Elsewhere, Then

Tracie Renée Dawson

University of South Carolina

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ELSEWHERE, THEN

by

Tracie Renée Dawson

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Accepted by:

Elise Blackwell, Director of Thesis

David Bajo, Reader

Julia Elliott, Reader

Susan Vanderborg, Reader

Cheryl L. Addy, Vice Provost and Dean of the Graduate School
ABSTRACT

*Elsewhere, Then* is a cross-generational road novel that traces the sociopolitical and personal narrative of a family through a musician making her way from Savannah to San Francisco. Traditional road narratives have long depicted the lone female traveller as being subject to violence when stepping outside the domestic sphere, which echoes history's larger and pervasive trend of denying women agency through silence and subjugation—in life, as in stories. The novel interrogates how (and by whom) narratives are created, embellished, changed, and/or discarded through the narrator's temporal and spatial journey. A guiding force behind the novel is William H. Whyte's idea of “triangulation,” which suggests performative interaction in public spaces (like busking) can transform our perception of strangers thereby enlarging our capacity for connection. It is my belief that, like the narrator's avocation as busker, stories should transform the page into a source of reconsideration, empathy, and wonder for the reader—into something that can help them see a little sharper.
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“I see a dirt road inside myself and on it I am walking...”

—Sharon Doubiago, *Hard Country*

“...westbound and rolling, taking refuge in the roads.”

—Joni Mitchell, *Hejira*
CHAPTER 1

GHOST TOWN IN THE SKY | 35°31'15" N, 83°06'23" W

One restless summer, with four KSU students shot dead by the National Guard and Neil Young's “Ohio” on every radio, Mercer Pellerin took a job as a cigar store Indian for a Western-themed amusement park. Years of working on his father's gulf trawler had given him a laborer's tan and a hardness around the eyes, so that when he let his hair go long he just about looked the part. On the promise of a friend's uncle who ran the mining town attraction, he drove nine hours into the Appalachians, the stretch of flat highway giving way in the last hour to mazy mountain roads and shallow creeks. The park was new, so people vacationed from all over the East Coast to take in the hourly shootouts, the can-can girls, the bank robbers scowling behind the iron bars of the jailhouse, just the Old World feel of paused time. He bunked with a rodeo clown who was hired because he looked like Clint Eastwood and could half-talk like him and who even went by Eastwood because his real name was Eugene. The log cabin they shared smelled of mesquite and stogies. They got paid in cash at the end of every week and only lost part of the haul to card games. On weekends, at the town's only bar and gas station, Mercer would fool around on a fifty-dollar fiddle, enough to buy a free hour at the pool table. Sometimes Eastwood would buy a pitcher of beer for them to split, but no more than that because they were told to watch for bears on the walk back to the cabin.

One of the dancers in the Wild West show had worked there two summers to save up money for a dorm at the local college. Between performances she used to buy a Coca-
Cola from the saloon to cool down, but that summer she just watched the cigar store
Indian in the fake deerskin vest at his post across the street. The store customers would
place penny bets on whether he was a person or carved wood, on whether they'd caught a
small breath or if it was only wind. A few would inch right up to his face then let out a
rebel yell: “Oooeee!” She was curious to see if he'd ever laugh or flinch or blink.

Toward the end of summer there was a young boy who stared at the cigar store
Indian for a solid hour, first from under the saloon doors then from behind the porch
railing, creeping closer as he built up his attack. The kid, maybe six or seven, looked back
at his parents for reinforcement. They were sifting through a bucket of gemstones, part of
the pan-your-own-gold attraction, and they were caught up in how the mineral deposits
shimmered this way and that. So, as any respectable general would do, he left the
stragglers behind, pulling the bill of his baseball cap down low as he adjusted his grip on
a neon squirt gun. When he made it toe to toe with the Indian, he squinted for signs of
movement before drawing the pistol level with his chest. Just before he pulled the trigger,
Mercer looked down and said, “Boo.”

The boy yelped, and Mercer said, “You sure had the deadwood on me. You
wouldn't have tangled with a Comanche, would you?”

“You're not a real Indian.” The boy, still unburdened by the concept of due
process, executed a row of nearby petunias with a few shots of water.

“Oh, what's a real Indian like then?”

“They say HOW and,” the boy gave a loud holler with his hand waving over his
mouth. “Doggone yellow-bellies, they'll scalp you before you get inside ten yards of
'em.”
“That's one kind, I guess.” Mercer squinted, as if into a high noon sun. “But I'm the only kind that's left.”

He winked, putting a finger to his lips before getting back in position as the parents came out with a 5 oz. bag of pyrite.

When Emma Rawls heard the Indian laugh, when she followed him to the bar that night and clapped along to his uptempo rendition of Ervin T. Rouse's “Orange Blossom Special,” it was in a time of disaffection but also one of possibility. The boundaries of war shifted by the year as the conflict dragged on, but space shuttles were going farther and the heavens were ever closer. Sometimes Emmie wanted to dance all night and sometimes she wanted to study Biological Sciences at Warren Wilson, but right then she only wanted peace from her mother and baffled, helpless father. They were good people, just with problems and without resources, so she knew they couldn't help but lean on her. But if there came down the track a speeding train, if there came a high loose melody caught up in the summer night air, how could she not want to get caught up too? How could she not hop on for the ride?

I'm not saying this right.

I was in the second grade when my father told me about his job in the Appalachians for career day—that is, he showed me pictures of the leafy paths, the graduated shadow of the mountains going from dusky blue on the horizon to the dark pine of near valleys, the surge of the peaks breaking against variegated skies. Postcards, essentially. This was the show-and-tell version, mere magic show. He tossed me a stolen eight ball so I could feel surprise at the weight. There was other evidence of that summer too: a few campfire songs trotted out, a buffalo nickel. An instant photo of him and
Eastwood showing them grinning in the lodge, their arms around a towering stuffed black bear, and I liked this one the most. Maybe it was the immediacy that appealed to me versus the careful compositions of distant landscapes, or maybe it was the hint of the wild. The bear frozen mid-swipe. Eastwood's eyes closed in a hearty guffaw. My dad smiling to someone off-camera, on the right, hand curled in a mock-claw. Shirt half-tucked.

The next day at school, I looked around for something to grab myself, a dog or maybe an oversized cat, but I knew nothing would appear. The varied geometry of the mountains might as well have been another continent compared to the monotony of the coastal plains. The playground was a flat grassy field abutting row houses and identical moss-draped oaks. I remember sitting on the bleachers outside, the metal scorching the back of my legs even in September. My friends lounged with me, the tangle of us in matching navy skorts. They were showing off the bits of treasure scavenged from their backyards over the summer—arrowheads, milky comet marbles, a few cat's eyes and aggies—when a caterpillar plummeted from the sky. Or from a bird's mouth, more like. But everyone scooted to the edge of the seats, laughing and shoving each other as the downy thing inched along the bleachers. Across the field, our small commotion reached the teacher's awning, where they ate lunch, and one of them sent back three sharp whistles. It was the standard warning to watch it, it being our volume and our visibility. They employed the same sort of warning when we were slow to form two lines during weather drills, when we let the unruly spirit of recess infiltrate the classroom, when chase veered from play to terror. I scooped the caterpillar into my hands. A nearby patch of monkey grass made for quick relocation, but the others had already gone back to trading.
rocks, scares forgotten. The tickled squirm of escape persisted on my palm, though, and I
found I liked the feeling of being brave, of squinting down the sun.

When I was a few years older, and careers were starting to be talked about in
terms of trajectories and annual compensation instead of fuzzy hypotheticals, my Life
Skills class was told to interview someone doing the job we wanted. As I didn't know any
outlaws or professional mermaids, after supper I wrote down questions for my father,
about his work at the park. My mother dumped the dishes into soapy water then
embroidered the story of their jobs at Ghost Town, in her own way.

“Look, Maria.” She opened up the Collier's Encyclopedia to the entry on
Buckingham Palace, pointing to the guards and their posture, how blank the faces were
under the bearskin even though tourists try hard to make them laugh.

“He was one of the best living statues the park ever had,” she said.

My father pointed out that he just had to wear a feather at the back of his head
instead of what looked like a small animal. But he liked to pretend he, too, was protecting
a queen, and he pinched my mother's arm when he said this so she knew he was talking
about her.

They can't agree on how many hours the trips took, coming and going, from my
father's job at the park to weekends at my mother's dorm in Swannanoa, but they agree it
was a lot, and not like there was anything else to do except get up to trouble. Like how,
the following winter, my father found himself with a gap in employment and charmed my
mother's family in Savannah into letting him stay over Christmas break. It was already a
full house at the time—her parents and two younger sisters still at home, plus three
cousins on an extended temporary stay that had lasted several years—but they thought
the extra help around the house could be useful. Not a week into it, my father convinced everyone to sneak some of the cheap sweet wine kept at the bottom of the refrigerator. He says they were just going to take a little and replace it with water, but they drained six bottles between the eight of them, ages eleven to twenty-one. The younger cousins threw up all over the linoleum and my mother, still very drunk and mistaking the Boone's Farm for blood, called my grandmother and told her they were all dying and what should she do.

They spent the rest of winter playing round after round of Yahtzee, unable to leave the eyes of her parents for more than the most pressing of bathroom breaks. No doubt it was meant as a cautionary tale, smelling faintly enough of scandal for me to learn from their mistakes. The story also served as an example of how far they'd come from those days of the marathon drives and reckless acts of caprice. The neat packaging of the events tempted the romantic in me. But, in the end, I just invented a project on the remarkable courage and heartache of taking orders at the drive-thru window of a fast food restaurant. Everyone applauded. I got extra points for the use of satire.

These were the versions I heard until I was old enough to skip violin lessons and sneak into movie theaters, palming cigarettes from college boys behind the old concessions building. Until I don't get caught but instead come home nauseous with a head full of exhaust.

Grabbing at the detergent to wash the smoke scents from my clothes, I knocked over a box from my maternal grandmother's house, rescued by my aunt while the property sat in probate. Everything spilled out in a jumble of shapes that landed at my
feet, the floor, inside the top-loading washer. I dredged up a taped cigar box, Swisher brand, what Granny Ruby used to store the butterscotch candy bribes I loved as a kid, then I moved on to saving what was left of her swan collection. My grandmother, she amassed swan figurines. Because of the live ones around her house or arising from some personal significance, I never knew. At one time there were hundreds of them, the sizes ranging from a one-inch wood carving cleaned with a toothpick to a three-foot tall bronze cast weighing close to a hundred pounds. The brick ranch that she paid off in the 1960s was too big for her, divorced with the five kids grown, and it tended toward ruin and disrepair. So over summer break, she would invite me or one of my cousins over to use the lemon Pledge and old dishtowels to wipe off her collection while she made macaroni. The only swans left were palm-sized, easy to handle, the rest sold off in the estate sale. I fished the small figures out one at a time, setting aside the chipped pieces as I spread the others on a towel to dry. My favorite, a ceramic wind-up, had split in half, the top part fracturing into a handful of jagged shards while the bottom more or less survived. Delicate and unwieldy, the weight of the bird's body had floundered on one stubby foot while the other arched behind it toward torpedo grass and cattails, neck arcing up and up. While it turned, I had used a dry rag and q-tips to get at the dust that settled in its bill and the folds of feathers before moving on to the other figurines as it played. I was never able to finish before the notes crawled to a stop, but I tried, a personal challenge. Now there was the hollowed-out body, the two feet—one pointing like an accusation toward a row of mown grass.

After checking the washer for debris, I started the machine then sat down to test the butchered wind-up swan. It still played somewhat, limping along—Offenbach's
Barcarolle, a 36-note melody gentle as floating on a gondola. (Later, in an intro-to-music-theory course, I learned the opening lines to the libretto, "Hélas! Mon coeur s'égare encore," which fit the image I had of the bird back then: arabesque, mid-flight, still trying to roam despite the winding down of the music box's combs. Later still, I realized that swans are more interested in wallowing in pond scum or threatening photographers than attempting flight.)

While the swan stuttered and spun in the background, I checked the cigar box for damage. Water had seeped in at the edges, bloating the old cardboard and smearing some ink, but the bulk seemed fine. A sheaf of documents were trifolded over a handful of kodachrome prints, the captions on the back gone sepia. I'd seen the photos when they were in frames, most of them, but not the papers. At the top of the stack was an envelope marked “property,” which contained a typewritten letter on 8½ x 14 paper that read “WHEREAS, the Act of Congress approved August 9, 1912, entitled 'An act providing for...’” I skinned down to a lot number, located in Nadeau, Kansas. It was land, 79.9 acres of it. The document was stamped in the 1940s, though, and sparring with the cotton cycle instead of locked in a safe deposit box.

The rest of the documents were arranged chronologically: a series of birth and death certificates, marriage announcements, tax records, just bits of disconnected flotsam left behind by family members. As the swan shuddered to a stop, I rewound the combs and resumed shuffling through the papers, looking for names I didn't recognize but also ones that I did. At the bottom of the stack, I found a mailer with several par avion stamps, obviously vintage, addressed to my mother. And if there was no postmaster
around, if there was no one around at all in fact, then who's to say it isn't for me? Who's
to say it isn't a time machine.

The discovery of a foreign lover would have shocked me less. Old penpal,
exchange student, shopping catalogue, wrong address, whatever. But it turned out to be
evidence of a past life, one I'd never heard a word of. I read the whole letter while
perched on top of the dryer, feeling the lurch, then returned everything to the box. I spent
the evening researching all I could about La Conservatoire National Supérieur de
Musique et de Danse de Paris. A long name, a prestigious invitation. Clicking through
web images, I tried to picture my mother the medical transcriptionist dancing on a stage
in France, domino-masked, or attending classes in such a funny curving building, waiting
for the métro in sweaters and leggings, strolling along the Seine, but I couldn't. Instead
Josephine Baker in Zouzou came to mind, Audrey Hepburn in Funny Face, and my
mother's face watching these movies. Attentive, but ultimately betraying nothing. No
more invested than anyone else. I also remember a past Christmas when she tried to
reprise her can-can routine and mostly succeeded, except for knocking over the kirsch
after a particularly enthusiastic turn. My cheeks ran hot as I tried to ignore how it
wounded me, the evidence of how little I knew. I wondered why there were no pictures
from that period of her life, no ballet shoes or tights. I wondered why there were no
stories, just an old folded envelope. Was it out of sentiment or shame or a mixture of
both?

At dinner, my father answered for her. He shrugged as he ladled a second serving
of spaghetti on his plate. “She didn't go.” Like saying it's raining today or the tires need
air.
“Wasn't that what they call an opportunity of a lifetime?”

“Those papers were intended for the recycling bin. Your Aunt Jodi is a hoarder and doesn't know when to stop.” When my mother said this, she didn't look at me. Just shredded her breakstick to crumbs.

“Our course, staying here, that was another kind of opportunity. Look at this fine Italian fare we dine on for example.” With a flare of his hand, my father presented the jarred sauce and neon garlic bread bought from the discount bakery. He raised his glass. No one joined him in the toast.

The math was wrong, but I said anyway: “Do you realize I could have been a Parisian?”

My parents looked at each other.

“French, anyway. Right?” I looked back and forth between them until my mother picked up her napkin and dropped it on her plate.

“Stop being dramatic, Maria. I filled out the application behind my mother's back. I didn't know about all the money involved in a transatlantic move. And me and your father, we had only been dating a few months. It was easier to stay. All dancing guaranteed was a struggle.”

“It was easier.” Saying the words was supposed to help them make sense, but I couldn't imagine it—based on my limited understanding of the tragedy plays assigned in school and late-night film noirs on TCM—that there could be any kind of passion without struggle.

My mother tried for some laughs, to deflect: “Well, it's not like I passed high school French anyway.”
“Or me,” rejoined my father.

