibility—absurd five years before!—that we needed more than just each other,

crept into our thoughts. Our fabric seemed to be wearing thin. And why this desire for ritual? To anchor us. *I will be here the second Saturday of every April. I will be here every Wednesday night.*

We never saw it that way, of course. I saw it that way later on. That's what happens when one of you dies. The clock stops. The story ends. You can make some sense of it all. Begin to see patterns. Begin to understand. Maybe you can only begin to understand. Maybe the patterns are only the ones that you impose. But the thing takes on a different shape. It takes on a shape.

Or, as one of my teachers used to say, you cannot see a landscape you are in.

But you do begin to see it when you step away.

This is me, just before my first glimpse of Alison: I am standing, hands on hips, staring at a patch of basil that has gone to seed, peeved at myself for having once again planted so much and once again failed to harvest it at the right time. It is one of those obscenely hot late July days when you walk outside and think there's been some kind of terrible mistake, because weather can't really be meant to be this oppressive. My hair, long and still close to entirely black, is tightly braided, pulled off my neck, clipped straight on the back of my head, so if the sun weren't too high for shadows, mine would look like I had feathers sticking up. I am wearing just a bra and shorts. My body, at forty-seven, is tan from gardening, mowing, walking. And I am strong, stronger than I ever was before I became a country dweller. My face? My face is broad, my Russian forebears lending me their wide, prominent cheekbones, their heavy square jaws. And my eyes, which are dark blue, are bluer still under thick black brows. If I am beautiful, I am not classically so; but at forty-seven I think I am beautiful. More than I ever did at twenty, at thirty. By this time I mind mirrors less. If I am honest, I will say I sometimes seek them out. I

look at my face, at my body, with a kind of clinical detachment into which a strand of admiration inserts itself. I always wanted to be powerful. In this decade, finally, I look powerful. I feel powerful.

And I feel alone. Standing there in front of the house, knowing the mail has already arrived so there won't be anyone close again for another twenty-four hours, I am alone in a way that is familiar to me by this day, but that I never experienced until nearly three years before, when we moved to this otherworldly place. It is a kind of solitude that continues even when Owen is standing beside me. It is a solitude that includes him. We are apart from the rest of the world. We are invisible to it. We have become by this time a single being, a being that argues with itself from time to time—as a knee may ache, as a tired back might refuse to cooperate, so you say, *Oh for God's sake, could you stop being so difficult;* but you are saying it to a part of yourself.

While I am peering down at herbs, Owen is in the barn, writing—or trying to. For months now, he has been that weary back that won't cooperate. He imagines that his prose has wandered to a distant acre of our universe, curled up and died. He still spends days inside the barn but he comes out looking grieved. I feel this ache all the time, though my own work is going well, and it is probably this that has made me wander out into the garden, into the day, so horribly hot. I am restless for him. I am restless as part of him.

The basil I am eyeing with such irritation is rampant. The air smells of it and of lavender. Owen and I are enthusiastic, ignorant gardeners. We are inadequately attentive. We are perpetually amazed. We are innocents to nature, stupefied by its every trick. Even as I am annoyed with myself for letting the basil go to seed, I am also in awe of it. Magic! These beings that continue to grow, that know what to do next, and next, and next.

"Halloooo . . ."

I am not alone.

First, a British voice. Then a small woman in a violet sundress. With a mop of gray curls. "Alison Hemmings," she says, her hand outstretched long before I might reach it. "I've just rented the house across the way. I'm so sorry if I'm here at a bad time . . ." A smiling face. Round cheeks. A firm grip. Startling light gray eyes, almost silver to match her hair.

No one during our time has lived in the house next door, the only building within sight of our home. I have stopped thinking of it as having an interior. It has become solely a shabbily beautiful façade.

"Gus Edelman," I say. "Augusta, really, but Gus. Welcome."

My voice is riddled with question marks; and then I remember that I am only in a bra. Folded in among the thoughts of a neighbor is the thought that the bra, which is purple, may pass for a bathing suit; then the thought that it serves her right, barging in—though she hasn't really barged in. Then the thought that it's too late to say anything about my bra. We have absorbed the fact of it already. We have moved on.

"It's so lovely here, isn't it?" she says.

"Yes, it is," I say. "Can I help you out in some way?" It isn't quite right, I know. I sound like a salesperson at the end of the day hurrying to close the store.

