THE AGE *of* MIRACLES

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1

We didn't notice right away. We couldn't feel it.

We did not sense at first the extra time, bulging from the smooth edge of each day like a tumor blooming beneath skin.

We were distracted back then by weather and war. We had no interest in the turning of the earth. Bombs continued to explode on the streets of distant countries. Hurricanes came and went. Summer ended. A new school year began. The clocks ticked as usual. Seconds beaded into minutes. Minutes grew into hours. And there was nothing to suggest that those hours, too, weren't still pooling into days, each the same fixed length known to every human being.

But there were those who would later claim to have recognized the disaster before the rest of us did. These were the night workers, the graveyard shifters, the stockers of shelves, and the loaders of ships, the drivers of big-rig trucks, or else they were the bearers of different burdens: the sleepless and the troubled and the sick.

These people were accustomed to waiting out the night. Through bloodshot eyes, a few did detect a certain persistence of darkness on the mornings leading up to the news, but each mistook it for the private misperception of a lonely, rattled mind.

On the sixth of October, the experts went public. This, of course, is the day we all remember. There'd been a change, they said, a slowing, and that's what we called it from then on: *the slowing*.

"We have no way of knowing if this trend will continue," said a shy bearded scientist at a hastily arranged press conference, now infamous. He cleared his throat and swallowed. Cameras flashed in his eyes. Then came the moment, replayed so often afterward that the particular cadences of that scientist's speech—the dips and the pauses and that slight midwestern slant—would be forever married to the news itself. He went on: "But we suspect that it *will* continue."

Our days had grown by fifty-six minutes in the night.

At the beginning, people stood on street corners and shouted about the end of the world. Counselors came to talk to us at school. I remember watching Mr. Valencia next door fill up his garage with stacks of canned food and bottled water, as if preparing, it now seems to me, for a disaster much more minor.

The grocery stores were soon empty, the shelves sucked clean like chicken bones.

The freeways clogged immediately. People heard the news, and they wanted to move. Families piled into minivans and crossed state lines. They scurried in every direction like small animals caught suddenly under a light.

But, of course, there was nowhere on earth to go.

2

The news broke on a Saturday.

In our house, at least, the change had gone unnoticed. We were still asleep when the sun came up that morning, so we sensed nothing unusual in the timing of its rise. Those last few hours before we learned of the slowing remain preserved in my memory—even all these years later—as if trapped behind glass.

My friend Hanna had slept over the night before, and we'd camped out in sleeping bags on the living room floor, where we'd slept side by side on a hundred other nights. We woke to the purring of lawn-mower motors and the barking of dogs, to the soft squeak of a trampoline as the twins jumped next door. In an hour we'd both be dressed in blue soccer uniforms—hair pulled back, sunscreen applied, cleats clicking on tile.

"I had the weirdest dream last night," said Hanna. She lay on her stomach, her head propped up on one elbow, her long blond

hair hanging tangled behind her ears. She had a certain skinny beauty that I wished I had too.

"You always have weird dreams," I said.

She unzipped her sleeping bag and sat up, pressed her knees to her chest. From her slim wrist there jingled a charm bracelet crowded with charms. Among them: one half of a small brass heart, the other half of which belonged to me.

"In the dream, I was at my house, but it wasn't my house," she went on. "I was with my mom, but she wasn't my mom. My sisters weren't my sisters."

"I hardly ever remember my dreams," I said. Then I got up to let the cats out of the garage.

My parents were spending that morning the way I remember them spending every morning, reading the newspaper at the dining room table. I can still see them sitting there: my mother in her green bathrobe, her hair wet, skimming quickly through the pages, while my father sat in silence, fully dressed, reading every story in the order it appeared, each one reflected in the thick lenses of his glasses.

My father would save that day's paper for a long time afterward—packed away like an heirloom, folded neatly beside the newspaper from the day I was born. The pages of that Saturday's paper, printed before the news was out, report a rise in the city's real estate prices, the further erosion of several area beaches, and plans for a new freeway overpass. That week a local surfer had been attacked by a great white shark; border patrol agents discovered a three-mile-long drug-running tunnel six feet beneath the U.S./Mexico border; and the body of a young girl, long missing, was found buried under a pile of white rocks in the wide, empty desert out east. The times of that day's sunrise and sunset appear in a chart on the back page, predictions that did not, of course, come to pass.

Half an hour before we heard the news, my mother went out for bagels.