I hadn't yet cultivated much of a poker face, and my father read something of the surprise I was feeling.

“Well, cheers to flunking out!” my mother announced then.

“Cheers,” I murmured, as their glasses clinked together like drunken chimes, my father happy to have something, anything, to celebrate. I kept my water on the table and turned up the volume on the remote. But when Jeopardy went to commercial break, I muted the TV.

“No, okay. So you buy a phrasebook. You get a student loan. You visit over breaks. It's hard but hardly impossible.”

My mother just offered me the rest of her wine and asked me to do Jodi the favor of just recycling that junk. Junk meaning her application, but also a hundred-odd years of history. It occurred to me that junk was a modern invention.

“No thanks.” I pushed noodles around my plate until they excused me from the dinner table.

In my room, the show pieces I was supposed to be working through sat neglected while I slumped on my bed fingerpicking easy Sinatra standards. As the major chords melted away in the last verse of “Somewhere over the Rainbow,” my father rapped on the doorframe. I pulled my marked-up Kreisler songbook toward me, flipping to the cadenzas, then told him he could come in.

He sat on the edge of the bed, testing his weight on the frame before settling, then pawed through the strings and resin arrayed on my sheets.

“The new violin working out?”
I twisted my hand into some fingered octaves, stretching my pinky.

“Sounding good, very good. Glad to hear.”

“Mm.” I moved on to showing off the tenths I'd learned.

“Let's put that down for a minute. Just for a second. Listen, I agree. I think you deserve to know where you come from, about your people. Jodi has some more things your grandmother saved that you might want to go through later, and those will be yours to decide what to do with.”

I latched the velcro around my violin in its case.

“What kinds of things?”

“Personal effects and some such. Letters and photos. Jodi would be better to ask, she's been all through it.”

“Cool.” I looked down at my lap and braided the fringe of a knit blanket.

“Let's not give your mom a hard time about this anymore, okay? She did what she thought was best at the time. That's all any of us can do.”

“No, she just kowtowed to her parents,” I said. Deep sigh.

“She did what?” My father has this way of screwing up his face when he hears something new: his eyebrows go down, he squints, his mouth closes. I laugh every time.

“Kowtowed. You know, just rolled over.” I lifted my arms and fell to my side.

“Where do you pick up these things?”

“We're reading Art of War.”

“Of course.”

He took up my bow and violin, laying out a blues riff. It wasn't as smooth as he was once capable of, but the color was there.
“You didn't kowtow, right? You did what you wanted.”

“I sure did.”

“Did you really flunk French?”

“Oh, yes. Your mémé would have another heart attack if she knew.” He hurried through the sign of the cross, not a practicing Catholic himself but respectful of the family souls maybe lingering in purgatory. “Flunked out of high school as a whole the first chance I got. Too busy running the streets.”

He switched to some Arlo Guthrie and, when that came out better, he handed the instrument off to me.

“Okay, I'm going to lay out some dad talk right quick.”

I braced my hands on both sides of the bed, then nodded.

“In your life, Maria, you're going to be given all kinds of opportunities, and you won't get to take them all. You just won't. And it didn't much matter to me, what I did, as long as I did something. It didn't matter if I went to France or Fiji or Fresno, I was going to end up in the same place.”

He laced his fingers together, considering his next words.

“I didn't have your ambition. I had something else. An itch of some kind. I'm not sure why I did all that running around. Just thought I was missing something out in the streets. But there was nothing for me there, nothing but diversions. I know that now.

“Did I ever tell you I had another job offer? Before the park. A bank job, that offered—I mean, it'd be like fifty an hour now. I had a chance at Supervisor in a year's time. Vacation days, retirement fund, the works.”

“—but you love the shop.” I cut in before I heard something I shouldn't.
“Sure, sure. I'm just saying.”

He ran his fingers over the fretboard, G to E, then stood to go, hands on his knees.

“Proud of you,” he said, tapping the songbook, then closed the door behind him.

I thought of hamster wheels and treadmills, of closed loops and codas, how we

It just didn't add up. My mother hated machines, anything she couldn't talk to, but

she'd learned how to use a scanner for my drawings and report cards. She kept holiday

greetings on the mantle a week, tops, before recycling. She was always cleaning, always

fighting off the accrual of knickknacks and one-use tools in the hopes, I thought, of

downsizing into a riverside condo one day, of moving to a better area of the city, the

possibility of which would only be delayed by holding onto material possessions. So I

thought. But if the letter should have been recycled, why was it there all these years later,
tucked inside a box of nostalgia. Because maybe she just didn't want to be reminded of

the life she was living, how it wasn't all she had hoped.

I was fifteen, and I thought about escape with the intensity of someone who had

never yet had to free herself from something. It was the future encroachments I was

preparing for when I watched foreign films and memorized a few words, when I browsed

the atlases in coffee shops and searched the Kelly Blue Book for cars I could afford. I

charted the possibilities and made lists of destinations like:

WEEKEND DISTANCES

Hilton Head, Beaufort: 1 h / 40 miles

Brunswick, St. Simon: 1 h 22 m / 82.9 miles

Jacksonville: 2 hr 1 m / 139 miles
Atlanta: 3 h 35 m / 248 miles

Raleigh(?): 4 h 40 m / 322 miles

I just laughed at the boys telling me to hang around another few minutes or an hour. I was raised on the American Dream, and in a few years I knew there'd be lights streaming through my window at night from cities that never slept, music that stopped me dead in the streets, lovers who could catch my drifting heart. And, what's more, it'd be a struggle worthwhile—the kind of thing that wouldn't ring as empty if you happened to look at it too closely.

I was fifteen, and I thought of my father standing in the high summer heat for eight hours a day enduring the ungentle prods of the public, and I thought of my mother daring to go no farther west than New Orleans and no farther north than Pigeon Forge, when somewhere, generations back, her grandmother crossed a continent and my father's people crossed a whole ocean. And I thought of my parents as cowards.
Recognizing the gaps and inconsistencies scattered before me, I was determined to fit it all back together. Curiosity but also compulsion pulled me outside of it all, wondering as an anthropologist might at my mother peck-typing bills into a spreadsheet, her head listing to one side, or the blurry morning porch routine until the 8-cup Mr. Coffee was empty. I always thought one of our most telling details is our wake up routine. After all, how we confront the world every morning is how we confront our lives. When she took off her glasses to rub at the angry imprints left behind—“Tell me something,” I’d say, and the non-answer she’d give would be only, “There's nothing to tell. Aren't you going to be late for school?” But of course there's always something to tell.

That month, I asked my Aunt Jodi to take me and my cousin KC to the department stores, for spring clothes. She let us try her Avon collection before leaving the house, and we rode with the windows down in her silver BMW, lips blazing. At the food court, I asked her about the land deed, and Aunt Jo flapped her hands in front of her face.

“Long sold off. Mama left us a bunch of nothing. No debts either, thank heaven. But if they'd held onto that place out on Skidaway...” She let out a low whistle as she broke apart a pretzel, being careful of her polish.

“What place?”
But KC, ready to shop, tugged me up so I could tell her whether she could get away with the hemlines.

I was still slurping my smoothie when we got back to their townhouse, and I fought off a brainfreeze as I inquired about the personal effects.

“Dad mentioned there was—whoo—stuff I could go through?”

Aunt Jo showed me the furniture and pieces of milk glass she was having appraised, but for the rest she said I should take what I like. After an hour of rifling, she drove me home with a pair of machine-ripped jeans, two shirts, and a wooden chest containing three generations of mementos and valueless collectibles: bank statements and maintenance records, folded letters and telegrams tied with twine, diaries and spiral notebooks, VHSs of first steps/birthdays/Christmases (some taped over with cartoons), arrowheads, poker cards, baby teeth, faded postcards and creased photos set adrift from their albums, plus the vinyl sleeve of a radio serial. The record itself was lost, but the backcover held its own world of connotations about my great-grandmother's past: *Adventures of Marla Mayhem*. Was the title a transcription error or was it the old idea that to give your name to another is to give them power over you? *Mafioso, forgeries, or fire—in the wind-worn deserts or fog-shrouded San Francisco—Marla Matson turns violence to her advantage! Tune in for another half hour of this new espionage thriller!* The adventures of a private investigator, who later vanished without a trace.

The dive into history and inventory process was slow. Considering the half-sort of satisfaction at work, the incomplete picture offered up for parsing, it wasn't easy either. Which told me I was on the right path. Over the years, I'd wait for a Sunday without distractions or chores, then when I was older for afternoons with texts mysteriously
unanswered, no phone calls or do-you-want-to-hangs. And then I'd dig out the chest to work my way through the writings, dating from my great-grandmother's tenth birthday to her death at 73: correspondence, notes, calendars, more often scraps. It always started as an exercise in sprezzatura, sprawling along the floor as I snacked on sandwich triangles while sorting papers. The radio played the Top 20s, and the TV looped muted game shows while my eyes drifted up for the winning announcements then back down. Soon, though, the agitated accelerando of cross-referencing stiff pages, unsticking pulp, the squint at the faded parts. Where my mother was set on staying closed-lipped and erasing the past, my ancestor chronicled it with obsession. It is from a ribbon of letters that I first glimpse the patterns, a genealogy of betrayal and failures, how it runs in the family as surely as our unruly hair and our eyes as changeable as the shore—muddy green shifting to gray before turning to sea mist. And in the five-year diaries, I learned about small-scale tragedies and triumphs like what makes for bad presidents and good weather, the results of local auctions, gas prices, and who died/married when where why. Mostly I learned that stories come in a thousand shapes, but we all hate and love and despair of our family in equal measure.

Aunt Jodi had been right about the land. I found another copy of the deed, with the address written next to the lot number. According to public records it had been parcelled off over the years before half of it was sold outright. There was also a photo of a spanish-style house set back on a vibrant green lawn the size of our whole house, pink bougainvillea draped prettily over the window ledges, “Calif. residence” on the back in a curlicue scrawl. It was like something out of a storybook, and might as well have been considering the absence of a paper trail or the least bit of breadcrumb. I called it a lost
cause and decorated my locker with the piece of mystery. With the Kansas land lost to
economics and the California dream home to history, it was the Skidaway property
outside Savannah that jumpstarted my search. A 20 minute drive away, my whole life.

The 1920 Federal U.S. Census puts Maria Ward, my maternal great-grandmother
and namesake, as born in Isle of Hope, Georgia around 1906 to J. Ward of Chatham
county and Eliza M. M. Carselowey of Tahlequah, OK. Maria had two brothers, John Jr.,
age 17, and Hugh, age 5. A scanned photograph accompanying the census shows a dark-
haired youth, sullen in a two-piece dress, on the front porch of The Roost, a sprawling
colonial whose grounds were surrounded on all sides by the flowing water and
marshlands of Skidaway Island. At the time, The Roost was one of the largest bed and
breakfasts in the area which, according to journals, John Ward never tired of telling as
built by hand from the ground up—not by his own hand, everyone understood, but rather
those of the seasonal black workers who came around in the spring. It's likely he also had
some help from his wife's dowry, his own family made of poor and obscure farmers.

Eliza Carselowey inherited a homestead and land allotment through the Dawes
Act, as both her parents had died of consumption within months of each other. This was
where the Kansas lot came into play. Though the land was originally held by government
trust and nontransferrable as such, the heirship meant she was allowed to sell when she
came of age. Until then, she stayed in an orphanage whose motto was "bring the
uncivilized to a higher state of culture." She left behind the trappings of home—like a
familiar path or favorite food—and gained instead new clothes and the concept of private
property. When she began to sell off her allotment, she did so because there was nothing
else of value. She married young, to John Ward, and traded a mouthful of a last name for
a tidy syllable. They moved to coastal territory where her husband had grown up caring
for chickens and where he said he knew of several business opportunities. And when the
census taker comes around, if the only person present to give an account of the family is
your white husband, turns out no one can say you aren't of the right lineage. So she was
marked down as white, too, though she was recorded as Cherokee by blood on the tribal
rolls, and the children too, who otherwise avoided written records entirely. In the bureau's
schools she had been instructed to *never tell, but never forget*. In the wake of hardship
and want, Eliza Ward did try to forget, though, exchanging braids for fingerwaves, and
familiar preparations for country recipes. She had enough money that people smiled to
her face and did the rest out of hearing. One of the first of her tribe to sell her land, she
was also one of the first to be able to afford to hire workers and to acquire a set of bone
china to display in a heavy mahogany cabinet behind glass. The dishes would only have
been taken out to impress company or for dusting in the spring, though of course
someone along the line must have ended up using them. All my family has left are a
gilded platter and two gravy boats—one sans lid after mysteriously acquiring a chip after
a doll tea party. It cracked straight through when my mother took it out for polishing. The
gold edge wore off the plate but, at the center, the flourish of a W was still visible—or a
slouchy M, depending on your place at the table.

Denial and greed: these were only the first betrayals. I knew my name was set a
few months before my birth, when Ruby died confused and nostalgic. She left me several
EE series savings bonds worth about $3,000 and her mother's name, which I came to
think of as ill-luck. No, it wasn't an easy story to make sense of; but perhaps this was
what I found so appealing, pouring over the papers. The gaps and questions confounded
but also enchanted me—what was maybe my great-grandmother's undoing, too.

The story, as I understood it, went that at somewhere between seven and ten years
old Maria Ward was too young to know killing a snake was bad medicine. But people
talk, and some in the family said ten was plenty old. When the rope fell out of the tree at
her feet, only instead of rope it was a six (or eight, or nine) foot long coachwhip, the
color of a ranger's belt and lashing about, what could she do but take up the nearest log
and bash its head in? To drag the body behind the shed and leave it there for the bobcats
and racoons. Depending on who tells the story, the answer is that the snake wasn't
venomous, that she should have left well enough alone, that she got what was coming
when years later she lost her oldest son to a car crash and a husband to the second war,
hard times on her heels until the end. One of the last entries in the diaries is this:
“managed a little cornbread for lunch, just water and meal.”

The second time Maria Ward killed a snake was in 1922, when she was sixteen.
No room for leisure, part of every summer she spent helping her mother with the
preserves. There were peaches, tomatoes, and peppers to be harvested from the garden on
the north side of the B&B, and usually she and Eliza managed 17 quarts between the two
of them. In addition to the fresh eggs the hens provided, it was something to help the
guests remember them when summer rolled back around. Even though they were
constantly running short of jars, it did make breakfast in the winter something special.

That year, she had to see the canning done on her own. Her parents had gone to
Athens to tend to the graves of her father's people and pay their respects. John, who was
best with the paring knife, had gone to work for Edmund Calder at the paper mill. By
early afternoon, steam billowed around her face making her hair wave out in loose strands and her hands were wet with brine. She had just finished pickling onions and a few peppers when she heard from somewhere off the porch one of the vacationing wives, calling for her husband over and over like a mantra.

“Hen-ry, Hen-ry, Hen-ry—” resounded off the wood-paneled walls only to fade away after a few seconds. She would have gone back to her canning but Mr. Henry Brasch, a fixture at the Roost who rented two rooms every summer and ran the American Exchange bank in New York, came into the kitchen ready to yell. One suspender hung down by his knees and the buttons on his shirt were misaligned. When he saw it was only the daughter in the kitchen, and not one of the hired help, he pulled the dangling suspender up to regain some dignity and informed her about the snake Mrs. Brasch had spotted outside. It wasn't news. The Roost was surrounded by rivers, and rivers meant snakes. But her mother had hissed in her ear before leaving, “Take care of things while we're gone.” Maria paused to locate a dishrag to wipe her hands, but as Mrs. Brasch started hollering again, she decided against it and grabbed the .22 kept in the anteroom, dripping on the oriental rugs along the way. She took out the water moccasin at fifty yards. About the time she took her finger off the trigger and lowered the barrel, a stranger came loping up the lawn.