She tells me she is leasing the place. "At least through September," she says. "Maybe beyond. Depending on how things go."

"I hadn't realized they were renting it out."

The owners, a young couple who inherited the property from distant family, have only ever visited once, maybe eighteen months before. They walked the land, several acres, had seemed to be arguing and then had driven off, never to return.

"You haven't seen the advert?" she asks. "Because you're in it. You and . . . is it your husband?"

I shake my head, frowning. "I had no idea . . ."

"On one of those rental sites. One of the features is the couple who lives next door. The writer. The painter."

"Oh. How strange. They never mentioned . . ."

She smiles. "I promise not to be a pest, but it did make the setting more appealing. I'm actually a painter too. And somehow the notion of a creative enclave . . . plus I figured if the ad mentioned you, you probably weren't axe murderers."

"Not recently," I say. "Not me, anyway." As we speak, I decide she's only a few years older than I, despite the gray hair. Early fifties. We look at one another a bit more, awkward, until she says she should be getting back to her unpacking. I tell her please to let us know if we can help her settle in, but I don't say it with much enthusiasm and as she steps away I lean down to pick some of the leggy basil, as though she has caught me in the middle of an important, pressing task.

"Many thanks," she calls back. "So good to meet!"

When I'm sure she's gone, I straighten up, my hands full of basil stems. I look toward the barn, and think of going there. A new neighbor is big news. But then I decide it can wait. Owen needs to be left alone to push the rock back up the hill. And I too need to get back to work, so instead of turning left, I turn right and go inside.

We'd moved into the farmhouse nearly three years before, after Owen's Aunt Marion died, surprising us by leaving a small fortune. Very small. But still, a fortune to us. It was enough money that we could think hard about what changes we wanted to make in our lives, enough money that we could afford to make changes without thinking too hard. For the first time in forever we had a safety net. We'd always talked about living the country life in a maybe-one-day kind of way, but once it was possible, we started to get serious, checking real estate online, driving beyond the

suburbs to explore houses that we knew within seconds we would never want to own. Too new. Too obviously designed for families of four. Too close to other human beings.

But then we found the farmhouse, and as buyers we were sold right away. Built in 1918, it was exactly the kind of lovely we'd been looking for. We saw it first on a breezy day in May when the land shimmered with every leaf imaginable, from ground to sky. I thought we'd stumbled onto the hidden spot in which the universe tested out its most exquisite shades of green. The pond, perfectly round, had a fairy-tale look, frog princes poised to set themselves on its edge. I have fallen in love very few times in my life, and once was with those seven acres, our home, on that day.

I wanted to live there. I wanted to paint every vista.

Owen could write in the stone bank barn once we ran electricity, and I could set up a studio in the enclosed porch, with its windows on three sides. There was work to do, of course. The kitchen, set back in the house, was a horror show, its only saving graces a beautiful worn terra-cotta-tiled floor and the old glass-paned door out to what would become our garden. The roof was a joke—like the old dribble glasses, designed to leak. But the house itself was dirt cheap and we had more than enough money to fix it up.

Our friends back in Philadelphia, incurably urban, thought we were mad, and we both rather enjoyed that part. In our crowd it was hard to latch onto any eccentricity no one else had yet claimed. Overnight we became oddballs, objects of affectionate eye rolling and shaking heads. *They'll be back in a week.* We had set ourselves apart from the crowd. And in some other sense, some entirely literal sense, that was exactly what we needed to do.

Neither of us acknowledged that our move had anything to do with my infidelity two years before. It had been some months since our City Hall ceremony, the ritual that was to have been the punctuation-mark ending to the whole episode. But that didn't

mean the betrayal wasn't a lingering presence in our lives, a taunting little goblin in the shadows, daring us to call him out.

For Owen, I knew, there were reminders everywhere. When I'd confessed to him, I had confessed fully—with all the misguided passion of one who believes that she is cleansing herself and forgets that she may be staining the listener. Owen became the man who knew too much. He carried in his head a map of meeting places, of locations where we might run into Bill. He could envision us slipping into this dim café, slipping out, a few minutes apart, from this hotel. He knew how to drive from our home to Bill's. He knew where Bill's law office was.