I think the cats sensed the change before we did. They were both Siamese, but different breeds. Chloe was sleepy and feathery and sweet. Tony was her opposite: an old and anxious creature, possibly mentally ill, a cat who tore out his own fur in snatches and left it in piles around the house, tiny tumbleweeds set adrift on the carpet.

In those last few minutes, as I ladled dry food into their bowls, the ears of both cats began to swivel wildly toward the front yard. Maybe they felt it somehow, a shift in the air. They both knew the sound of my mother's Volvo pulling into the driveway, but I wondered later if they recognized also the unusually quick spin of the wheels as she rushed to park the car, or the panic in the sharp crack of the parking brake as she yanked it into place.

Soon even I could detect the pitch of my mother's mood from the stomps of her feet on the porch, the disorganized rattle of her keys against the door—she had heard those earliest news reports, now notorious, on the car radio between the bagel shop and home.

"Turn on the TV right now," she said. She was breathless and sweaty. She left her keys in the teeth of the lock, where they would dangle all day. "Something God-awful is happening."

We were used to my mother's rhetoric. She talked big. She blustered. She overstated and oversold. *God-awful* might have meant anything. It was a wide net of a phrase that scooped up a thousand possibilities, most of them benign: hot days and traffic jams, leaking pipes and long lines. Even cigarette smoke, if it wafted too close, could be *really and truly God-awful.*

We were slow to react. My father, in his thinning yellow Padres

T-shirt, stayed right where he was at the table, one palm on his coffee cup, the other resting on the back of his neck, as he finished an article in the business section. I went ahead and opened the bag of bagels, letting the paper crinkle beneath my fingers. Even Hanna knew my mother well enough to go right on with what she was doing—hunting for the cream cheese on the bottom shelf of the refrigerator.

"Are you watching this?" my mother said. We were not.

My mother had been an actress once. Her old commercials—mostly hair-care and kitchen products—lay entombed together in a short stack of dusty black videotapes that stood beside the television. People were always telling me how beautiful she was when she was young, and I could still find it in the fair skin of her face and the high structure of her cheekbones, though she'd gained weight in middle age. Now she taught one period of drama at the high school and four periods of history. We lived ninety-five miles from Hollywood.

She was standing on our sleeping bags, two feet from the television screen. When I think of it now, I imagine her cupping one hand over her mouth the way she always did when she worried, but at the time, I just felt embarrassed by the way the black waffle soles of her running shoes were twisting Hanna's sleeping bag, hers the dainty cotton kind, pink and polka-dotted and designed not for the hazards of campsites but exclusively for the plush carpets of heated homes.

"Did you hear me?" said my mother, swinging around to look at us. My mouth was full of bagel and cream cheese. A sesame seed had lodged itself between my two front teeth. "Joel!" she shouted at my father. "I'm serious. This is hellacious."

My father looked up from the paper then, but still he kept his index finger pressed firmly to the page to mark his place. How could we have known that the workings of the universe had finally

made appropriate the fire of my mother's words?

3

We were Californians and thus accustomed to the motions of the earth. We understood that the ground could shift and shudder. We kept batteries in our flashlights and gallons of water in our closets. We accepted that fissures might appear in our sidewalks. Swimming pools sometimes sloshed like bowls of water. We were well practiced at crawling beneath tabletops, and we knew to beware of flying glass. At the start of every school year, we each packed a large ziplock bag full of non-perishables in case The Big One stranded us at school. But we Californians were no more prepared for this particular calamity than those who had built their homes on more stable ground.

When we finally understood what was happening that morning, Hanna and I rushed outside to check the sky for evidence. But the sky was just the sky—average, cloudless, blue. The sun shone unchanged. A familiar breeze was blowing from the direction of the sea, and the air smelled the way it always did back then, like

cut grass and honeysuckle and chlorine. The eucalyptus trees fluttered like sea anemones in the wind, and my mother's jug of sun tea looked nearly dark enough to drink. In the distance beyond our back fence, the freeway echoed and hummed. The power lines continued to buzz. Had we tossed a soccer ball into the air, we might not have even noticed that it fell a little faster to the earth, that it hit the ground a little harder than before. I was eleven years old in the suburbs. My best friend was standing beside me. I could spot not a single object out of place or amiss.

In the kitchen, my mother was already scanning the shelves for essentials, swinging cupboards on hinges and inspecting the contents of drawers.

"I just want to know where all the emergency supplies are," she said. "We don't know what might happen."