“They don't hurt none, girl,” he called, tipping a grey silk hat her way as he toed the body of the snake. “Unless you get too close.” She would've asked what qualified as too close, but he had a black look to him. She was none too brave, then, and didn't want the answer none too quick.
As he angled across the grass, she realized he looked older than her but still very young compared their usual guests of the established variety. He was perhaps in his mid-twenties. The hat stood fresh despite the midday heat, as did his crisp three-piece suit. She felt for her hair clinging to her cheeks before she remembered the syrup coating her fingers, leaving sticky prints behind.

The stranger licked his thumb to get at the sugar on her face and asked if he could have a room on the south side of the house, facing a row of shrubs and marshland, which offered the most privacy there was to be had. Her skin felt cool where he had touched her. She started to say they were all booked, but about that time her younger brother appeared at the screen door.

“I heard shots,” Hugh said, worrying at a hole in the mesh with his fingers.

“One shot,” she corrected. “Just a cottonmouth. And stop that.”

She knew her parents would want the money and the man would want to argue, so she told him all right, that they'd figure something out, and held the door open.

“Be a dear and wipe this off.” She handed Hugh the gun, adding in a whisper, “and don't tell John I let you.” Hugh liked to keep secrets, any secret at all.

The screen door slammed behind them as she led the stranger past the Braschs, who were arguing outside their room in clipped sentences as Mr. Brasch tried to fix his buttons.

Maria took him down the hall and up the stairs to the Magnolia room on the southwest corner, the furthest from the bedroom she shared with Hugh on the ground floor in the northeast. Before she could tell him their daily rate, he took out a stash of
bills held together by a rubber band and peeled off enough to cover the room for at least three months.

“How long will your business be down in these parts?” It was a phrase she'd heard her parents use with disreputable guests. She kept her eyes down on the money, like it might flutter away if she blinked.

“I dunno, depends on if I take a liking to the place.” He winked as he tossed his hat on the bedpost, like the frame had been carved to that purpose. He had but one bag on his person, a small doctor's satchel, which he nudged under the bed with a heel, hands tucked in his pockets. He didn't look the doctoring type.

“Breakfast don't start 'til 7 and laundry gets done on Thursdays,” she added, before curtsying and closing the door on him. She felt for the crisp edge of cash tucked away in her apron, then took it out for a glance, just to be sure.

She walked away then stopped, tip-toeing back to the door to listen. But the solid oak didn't permit any sound and she was moving away as Hugh came up behind her as he pretend-loaded the gun.

“Ka-chunk. You got a rascal that needs killin’?” he asked.

“Why, yes. There are some peppers that need the water torture treatment in the kitchen.”

“Horsefeathers! I'm not helping you with your chores.”

“Oh, fine. Go on then.” Hugh ran to wherever it is boys run over summer break, and she went downstairs to put the rifle back in place, wiping off a spot that'd been missed. The Brasch's were back in their room but the argument had gotten louder—the wife saying how she didn't pay to get scared out of her skin, and the husband drawling
how she didn't pay at all. Maria guessed they wouldn't be back the next year. She had
done what she could, though, and she went back outside with a shovel to dispose of the
body.
In the years when I first started living on my own, when I realized gaining one freedom meant taking on chains of another kind—namely rent and bills—I often thought about my great-grandmother's typical day. Trapped behind my post at a restaurant bar, I tried to imagine what her responsibilities entailed and the type of people she would have encountered at a genteel B&B versus the touristy sort saturating River St. At twenty-six, I was ten years older than she would have been at the time. But the names of her regulars—like Telfair, Whitson, Lumpkin, and Clark, who'd vacation all four seasons—sometimes matched up with the names on credit cards that I ran through the machine. Focusing on the larger details and accidents of history helped a little with the burnout from sloppy drunks I had to mop up after and men who told me I'd be even prettier if only I whatever. I'd shape my mouth in grateful flattery but didn't let the smile reach my eyes. They usually didn't tip well anyway.

But there was still the crawl of time, as I practiced my “wax on, wax off” technique on the maple counter. I admitted to sometimes picturing Pat Morita watching as I polished the dark-stained wood, and of course he cheers me on, admires my expert buffing skills. He's never seen anyone turn a bar into a mirror. When the surface finally gleamed, I tried to be carried away on the ebb and flow of the crowd outside. We were all so eager for distraction. The bachelorettes in carriages waving obscene lollipops while holding their heels and drinks. The photographers and hawkers. Pedi-cabs and the older
couples they catered to, asking only tips for trips. When zening out didn't work, I watched as an overheated bride fanned her make-up and adjusted the curls posed over her shoulders, waiting for a cargo boat to leave the backdrop so the image would be unspoiled. There was always a wedding of some sort going on, and it seemed like everyone in the whole city should have been joined up by then.

It was July, so I was doubly tense: there was the other hundred bucks I needed to scrape together for rent, and it was time for a response from the Conservatorio di Ives. When I told my mother I was dropping out for the semester, to be more productive, to work and practice on my own time, she said fine but gave me brochures on student loans. Over laundry, she asked me to explain again, and I told her it wasn't about the money. I had looked at her and said it's what I want. And she just nodded, straightening the same stack of towels over and over until all the corners aligned. Later, tucked between my jeans, I found a printed application to study in Italy, at the Conservatory in Turin. First, I looked up the school and recognized the name of an avant garde violinist. I hadn't realized Jarek Stanislav was teaching at all, much less at a school. I'd seen an interview once where he talked about the importance of inviting chance and play into the music, calling Barber's violin piece “the Great American concerto.” He stated these things with such a quality of force and coherence that I didn't think it'd be such a bad thing to take on that quality as well, to pass it on to my music. Second, I figured Stanislav was well-known and admired in certain circles, but he was mostly unknown to the world so he might not be too high in demand. Third, je suis la fille de mes parents. I remembered the stories and wouldn't risk not trying at least. I recorded the demo for my application
materials that night. So now I was left crossing and uncrossing my fingers, not daring to hope but hoping a little anyway.

I brought fresh beers for a couple at the far end, glancing at her wedding ring, the absence of one on his hand, their intimate posture, not caring to guess beyond that but noticing anyway. Everyone else at the bar was there for the same education conference, tossing around jargon over expensive drinks that would be comped by a company card. Before I had time to zone out again, Amanda ducked in over her lunch break. We've known each other since high school through Nina, a second cousin of hers from Michoacán with the best karaoke voice and an old bandmate of mine. She got a job at the hotel up the street after I passed on the hiring notice for a valet. It wasn't her dream job, but it was close. She crooned about a Gallardo she got to park, and I was happy for the entertainment.

"Describe it again?"

"Like, atomic candy blue."

I teased her, "Weren't you saving up for an anaconda or something?"

"A Viper, yes. And a Lotus, I don't care what model. It'll be a menage. Hey, you have your dreams."

"Sure, but I'm not picky. As long as it goes, right?" Amanda was making due with a perfectly serviceable pre-owned Kia while I made due with an unairconditioned Bonneville picked up cheap on auction, what she called my Miss Daisy car.

She traced a drop of water across the waxed surface, leaving smudges as she drew flames. "It's about the journey, they say. And I don't see how you can enjoy it with that clunker."
"Slowly, with much sweet talk and duct tape."

"Isn't that model known for losing the transmission at what, a hundred, a hundred fifty miles? The engine's going to drop out any day now."

"Base slander," I declare. "Bertha's going to last forever."

She nodded, swivelling in her seat. "Oh, I ran into Ben the other day."

"Tall Ben or Julie's Ben?"

"Tall Ben. He mentioned you scored a gig at a new Italian joint."

_**Gig**_ in the loosest sense. The owners would paid me in tips to play sonatas to the dinner crowd. The last one figured he could buy a Vivaldi box set and invest in nicer lighting without losing any of the customer base. It was only a matter of time before I was made obsolete again by a sound system and twenty subtly placed speakers.

"Oh, yeah. I'm not going. What's the point?"

I scanned the crowd, and since no one was paying attention I took a moment to grumble about how the bar had been cutting my hours since school let out.

Amanda drummed her legs against the rungs of the stool. "You should move in with Marcus. Split two ways is so much cheaper, you could get south of Victory."

"Yeah," I said, wiping away her doodles. "I'll think about that when a deposit magically appears in my bank account."

"So pub after this?"

Cheap burgers up the block was our standing dinner plan, then we'd part for our respective evenings with her throttling the engine as she drove off just to showboat. I did want to go out, to delay the moment. Like how before I dropped the application into the
mailslot, I just stood there holding the package, on the verge of doing and not doing, balanced on the edge of both success and failure.

“C'mon, I still need to tell you about my date with Park.”

“The sprinter?”

She nodded, holding a hand over her head to show his height.

"I should head home, actually." I decided there was no point in delaying the call to my landlord or checking the post. "Next time?"

“Yeah, yeah,” Amanda said, hopping off her stool. She came back and knocked on the bar. "AMC Rambler. That's the car for you. Not as clunky as your Pontiac but close. You'd love it."

"AMC?"

"American Motors got eaten up by Chrystler in '87. Saw someone with a restored version the other day, and it reminded me of you."

"So the car's vintage then. Sounds out of my pay range."

"Isn't everything?"

We shook our heads and I went back to washing the few glasses I had left, wiping down the counter and checking in with the guests. Most of the conference-goers had moved on but the couple at the end were still laughing, touching each other's arms now after every joke, keeping their eyes on the floor or each other, the rest of the space mere background muzak.

A few minutes before my shift ended, a woman wearing a crisp black blazer and bowtie with jeans took a seat and ordered a whiskey neat, top shelf. Her partner—thin,
scruffy, sincere-looking—joined her after a few minutes, complaining about the parking, and he ordered a local IPA without glancing at the menu.

“Let me guess, you're SCAD?” I said.

“I didn’t think I looked like an art student, but yeah.”

“You don’t, but a young guy with tattoos in this area means that or you ride with one of the bike clubs.” I pointed to a line of Harleys parked outside.

The woman laughed and started flipping a coin across her knuckles. “Yeah, that's not really the level he rides at.”

He jostled her shoulder in a friendly shove, told her to shush. “I dropped out a few years ago to move to Atlanta, where we're based now. My brother got me a summer gig, though, so here we are.”

“How is it being back?”

“Like I never left.” He scraped at the label, festooning the bar with bits of paper.

“Did you do SCAD too?”

“For a few semesters. Can't you tell?” I spread my arms to show the pens in my service-industry pouch, my spattered shirt and sensible shoes. “I transferred from the community college to study music composition. Then I found out would you like fries with that was an art school epilogue.”

They nodded sympathetically as they sipped their drinks.

The woman said, “Hey, want to see a trick?”

I watched as the coin multiplied between her fingers—two, three, then four—before vanishing down to two again. She managed to look almost bored as she moved her hand around.
She put the two coins heads up on her palms, showing me the faces, then flipped her hands down toward the table. “Okay, will it be heads or tails?”

I said heads, suspicious of the obvious answer.

She removed her hands to show both coins had landed on tails, as physics would have dictated. When she set the trick up again, with both coins heads up on her palm, I switched my answer to tails. She once again flipped her hands down to the table, only this time the space under her right hand was empty and both coins were under her left hand. Heads up, like the coins had passed straight through her hand.

“That,” I said, “is quite the trick.” I looked around before adding another splash of Lagavulin to her glass. I knew it wasn't real, but it was nice to believe for a moment.

She brightened, sitting up straighter, and took a small bow.

“See, Frank, some people are impressed. And generous.”

“Some people aren't?”

She shook her head and told me about the fruitless hours of trying to play to the crowd outside, sometimes being mobbed but mostly being ignored. It was a familiar struggle—the terror of invisibility balanced against the anxiety and thrill of performance.

“Don't feel bad. River Street's a big pitch and it can be tough to handle the crowd.”

The man, named Frank I gathered, drained his beer. “She's right. Even fucking Gazzo would've flopped.”

I cleared away his bottle and asked whether they'd tried City Market yet.

“Is it close?”
She pulled up the area on her phone and I showed her where to zoom in, to a corner near the art gallery and coffee shop. It's where my dad and I used to perform.

When I was five, my mother left us, citing a need to visit with Ruby at her place in Virginia. She was having problems that we still don't talk about and were never specified. In any case, something was wrong and she ended up staying away for several months. While she was gone, my father was hopeless and lost, so he did the only thing he knew how to do. He took me down to the squares with his Epiphone acoustic and we played there, just like he used to play at clubs. Even with less smoke and no booze, people watched all the same. Still, the impromptu medley of the streets was more comforting than chaotic. He would dress me up in a faux-leather jacket and neon tights, something my mom got me for Halloween, and he'd sit me on his knee as he opened with Dylan and Hendrix, Clapton and Page, then an endless repertoire of '80s best hits that the crowd ate up.

I opened Google Street View to show her how strategic a location it was.

“See the overhang? If it gets hot, you and the crowd can get some shade. And the path is narrower, everyone's closer together, so you don't have to try to pull them in from across the street. But go early because traffic dies down around three.”

“That makes a lot of sense. You're a genius.”

“Hope it works out for you guys. Try the side with the horses, though, not the band, so there's less competition.”

Frank saluted. “Will do. Nice meeting you.”
As they left, the woman caught me off guard by dropping a twenty into my tip jar. I had been shelving glasses when I noticed, the door already swinging in their wake before I could call out in thanks.

The evening dimmed around me as I merged with the rest of the throng, torn between desiring resolution and fearing disappointment. I ambled, as sidewalk traffic allowed, under the lacy doilies of the wild oaks and shook my head when tourists posed with the moss as beards. They'd find out soon enough that things were beautiful because they held an element of terror and that the moss was full of chiggers. The porch fans spun and spun, and I landed on a compromise: sample the night's sounds at Rousakis Plaza then head home when it gets dark, to squint down the sun.

—

My dad told me I was shy at first, that I would sit on his knee and look at my hands, twist them in my lap, but by the second week I would tap dance for everyone, even throwing in a little twirl of my hair at the end. I don't remember this routine. What I remember is the man who owned the pizza shop next door. He benefited from our routine, too, as people would get hungry standing in the sun and would want to sit on his patio to watch us with a cool beer and a slice of Neapolitan. I missed that guy. He'd treat us to lunch after, and sometimes he had an ice-cream sandwich waiting for me that would, invariably, drip all over my tights, and the cookie parts would go soggy the way I liked best. A chain coffeehouse moved in, but the area was free from any major renovations or demolitions.

That all stopped once my mother returned. My father settled down to refurbishing instruments, an easy if irregular gig that was unassuming in a way that must have been
weird at first. Quiet. Sometimes he got complaints from the neighbors for playing the radio too loud in his workshop, and I imagine the market was appealing because he didn't have to hold back the music. He could just let it come, to do what violence or joy as it would.

It was the hour before the dinner crowd rush and my violin, Verona, was still in the car from staying overnight with Marcus. I took it with me to the plaza area, maybe thinking about the magician but also reasoning that the heat wasn't good for the instrument. And I thought about the way space interacts with sound, how it changes it, catching it up to release far away or just hold close. There was the subway with the lovers' corners: you whisper on one side of the station and someone else responds on the other side. Acoustics were a powerful thing, and I hadn't played in the open air in too long.