I always half believed that Owen would have an affair one day himself to restore balance of a kind. In certain moods, dark moods, I even believed he was entitled, though the thought of it was hideous to me. Sexual jealousy. Emotional jealousy. I couldn't bear the prospect of going through what he had gone through. (What I had put him through.) But a part of me believed that it was only fair. A part of me thought maybe it would set us right again.

A couple of times, I almost convinced myself it had happened. There was a student of his whose name seemed to come up too often. Victoria Feldman. And a little later there was a young woman, a girl really, who worked at a nearby coffee shop. I thought I could catch a little atmospheric hum around each of them. I had my hunches. But then, for whatever reasons, I changed my mind. Maybe he said Victoria Feldman was *tedious,* a word I knew he wouldn't use about a woman he was taking to bed, not even to cover something up. Maybe I looked a little more closely at the coffee shop girl and realized he would be appalled by her age, closer to sixteen than I had thought. I don't remember the details of how my mind first entangled, then disentangled him from these nonexistent liaisons, but the point is that I was always on alert.

When I was a teenager, long before any of this, my sisters and

I used to play a game, just between ourselves, that consisted solely of muttering under our breath, *there's a nice little friend for you,* whenever we saw a boy—or in my sister Jan's case a girl. Most of the time it was said sarcastically: *there's a nice little friend for you,* just as the most appalling skinhead cousin of the kid hosting the party walks in. Every once in a while, though, it was said appreciatively. *There's a nice little friend for you. No, seriously. By the door.* We were always on the lookout. All teenagers are, I suppose. We were human periscopes, scanning, scanning. And the fact that there were three of us, close in age, meant that there was never a time when at least one pair of eyes wasn't engaged.

The period between my affair and our move to the country was a bit like that. Is this her? Is this possible? *There's a nice little friend for you.* I hope he doesn't think so. I hope he doesn't see her. I hope he does. I hope he never tells me. I hope he does. It was never far from my mind.

We could move out to the country now, you know.

As we always told the story, the idea came upon us both at once, as though we had acted on it without either of us having to speak the words aloud. But in fact I was the one who said it, sitting in a diner, dawdling over late night pie and coffee, trying to comprehend the degree to which our circumstances had changed with our newly copious bank account.

"We could move out to the country now, you know."

This is Owen, on the day we moved in: He is pacing off the distance between the kitchen door of the house and the great doorway of the barn. Well over six feet tall, slender to the point of being skinny, as he places one heel to the front of the other foot's toes, and again, and again, he looks single-legged and as though he will blow over with just a mild gust of wind. It is autumn, mid-October, and the greens of our first encounter with this land

have dressed up in fancy costume, orange, scarlet, yellow, to welcome us. It is almost too much to take in, all the beauty. And this is why Owen is doing what he is doing, measuring this line—which there is no reason to measure. Because this is what Owen does when he is overwhelmed.

Watching from what is to be my studio, I know he doesn't really need or even want to know how many lengths of his own feet it is from one building to the other. Except that it is a start. In this hurricane of incomprehensible loveliness, he begins with the ground, with his own feet on that ground. He begins with a count. And standing at the window, I remember how he first loved me, physically. What those earliest sexual moments were like when he counted the freckles on my belly, when he stretched his hand across my breasts, nipple to nipple, measuring my body with his own, so earnest, so strangely in his own head yet defined by the act of knowing me, all at once. It felt like a form of devotion I had never imagined, as he committed my body to his memory and so committed himself to me.

I could never match it, I was sure.

When he reaches the barn, his form relaxes. He turns and walks briskly, loosely, back to the house. He is still boyish at forty-eight. He is that boy with the just-too-long hair that falls into his face, wearing the sweater he must have borrowed from his dad. His limbs still seem as though he'll grow into them, with time. As he nears, I see the earnestness on his face. He has solved a problem. He'll move on now to the next one. Testing the depth of the pond. Or counting the steps to the basement. This, for him, is moving in, as for me painting walls and hanging pictures is. He is all about acquiring knowledge. I am all about recasting a place into what I want it to be.

These are the sorts of things you see when you step away. It doesn't mean you're right. It just means it's what you see.

2

The basil I picked that day ended up on our kitchen table in a mason jar where it looked more than a little sad, and I went back into my studio, back to work.