"I think I should go home," said Hanna, still in purple pajamas, her arms wrapped around her tiny waist. She hadn't brushed her hair, and hers was hair that demanded attention, having grown uncut since second grade. All the Mormon girls I knew had long hair. Hanna's dangled near her waist and tapered at the end like a flame. "My mom is probably freaking out, too," she said.

Hanna's house was crowded with sisters, but mine was the home of only one child, and the rooms always felt too quiet without her. I never liked to see her go.

I helped her roll up her sleeping bag. She packed her backpack.

Had I known how much time would pass before we'd see each other again, I would have said a different goodbye. But we just waved, Hanna and I, and then my father drove her back to her house, three streets over from ours.

* * *

There was no footage to show on television, no burning buildings or broken bridges, no twisted metal or scorched earth, no houses sliding off slabs. No one was wounded. No one was dead. It was, at the beginning, a quite invisible catastrophe.

I think this explains why what I felt first was not fear but a thrill. It was a little exciting—a sudden sparkle amid the ordinary, the shimmer of the unexpected thing.

But my mother was terrified. "How could this happen?" she said.

She kept clipping and reclipping her hair. It was dark and lovely, thanks in part to a deep brown dye.

"Maybe it was a meteor?" I said. We'd been studying the universe in science, and I'd memorized the order of the planets. I knew the names of all the things that floated out in space. There were comets and black holes and bands of giant rocks. "Or maybe a nuclear bomb?"

"It's not a nuclear bomb," said my father. I could see the muscles clenching in his jaw as he watched the television screen. He kept his arms crossed, his feet spread wide. He would not sit down.

"To a certain extent, we can adapt," a scientist on the television screen was saying. A tiny microphone had been pinned to his collar, and a newscaster was plumbing him for the darker possibilities. "But if the earth's rotation continues to slow—and this is just speculation—I'd say we can expect radical changes in the weather. We're going to see earthquakes and tsunamis. We might see mass plant and animal die-outs. The oceans may begin to shift toward the poles."

Behind us, our vertical blinds rustled in the breeze, and a helicopter buzzed in the distance, the thrumming of its blades wafting into the house through the screens.

"But what could possibly cause something like this?" said my mother.

"Helen," said my father, "I don't know any more than you do."

We all forgot about that day's soccer game. My uniform would remain folded in a drawer all day. My shin guards would lay untouched at the bottom of my closet.

I heard later that only Michaela showed up at the field, late as usual, her cleats in her hands, her long hair undone, her red curls flying in and out of her mouth as she ran sock-footed up the hill to the field—only to find not a single girl warming up, not one blue jersey rippling in the wind, not one French braid flapping, not a single parent or coach on the grass. No mothers in visors sipping iced tea, no fathers in flip-flops pacing the sideline. No ice chests or beach chairs or quarter-sliced oranges. The upper parking lot, she must have noticed then, was empty of cars. Only the nets remained, billowing silently in the goals, they the only proof that the sport of soccer had once been played on this site.

"And you know how my mom is," Michaela would tell me days later at lunch, slouching against a wall in imitation of the sexier seventh-grade girls. "She was gone by the time I got back down to the parking lot."

Michaela's mother was the youngest mother. Even the most glamorous of the other mothers were at least thirty-five by then, and mine had already turned forty. Michaela's was just twenty-eight, a fact that her daughter denied but we all understood to be true. Her mother always had a different boyfriend at her side, and her smooth skin and firm body, her high breasts and her slim thighs, were together the source of something shameful we only dimly perceived but which we most certainly *did* perceive. Michaela was the only kid I knew who lived in an apartment, and she had no father to speak of.

Michaela's young mother had slept right through the news.

"You didn't see anything about it on television?" I asked Michaela later in the week.

"We don't have cable, remember? I never even turn the TV on."

"What about the car radio?"

"Broken," she said.

Even on ordinary days, Michaela had a continuous need for rides. On that first day of the slowing, while the rest of us watched the news in our living rooms, Michaela, stranded at the soccer field, fiddled for a while with an ancient, out-of-service pay phone, long forgotten by its maker—all the rest of us had cell phones—until finally the coach drove up to tell anyone who had shown up that the game was canceled, or at least postponed, and he gave Michaela a ride home.

By noon on that first day, the networks had run out of new information. Drained of every fresh fact, they went right on reporting anyway, chewing and rechewing the same small chunks of news. It didn't matter, we were mesmerized.