Only the palm leaf artists glanced my way, gauging interest, before turning back to their work. A woman dressed in long beaded necklaces and a vibrant print dress played near a set of handrails, jangling on an electric banjolele. It had a high clean sound, but I couldn't quite hear what she was playing or maybe it was something I didn't know. In front of her on the pavement was a bright yellow sign reading "drop thumbs / not bombs" with her social media handle at the bottom. I moved far enough away that I didn't interfere with her sound, to a spot that still had some sun and faced the water. I sat counting the boats in the harbor while I undid the snaps and lifted my fiddle from its case. The strings were still in tune, as I picked out the opening bars of the song I used for my application. I had chosen the fugue from Bach's *Violin Sonata in G minor*, the easiest of the sonatas, some say. But for that reason it was the hardest to impart any style on.
Stanislav might at least be intrigued by the polyphonic rendering, even if he wasn't impressed. I liked the challenge of playing a fugue when the violin, a traditionally monophonic instrument, shouldn't be able to play it. The sonic equivalent of an Escher waterfall. I took up my bow and launched into it again, rough at first but gaining strength as I played, eyes closed. When the end of the movement came, I stood, letting it fade into Biber's Battalia, leaning into the dissonance and doing the drum parts by tapping with my feet. I had played for Stanislav as virtuostically as I could manage, but in the park accidentals snuck in to adorn the piece and I added my own bowings. As the war cry ended, a half-remembered partita rounded out the trio, a slow and meandering number that fit the soft buzz of the afternoon heat soaking the air.

When my eyes opened, I was surprised to find a small crowd forming a loose semicircle around my bench, including the lady I saw across the street earlier. To my embarrassment, an older man in a polo started a round of applause. He walked up and dropped a ten in my case, which was still open on the bench next to me. "That's some playing," he said and continued on his way. I started to tell them I was just fooling around, that I couldn't take their money, when the banjo player came over and asked to do a song with me.

She named a handful of options but the Orange Blossom Special was the only one I had any familiarity with. She tossed her dreads over her shoulder then barreled into it, and I had to hurry to catch up. Once we found a rhythm we played through it well enough, but the instruments melded together better when she dropped back on the A and C parts so my fiddle could shine. I did the pizzicato bell effects while she provided a solid beat on E.
While we played, a man in a dove grey bespoke suit stopped in front of us, phone to his ear forgotten.

"That's clawhammer," he said, mostly to the air, the music drowning him out.

The banjo player raised her eyebrows and nodded, slightly increasing her tempo as I sped up to match it.

He opened his wallet and dropped the contents into my case, watched a few more seconds before shaking his head and walking on. Who knew what his history was, but I liked to imagine he saw something of himself in us, perhaps an old dream come alive on the streets to surprise him, a familiar song rousing him to memory or action.

After we finished, we took a little bow for the crowd, which had grown. Most dropped their scattered change for us.

"That was great," I said, a little breathless. "Have you done this long?"

"I try to set up by noon, catch the lunch crowd"

I clarified that I meant the performing, playing to the crowds.

"On and off over the years. When I was younger, Boulder was the place to be. Since I moved here with my girlfriend, it's just in the summer when my boys are off at camp. Mind if I ask why don't you have a sign?"

"Well, I'm not—I just wanted fresh air. What's the sign do?"

"The sign's so people know who you are and what you're asking for. Mine's nothing fancy, but it's better than answering the same questions a million times. The size limit here is 8½ by 11, which is way too small for most eyes but you work with what you have to."
It was dark enough for the streetlights to turn on, and I guess that was the banjo player's cue to head out.

"Well, if you do want to come back out, have a permit. They're free now at least."

We split the haul and I'm left with the better part of a hundred dollars for an hour's play, what would take a whole shift to earn on a mediocre day at the bar. The crowd had thinned and I started to pack up my violin, but a little girl walking a brown border collie asked for another song, something she might know. After a few false starts, I managed "It's a Small World After All," short enough and popular, which she happily bounced her way through, clapping out the rhythm for me. The dog barked. I ended with a minuet, surprised when a few more bills dropped into my case from passersby but questioning it less.

I take the long way back to my car, along the riverwalk west of Abercorn. I tried to hear the street noise as individuated racket rather than mere static, to smell the horses like it's for the first time, to walk past the WWII memorial and snap a shot of it like a visitor. The split globe of our strife.

But my eyes are lazy and comfortable, and the river looks as it always does, no more or less glassy than other afternoons. I know in another hour the sun will sink, swathing the sky in a wash of yellows and blues, reminiscent of watercolor splotches then fairground cotton candy as the night wears on. Maybe a single fiery orange streak will glare across the clouds so the new art students will be tempted to photograph it, to capture it forever and say this. Most don't, probably banned by an explicit class rule regarding yet another damn River St. sunset.
My dad once shared a story about a passing businessman who bought him a round after he packed up for the day. Over their beers, the man told him about this nomadic tribe dying out in South America who memorized sunsets as part of their culture. They were a small group, somewhere between forty to ninety people at any given time, and the last person with complete knowledge of their language was about to die. Desperate to preserve their history, for the first time in centuries they welcomed in an outsider—an anthropologist—who eventually brought in a cameraman for a documentary and went on to publish the story in a top magazine, something even a businessman would read, and he won several prizes from AAA. Somewhere along the way the anthropologist noticed that every day the tribe would stare at the sky, and he asked—through hand gestures and sketches—why they would do that. And they eventually conveyed to him that the sunsets were their calendar. Each sunset was different, so marking the occasion of this one's birth, they would say, “Remember the two pink clouds with five horizontal rays of light,” or they might recall a disaster as “the day with the orange and blue and orange and smear of green on the horizon.” And so they memorized every sunset, orientating their lives around the smallest details of refracted light.

But it all looked the same to me. When the lights of the Westin came on, breaking and scattering across the water, and the whole area took on the cast of a Van Gogh painting, I knew it was time to head out.
I'm not sure whether the saying about troubles coming in threes in right, but I agree that they often don't come alone. For example, the Roost had another visitor that day, the neighbor boy Ronnie. Maria Ward didn't recognize him at first because he'd grown like a ragweed since the last summer. He came over to find her walking the length of the driveway, peering into the dirt, the grass, the hedges lining the yard.

“Everything okay, Miss Maria?”

“Yes, yes,” she said. Except the snake's body had vanished.

She recalled at that moment the stories about joint snakes and hoop snakes and the old legend her mother once told her when she refused to go to sleep. John had long passed out, the light whistle of his breathing a metronome in the night, and yet she had wanted to hear story after story, pressing for another. Desperate, her mother finally told her about the inada. In this tale, winter has lasted longer than usual and food stores are running low. A hunter, distracted by tracking a lethargic buck that he knows will feed his family for a week, steps on the head of a snake. He doesn't notice he has crushed it and continues following his game, but when he goes to take the killing shot—a snake appears on the buck's back. The buck is startled, gets away, and the snake disappears as well. The hunter is angry at his bad luck, so he makes camp early and goes to bed hungry. But when he wakes up he is surrounded by inada who multiply when he hacks apart their
bodies. They nip at him for a week, and then another, and so on until the new moon when they finally allow him to die. She swatted at her ankles just thinking about the story.

“John's not home yet, Ron. I don't expect him for awhile.”

“Maybe later then,” he said, already backing away. “Sorry for the bother.”

Maria decided a cat must have carried it off, shook her head and waved goodbye before going inside to finish the peppers. She caught her reflection in the window and wondered whether she'd grown so much too. Her hair was growing out and turning reddish in the sun, her dresses fit a little tighter at the waist. She angled the lid for the boiling pot toward her face to see better, and she caught a glimpse of the stranger entering the room behind her. She played off the vanity by covering the pot and moving on to her cutting station.

“Can I help you?” She picked up the knife and made rapid, industrious chops while he picked up a squash to test its firmness. He motioned to the counter.

“Quite the harvest you have there.”

“We try.”

“You want to know the trick of it?”

She looked down to find the tomato she was trying to dice rather deflated instead, the innards running out of the skin and puddling on the board.

He stepped closer, picked up the serrated blade they kept out for bread, and reached over her for the plumpest one from the pile. The slice went down the middle in one movement and he showed her the two sides of the split globe, wet with seeds. There was a practice to his motions, and she knew he was the type who could bed a man down if the need be on him.
He offered the knife to her, handle first, and she tossed it in the sink with the rest of the lunch dishes.

“Thank you, but I think I’ve managed fine all these years.”

He put up his hands. “Just thought you might want to eat it instead of butchering.”

“Weren't you looking for something?”

She offered him a towel, though she could see he had managed not to get any juice on him.

He shook his head. “Washroom. Must have gotten turned around.”

“There's one at the front, to the left of the hall.”

He looked toward the direction she pointed, nodded and left her alone to speculate. She tried to figure out how that worked, getting lost with the bath but two doors down from you. She mimicked his motions with one of the halves, but the results were fit only for soup. On the other she tried another sawtoothed knife and managed to get the slices fanned across the board in thin rows, which both pleased and irritated her.

Maria Ward got the rest of the canning done that evening, but it meant not making it out to the chicken coop until it was an hour shy of nightfall. She hurried through the motions of scattering fresh straw. More rain had been promised that week but had so far held off, so she measured out the feed, grit, water, then spent the remainder of the day on the back porch. While scanning the trees for deer and their telltale eyeshine, she braided wildflowers and bog lilies to pass the time, the oriental musk of the blooms fragrancing the heavy air. Some nights it almost crowded out the notes of sulphur from the distant factories. The smell of money, her father would say, before taking a deep whiff of the rotted morning breeze.
When John came back, he saw her pacing and brought a bag of shelled corn from the pantry to help lure the creatures, even though he was worn out as always. The foremen got to sit but he wasn't a foreman. A schoolhouse feud with the current foreman all but ensured he never would be, so he had to stand all day at the mill, in high summer temps made higher by the pulp processing. She didn't say anything when he lifted his haunches onto the porch handrail, hiding a groan by letting out a bark of a cough instead. They weren't supposed to sit up there, some of the wood was beginning to swell and splinter, but he did it all the same when no one could catch him.

While Maria rustled the bag and grasped a palmful of corn, John swung his legs and asked after her day.

"Mighty long," she answered, then listed all the jars she managed to put up.

"Mama's going to be glad she missed out on all the fun."

She decided to leave out the stranger showing up, thinking how little it really amounted to. What was between them but the red sap of the tomato? Her fancy had merely run away, something that had set many a person afire. They all knew of those who worked to transform the smallest hope into the most glimmering reality. A few flakes of gold as inducement to sell everything, uproot or abandon families, to seek out carpetbagging clairvoyants for scrying visions and phantasmagory out of a desert waste or elsewhere. So she kept quiet.

Right at dusk, a doe showed up. But their delight faded when they saw it was limping.

John hopped off the rail, easing his way up to the deer. Maria recognized it as one that roamed as a family on the other side of the bridge, and either familiarity or hunger let
her brother get close enough to put his shirt over the doe's face and neck, calming the poor thing as he smoothed his hand down its hindquarters.

"What is it? What's wrong?" Maria asked, almost coming off the porch in her strain to see.

"An arrow. It was one of the Howard boys, I bet. This was blood sport, not a killing shot. You aim at the lungs and heart, not shoot it from behind as it runs."

Maria watched as he felt his way around the arrow with his fingertips, the deer pliant at his touch. She couldn't help telling him, "It's a shame daddy won't let you go to that veterinary school in Iowa. You'd make such a fine doctor."

John pretended he hadn't heard. He showed her how to put the treats under the doe's nose, letting her feed while he listened for the heartbeat to slow. When she seemed to have gotten her fill, he took out his pocketknife, snapping the arrow off above the flesh. They watched as she bolted, disappearing silent as smoke back into the pampas grass.

John gave the patient's prognosis. "It was a large muscle, no infection yet. Should heal if she can reach back there to keep the wound clean."

He handed Maria the arrow then knocked the mud off his boots before heading inside.

Maria followed behind, stopping only to toss the splinter of wood into the treeline. Before heading to the pantry, she dropped off the money she had collected in their big safe, to lock it up until she could make the run into town. She went to pencil the stranger's balance in the ledger but realized she didn't even know what name to put down.
Nobody but Hugh had witnessed the arrival of the new guest; nobody yet knew the trouble Maria had ushered into their lives.
Back home by nightfall, I took the porch steps two at a time to get to the mailslot. Glancing in, I didn't see anything and had to swallow back a sense of impatience laced with relief. My hand felt along the inside box, just to be sure. Empty. Worked up over nothing, I told myself. The doorknob stuck on my way in, the old hardware sticking and taking more wrestling every year. It took a rough push of my shoulder to get it open.

I leaned my case on the futon and checked the fridge for food, situation dire but less so with the cash in my pocket. I was just sniffing a quart of blueberries when I heard a knock on the door. The neighbor was standing behind the screen, and when I pulled it open he threw some colorful shredded napkins in the air, yelling, "Surprise!"

He handed me a sheaf of mail, a late birthday card plus coupon magazines and an unmarked envelope with a *par avion* stamp. “Yeah, the mailman or mailgal I guess put this stuff in my box.”

"Thanks, Vico. And this was sweet, but my birthday was a month ago. My grandmother just forgets."  

“Yeah, so hey, you know what's up with the sirens?” He nods up the street toward the cruisers flashing their lights.  

Drug busts happened a lot in the neighborhood, more than we cared to count. Fear spreads violence, in desperate times, and there were always stories about people forgetting a GPS on the dash and coming out to find it gone, doors hanging open. I'd
grown up knowing not to leave things lying around in the car, to park under lights and in populated areas, but I'd still had my windows busted twice, once on the driver's side and once on the passenger's. Each time, the burglars couldn't have taken more than a few coins, worth maybe a day's bus fare. From the cupholder they'd also taken my silly yellow star-shaped sunglasses. The shades were dollar store, but the replacement glass had cost a paycheck. The windows never rolled up the same, shards screeching inside the body of the door whenever I cranked the handles for air. The feeling of invasion would return, then, as I wondered what'd been touched, what they'd seen and smelled and known about me.

The blue lights blazed in silence, though, and the sidewalk was free of spectators, so I guessed it was just a disturbance call. A couple fighting, a rowdy party.

“Maybe a domestic dispute.”

I offered him a berry and he declined, moving toward his side of the duplex. “It's cool, I've got a pizza on the way.”

“Hey, you're cleaning this up, right?” I gestured to the bits of paper littering my half of the porch.

“Oh yeah, for sure, for sure,” he said, moving his hair out of his face as he bent down.

I closed the door and resumed picking through the fruit for rinsing then added an overripe banana to the mix. I took my fruit concoction and the mail with this year’s peachish tan envelope to the bedroom. My birthday was always marked by ten dollars and a Bible verse from my grandmother on my dad's side, tucked into envelopes that came in pastel shades of easter candy. This year's peachish tan reminded me of the
bologna and mayo sandwiches Granny Ruby would send me to the park with, which I'd always just feed to the swans instead of eating even knowing I'd be ravenous by dinner.

Closing the door behind me, I tossed the mail on my desk and turned on the computer to stream music. Something upbeat and smooth seemed about right for the moment's soundtrack. Nancy Sinatra's flat yet sultry stylings filled the room as I popped berries in my mouth. I opened the birthday card first, retrieving more rent money and Judith 16:10. The card itself was a colored pencil kitten holding a bouquet of glittering flowers. “Love, gma” scrawled inside. I propped it open on top of old textbooks then threw the coupons and grocery store circulars in the wastebasket. That left the mailer. I held the envelope up to the overhead light, seeing if I could make out the results but also not really wanting to spoil the ambiguity in that way. I typed up a message to Marcus saying we should meet up, deleted half of it, then retyped the message, adding a parenthesis smile. I hit send. My work clothes went in the hamper, and I changed into running shorts and my softest shirt, free swag from a friend's defunct punk band called Unicorn Typhoon. They hadn't played in weeks since the drummer was arrested for allegedly starting a fire in the basement of a venue. There's no evidence, but, well.