It is typical of productive artistic periods for me that they have their origins in something beyond my control. (That's true of the bad times too, of course, which is the hell of it—as Owen was daily experiencing.) My work that summer had started with a bathroom renovation we had finally gotten around to a few weeks before Alison's arrival. The second-floor hall bathroom was a wreck. It had never been used much, so we'd always ignored it, but that winter the tiles had started popping off the walls and somehow that made the sagging ceiling intolerable. In May, we took a few bids, all of which were low. Nobody had enough work, everyone was cutting their profits. We went with the man who seemed most amiable, and before a week passed he had a crew there doing demolition.

I spent an irritated morning listening to the bangs and shattering, to the too-loud, blaring radio, and then around noon went up to ask if they needed anything for their lunch. Something caught my eye. A pile of old newspapers, twisted and crumpled, in my hall.

"What are those?"

"From when the house was built," the contractor—Thad—told me. "People used those to insulate. Back in the day."

The first thing I did was iron them. (Owen laughed because in all the years we've been together neither of us had ever ironed anything. The iron had come with the house, as had any number of such odds and ends.) It took me a long time. It took me far longer than it had to because I got caught in watching the way the faces, the images, and the words came clear. The crumples themselves were like a blurred focus that I could manipulate. And there was also, inevitably, a sensation of moving backward in time. Not only because the papers were old, but because the act of crumpling a newspaper is a strictly forward-moving act. It isn't something one normally does, then undoes. The ironing process became all about restoration for me. Restoration, clarity. And then, also, loss. War. 1918. World War I. Crumpled newspapers with body counts. With surges of hope, documented. Defeats. Deaths and more deaths. Homecomings and more deaths.

I recrumpled some, to get the feel of doing that. Just the act of bringing the names of the slaughtered into focus and then obscuring them again; then back into focus. I began to jot notes about permanence and impermanence. I began to imagine the newspapers themselves in other forms. Things that could not be crumpled. Chiseled in stone. Etched into metal. I took one and burned it in a small copper bowl I had and saved the ashes. Why? I didn't know why. I'd stopped thinking sensibly—which is *not* how projects usually begin for me. But from the beginning, this was different. This was about ideas, about intuitions, something intriguing me that I didn't understand. And in the beginning, that felt right.

I took pictures of the bathroom still under construction, of the space between the walls where the papers had been entombed. I thought about the papers having been used for warmth and of the heat of the iron bringing them back. I tried to make something of that. I thought of the tiles popping off, of the pressures exerted not

by the fluctuations of temperatures over years but by the words and images themselves.

There are moments in a creative life when you understand why you do it. Those moments might last a few seconds or maybe, for some people, years. But whatever the actual time that passes, they still feel like a single moment. Fragile in the way a moment is, liable to be shattered by a breath, set apart from all the other passing time, distinct.

But then it changes. And what seemed unimaginably exhilarating gets bogged down, even when a project is going well. It is a gradual, inevitable sobering during which your right to be passive diminishes. What the ether has given you, now in fact belongs to you. And then it is work. Then it is hard.

By the time Alison arrived, I had moved into that second stage. The one that requires not only that boundless sense of possibility, but practical decisions. What form was this project to take? All my life, even in childhood, I had drawn and painted views of one kind or another. Landscapes. Streetscapes. Buildings. Interiors. Whatever happened to be outside a window. Since we'd moved to the country, it had been mostly rural views, the occasional village street. To the modest circle of people who knew my work, my canvases were distinctive for their minute detail and precision. And I had always had a way with light, an essence that seemed to speak a language in which I was fluent, a vocabulary of projection and shadow. But I had never been much for portraiture. I could manage simple likenesses, as any decent art student might, but human forms, human faces, were not for me.

Yet it was these boys, caught in these obituary photographs, and the fact of their cannon-fodder deaths that drew me in. Not a vista, as usually inspired me; but something more like a story. Their deaths and then their utilitarian haunting of my home.

I didn't understand the project yet, nor what it would grow to mean to me over time, but I was already somewhat wary of my attraction to these stories of death, aware of my capacity to define

myself by what I had lost when my young mother lost her life; aware that my sister Charlotte's death had echoed my mother's, compounding that capacity in me. Painting had always been a shelter from those wounds, my canvases both unpopulated and unapologetically beautiful, a salve for the uglier realities of human life. That those realities seemed now to be finding their way into my work unsettled me; but I could not ignore the pull.