I spent that whole day sitting on the carpet, only a few feet from the television with my parents. I still remember how it felt to live through those strange hours. It was almost physical: the need to know whatever there was to know.

Periodically, my mother went around the house checking faucets one by one, inspecting the color and clarity of the water.

"Nothing's going to happen to the water, honey," said my father. "It's not an earthquake."

He held his glasses in his hands and was wiping the lenses with the bottom of his shirt, as if ours were a problem merely of vision. Bare of the glasses, his eyes always looked squinty to me, and too small.

"You're acting like this isn't a big deal," she said.

This was a time when the disagreements between my parents

were still minor.

My father held his glasses up to the light, then carefully set them on his face. "Tell me what you want me to do, Helen," he said. "And I'll do it."

My father was a doctor. He believed in problems and solutions, diagnosis and cure. Worry, to his mind, was a waste.

"People are panicking," said my mother. "What about all the people who run the water systems and the power grid? What about the food supply? What if they abandon their posts?"

"All we can do is ride this thing out," he said.

"Oh, that's a good plan," she said. "That's a really excellent plan."

I watched her hurry out to the kitchen, her bare feet slapping the tile. I heard the click and creak of the liquor cabinet, the clinking of ice in a glass.

"I bet things will turn out okay," I said, gripped by an urge to say some cheerful thing—it rose up from my throat like a cough. "I bet it will be fine."

Already the crackpots and the geniuses were streaming out of the wilderness and appearing on talk shows, waving the scientific papers that the established journals had declined to publish. These lone wolves claimed to have seen the disaster coming.

My mother returned to the couch with a drink in her hand.

At the bottom of the television screen, a question blared in red block letters. This was the question: is the end near?

"Oh, come on," said my father. "That's just pure sensationalism. What are they saying on public television?" The question dissolved in the air. No one changed the channel. Then he looked over at me and said to my mother, "I don't think she should be watching this. Julia," he said, "you want to go kick the ball around?"

"No, thanks," I said. I didn't want to be outside. I didn't want to miss a single piece of news.

I had pulled my sweatshirt down over my knees. Tony lay beside me on the rug, his paws outstretched, his breathing wheezy. His body was so bony, you could see the knobs in his spine. Chloe was hiding under the couch.

"Come on," said my father. "Let's go kick the ball around for a while." He dug my soccer ball out of the hall closet and pressed it between his hands. "It feels a little low," he said.

I watched him handle the pump as if it were a piece of his medical equipment, inserting the needle into the opening with a surgeon's precision and care, then pumping methodically, like a respirator, always waiting for the last gasp of air to pass into the ball before forcing the next one through.

I tied my shoes reluctantly and we went outside.

We kicked back and forth in silence for a while. I could hear the newscasters chattering inside. Their voices mingled with the clean thud of foot against ball.

The neighboring backyards were deserted. Swing sets stood still as ruins. The twins' trampoline had ceased to squeak. I wanted to be back inside.

"That was a nice one," said my father. "Good accuracy."

But he didn't know much about soccer. He kicked with the wrong part of the foot. I hit the next one too hard, and the ball disappeared into the honeysuckle in the corner of our yard. We stopped kicking then.

"You're okay, right?" he said.

Large birds had begun to circle the sky. These were not suburban birds. These were hawks and eagles and crows, birds whose hefty wings spoke of the wilder landscapes that persisted east of here. They swooped from tree to tree, their calls drowning out the twitter of our usual backyard birds.

I knew that animals often sensed danger where humans did not, and that in the minutes or hours before a tsunami or a wildfire

strikes, the animals always know to flee long before the people do. I had heard that elephants sometimes snapped their chains and headed for higher ground. Snakes could slither for miles.

"Do you think the birds know?" I asked. I could feel the muscles in my neck tensing as I watched them.

My father studied their shapes but said nothing. A hawk landed at the crown of our pine tree, flapped his wings, then took off again, heading farther west toward the coast.

From inside, my mother called to us through the screen door, "Now they're saying it might be affecting gravity somehow."

"We'll be there in a minute," said my father. He squeezed my shoulder hard, then tilted his head up to the sky like a farmer on the lookout for rain. "I want you to think how smart humans are," he said. "Think of everything humans have ever invented. Rocket ships, computers, artificial hearts. We solve problems, you know? We always solve the big problems. We do."