Sheet music cluttered the bed, so I just pushed it to one side, flopping down to count the night's cash one, two, then three times. Miraculously, it was enough for rent with a bit leftover to put toward my hypothetical deposit fund. I'd done the knife-edge dance of panic month-to-month since dropping out, and so many classmates stayed just to defer student loans. But Helas mon cœur etc. etc. was about all I took away from my brief foray into music theory. And Marcus, I guess.
Three weeks into the semester the professor had passed out pages from György Ligeti's *Étude 9*. As she explained the micropolyphony that had influenced *2001: A Space Odyssey*, the flutter of chords and vertigo-inducing melody, I listened to the music bouncing up and down, crescendo and decrescendo, picking out notes. I had wondered what she would think of Barber's unplayable sonata—the sprint of the last movement like running a four-minute mile—when I noticed a section designed to be played “softly, softly,” a handwritten note said.

But rather than *p* or even *ppp*, Ligeti wrote *pppppppp*, with obvious care and chutzpah. The exuberance and futility of it! It had to be a sound so soft it might as well not exist, yet there it remained and insisted on a presence.

I had looked around the dim lecture hall to gauge whether anyone else seemed bowled over by this, but mostly I saw heads drooped or tilted against a palm. I made eye-contact with a guy in a *Pretty Hate Machine* shirt next to me and gestured toward the page, but he just slipped me a folded note with a party invite. By the end of class the professor still hadn't referenced Ligeti's coup, but she had issued a short writing assignment in which we were to comment on the composer’s use of any classical technique in the *Étude*. So I filled three pages front and back about what struck me as the infinitesimal distance between one *p* and another and the next until the jumble of them rucked together, and how there are subtleties far beyond the possibility of being heard, or articulated, but nevertheless must try to be heard, and articulated, though it will surely be lost in the overarching grandiose aims of the piece. I got a C-.

And so I was ready to be done pretending that college was working out. The others in the class could make the right moves and say the right words, but not me. When
I was supposed to be penning 16-bar melodies or pivot chords, I was daydreaming about other places, other vistas. The music would multiply in my head, a swarm of finger positions and de rigeur procedures, what someone like Jarek Stanislav would consider a dive in a ballpit I'm sure. It was all impossible until I got home and took out the fiddle I'd inherited from my father, loose bridge and all. Old Maggie was the name I'd settled on, after the valley where my father met my mother. I'd have to play a classic, maybe "Wildwood Flower" or other soft folksy thing that tripped along under my fingers. I'd picture a river unraveling, or sometimes Offenbach's drifting gondola. *Andante.* A walking pace, without hurry or demand.

I had dropped the intro-to-music theory class at the Registrar's office then drifted over to the private island where the party was being held, because it's not like I had homework to stress about anymore. The only person I recognized was НИ guy, now in a Beach Boys shirt, who waved and walked over to hand me a solo cup of warm beer before he went back to building the bonfire. The branches nested in a way that reminded me of an oversized backyard Jenga. I sat on my backpack, watching as the flames mounted, trying not to think about my dwindling scholarship funds and uncertain path. The alcohol and heat conspired to make me drowsy, so I borrowed a guitar and plucked out an easy White Stripes riff I'd picked up. Some listened, bobbing their heads, but I gave up when the car radios started competing. Copying the people around me as they lounged on their elbows, I stretched out near the fire to bake in the heat. As the sky darkened, I shifted my arms to behind my head, gazing at the one or two stars, probably planets, visible in the sky.
Someone turned down the volume, and I gathered from the cheers people were burning things in either effigy or anarchy: mood rings, ex-boyfriend's shirts, CDs and posters, pizza boxes. One guy in a SCAD shirt threw in a football and yelled "Fuck sports!"

The only things on me were my violin and textbooks, and I figured the methods book wouldn't fetch much resale value anyway. I tossed it in and everyone clapped, except sports guy who said, "Whoa, whoa. We don't burn books around here." He said this gesturing with a bottle of Woodbridge.

"It's not a book," I countered. "It's a totalitarian regime."

But he'd already turned away, bored, looking for another drink.

The book didn't even make it all the way in the fire, the hardcover weighing it down. I toed at it, trying to get it closer to the flames. Marcus—still just eclectic t-shirt guy to me—reappeared with a head nod. He picked up our textbook and flung it into the heart of the blaze, and I clapped. We watched the heat lick at the cover a long time, until the book started to be reborn as ash. He dug in his pocket for a moment then crumpled up some paper, handing it to me to toss in. I lobbed it underhand into the fire and it went a little wide, but the throw felt great. Like the end of a long concerto or the first perfectly blue sky of summer: just inevitable.

"Your contribution?" I thumbed toward the bonfire.

"Heard I got a full ride to my pop's alma mater. Harvard."

"Oh, yes, Hah-vahd. Who wants to go there?" I flashed him a smile.

He returned the smile, then looked into his beer or down at his shoes.

"So why not music?" he asked.
"Not music, just theory. It's fine, but I think there's a better way than...." I shrugged through the rest even though I guessed it was too dark to see. “Not that I can find it yet.”

"You will," he said, like he meant it. "You will."

"So why not Harvard?" I followed up.

"I know it's not practical, but I want to study the Atlantic. To live there and come to know its ways. Start with the sunrise and end with hauling my own supper, I don't know. But something simple, you know? There's plenty of others who can handle law."

“Sounds practical enough to me.”

“Lucrative, then,” he corrected.

Which I couldn't disagree with. It wasn't long before we found ourselves stumbling across the dunes, away from the crowd. There were others with the same idea, couples entwined, making out or mostly talking in hushed tones, and we weaved around them, wandering up and down the shore until morning, knowing we should sleep but not bothering. He told me about getting his diving certificate and how much there was left to know of the planet. I nodded at the right places, not talking much. He counted my vertebrae while I counted cars, those engines of escape.

In the morning we didn't recognize each other, hair tousled and drained of firelight. We had to start all over, beginning with our names.

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That's our thing, to go out for a few weeks at a time before falling back to our old routines, him occupied with school or the next dive while I got busy with work or lost in learning a new song. And then one of us would remember the other, a flashing screen in
the night, and when we met again he would act like it's for the first time. Or like it's been years instead of weeks. Holding doors, asking after my parents. Perhaps that was the allure and the frustration of him: we always started over each time. We never got far. We knew it wouldn't work out but somehow we still hung around.

When he texted me back, it was with a date later in the week.

I wrote him back saying, No, now.

He told me he would stop by on his way into the call center. I scrolled through pictures of the Turin skyline on my phone and tried not to fall in love with the grand spire and snaggy Alps. Through the thin plaster, Vico's sludge rock warred with my blustery pop ballads while outside the stray dogs yowled in packs as they roamed the alleys for food.

Marcus let himself in instead of trying to knock over the noise. He muted my computer before stretching out on the bed next to me. His hair still smelled of coconut thyme, his go-to scent in the $1 shampoos he buys.

“'I think Britney might have been winning that time,'” I said mid-yawn.

He rubbed at his facial hair, a nervous tic, as he dropped his own news before I could mention mine. An oceanography program had accepted him, a way he could work with the water and not totally shame his father.

"That sounds perfect. You'll have to tell me all about the crazy fish you see!"

I threw my arms around him in a big bear hug and rolled us around on the bed, crumpling the music sheets.

“Wait, MJ.” He brushed up and down on my arms, a comfort move he does when I've drank too much or come down with a cold. “Part of the program involves a
reclamation project, which means living on the ocean floor. It's for three months. Near Cambridge."

"Ah, yes. Hah-vaht."

"The irony is pretty unbelievable. But... you're cool with the time?"

"Yeah? There's email. It's not that long."

"If I do this, I've gotta leave in two weeks."

"Wow. Okay." I laid my hand on his chest. "So we've only got two weeks to watch all four Jaws films? That's a tall order."

He went back to rubbing my arms and asked what was up in my world. I showed him the birthday card and told him that I got Judith this year. And a Hamilton to buy him a very cheap beer to celebrate. We spent the hour before he had to go to work talking about angler crabs and spider crabs, vampire squids and coffin fish, dreaming up new creatures out of features of the old. Before Marcus left, unmuting the speakers for me, I told him that I thought I'd get the response from the Conservatory soon.

"No worries, you've got great tunes," he said. "But it wouldn't be the worst thing if you're stuck here with me."

I listened as he locked the door behind him, slamming it so the jamb would catch. The cops were gone when I looked out the window, and as I watched his car pull away from the curb I realized he'd never actually seen me perform, just play around with standards and my own half-finished tunes. Instead of Nancy, Aretha's mezzo-soprano flutter boomed around me as I sat cross-legged with the envelope. A promising omen, I thought. Could omens be promising, though, or was it an augury?
I ripped through the top fold and read through the letter quickly, seeing “We're happy to inform you...” as the first sentence. Equal parts elation and trepidation flooded my mind until I read it again: I got in, meaning they're happy to take my money, but Stanislav had not accepted me as a student so I wouldn't be funded. He, or more likely an assistant, had passed along letterhead with some jotted feedback.

_Fine attempt. But what's the organizing force? Patience brings roses._
As my own options had narrowed, I thought of the stranger's possibilities and how they might change the tenor of the stories. Did he come from a family accustomed to traveling, by whim and by season, to wherever the trade winds took them. Could he be dodging shadows from a violent past and passionate crimes? Was he a revolutionary? Maybe he had merely come from up north to escape the cold and an unfavorable engagement.

Curiously, the journals never named the stranger, though Maria Ward must have had a name for him at some point. Still, she just referred to the stranger as “he,” as though cherishing the pronoun. As in “he was just impossible in every way. The way he showed up on the porch one mourning (sic) wearing New York clothes. The way he chewed his words like cowboys on the radio.” The way he grabbed her wrist under the table at dinner that first night, rubbing the small bone there just to watch her blush. The pisiform, she recalled from an old grade school mnemonic—Some Lovers Try Positions They Can't Handle. Scaphoid, lunate, trictrum, pisiform... She disremembered the rest, and John sat between them every meal after that first one anyway. She tried not to hear the front door creak open late at night because it made her legs itch to follow him. Hugh had a sleigh bed next to hers, but she wasn't worried about him. He'd once slept through a gaze of raccoons getting into the attic over winter. John was in the next room, though, and he could be a light sleeper. He wouldn't understand.
When Maria's school friends wanted to gather for homework or sodas, she asked to meet in the squares, where they could run wild or at least pretend to. But word got out about the stranger, and the girls wanted only to hang out at The Roost, blaming the summer heat or complimenting the quiet. Hetty, especially—she came over almost every day to fan herself on the porch while flipping through the same issue of McClure's for hours, waiting for the stranger to pass. Maria, for her part, tried solitaire, sewing, even weeding the flowerbeds, whatever she could to speed up the time.

Hetty held up a hosiery ad showing off shiny stockings that were real silk. The slogan read “the reflection of perfection.”

“You'll never afford it.”

"No, doesn't it sound like someone we know?"

She climbed up onto the railing and kicked her leg high, flourishing her skirts like a Ziegfield girl.

"He's all right, I guess."

But they both ended up keeping watch, disappointed when it was only Ronnie who ducked through the bushes to borrow a hose. They scanned the lawn in agitation until a quarter to three, when the stranger came strolling back into view. Hetty jumped up to wave from the porch steps while Maria busied herself with laying out a game of cards, the faces cascading in rows down the bench.

The stranger tipped his hat at them, as was his charming custom, but Maria pretended not to see for the concentration required of her. Hetty stretched her neck prettily and said he looked famished, figured she could rustle up some crackers and tea
for him if he minded. He accepted with another tilt of the hat and leaned over the railing as she knocked through the house to prepare his snack.

Maria was content to let the long moments yawn in silence enriched by his presence, but she felt his gaze on her hands. She made her moves slower, then not at all, too distracted by his movements to keep track of strategy. When she checked, he was staring at her, not the cards, and then he looked at his shoes like they were something new, blushing down to his boots.

"I never had the mind to learn Patience," he finally said, pointing to her spread.

"Would you want to?"

"I'd want to do many things, given the time. But time's a tough thing to get ahold of."

He seemed to have nothing but time to her. Coming and going at all hours, he lounged half the day away when everyone else was up by first light. Hetty returned, balancing a plate of ginger cookies and a tall glass of lemonade on one arm. The stranger leaned against the railing while he sipped the drink. He stretched, saying he'd had a big lunch, and patted his stomach to wave off the baked goods. Hetty nudged the plate his way as she talked about school and summer, pouting. He drained the glass and took it with him inside, leaving them to their gossip.

Hetty was the first to say what they were all thinking: “I bet he's a rum-runner.” The year before, Hetty had sat in the plush seats of the newly constructed Lucas Theatre to watch the premier of The Shiek, starring Rudolph Valentino. She would bring this up later, in a letter about seeing the sequel amid the hysteria of the young actor's death. The
entire movie she tried to place who it was the actor reminded her of then remembered with a small gasp.

Maria said, “Naw,” but mostly agreed. She had heard about bootleggers, of course, from the druggist who was mad about losing fountain drink sales which had temporarily shot up when the prohibition started. But she hadn't thought she'd ever get to meet such a character in real life.

Order was restored but for a short time with her parents' return from Athens. They brought with them a steamer trunk full of new styles—for Maria, two dresses and a bottle of Chanel—and an open curiosity for the quiet stranger with so little laundry and so much money. Her mother and Ms. Willigen, a youngish seamstress from Kentucky, fawned over the stranger from the start. Her mother, especially: in a moment of indiscretion, she compared him to warriors she knew in her youth, who by that time had been forced to shear their braids but nevertheless retained an undercurrent of vitality and violence, simmering always. They'd corner him into a round of Mah-jongg in the morning, bring him his own pitcher of unsweetened tea when he came back from a walk, and stop by at night to ask for laundry. The other residents made due until the Thursday wash, but they'd handscrub one of the two shirts he had before bed (Brooks Brothers, they noted with shared awe), fix any buttons that needed fixing, and leave it pressed and folded at his door the next morning. Her father was just tickled by it all. When questioned, he said, “Oh, I'm used to being 'round a bunch of hens,” and went back to enjoying the spectacle. It didn't get in the way of his business or his dinner, so no harm done.

Up until that point, Maria, and The Roost as a whole, had been cautious, giving the stranger a wide berth. But as summer came to a close, she abandoned her hobbies for
following the stranger at a distance when she saw him about town. She bribed Hugh with candies into doing some of her work and left when she saw him leave for a walk. Once she tailed him all the way to Daufuskie but lost him in a stand of trees. She was near where her mother's weekend help lived, and she ended up having a big dinner with her and her daughter, Tulu, when she passed them on the road. She was sent home with a big jar of preserved okra, and every time she bit into one she was reminded of the visit with a secret thrill. She knew her parents would disapprove, thought them poor and always tried to passing off bags of hand-me-downs, though Tulu's father owned a store in town. They seemed to do as well as anyone. She snuck back a few times more, when her parents went out to attend yet another midnight party. They were always telling her to have a hot meal, she thought. But she never figured out where the stranger went.

When she did happen to see him crossing back over the bridge, usually minutes but sometimes hours after he'd left, she'd raise her hand in a small involuntary wave and he'd lift his hat to her, say her name. She began gathering with the family in the evenings, along with everyone else, hoping something of his life would come out. While the nation tuned in to President Harding or laughed along to The Happyness Boys, the Wards tried to cajole the stranger into sharing something of his past. They never did manage to break through his amiably distant ways though. Even when he sat with them for hours at a stretch, listening to music, he deflected questions with jokes or tall-tales or pretended to be asleep by resting his hat over his eyes.

For instance, when the talk eventually turned to politics, her father asked the stranger if he considered himself a self-made man.
The stranger had been shuffling a deck of cards, cutting them in long arcs. He laid out the tableau of seven rows fanning down before he responded, “We all know the stories of men now in high circumstances. Men who, with no help from others, surround themselves with fortune. The other day I overheard such a man bragging to his friends. You know what he said?”

We shook our heads, watching as he flipped over the top cards.

“When I first came to the city I carried all my belongings in a bandanna handkerchief. Now I own my own home and I have a good job with one of the biggest wholesalers in the city.’ One of the friends asked, ’What was in the handkerchief when you came here?’”