These were the problems I was worrying about in the morning, just before I met Alison, problems on which it wasn't easy to concentrate after our encounter in the garden. *Hallooo . . .* The intrusion, as I thought of it, as if it were clearly a negative event, though underlying that peevish stance toward any interruption of our solitude lay a curiosity about her presence that bordered on excitement.

Unable to focus, I gave up and checked my email. And there, among the political petitions I might sign and the notices of gallery shows back in Philly I wouldn't attend, I found a note from Bill's daughter, Laine. Laine, who was the reason Bill and I had met. She'd been one of my private students, back when she was in high school. By the time of Alison's arrival, she'd just graduated NYU a few weeks before, staying on in New York, working at temp office jobs and taking a studio class. We exchanged emails regularly, every couple of months, a fact I kept hidden from Owen, though I didn't like to think of it that way. I had just never mentioned it, I preferred to tell myself. I was always happy to see her name there in my inbox, though always too, inevitably, her emails carried a wave of sadness back to me.

So, it's time for me to give you the summer report. Aren't you just dying to hear how my adventures in The Big City progress?

Our work together had started in the spring of 2005, soon after Charlotte's death. Just seventeen years old, Laine had been a handful then. It was her mother (Georgia, about whom I would

later have emotions like battling weather systems) who'd made the first call, describing Laine as very sweet *underneath it all.* And artistic—they thought. They were looking for something for her to get into, something to keep her from becoming a completely disaffected, messed-up kid. She was about halfway there, halfway to fully checked out, her mother said; and I'd felt a lot of respect for Georgia's straightforward approach. Most of the kids I taught who were heading for trouble had parents with their hands over their ears, saying *la-la-la-la-la* dawn to dusk. I looked forward to meeting a mother who seemed ready to see her child for who she actually was.

But then it wasn't the mother who brought Laine that first Friday afternoon. It was the father. It was Bill.

It was always Bill.

Laine and I worked together for eighteen months, a time during which she grew from being a surly, hostile kid hell-bent on pissing off all adults, to being a hardworking young woman anxious to please; and a damn good painter too. And all that time, all those months, all those Friday afternoons and then later Fridays and Tuesdays both, Bill brought her and Bill picked her up—because Laine hadn't yet learned to drive and because this was their special time together; and because now and then the universe just insists on changing your life in ways you didn't ask it to.

> *This studio class I'm taking is totally worth it, even though approximately half the people in it are complete freaks—and not in a good way. But the teacher is really excellent though not as excellent as you, of course. . . .*

Sometimes a teacher and student click, even though their work is very different, and that was our story. While I had never been drawn to figures, Laine saw herself, even then, as a portraitist of a kind. While I could find it oddly unsettling to stare at faces, Laine

became increasingly aware that doing so both soothed and inspired her. And since the models most readily available were me, Bill, and also Laine herself, reflected in a mirror I had supplied, many of her paintings were of one or two or sometimes all three of us. She would also turn up occasionally with sketches of her mother, meaning Georgia watched over us all during some weeks. Once in a while, I would shift Laine's gaze out the window toward the skyline of Philadelphia, or take her into Fairmount Park and ask that she broaden her view, think more about the big picture, the interaction of light and something other than a face; but soon she would turn back to what she loved.

"It's the only thing that interests me," she would say. "People."

"Well, me too, I suppose. But there's more to people than the people themselves."

I just broke things off with Dean—whose real name wasn't even Dean, it turns out. Do you believe that? He had this James Dean fixation, so the name was some kind of homage and honestly if I had known that from the start I definitely would have spared myself three months of discovering what a pretentious wannabe hipster fool he is. But at least it was only three months. . . .

Over the time that she and I worked together and argued and grew—both of us—*something* developed between me and Bill though we never crossed any lines, never did any more than talk. And we never talked about anything even remotely inappropriate. I had blurted word of Charlotte's death early on, maybe using the fact to excuse some mistake in scheduling I'd made, my thoughts still scattered, my brain not quite functioning; and it turned out he too had lost a sibling—a brother, when they were small. A house fire, Bill in the home as well, but rescued in time. I remember how his telling me seemed to freeze the scene we were in, just for a moment, as if I needed a pause in reality to recast him, to

reconfigure us all. I had been so quick to dismiss his suit, his briefcase, his clean-cut, lawyerly presence, and to mistake it for his real self. I had been so wrong. We didn't speak exclusively or even often about grief for all those months, not by any means, but we shared an intimacy with it that I did not with Owen. And we shared Laine increasingly too. His daughter, whom I was also raising—in a way. Who needed me. Who had taken on some of my outlook, some of my being. I would never have said she belonged to us, together, but I felt it in my body, in my blood.