We walked inside after that, through the French doors and onto the tile, my father insisting that we wipe our feet on the doormat as we crossed—as if remembering our rituals could ensure our safe passage—back to the living room to my mother. But I felt as he spoke and as we walked that although the world remained intact for now, everything around me was about to come apart.

In the hours that followed, we would worry and wait. We would guess and wonder and speculate. We would learn new words and new ways from the scientists and officials who paraded in and out of our living room through the television screen and the Internet. We would stalk the sun across our sky as we never had before. My mother drank Scotch over ice in a glass. My father paced. Time moved differently that Saturday. Already the morning felt like yesterday. By the time we sat waiting for the sun to drift down behind

the hills to the west, it seemed to me that several days had passed inside the skin of just this one, as if the day had ballooned by much more than a single small hour.

In the late afternoon, my father climbed the stairs to my parents' bedroom and then reappeared transformed in a collared shirt and dark socks. A pair of dress shoes was swinging from two of his fingers.

"Are you going somewhere?" asked my mother.

"I'm on at six, remember?"

My father delivered babies for a living, and he specialized in high-risk births. He was often on call, and he sometimes worked the overnight shift at the hospital. He frequently worked weekends.

"Don't go," said my mother. "Not tonight."

I remember hoping she could convince him not to go, but he continued to tie his shoes. He liked the loops in his bows to be exactly the same size.

"They'll understand if you don't show up," said my mother. "It's chaos out there, with the traffic and the panic and everything."

Some of my father's patients had spent months in the hospital, trying to hold their babies in their wombs until the babies were strong enough to survive the world.

"Come on, Helen," he said. "You know I can't stay."

He stood up and patted his front pocket. I heard the muted jingle of keys.

"We need you here," my mother said. She rested her head sideways against my father's chest—he was over a foot taller. "We really don't want you to go, right, Julia?"

I wanted him to stay, too, but I'd grown expert at diplomacy as only an only child can.

"I wish he didn't have to go," I said carefully. "But I guess if he

has to go."

My mother turned away from me and said to him more softly, "Please. We don't even know what's happening."

"Come on, Helen," he said, smoothing her hair. "Don't be so dramatic. Nothing's going to happen between now and tomorrow morning. I'm betting this whole thing will blow over."

"How?" she said. "How could it?"

He kissed her on the cheek and waved to me from the entry hall. Then he stepped outside and shut the door. Soon we heard his car starting up in the driveway.

My mother flopped down next to me on the couch. "At least *you're* not abandoning me," she said. "We'll have to take care of each other."

I felt like escaping to Hanna's house right then, but I knew it would upset my mother if I left.

From outside, the voices of children floated into the living room. Through the blinds, I could see the Kaplan family walking down the sidewalk. Saturday was their Sabbath day, which meant they didn't drive all day. There were six of them now: Mr. and Mrs. Kaplan, Jacob, Beth, Aaron, and the baby in the stroller. The kids went to the Jewish day school up north, and they dressed mostly in black, in a way that reminded me of characters in old movies, a flutter of long skirts and black pants. Beth Kaplan was my age, but I didn't know her well. She kept to herself. She wore a long-sleeve shirt and a long rectangular black skirt with stylish red patent-leather shoes. I figured that footwear was her one place to shine. As the Kaplans glided past our house, the littlest one picking dandelions from the edge of our lawn, I realized that they might not yet know about the slowing.

I found out much later from Jacob that I was right: The Kaplans did not discover until sundown—when their Sabbath was over and their religion once again allowed them to flip light

switches and watch TV—that this world was any different from the one they'd been born into. If you didn't hear the news, the landscape looked unchanged. This was not true later, of course, but for now, on this first day, the earth still seemed itself.

We lived on a cul-de-sac in a neighborhood of tract houses built in the 1970s on quarter-acre lots with stucco exteriors and asbestos in the ceilings and the walls. An olive tree twisted up from every front yard unless it had been torn out and replaced with some trendier, thirstier tree. The yards on our street were well kept but not obsessively so. Daisies and dandelions were scattered amid the thinning grass. Pink bougainvillea bushes clung to the sides of almost all the houses, shaking and shimmering in the wind.

In satellite maps from that era, our row of cul-de-sacs looks neat and parallel, each with a fat bulb at the end, like ten thermometers hanging from a string. Ours was one in a web of modest streets carved into the less expensive side of a coastal California hill whose pricier slope faced the ocean.