With no moves, he had to pull from the reserve pile. After a few cards, he managed to lay down an ace, and then he delivered the answer.

"The man said, 'Nothing but ten thousand dollars in cash and bonds!'"

—

After a night of heavy rains, when the fall was almost on them and the stranger's balance running low in the ledger, Maria slipped out of bed. She stood outside John's door and called his name in a loud whisper. The cicadas' song was particularly thunderous after the storm and, when he didn't answer, she thought she might make it down the stairs. On the first creak of the porch steps, she slipped through the dark house after the stranger. The halls seemed to stretch on in ways they never did in daytime hours. She was sure she was wading through mud instead of through shadows.
She pulled the door open and shoved through the screen into the moonlight, so fast she didn't realize the dark outline of him was waiting for her at the bottom of the steps.

“Awful late for a rendezvous,” he said.

“I could say the same,” she dared to reply.

“I'm just a student of astronomy,” he said, gesturing to the sky. “But what might you be doing out with the stars?”

“I—I don't know,” she told him, which was mostly true. She couldn't very well say that she had been planning on tailing him, wherever it took her. “Couldn't sleep on account of the noise.” Which was mostly true as well.

He touched a finger to her upper arm, the purpose of which she could never figure out but would puzzle over later. Was it to scold or steady or something else?

“We sit here for an hour, then you go back inside.”

Maria agreed to the terms.

They sat, like he said, on the top step for a long while. She couldn't tell how much time had passed or how he would tell when their hour was up. The last bed warmth had left her, and the cool of the night turned her drowsy. So she started talking just so she wouldn't fall over on him. He didn't seem to mind, didn't do much of anything, so she told him everything about her life she could think of, which was pitiful little she realized.

“Where are you from?” she asked, after telling him about her fall from the pear tree when she was Hugh's age, the broken elbow, the long ride to the hospital as she howled.

“Don't matter,” he said. “Ask me a real question.”
“How old are you?”

“Now that's just rude. Didn't anyone ever teach you better?”

She started to flush then realized in the starlight that he was smiling, a joke.

“All right, a polite and real question. What do you do for a living?”

“You think that matters?” he asked, squinting one eye at her.

“Why, sure, what you do is who you are. Stands to reason what you choose to do is doubly who you are.”

“Well,” he said, “Your Pa seems to satisfactorily provide for you and yours, wouldn't you say?”

“Sure, I would say,” Maria ventured, thinking about how they never went hungry and they had fresh oranges in the dead of winter.

“So you satisfactorily provide a dozen men with the means to live, the means to put food on the table—some of them with large, growing families. Would you say it was important, that line of work?”

“I would,” she said, waiting for more. But it seemed like that was all he was going to say on the matter. Maria thought over the bits of information he'd dropped before her, not noticing the chirrups of the frogs growing quiet.

“The Mississippi Delta,” he said. “That's where I'm from, Maria.” He touched her arm again, in the same manner as before, and said, “All right, go on in. We'll play cards and dice later. I'll teach you a new game.”

He'd already taught them all whist, so she said, “Hazzard?”

“Hazzard,” he laughed, “If that's what you want. No telling your folks though.”
And she had no choice but to do as he said. Though outside the cold hadn't bothered her, in bed she shivered violently and could not get warm again. The next day she didn't make it downstairs until her mother called for her, twice, to make up the breakfast table.
In contrast to the ungroomed islands fringing the coast, the geometrical gardens of Savannah were impossible to get lost in. Where some might have been inspired by English gardens, Oglethorpe evoked the rigidity of a war camp, which makes sense considering he was a general and the space had been intended for military exercises, not residential life. The city chafed under this restriction, visible in the shambling sensibilities of many parts. On my way to work, a boarded-up brick bungalow neighbored a modern renovated condo. The realty site had sold it a few years ago, asking for just under a million. I hadn't seen any signs of life from either property, but I didn't think the bungalow needed that much work to be something special. Though I also liked the sharp angles of the condo's street numbers, the art deco stainless steel suggestive of skyscrapers and the inexorable march of the future. Groomed ivy climbed the wall around the numbers. Shaggy azaleas overtook the front of the bungalow, but just a few years ago the ivy had been a splotchy mess on wire trainers. In this way rapid gentrification often ran parallel or butted up to growing blocks of urban crime. On the upside, the city's orderliness meant directions could be given off Abercorn Street, and you'd know if you'd gone too far when you fell in the water.

Marcus and I were looking at apartments on the west side, which wasn't south of Victory but was in the Victorian District, all gingerbread details and sunburst gables. I had handled the rejection from the Conservatorio di Ives in the same way as when I was
chosen to play a winged monkey instead of Dorothy: it became what I'd really wanted all along. I'd told Marcus first, on his day off, saying that I'd have to pay tuition but Turin was still on the table. He said it could be worth it, but his eyes stayed on his computer, reading some article about reef islands. Sulking. When my mother took me out to lunch on Saturday, I'd told her the answer had come in the mail. I could already see her doing the math, figuring out what expenses would have to be cut, like the monthly restaurant visit. I knew she'd kill herself trying to make it work for me, so I just told her I didn't get in but Marcus and I might start looking at apartments, to save on costs. She had clapped her hands down on the table, said that was wonderful. She'd start looking for rental signs and oh, KC's youngest had started walking.

Texas toast BLTs, poptart yogurt parfaits & grits, cereal shakes, frozen waffles doused in Log Cabin syrup. In the days leading up to his departure, Marcus and I ate through our limited culinary repertoire as we spent mornings wrapped in blankets in his small eat-in kitchen, sharing listings we'd found or making hushed small talk over our steaming mugs. But mostly we let the morning unfold in silence. I had told him I wouldn't be going to Italy after all, since it wasn't on the exact terms I'd wanted, and he'd celebrated by taking me out to dinner. Marcus mentioned the call center was hiring and offered decent money if you could stand the hours, but I said I'd just keep working at the bar. The new certainty of our respective futures drew us closer together rather than apart. I thought of quick-dry concrete and the habits we had already picked up. The cozy kitchen routine. His roommates learned to leave space for my car in the driveway. Amanda stopped asking whether I wanted to do a food run after work.

A Massachusetts houseboat was for sale, so I turned my laptop toward him.
“Wouldn't this be perfect?” Deeply discounted and needing renovations, it was still out of our price range. But as Amanda would say, I could dream.

“The maintenance would be a nightmare,” he groaned.

“I mean, yeah, but the idea.”

“Ha. Let's stick with finding something I can actually show my parents.”

I searched for practical, respectable, cheap, waterfront properties, but I just got articles about the housing market needing to rebound after the recession.

“Bon appetito!” Marcus flourished a plate in front of me, loaded with soft-boiled eggs and buttered toast soldiers.

“Buon,” I corrected, tapping on the shell at quarter-strength capacity. It always shattered anyway.

“I know. Just testing your language acquisition skills, Pellerin. See if you could have survived over there.”

I shrugged; who can know?

“So, I made this finely prepared and elaborate breakfast...”

“What, you want me to say grazie?”

I did say it, in so many ways, but then the clock scrolled to one-ish and I had to scoot off to the restaurant gig (after all, there was my deposit fund). Marcus made sure I had everything, then said he'd clean up. He kissed me at the door, playing house, and I almost believed it. As I backed out of his driveway and directed my car toward the freeway, away from the townhouses and apartment complexes, I turned up the radio progressively louder. Joan Jett accompanied me for the first part of the commute, a back-to-back tracks hour, then I changed to the hits station when the lilt of some summer-sick
heartbreak started. Miley's anthem for the wild, released a month ago, was still far from the overplayed phase so I settled there.

Rather than engage in the idiot circle for parking, I grabbed the first street spot I saw before hitting downtown. The long walk through the squares would be full of sun and air, the perfect counter to the lethargy I was feeling even though (or maybe because) we'd done nothing but laze in bed all weekend. In Ellis Square, a guy with his dog sing-shouted “Champagne Supernova” at passersby, so I crossed to the side with the Johnny Mercer statue. I saw the flash of kerchiefs first, the yellow and blues and greens a blur, then realized it was the magician from before, working what looked like a sizeable crowd. The twenty she left as a tip still weighed on my wallet, so I wandered over, hoping to return the gesture. I was uncomfortable owing something to anyone but, I had to admit, throwing that kind of money around? She had to be the type that busked for the thrill of it more than anything, something I've never understood. The one time I asked about us going out on River Street again, my dad stressed what hard work it was, only a quarter of it performing your talent. Mostly it was standing and waiting and hoping and reading the crowd. Mostly it was being able to command the space, to take liberties.

Like the magician, throwing plastic hoops in the air. She didn't have the air of desperation of so many others, the do-or-die cast to the eyes that drives crowds away like a dissonant note. She was decked out in her usual—jeans and a black blazer that made me sweat just looking at it. She'd ditched the bow tie, and I appreciated the switch to casualness. The current trick was linking and unlinking several metal rings, which I'd seen enough times before, but she moved to progressively smaller hoops of household items—gold bangles, pewter curtain rings—until at the end a row of lifesavers strung
together in a row. When a guy in the back attempted to jeer at her, yelling about a flash. I’d find out later this meant a slip in the performance, a peek behind the curtain—verboten in magic shows. She nodded her head to someone on her left, as though acknowledging a fan, and continued with the trick. The man must have been sufficiently disarmed, for he wandered off and the rest of the crowd applauded, I with them.

The restaurant owner had engaged me for the teatime crowd, and I wasn’t eager for four hours of plodding through slow, dreamy pieces. What they’d want was Massenet’s "Meditation" on loop. I hung around until a quarter past two, when the square started to empty and the magician wound down her act. The closer involved popping one mint in her mouth then sticking out her tongue to show two, newly linked. I clapped along with the crowd, only some of whom emptied their pockets but enough.

“Great show,” I told her, when the people had moved on with their afternoon.

“Thanks,” she said. “MJ, right?”

“You read minds, too?”

She laughed, a short amused burst. “I wish. No, just receipts.”

“Ah,” I said, extending a hand. “Maria. It's only Maria Joanna if you're my manager or my mother.”

We shook hands as she introduced herself as Véla the Virtuosa, or Véla Vallarta, or just Véla. She gave me her card, her name in thick black letters surrounded by red and gold foil storybook flourishes. The design of the cards matched with the dark drama evoked by her outfit, and I wondered how much was marketing.

“Wow, that's intense.” I slipped the card into the zipped pouch on my case where I kept extra strings. “How long have you been here?”
“Maybe eighty bucks worth,” she joked, rifling through her felt top hat, the oversized exaggerated kind, labelled TIPS. She exchanged the blazer for a leather jacket and started stuffing everything into a backpack.

“I mean in town,” I said, looking over the errant pieces—sponge balls, Styrofoam cups, cards. A group on rental bikes wobbled past us, bumping along the cobblestones.

“Also not long. A month? Two? I’d wanted to try St. Augustine for the summer but I heard the rules got too strict. Then Frank landed that sweet construction job.”

She scanned up and down the streets, searching, and I guessed they'd planned to meet. I looked too, but there was just a horse trotting past on its tired circuit.

“You clean up nice.” She nodded her approval of the velvet wrap dress I wear for restaurant crowds then offered the last lifesaver from the pack. I took it even though I didn't like wintergreen, just held it in my palm.

“Thrift store. Thanks. Are you going back to Atlanta after this?”

“Yeah, have to. But I like the vibe in this town. More guests, less crashers.”

She read the blank look on my face and clarified. “Someone willing to participate in the show. It gets you crowd support, trust, usually tips. Versus gawker assholes who just stare and heckle at you. Mostly guests in these parts. O.G. Southern decorum I'm guessing?”

The sun was beating directly down on us and I felt the candy start to go sticky in my hand. “Or maybe just a different kind of tourist. But the town used to be better. I played River Street when I was younger, backing up my dad on guitar. Just with tambourines or maracas until I took up violin.”

“How long have you played?”
“Almost two decades now, I think. On and off though.” Most of the busking was a blur: the bridges and boats we passed on the way from the suburbs, candy-colored houses, Italian ice dripping down my shirts and staining them red, the endless dancing in the streets.

She nodded. “Long time. Well, good tip on leaving River Street. I owe you one.”

“We knew most of the guys around back then, but most everyone has moved on. We got free meals from this little pizzeria every day. It's closed now, I don't remember the name, but it was run by a guy named Gio who thought we helped draw customers. He was big on Mozart.” Looking down, I saw the white coating starting to smear in my hand, so I swallowed the candy whole. “I quit, though, when I started going to lessons years ago. I don't know why I sound so nostalgic.”

“Ha. No, not nostalgic. But maybe you need a new scene.”

I agreed, wiping my hand on a fold of my dress.

Frank pulled up to the curb on a scuffed Yamaha wearing brown cords and chambray, different than I remembered. He had on motorcycle gloves and a sleek black helmet that made the picture look somewhat cinematic. I wondered what his friends at the construction site thought.

“Ciao,” he called to us as he killed the motor.

“Yeah, chow, I'm starving! Frank, meet the world-famous violinist Maria.”

“Fiddler,” I clarified, though I knew it was a worthless distinction. “Nice ride.”

“Charmed,” he said as he took off his helmet. “It's my brother's. Hey, you know anything by Alison Krauss?”

I shrugged. “My dad's a fan.”
“I thought about putting one of her lines down my arm: 'You can't draw water from an empty well.'”

“Nice,” I commented, without really getting the significance of the phrase. I turned to go, feeling intrusive, but Véla suggested we all go out for something cold.

“I'm melting,” she said, flapping the front of her jacket. I don't know why she didn't just take it off, maybe because it'd compromise the uniform of her look.

“Sorry, I've got to pass. Work soon.”

She turned to Frank. “C'mon, let's steal her away.”

Something passed between them, an undecipherable look.

He mentioned the famous ice cream shop near the bar, citing all-star reviews and a short walk to work, but again I had to decline.

“It's this side gig on the west side. It'd be a long walk.”

“Side gig? How important can that be?” she said. “Half an hour. Let me treat you. To celebrate or wash away the day, depending on how it goes.” The twenty in my pocket made me shake my head no at her generosity, which seemed boundless in a way I didn't trust.

“I thought you said you were bored?” Véla challenged. “Walk over with us at least.”

“I didn't say bored.”

The opposite direction from work, I'd never make it on time even if I got a cone to-go. But it's not like the restaurant would miss my presence. The owner would put on a CD; I'd lose out on a meal and competing with the waitstaff for tips. Frank went ahead of us to find parking for his bike and scout the line, while I walked over with Véla.
We waited for a Segway tour to pass then crossed to Whitaker so I could direct her onto Broughton. Normally it'd embarrass me, the fact that her guided tour would mostly include the Paula Deen Store, the honey shop, and side-stepping horse shit in the streets, but she probably gets it. O.G. Southern decorum and all.

“I bet this feels quiet compared to Atlanta.”

“Some parts, sure. But compared to where I normally play, City Market positively teems.”

“Well, pre-dinner hours are pretty busy, but that's why they're best for netting tips.”

After I confirmed the samples were free, really free, we stopped to sample each flavor of honey with a thin slice of green apple. I skipped the acacia, though, having already learned it wasn't worth the bellyache.

“God, isn't it sweeter when you don't have to pay for it? Is that like a psychology thing?” She crunched through a chunk of honeycomb while reading the label on some lipbalm.

“Yeah, I think it could be.” I thought of Gio's kindness and chilled Italian ice as I drizzled my last slice.

A girl stole glances at my case while she checked out the sample counter with her boyfriend. She bit her lip before coming over then asked with a big smile, “Okay, I gotta ask: is that a ukulele?”

“No, violin,” I said, hefting the case a little.