"Neither Georgia nor I has the least creative talent," he would say. And he would marvel at my work in a way I was unused to, traveling as I did in artistic circles where it was just assumed that everyone had talent of some kind. To Bill, the fact that I could fill a canvas with oily goo from tubes and have the result be both beautiful and—as he would say and say—emotionally compelling, was nothing short of a superpower. That I could help his daughter do the same he looked on as a miracle. There was an innocence to him, an innocence of my world, that ultimately attracted me enough to rob us both of any claim to innocence we might make.

Sometimes, when Laine used us for subjects, she would ask that we sit motionless while we spoke, and occasionally would insist that we stop moving even our lips—almost as though she sensed something might be happening that she should try to avert.

But nothing could avert what was to come.

Watching Laine over those months was like watching a slow-motion film of a driver who damn near swerves off the road, but then corrects course just in time. Watching me, I suppose, was like some kind of reversed reel. At the time, it felt like the relationship that Bill and I developed was helping me heal—from Charlotte's death; from learning that with Owen I would never have the children I had decided I wanted after all. I felt not only grief-stricken then; I felt incapable. I had been unable to save a

sister. Unable to become a mother. What was I able to do? What powers did I actually have? I was right up close in a staring contest with the undeniable fact that for all the little things over which we have some control, for the most part we have none; and I was at a loss to know how to respond.

It's a lesson I might have learned when I was two and my mother died. It's a lesson that should perhaps have been etched into me then, whatever my conscious memory of events, but it felt newly true after Charlotte's death, after my own empty body remained unfilled.

And to be honest, after faux Dean, I think I may be done with relationships for a while. I mean, the whole "we're going out together" thing is kind of a joke. I know you've been with Owen your entire adult life, but the truth is that basically no couples my age make it past a year. So why even pretend it's some kind of lifelong thing? I would much rather put that kind of commitment into my work. . . .

This is us on the afternoon of Laine's last lesson:

Bill and I are seated on wobbly old stools at the end of my studio, all rough-hewn factory space. And we are suddenly awkward with one another. Because it has happened in a flash. A look has passed between us, a sudden, irreparable change. And it has stifled the flow of our speech. For weeks now, for months, we have been engaged in excitement over Laine's next step. She got into the school she wanted to attend. She put together a senior project of paintings so eloquent they seemed eternal; they seemed like real art. It is all so exciting. I am filled with pride, as though she were my child. Maybe I exaggerate my own role—my push back to the universe. *Look! Look, it does matter what we do. It does.*

But in all the excitement, in all of the pride, one fact has gone unrecognized.

It shouldn't be hard to manage—not if we really are, as they

say, just friends. It should be easy. *Well, we'll just have to meet for coffee from time to time.*

Except suddenly what should have been easy has become impossible. Everything has become impossible as we sit together, Laine painting her own portrait some thirty feet away. It is unacceptable to leave seeing each other to chance. But to make a date . . . there is no kidding ourselves. To make a date is to make a date.

And we do not make a date. But I know that we will make a date. Laine gives me a huge, heart-rearranging hug goodbye; and as I tidy up, forestalling going home; as I walk the six blocks, then add six more; as I eat dinner with Owen; moving through every activity of that evening, that night, the next two days, I am both agitated and disturbingly calm. Because I know what is going to happen. And it scares the hell out of me. But it also feels right. And good. And deserved.

. . . And my work is going well. At least I think it is. I hope yours is too and I hope the country life is still good. You have to tell me everything. It's been way too long. You owe me a full report.

Love,

Laine

Deserved.

To what exactly had I felt entitled with Bill? There is an answer: Joy. Not happiness, which by that time seemed a fantasy one had to agree to give up in order to keep from going mad. By forty, is there anyone who hasn't had to recognize that happiness, as understood by youth, is illusory? That the best one can hope for is an absence of too many tragedies and that the road through the inevitable grief be, if not smooth, then steady? Daily life was a pale gray thing, it seemed, and to expect otherwise was to be a fool—at best.