Our mornings were bright back then. Our kitchens faced east. Sun streamed through windows as coffeepots gurgled and showers ran, as I brushed my teeth or chose an outfit for school. Our afternoons were shady and cool because each evening, the sun dropped behind the nicer houses at the top of the hill a full hour before it slipped into the ocean on the other side. On this day, we waited for sunset with new suspense.

"I think it moved a little," I said, squinting. "I mean, it's definitely going down."

All along the street, garage doors eased open on electric tracks. Station wagons and SUVs emerged, loaded with kids and clothes and dogs. A few neighbors stood clustered, arms crossed, on their lawns. Everyone was watching the sky as if waiting for a fireworks

show to begin.

"Don't look directly at the sun," said my mother, who was sitting beside me on the porch. "It'll ruin your eyes."

She was peeling open a package of double-A batteries she'd found in a drawer. Three flashlights lay on the cement beside her, a mini arsenal of light. The sun remained high in the sky, but she had grown obsessed already with the possibilities of an extra-long night.

In the distance at the end of the street, I spotted my old friend Gabby, sitting alone on her roof. I hadn't seen her much since her parents had transferred her to a private school in the next town over from ours. As usual, she was dressed in all black. Her dyed black hair stood out against the sky.

"Why did she dye it like that?" said my mother.

"I don't know," I said. Not visible from this distance were the three tiers of earrings that hung from both of Gabby's ears. "She just felt like it, I guess."

A portable radio chattered and buzzed beside us. We were gaining more minutes with every hour. Already, they were arguing about the wheat point—I've never understood if this was a term that had been buried for decades in the glossaries of textbooks, or if it was coined on that day, a new answer to a new question: How long can major crops survive without the light of the sun?

My mother switched the flashlights on and off, one by one, testing their beams in the cup of her hand. She dumped the old batteries out of each barrel and replaced them with new ones, as if arranging ammunition in a set of guns.

"I don't know why your father hasn't called me back," she said.

She'd brought the cordless phone out to the porch, where it sat silent beside her. She took quick soundless sips of her drink. I remember her the way she was then, the sound of the ice clinking in the glass, the way the water dripped down the sides, leaving in-

tersecting rings on the cement.

Not everyone panicked. Sylvia, my piano teacher, who lived across the street, went right on tending her garden as if nothing at all had happened. I watched her kneeling calmly in the dirt, a pair of shiny shears in one hand. Later, she took a slow walk around the block, her clogs tapping the sidewalk as she went, her red hair falling from a hasty braid.

"Hi, Julia," she said when she reached our yard. She smiled at my mother but did not say her name. They were about the same age, but Sylvia still seemed girlish somehow, and my mother did not.

"You don't seem very worried," said my mother.

"Que será, será," said Sylvia. Her words were one long sigh. "That's what I always say. Whatever will be, will be."

I liked Sylvia, but I knew my mother didn't. Sylvia was cool and wispy and she smelled like lotion. Her limbs were lanky, like the branches of eucalyptus trees, and were often encircled in chunky turquoise jewelry, which she removed at the beginning of each of my piano lessons in order to commune more closely with the keys. She always played piano barefoot.

"Or maybe I'm just not thinking straight," Sylvia said. "I'm in the middle of doing a cleanse."

"What's a cleanse?" I said.

"It's a fast," said Sylvia.

She bent toward me to explain, and I heard my mother slide her flashlights behind her back. I think she was suddenly embarrassed by her fear.

"No food, no alcohol, just water. For three days. I'm sure your mother has done one before."

My mother shook her head. "Not me," she said. I was aware of my mother's drink, sweating on the pavement beside her. For a moment nothing else was said.

"Anyway," said Sylvia, beginning to walk away, "don't let this stop you from practicing, Julia. See you Wednesday."

Sylvia would spend the next few afternoons pruning roses in a sun hat and casually pulling up weeds.

"You know, it's not healthy to be that skinny," said my mother after Sylvia had gone back to her gardening. (My mother kept a closet full of dresses one size too small, all waiting in plastic, for the day when she lost the ten pounds she'd been complaining about for years.) "You can see her bones," said my mother. And it was true: You could.

"Look," I said. "The streetlights came on."

Those lights were set to a timer, designed to ignite at dusk. But the sun continued to shine.

I imagined people on the other side of the world, in China and in India, huddling now in the darkness, waiting, like us—but for dawn.

"He should let us know he got to work safely, at least," said my mother. She dialed again, waited, set the phone down.