“Oh.” She walked away, interest lost.
As we exited, waving off the catcalls of drunk college boys, I gave her a rundown of the must-sees and the places she could probably skip. Unless she liked the kitsch of hearse tours then by all means.

“Just the buildings here,” she said. “It's all new construction on my side of town.”

There was a recent push to save historical grounds, the ones that survived, but a lot of them had already been updated in ugly incongruous ways. Which I guessed was still better than being torn down outright or razed, as had happened with many places—like The Roost. But, again, the tension between preservation and growth. Order has its consequences.

“It definitely takes money for maintenance, though, and there's only so much of that to go around.”

“Oh, yeah, I can imagine.”

We passed the low windowsill of a boarded-up business, where someone had left a lone piece of California roll, and there was a cup of spilled fries on the grass under the window. It was hard to imagine what situation had conspired to make this particular tableau, but something had.

“Gift for the party gods, I guess?” Véla smiled. “See, that's the kind of serendipity I love, when you just tune in to the absolute weirdness of the universe.”

Frank stood with his arms crossed as he chatted with an older couple resting at one of the outdoor tables. They said how nice it was to talk, then Frank opened the door for us. I told them to go ahead and get in line while I gave work a call. Outside, the husband was still talking about classic Coke advertisement when I dialed. It went to voicemail, so I just said I didn't think I'd be able to make it, citing a major traffic jam, and
apologized. The owner would probably believe it, considering the sidewalk chatter blurring with the street noise in the background. I crossed my fingers and tried not to give it too much thought, telling myself it wasn’t exactly a résumé builder.

The draft from the open door fanned me with a lukewarm breeze that felt cool until I adjusted to the cranked A/C. At the counter, Véla waffled over her options before pointing down at the menu, eyes closed, to a fruit sundae. I’d already tried it all so just stuck with my old favorite, lemon custard and ginger. Frank ordered a scoop each of the three seasonal flavors, saying he hated to miss out and wonder. He insisted on paying, too, pulling out a wallet embossed with COMPTON in silver gothic letters. It was so at odds with the rest of his style that he had time to throw some crumpled bills on the counter before I could recover and object.

Véla read all the famous autographs out loud, even trying on a hilarious impression of Morgan Freeman. Amid the art students hunched over their food—skin exposed by tank tops, faces sometimes punctuated with jewelry—we found a free corner in the side room. When our orders were ready, Frank pushed his cup away and left for the bathroom while Véla started in on hers. It was, as I would learn, how she did everything: with surprising gusto. She downed the whipped cream dollop and candied cherry in a single bite, while I savored my scoops by taking tiny spoonfuls.

An old Ataris cover song came on, and Véla and I started humming at the same time. We smiled at the small bonding moment.

“But I can see youuuuu,” we sang into our cups. The girls at the next table glanced at us before turning back to their conversation.

“Still good,” I said, pushing aside the whipped cream for a ginger chunk.
“So, why'd you give up the lessons?”

“More like they gave up on me.” I meant it to be banter, something I could volley before diving back in to my ice cream

“Hm?”

Véla looked up, waiting for the rest, and she missed the huckleberry syrup drip from her spoon to pool on the table. I broke eye contact first to stare down at my spoon as my swirled motions turned the two scoops into a single mass of sludge. I wanted to give her a story, but in truth there had been no climactic scene, no grand denouement.

I handed her a clutch of napkins while I tried to sort out the telling.

“It was Stravinsky's 'Berceuse' and 'Finale,' for a competition in New York. I was sixteen.”

I contemplated my weepy dessert, slurping a portion to draw out the suspense.

“The Firebird Suite has so much energy—real verve, you know?—while the orchestra's arrangement just felt watered down. The intensity of the scales, the charged lines, I just wanted to communicate something of the original. So I ornamented it here and there, did my own bowings. And, well, when you do that playing a concert being assessed by judges… you pretty much know it's not going to work out.”

“It's a concert, so multiple instruments? It couldn't have been that noticeable.”

“Which is exactly the point. I only dragged down the orchestra, failing the performance I was being judged for while obscuring the one I was interested in.”

She nodded. “Sounds badass though.”
“No, not at all. A string slipped during my cadenza because TSA made me take them off for the flight there. It's probably what made us lose the competition, or didn't help in any case.”

I buried my face in my palms.

“No matter, you showed them how it's done.” She toasted me with her dredges, the sides of her cup almost scooped clean.

“How what's done?” Frank weaved his way back to us through the café tables, and Véla sighed at the new stain that he was dabbing at.

“Okay, how do you always manage to wear your coffee instead of drink it?”

“Not mine. I bumped into some doofus wearing Beats waltzing around without a lid on his latte or whatever.” He gave her a big shrug that said what could I possibly have done to prevent this? “Go on, what were you saying, Em?”

Marcus and my parents were the only ones who shortened my name, and I flushed at the sudden endearment. It made me think about how my parents came to find me backstage after the concert, only the softest of smiles as they handed me a supermarket bouquet. A stupid tradition I could never get them to quit. My mom squeezed on my shoulder, the kind of automatic movement she did when I fell off my bike or burned myself in the kitchen. She looked so helpless to erase my pain when it's not like I had expected her to. Her injury amplified mine, and I had been glad when she took a cab back to the hotel to get an early sleep, hauling my heavy case with her. My dad and I started the long walk back, hunched against the icy winds, until we smelled firewood, a grill, something roasting. We glanced down a tucked alley and found a shop with a neon pizza slice rotating over a gabled brick front. He let out a low whistle as he marched us through
the fogged glass doors. Sweet basil and spicy oregano crowded two windowboxes behind the counter while Dean Martin crooned static from an old boombox. Even the clear pebbled plastic cups seemed like the perfect touch. We found a booth at the back and ordered a large margherita, which came out with freshly shredded herbs scattered on top of gobs of mozzarella. He let me try a sip of his beer and, then, inbetween folded bites, talked to me about a summer when he'd tried to turn to painting houses, for more profit. How he'd picked up fifteen ways to finish a wall but the owners only ever wanted it eggshell. I'd just finished getting a satisfying amount of stuffing to poke from a tear in the vinyl seats when he said, “It's only about what's seen, Maria. The end product. You understand?” I looked up and nodded, feeling as if I had indeed understood at least some of it: the gift and the curse of art. Namely, he could try out a three-color sunburst on a guitar, but the wall had to go up flat white. I pushed the stuffing back in and ate my last slice.

“I flubbed a concert trying to show off,” was the cliffnotes I gave to Frank. “After, my dad told me that just because you can do something doesn't mean you should. I took that as a gentle suggestion to redirect my energy where it'd be appreciated.”

“So no orchestra,” Véla said. She tried to dip into Frank's dish but he nudged her spoon away. “What'd you do instead?”

“Stuck around here, worked, went to school for awhile.” My ice cream was mostly ginger now, spicy with the barest citrus aftertaste.

My phone vibrated, and it was the owner sending me a text saying I could come in late if I wanted, but it was fine either way, there wasn't as much a crowd as he'd hoped. I bet Vivaldi or similar was on loop.
A guy in headphones shouted “Goddamnit!” and we all swiveled in our seats to look toward the register. He grabbed at his backpocket then front pockets, eyes searching the penny tile. “It's gotta be here, man.”

Frank gulped a scoop of something pastel and floral-looking, smiling hugely.

“What'd I say, Vee? Everyone's trying to get away with something.”

“Oh maybe just away,” I said.

I spotted a beamed eighth note of a tattoo on the guy's forearm, the farmer's tan peeking out from a white crew shirt, the skater shoes, like someone who would pick up acoustic guitar on a lark.

Véla looked at Frank until he threw his hands up. “Alright, alright. Just wanted to teach him a lesson in civility.”

He walked around the tables to the far side of the counter, pretended to read the overhead menu, then ducked down toward his shoes.

“Hey, is this yours?” We watched as he straightened, holding up the wallet between pinched fingers, and the guy sighed with relief, thanking him profusely and apologizing again about the coffee.

“He's just messing around. Likes to prove he can also do a little sleight of hand.”

Frank slumped back into the chair. “She's the one who ever gets to have any fun.”

Véla wiped the triangle of table in front of her with the napkins.

“So what do you think about going to Atlanta with me? This weekend? We could collaborate and do a joint show.”

Frank was nodding and they were both staring me down, as if expecting an answer on the spot.
Véla noticed my reservation and leaned forward. “Truth is I landed a housesitting gig this weekend, but I'd agreed to do it awhile ago and I didn't realize it overlapped with the time we'd be here. So I've got to figure out how to get back. One of Frank's buddies can hook me up with a car but,” she raised her hands to show me empty palms, “I didn't keep my license because Frank does the driving. The trip seemed like it might be mutually beneficial so I had to ask, but, yeah, you hardly know me.”

“No, that sounds cool, but I can't really afford to travel. Besides, not sure I could get away. Plans and all.” Which was only a small lie. Surely going back to Marcus' townhouse and watching AMC re-runs in his room was a kind of plan.

Véla dismissed my excuses with an arched eyebrow.

I looked back and forth between them. “I mean, what, just like that?”

“The house has plenty of room, Maria. Too much room. The owner is loaded so we can take advantage of the house.” She nudged Frank as she plaited her hair to one side and tucked it into her jacket. “Tell her about the stones.”

He broke the handle of his spoon into five pieces, arranging four of them in a starburst X configuration off the centered one. “Right. Imagine a modern Doomsday Stonehenge.” Waving his fingers, he goes *sotto voce*. “It foretells a terrible cataclysm that can only be righted with militant rationalism and maybe also some basic common sense.”

“It's a mini version. With boring graffiti,” Véla interjected.

“In... Atlanta?”

“Northeast of it, on the way back.” Frank wiped the spoon fragments into his cup and shoved our used napkins in, too, ice cream unfinished. “It's in Elberton. A little off the map, but a business partner told me about it recently. Figured we’d investigate. It’s
called the Guidestones, but nobody knows what they're really a guide for. Woo-woo stuff is my guess—aligning yourself with nature? It's maybe three hours away, a daytrip.”

“And there's the coffins,” Véla added. “Like the wall of China but made out of plastic tubs. We checked those out on the way here. Pretty wild.”


“Okay, yeah.” Véla sighed as she tightened the straps on her backpack.

We stepped back onto Broughton, and I walked with them to Frank's bike parked up the street from Lucas Theatre.

As they buckled into their helmets, Véla tried one last gambit. “I get it, there's too many unknowns. But you know that's half the fun.”

“Maybe.”

“If it's about money, room and board are covered and we'd make up the gas cost with a few hours in Little Five Points, easy. Let me know if you change your mind?”

She wrote down her number for me on a scrap receipt, and Frank saluted me before they took off. I zipped her number into my case with the card and saluted back, but the view was already blocked by a carriage.

Retracing our earlier route, I followed the river west and ended up performing three hours of my best Massenet impression instead of four. The owner left me a takeout box of mushroom risotto, and I stepped out into the muggy night for the long walk back to my car. I dodged women in heels who didn't know about the uneven pavement or who didn't care for the sake of fashion. Those looking for a party were already out on the sidewalks, drinking from plastic to-go cups filled with beer. Long wails resounded from a
ship moving close in the water, and as I drifted farther away I found that the horn's call
descended in my chest where it turned to a deep thrum, more felt than heard, as the giant
machines groaned their upheaval before grinding to a pause, waiting for the next journey.
Maria tried to stay up at night, to catch the stranger again in his comings and goings, but the opportunity never came. Her brother John would be tossing on the other side of the wall, or she'd nod off, always short of sleep.

Then one morning, she came downstairs early for breakfast to find the gilded and monogrammed platter, what they reserved for special occasions, loaded with a split and diced pineapple. A sign someone was no longer welcome. Maria's hands went to her stomach as it churned, knowing before she made it to the dining room doors that the stranger would be there, that he'd been asked to go.

He stood at the head of the table, holding onto the back of the Chippendale chair, while her parents sat across from each other tense as rabbits in the copse.

“We know you mean no harm, but we don't want trouble,” she heard her father say.

The stairs creaked beneath her feet, and the stranger met Maria's gaze for a long moment. He glanced away to his hands.

“And I wouldn't want a ruckus for you folks neither. Talk enough when horses fight, as they say. I'll conclude my business and be heading on within a few days' time.”

He lifted his hat at her parents as he pushed away from the table, clomping down the porch steps in a small demonstration of the speediness of his departure.
Hugh came down behind Maria, bumping into the balusters as he rubbed sleep from his eyes, alerting her parents to their position. She had no choice but to lead them both into the poisoned atmosphere left hanging in the wake of the exchange. She pulled him onto her lap and served them both fruit, wanting to ask after what she'd heard but knowing she couldn't rightly. Her mother took pity on her, explained there was talk at the factory. Things had gone missing. One of the Telfair's hired help disappeared. Hushed words got passed around, then not so hushed.

“He had to be going anyway, dear. It'll be better this way,” her mother said, wrinkling her napkin by folding it and refolding it. Hugh pushed away from her attempt to kiss him on his forehead, his current idea being that he was too old for obvious signs of affection, but Maria accepted the brush of her mother's hand over her hair as she smoothed her curls. Her mother and father saw them fed, then pushed through the swing door into the kitchen arguing over what an acceptable hors d'ouvre would be.

The whole place seemed to come to a halt with the news of the stranger's pending departure; even the chickens were uncharacteristically docile for their feeding as they pulled in their necks and squatted. Maria resumed sewing and embroidered miniature scenes, threading here and there to form a line of trees, a scattering of stars, curling antlers. She could do this while chatting with guests over tea, trying to be a gracious host, but she could also listen to the voices coming and going throughout the house, and she'd pause everytime she heard boots climb the porch steps.

Unsettled all the long day, she finished her chores in a rush. On finding that her parents had already left for their party, she took the first opportunity she could—when a guest mentioned the salt cellar was running low—to announce she would just pop into
town. She bounded down the steps and tugged the bicycle from the shed before she could hear any objections. She knew her Pa hated the idea of her on it, citing grease marks and materializing dangers, but she’d done the same route with John often enough. She pedaled over the wooden bridge that secluded Isle of Hope from Savannah proper, her skirts flying. On her way out she saw Ronnie, cantering on his horse. He pulled it to a stop as she went past at steady clip, waving. She whipped her head to follow the treeline, even as she admitted to herself that the stranger had already disappeared to whatever business he was about.

The path into the city was flat at least, not too strenuous, but it was hard to escape the length of the journey no matter the conveyance. An hour or half an hour—it always seemed like she’d never arrive. She had time to ponder over the lacy shadows cast by the oaks, the showy azaleas and languid tidal creeks, but also how she didn't know what to hope for: to spot him about town or to never see him again.

By the time she reached the squares, damp with the effort, she still hadn't decided. The rank crowd of commerce and burning fuel soon replaced the salted air of the marsh in her mind. She hitched the bike to a post just outside City Market before weaving her way toward the horsecarts and covered stalls. Nervous about being spotted by friends of her parents, she skirted the center hub in favor of the side streets. Yamacraw Market came to mind as she thought about how she might gift the stranger with something to carry with him, something small and inexpensive. To remind him of them, her, whatever that had been. She was just pushing into the heavy wood door when Tulu hooked her arm from behind.
“You don't know how to answer when I wish the time a'day to you?” Tulu's accent, inherited from her mother, smoothed “answer” into “ansuh,” and Maria found she missed her geechee tangle of a drawl. In the uproar over the stranger, she'd forgotten about her new friend and, she blushed to think, grown deaf too.

“I'm dreadful sorry, Tooti.” On her last visit, she'd been entrusted with the nickname used by Tulu's family after Maria had stolen her mother's sage bundle and shown them how to smudge. It was a calculated intimacy between the girls, and she used it now to show she'd not intended to ignore her so.