But there could be moments of joy. And there had been some-

thing like joy in those afternoons with Bill and Laine. There had been hours for me so restorative, so critical to my vitality that the thought of *never again* felt like death. And it had been enough. As long as Laine was there and I could have her as my protégée, my girl, and her father for my partner, it was enough.

If only time had been forced to a stop.

We were a distortion of the married couple whose marriage collapses when their child leaves home—as Bill's to Georgia did not even two years later when their son went off to school. Our child left us and we fell in love.

By the day of Alison's arrival, I wasn't in love with Bill anymore, but I was tender still, tender the way a bruise is tender; and it wasn't a feeling I wanted that day, a day destined not for melancholy memories, but for the comic if also irritating potential of a new neighbor materialized across the hill. I typed a hasty response.

So good to hear from you, Laine. The class sounds good. The boy like a good one to dump. Much more soon, I promise. Lots of funny stuff going on here, along with some less funny stuff. I will have to catch you up. All love . . .

And then I stopped, just for a moment, before signing *Augie,* Laine's nickname for me, born of her refusal when we met to do anything asked of her. "Why call yourself by your second syllable? People should call you Augie. Has anyone ever called you Augie?" No. No one ever had. And no one ever did—except for Laine and Bill.

"Augie," I wrote, and pushed send, then returned to my work.

As if to shock myself back into the project, I picked up an obituary from the pile of papers, John "Jackie" Mayhew, killed at seventeen, in action in France; and I began to sketch his face in charcoal. I got the shape, the wide forehead, balanced by a wide

jaw. And I could replicate his eyes, round and a little close together; the small lips, set for the photograph in that serious, straight line. All correctly copied. All distances between the features accurate. But as I drew, I felt the familiar sag of mediocrity travel down my arm, through my fingers, into the charcoal, onto the paper, stiffening my lines, emptying him of life.

"Of course," I said out loud, as I viewed the result. "What did I expect?"

The western wall of my studio faces the pond. The eastern faces our front lawn. If you stand at the corner where east meets north, you can see scraps and pieces of Alison's property about an acre away through the trees; and as I drew I knew that she was there, that I might see her carrying boxes and who knows what, if I looked. I also knew that if I looked, I wouldn't stop looking. So, instead of crumpling the sketch, my first impulse, I pushed forward, softening a line here and there with a finger, using my reliable companions, light and shadow, to create more interest in the composition, if not in Jackie Mayhew's emptied face.

Owen spotted Alison's car as he walked back from the barn at around five. I saw him coming, and I stepped away from the studio, through the living room, into the kitchen, to fill him in on the news.

"What you don't know," I told him, "is that she's a painter who came here in part because apparently we are one of the features of the home. The artist couple next door."

"Oh great. That's just what I want to hear. Maybe we can charge people admission to watch me stare hopelessly at the walls." He turned on the tap. His afternoon drink of water. I was never sure whether he knew that he filled the same glass each day when he came back from the barn. I stayed silent while he downed it, as though neither of us could speak with his mouth full.

At fifty-one, Owen had finally lost some of that boyishness.

His face, well defined by a long straight nose, a sharp, just barely cleft chin, was acquiring an unmistakable cragginess. The lines on either side of his mouth had deepened, and the light brown of his eyes shined now from below a lowered brow. Though still lean, he had become more substantial in the way some men do, almost as though their bones, not their flesh, have gained heft. His hair, which I had been cutting for years to a running stream of Samson and Delilah jokes, was graying gradually, all over. No creeping silver sideburns, just a lightening from year to year.

"It's hotter than hell out there," he said, as he put the glass down. "We could use a thunderstorm."

"We really could," I said.

By then it had been about ten months that Owen had been unable to write anything he thought worthwhile. Since his early thirties he'd authored five quirky little books, all published by small presses, all embraced by whatever critics took notice, and, for the most part, all eschewed by all but a couple of thousand readers. His was the sort of career that earns you descriptions like *underappreciated* and *a writer's writer,* serious, significant praise that presents itself tinged with an aura of befuddled disappointment. In the great race of professional life, he saw himself as the ultimate tortoise, waving on multiple hares while hoping for the eventual victory. His share of our income over the years had come from juggled adjunct and lecturer jobs, a bounty of which exist in the greater Philadelphia area—though the word *bounty* seems wrong to describe something with returns, of money, of prestige, that are so slight. But through it all, for years and years, he kept at it, the teaching, the writing, all with a calm and a confidence that made me feel like a broken barometer as I careened over highs and lows of hope and despair over my own extremely modest professional life.