I'd gone with my father to work once. Not much had happened while I was there. Pregnant women watched television and ate snacks in bed. My father asked questions and checked charts. Husbands milled around.

"Didn't I ask him to call?" she said.

She was making me nervous. I tried to keep her calm.

"He's probably just busy," I said.

In the distance, I noticed that Tom and Carlotta, the old couple who lived at the end of the street, were sitting outside, too, he in a faded tie-dyed T-shirt and jeans, she in Birkenstocks, a long gray braid resting on her shoulder. But they were always out there at this time of night, beach chairs in the driveway, margaritas and cigarettes in their hands. Their garage door stood open behind them, Tom's model train tracks exposed like guts. Most of the

houses on our street had been remodeled by then, or fixed up, at least, given fresh veneers like old teeth, but Tom and Carlotta's house remained untouched, and I knew from selling Girl Scout cookies that the original burgundy shag still lined their floors.

Tom waved at me, his hand thick with a drink. I didn't know him well, but he was always friendly to me. I waved back.

It was October, but it felt like July: The air was summer air, the sky a summer sky, still light past seven o'clock.

"I hope the phones are working," said my mother. "But they must be working, right?"

In the time since that night, I've developed many of my mother's habits, the persistent churning of her mind on a single subject, her low tolerance for uncertainty, but like her wide hips and her high cheekbones, these were traits that would sleep dormant in me for some years to come. That night I could not relate to her.

"Just calm down," I said. "Okay, Mom?"

Finally, the phone did ring. My mother answered it in a rush. I could tell she was disappointed by the voice she was hearing. She passed the phone to me.

It wasn't my father. It was Hanna.

I stood up from the porch and walked out into the grass with the phone to my ear, squinting at the sun.

"I can't really talk," said Hanna. "But I wanted to tell you that we're leaving."

I could hear the voices of Hanna's sisters echoing in the background. I could picture her standing in the bedroom she shared with them, the yellow-striped curtains her mother had sewn, the stuffed animals crowded on her bed, the hair clips spread out across the dresser. We had spent hours together in that room.

"Where are you going?" I asked.

"Utah," Hanna said. She sounded scared.

"When are you coming back?" I asked.

"We're not," she said.

I felt a wave of panic. We'd spent so much time together that year that teachers sometimes called us by one another's names.

As I would later learn, thousands of Mormons gathered in Salt Lake City after the slowing began. Hanna had told me once that the church had pinpointed a certain square mile in Utah as the exact location of Jesus' next return to earth. They kept a giant grain silo out there, she said, to feed the Mormons during the end times. "I'm not supposed to tell you this stuff because you're not in our church," she said. "But it's true."

My own family's religion was a bloodless breed of Lutheranism—we guarded no secrets, and we harbored no clear vision of the end of the world.

"Are you still there?" said Hanna.

It was hard to talk. I stood in the grass, trying not to cry.

"You're moving away for good?" I finally said.

I heard Hanna's mother call her name in the background.

"I have to go," Hanna said. "I'll call you later."

She hung up.

"What did she say?" called my mother from the porch.

A hard lump had formed in my throat.

"Nothing," I said.

"Nothing?" said my mother.

Tears began to fill my eyes. My mother didn't notice.

"I want to know why Daddy hasn't called us," she said. "Do you think his phone is dead?"

"God, Mom," I said. "You're making everything worse."

She stopped talking and looked at me. "Don't be a smart-aleck," she snapped. "And don't say *God*."

A slight static crackled through the radio speakers, and my mother adjusted the dial until it cleared. An expert from Harvard was talking: "If this keeps up," he said, "this could be catastrophic

for crops of all kinds, for the whole world's food supply."

We sat in silence for a moment.

Then from inside the house, we heard a quick thud, the wet smack of something soft striking glass.

We both jumped.

"What was that?" she said.

The unimaginable had been imagined, the unbelievable believed. Now it seemed to me that dangers lurked everywhere. Threats seemed to hide in every crack.

"It didn't sound good," I said.

We hurried inside. We hadn't put anything away, and the kitchen was a mess. My bagel from the morning lay half eaten on a plate, exactly where I'd left it eight hours earlier, the cream cheese crusting at the edges. A container of yogurt had been overturned by the cats, its insides licked clean. Someone had left out the milk. I noticed that Hanna had left her soccer sweatshirt on a chair.

The source of the sound turned out to be a bird. A blue jay had struck a high window in our kitchen, then dropped to the back deck, its narrow neck apparently snapped, its wings spread asymmetrically around its body.

"Maybe it's just stunned," said my mother.

We stood at the glass.

"I don't think so," I said.

The slowing, we soon came to understand, had altered gravity. Afterward, the earth held a little more sway. Bodies in motion were slightly less likely to remain in motion. We were all of us and everything a little more susceptible to the pull of the ground, and maybe it was this shift In physics that had sent that bird straight into the flat glass of our windowpane.

"Maybe we should move it," I said.

"I don't want you touching it," said my mother. "Daddy will

deal with it."

And so we left the bird exactly as it lay. We kept the cats inside for the rest of the night.

We left the kitchen as we'd found it, too. We'd remodeled it recently, and you could smell the paint in the air, but that chemical scent was mixing with the tinge of soured milk. My mother poured a fresh drink: Two new ice cubes cracked and resettled beneath a stream of sparkling Scotch. I'd never seen her drink so much in one day.

She headed back out to the front porch. "Come on," she said.

But I was tired of being with her. I went up to my room instead and lay flat on my bed for a while.

Twenty minutes later, the sun finally did slip behind the hill, proof at last that the earth, however slowly, continued to turn.

The wind reversed in the night and turned hard, blowing in from the desert instead of up from the sea. It howled and shrieked. Outside, the eucalyptus trees struggled and heaved, and the glittering stars showed that the sky was clear of clouds—this was an empty, stormless wind.

At some point, I heard the creaking of cabinets in the kitchen, the soft squeak of hinges. I recognized the shuffling of my mother's slippered feet, the uncapping of a pill bottle, and a glass of water slowly filling at the sink.

I wished my father were home. I tried to picture him at the hospital. Maybe babies were being born into his hands right at that moment. I wondered what it might mean to come into the world on this of all nights.

Soon the streetlights flashed off, sucking the low glow from my room. This should have marked dawn, but the neighborhood remained submerged in the dark. It was a new kind of darkness for

me, a thick country black, unseen in cities and suburbs.

I left my room and crept into the hall. Through the crack beneath my parents' door, I could see the sickly blue light of the television leaking onto the hall carpet.

"You're not sleeping, either?" said my mother when I opened the door. She looked slouchy and worn in an old white nightgown. Bouquets of fine wrinkles fanned out from her eyes.

I climbed into bed beside her. "What's all that wind?" I asked.

We spoke in low tones as if someone were sleeping nearby. The television was on mute.

"It's just a Santa Ana," she said, rubbing my back with the palm of her hand. "It's Santa Ana season. It's always like this in the fall, remember? That part, at least, is normal."

"What time is it?" I asked.

"Seven-forty-five."

"It should be morning," I said.

"It is," she said. The sky remained dark. There was no hint of dawn.

We could hear the cats, restless in the garage. I could hear a scratching at the door and Tony's persistent, uncertain wailing. He was nearly blind from cataracts, but I could tell that even he knew something was wrong.

"Did Daddy call?" I asked.

My mother nodded. "He's going to work another shift because not everyone showed up."

We sat for a long time in silence while the wind blew around us. The light from the television flashed on the white walls.

"When he gets home, let him rest, okay?" said my mother. "He's had a very rough night."

"What happened?"

She bit her lip and kept her eyes on the television.

"A woman died," she said.

"Died?"

I'd never heard of such a thing happening under my father's care. To die in childbirth seemed to me a frontier woman's death, as impossible now as polio or the plague, made extinct by our ingenious monitors and machines, our clean hands and strong soaps, our drugs and our cures and our vast stores of knowledge.

"Daddy feels it never would have happened if they were working with a full staff. They were stretched too thin."

"What about the baby?" I asked.

"I don't know," she said. There were tears in her eyes.

For some reason, it was right then and not earlier that I really began to worry. I rolled over in my parents' bed, and the scent of my father's earthy cologne wafted up from the sheets. I wanted him home.

On the television screen, a reporter was standing in a desert somewhere, the sky pinkening behind her. They were charting the sunrise as they would a storm—the sun had reached the eastern edge of Nevada, but there was no sign of it yet in California.

Later, I would come to think of those first days as the time when we learned as a species that we had worried over the wrong things: the hole in the ozone layer, the melting of the ice caps, West Nile and swine flu and killer bees. But I guess it never *is* what you worry over that comes to pass in the end. The real catastrophes are always different—unimagined, unprepared for, unknown.