But then, the fall before Alison's arrival, everything for Owen came to a screeching halt.

The only time I'd felt that sort of vise grip of creative empti-

ness was the year after I told him about my affair; and it had been easy for me to connect the two occurrences. Over those months, pain had blossomed in me at every waking, a physical sensation in my gut, as though I had swallowed a malevolent flower, responsive to the rise of the sun. Nearly all of my energy, creative and otherwise, went into contending with that ache.

And my unspoken fear was that Owen's blockage, years later, also related to that time.

When I'd told him about Bill, he was already embarked on two simultaneous projects, books four and five, one a collection of essays about his itinerant childhood as the only child of a pair of married archaeologists, the other a novel that used related material, reimagining a particular summer afternoon of his mother's life, early in her career, on a dig in Morocco. Both projects were shelved for some months while we thrashed through whether to stay together, but then, once the decision was made, though I found myself creatively stilled, he went right back to work. Those books kept him busy through our sudden affluence and our first years in the country. When they came out they were praised to the sky by critics in obscure literary journals, and barely sold—just like all of his previous work. I never understood it. I loved it all. The gentle, acute sensibility, the quiet passion for getting things right; while at the same time, evidently, poignantly doubting that such a task is possible. Whenever I read his work, I thought that all his readers must fall in love, and maybe all of them did, but for reasons that eluded me there never were very many in that group.

Then, soon after the double publication, it became clear that he was struggling to come up with something new. It made sense that there would be a transition lag, but from the start this felt like more than just needing a break between projects. I saw panic in his eyes when he came back in from the barn. Occasionally, it would seem as though he was onto something, for a few days, maybe even a couple of weeks, but then he'd walk into the house

with that unmistakable expression on his face. Another project revealed to be hollow. *I doubt I'll ever do anything worthwhile again.*

I was keenly aware that this was the first time he'd had to generate anything new since my telling him about Bill, and it was all too easy for me to believe that a piece of what I had shattered then was a necessary component of his creative being. The betrayer doesn't get much sympathy, not even from herself, but it is in fact a heavy weight to have hurt someone you love, and it can be difficult even years later, to detect any impermeable boundaries around the damage you may have done.

We didn't discuss writing or painting on that day of Alison's arrival—nor, of course, Laine's email to me—as together we made a meal of grilled lamb, salad, and rice. By then I knew better than to talk about work, his or mine. Earlier, in the spring, he'd told me it wasn't helping to have to *report in* to me every day—his term. So I'd stopped inquiring. And I forgave him the irritation in his voice, the nasty phrase, because I understood the terror that it's all just disappeared. I felt tempted at times to try and encourage him, to say things like *I've been there and I came back. You'll come back too.* But I knew it would only irritate him, as it would have me. And it was simply impossible to discuss my own projects, however well or poorly they were going, in the context of a prohibition on mentioning his.

"Did she say how long she's staying?" he asked, as we ate.

"That seems to be unclear," I said.

This taboo created a huge chasm in our days, a terrible change in our rhythm. So much of our shared life together, a life that began when I was only twenty-two, had involved processing our work, comparing sorts of creativity, commiserating through lousy days and celebrating triumphs. But that dialogue depended on our both wanting to have it, and he no longer did.

This wasn't my first experience living under a regime of unspeakable subjects. I was well practiced. After my mother died,

my father mandated that she not be mentioned, so by the time my conscious memory of childhood kicks in, I was already trained to short-circuit the flow between my thoughts and my voice.

There were very few ways in which Owen reminded me of my father—at certain points just the idea of any similarity would have horrified me—but in fact both had played this censoring role in my life, rendering my speech a kind of topiary, trimmed and trained and shaped to please.

"I have a terrible headache," he said, as he put down his fork. "But I don't think we can blame the new neighbor for that."

"Why not?" I asked. "Why not blame her for everything from this point on?"

Why not, indeed. By then I was more than ready to cast someone else in the role of guilty party.