They twined arms as she recounted the high events of the past month: the stranger leaving soon, but also the speeding cars and accidents, the state of the crops, the cooling weather. They stood, heads together, laughing in the shadow of the doorway. Boys from school were staring at them from across the street, arranged in a loose churning knot. She knew they probably felt much like her parents about associating with the islanders. They would never take the ferry over and whispered about the muted miles of paths not being two hundred years past bloodshed and slaughter. But if the schoolboys evoked ghosts and hauntings, she just looked to the way the shutters on the houses matched the very heavens. *Haint blue*, Tulu called it, *to keep the haints, spirits, and boo hags out*. She didn't know whether she believed in those things or how well the paint would work, but she did so love seeing the bright slant shacks peeking from the trees.

As she thought might happen, one of the boys broke from the group. Les Howard, the foreman from the mill, looked around before crossing the street toward their alcove. He kicked at the dirt as he went, and the others fell out behind him like a pack of wolves.
She'd heard him call her a swamp witch, once, and other names that made her ears burn. She eyed his hands behind his back, standing straight and ready.

“Morning, Ms. Maria— Ms. Tulu—” His voice was soft and deferential toward their persons as he nodded his head, and she realized she had read the situation all wrong. He was only trying to gain entrance to the store, which they were blocking with their chatter. She stepped aside to let him pass, and as he moved in close he pivoted to pin Tulu against the wall, one hand across her throat. The other held the foreleg of a deer, long dead. The other boys stepped forward, laughing, taking turns poking the limb at her and lifting her skirts with it.

“You don't mind, do you?”

Maria said, “Leave her alone, Les.” She tried to shove him off but couldn't get him to move even an inch. It was like trying to push a dog away from a squirrel. In this case, the dog latched its teeth into Maria's arm in the next instant. Registering her fists, Les loosened his grip and watched as Tulu backed into the corner before redirecting his focus. He turned to Maria with a grin as he brandished the rancid leg at her instead.

“You certainly don't. Flashing them so pretty when you ride by on that bike.”

Maria made to move past him, to the open street, but he grabbed her wrists out of the air and held them over her head. She tried to kick at his legs but that only made him tighten his grip on her hands, grinding the fine bones there together.

“Show us your legs, Maria, like you show that labor spy your folks put up.”

She looked over at Tulu, who had tucked her shoulders trying to make herself seem small. Her eyes were as wide and dark as a well, and she couldn't speak because it
would draw attention back to her own skirts. Probably silenced by a lifetime of moments like these, if not in exact action then in general tenor.

She half-wished for the stranger to appear and rescue her, but she knew that wasn't how things worked. And she knew it wasn't how she wanted things to work, even if they could.

“Let me go, Les. Mr. Calder won't like hearing about this.”

He responded by placing the end of the limb in the hollow of her throat, dragging downward toward the clasped buttons of her shirt.

The adults were caught up in the end-of-day rush and the square was emptying fast. No one was coming to help. She looked into each of the faces before her, unflinching in their emptiness. Her eyes settled on the youngest, the Cowper boy who used to toss baseballs with John. He hung back from the rest of them, almost shy, like he wasn't sure if he was supposed to be there.

“James Lloyd, stop them!” She called to him, but he wouldn't look.

“Jimmy,” she said, looking directly at him and speaking softer.

He directed his face at the ground as he said, “Knock it off.” Then turned and left.

Having lost an accomplice, a little of the fire went out of Les. Enough, anyway.

He threw the leg at Tulu's feet as the band stalked off to terrorize someone else.

Tulu allowed herself a breath, then turned on Maria.

“You shouldn'ta interfered. I know how to handle those ones by now.”

“Was I supposed to just stand there?”
“Just making things worse,” Tulu said, then set about straightening the disarray of Maria's hair and clothes. “They only know how to bemean people, nothing more. Nothing in that head of theirs.”

Maria let her fuss as she stared after them, thinking about how Savannah may have been the first planned city but there was no coralling the wilderness of the human heart. To think, she would have to marry one of them if she stayed. She thought about how men had feared her ancestors, their rituals and myths, to the point of eradication, maybe because they knew how take from the earth without salting the ground after them.

At that moment, the entry door swung open as a woman in a black mourning dress and shawl stepped out of the store. But she didn't look tragic. She wore her hair short and bobbed, and her lips were bright and fierce as though dipped in the blood of her victims.

“Pardon me,” she said, as her heels clicked past the girls.

She held one hand over her face to block out the setting sun and retrieved a cigarette from her purse with the other. With her free hand, she fitted it in a holder, lit it with a match flame, and tossed the stub to the ground. She walked down the street and got in a car, on the driver's side, then jerked into traffic and vanished. Maria suspected that no one would think to threaten someone like her, and if they did she'd just ride off laughing.

Tulu gazed after the woman too. “How much you think that hat cost?”

“Too much,” Maria said.

They were too shaken to linger any longer, the light fading fast, so they said their goodbyes. Maria walked halfway up the street before remembering the guests expected her to bring back groceries. She had shaker salt and baking powder added to their tab,
then hurried out to her bicycle. At the end of the street, she thought she saw a silk hat duck around the corner. But she couldn't be sure of the color or of what she'd say to him. Balancing the bag between her handlebars, she pedaled down the road, past a line of men waiting for the barber's chair, shaking their heads at her.

She thought she'd been mistaken, thinking if it was the stranger she'd seen, he would have been heading west where all the business was, away from the island. She cut toward the path that wound back toward home, but at the dead-end, before the right hand turn, there was an old sailor's inn operating as a jazz club. Pirates' House, it was called, after its most popular patrons back in the day. On the way into town, she had gone through the middle squares, not because of the legends of pirates using it to hide booty and bodies alike, not because people went missing there, not because it was said to be haunted. She knew it was outside the usual world she operated in and it just didn't register. But there was the stranger, smoking with a man as they bent over some papers on the ground.

They looked up as Maria approached, so there was no time for her to hide if she had wanted to. The stranger's mouth moved, and the man collected the papers to stuff them into an inner pocket. They shook hands and stood, the stranger watching to make sure he had gone inside before lifting a hand her way.

“Come for the send-off party?” He leaned against a car and offered her his smokes as she pulled up on the bicycle. She waved the pack away but stood beside him, facing the street.

Looking ahead at the road, she asked, “Are you a gangster?”

He laughed.
“You're a strikebreaker, then.”

“Neither,” he said, coughing on his cigarette.

“Then what are you? No more games.”

He turned to look at her, holding his hands wide.

“I'm just trying to keep my run of luck going like everyone else.”

Maria began to see past the charm of the mystery, at last, to a man struggling in the world like all the others—no prescience, as she'd imagined, other than plain caution; no magic of any kind, old or new. She realized she’d seen him all wrong, as golden and right when he was dull and wrong.

“Sorry to have disappointed you.” Smoke curled around his mouth. They watched as a car swerved up to the door, then another, spilling out clumps of people onto the pavement. They lurched as one toward the entrance, each voice drowning out the other.

She drew up her posture, imagining an apple on top of her head like in the etiquette books.

She turned to him and said, “No one's disappointed me.”

They stood in silence until his filter burned down, and he put out the stub on his heel before tossing it into the weeds. Behind them the door to the club banged close, taking the voices with it, and the stranger pulled the poker deck from his pocket.

“Okay. No more games, Maria Ward.”

Accepting the box with both hands, she turned it over, noting the obvious wear, the frayed corners and the torn flap.

“I best get home,” she murmured, picking up her bike. She didn't wait to see whether he would go inside.
She pumped her legs as fast as she could, her muscles one long exercise in turmoil. Back at The Roost, knowing he'd be away a while longer, she slipped into his room, palming the flint lighter they kept for winter candles. Nothing fancy, but a reliable source of heat. His second shirt hung over the back of the armchair by the window, the fabric starched and cool. She tucked the lighter under his pillow, then moved it to the chair, the bureau, unable to land on where to hide it. His satchel poked out from under the bed, and she paused before opening it. She held her breath. Instead place of money or guns or whatever she had expected—just pamphlets. Road guides. She had to admit, then, that she knew nothing about him, at least nothing she hadn't invented or ascribed herself. She laid the lighter on top of the papers, and in this way she wished him well on his way and considered them even.

Two days later, with a small balance still in the ledger, the stranger left town in the middle of the night, and a handful of things happened all at once. The town was astir over a man they'd found impaled on the barbed edges of a wrought-iron fence, in the backyard of a newly-renovated home. He'd apparently fallen from the roof in the night. Pushed by a ghost it seemed, though the question remained as to why he was on the roof to begin with. Then disaster struck close to home as well. At The Roost, snakes got into the raised coop and scared the birds, making off with all the eggs. And John got into a fight at the mill and came home with a black eye and bruised ribs, over what he wouldn't tell anyone. Maria took to going to parties with her parents, stealing sips of the clear liquor that whirled around on trays before stumbling outside to shiver under the stars, waiting for the next thing the road would bring. When she tired of waiting, she would
search out the road for herself and would leave, two years later, during a time when “take someone for a ride” meant to leave them murdered in a deserted location.

—

When one of my high school boyfriends got an almost-new Ford Explorer for a graduation present, I had him drive me all over town just to feel the road under me. To kitschy haunted joints and local landmarks. To bookstores, where he'd push me into the romance section and hold up the cover of harlequin novels, posing us and pulling faces to mime the ardorous lovers, forever entwined and fawning, forever ill-fated. Once, though, I had him take me out to where the old bed and breakfast would have stood. I'd never had reason to go on Isle of Hope, just knew the houses were big and too expensive for us. The Roost had burned after the Depression and was never rebuilt, the Wards just taking the insurance money and retiring somewhere. But it was the land I wanted to see.

I had him park so we could check the directions. While I was waiting for the lot coordinates to load, I saw a deer, paused in someone's front yard. The sun was behind it, low on the horizon, and I could just make out three horns on each antler. We looked at each other, my breath fogging the glass and the deer's neck craning toward our idling engine, ears swiveling. The boy hadn't seen the deer and started to talk, so I shushed him before it startled. I ejected the CD and rolled down the window, humming soft greetings to the deer. There was this long moment where I blinked at it and it blinked at me, as it decide who I was and what it wanted to do about that. It stepped forward a few paces to nibble on a bush, forgetting my presence in favor of dinner. The boy ended the quiet by saying the directions had loaded, putting the phone in my hands. The deer jerked its head up before fading into the treeline, moment over.
We circled the roads until we thought we had found the right place, but couldn't get to it, the bridge gone and a neighborhood cul-de-sac blocking access to the islet. An older woman walked over from her side garden to ask what we were looking for, probably to make sure we weren't scoping the neighborhood or using it to make out. I told her my name and my relatives' names, some of whom she recognized.

“We moved in about ten years ago now, and the realtor didn't tell us much about the history of the area.” She looked somewhere over my head, as though the past was low-hanging fruit and if only she could reach. “The Wards sound familiar. I think next-door they heard of them,” she said, pointing to a sizable old mansion on our left. She added, “Pellerin, though, that name I know. My son got a guitar from your dad a few years back. Played the devil out of the thing and nearly drove us crazy until he moved in with his girlfriend. What a blessing that turned out to be.” I smiled and apologized about that, and after a moment she walked us over to the gate to her backyard.

“Go on,” she said, opening the latch. She didn't return to her gardening, just stood there watching us from the fence as we poked up to the edge of her property and craned to see the land on the other side of the stream. If that was it, there wasn't much left these days. Everything was overgrown, and not even the foundation remained. I wasn't expecting it to, though, with the neighborhood as nicely built up as it was. No room left for the abandoned or ungroomed.

There was a plaque nailed to an oak tree that shaded the back half of the lot, informing visitors that in 1962, after Henry Mancini's hit song exploded over the U.S., the river in front of them, what would have run behind and around my great-grandmother's home, was renamed: Moon River. The lyricist for the song and my father's
namesake had grown up in Savannah, had drawn on his wistful childhood memories to write the song, a song that had always sounded half-unfinished to me due to the chord structure. It was romantic to think about: an earlier Maria sailing away on the song's wanderlust sentiments all the way to the other side of the continent, or a song shaping a whole river.
When I got back to Marcus' place, the table was empty but still bearing crumbs and sticky spots. I loaded the dishwasher while he wiped down the table as we cleaned up. He asked about the gig, and I said it went fine, made thirty or so bucks if you counted the comped meal. Without actually naming them, I also mentioned Véla and Frank’s suggestion, just saying Atlanta could be worth checking out.

Marcus actually knew about the Guidestones already. He said he'd stopped there with his sister, to stretch their legs, on the way back from the airport after she returned from study abroad in Auckland, so I told him I was thinking about investigating it over the weekend. He said nothing, at first, then responded only with careful neutrality. I sprayed him with the sink hose, just enough create a slash of dark spots across the front of his t-shirt.

"Have out with it already."

His hands went up, on the defense. "I just don't get the appeal. We went and looked at some rocks. Big deal. It was boring."

"Maybe you're boring," I suggested, trying to keep my tone light. But I felt protective of this place I’d never seen, or the idea of it, and the hurt slithered out in a sharpness in my voice.

"Maria, I don't mean to shit all over your parade."

"I didn't say you were, but all this negativity—"
“Just hear me out. If the message was done up in graffiti under an overpass, nobody would give it a second thought. Right? Agreed? But because it's this official monument, a large, expensive one at that, everyone's so very intrigued. It's pure context. Not to mention general bullshit hocus pocus. Without all the added conjecture, it's just stone, and dirt, and grass. Right?”

I didn't want an argument, so I said sure, then offered him some of my leftovers.

While Marcus showered for work, I flipped through channels in the living room. waiting for the microwave to go off. Nothing held my interest, so I settled on the couch with my reheated risotto, leaving it on a Western. The set managed to be both vibrant and desolate, evoking times past with all the exuberance of technicolor. Fifteen minutes in, I realized that I had seen it before. Not the movie, just the whole *mise en place*: the wet-cheeked woman calling from the porch, clinging to her dusty dress/skirt/apron as the man rides off in a cloud of grit/dirt/sand. The close-up shot of her looking longingly at the fading figure on the horizon. But give her a horse, I thought. Give her a horse to set them on equal ground, and see how far how fast she'll go. I thought of Barbara Stanwyck in the one with the hired guns, a film that sees her shot by her brother, wounded and brought low. But she doesn't cling to the porch. She doesn't let herself be left behind but gallops right off to California.

One of Marcus' roommates shuffled down the stairs, saying how the smell of the risotto made him hungry.

“What's on?”

He sprawled across the other half of the couch with a soup bowl of Lucky Charms and motioned to the TV.
“Not sure, I was trying to figure that out.”

“That is why we have technology.” He pulled up the TV Guide, reading off title and actors and short synopsis. “Any good so far?”

“I hadn't decided.”

He picked up the remote and aimed it at the set.

“Mind if I change? I think American Ninja Warrior is on.”

“Go ahead, I'm heading upstairs anyway.” I put my plate in the dishwasher and left the room to a soundtrack of awes as a competitor fell off the net swing into the water.

From an open window, thunder rumbled in the distance, a summer storm brewing off the coast. Cross-legged on the futon, I took out Signora Verona and tried picking my way through the Fistful of Dollars theme by ear. Marcus came in joking about a showdown at high noon as he turned on his computer. He'd found a two bedroom/two bath for us, under a thousand a month. The landlord said he just really wanted to rent to someone nice, so he could accept the deposit in chunks over a three-month span if needed. Marcus suggested I decorate the place while he does his residency, or we could just work on it together when he gets back.

“Look at all those old details you love. The random shelf in the wall?”

“That's where the telephones used to go,” I explained. The kitchen still had a Wedgewood stove, cute in a 50s diner way.

We made plans to do a walkthrough the next morning, then I said I was going to head back to my place to do laundry.

“Just wash something here, it'll be easier than going out in the weather.” He pointed to the ceiling as more thunder sounded.
“That's why we have umbrellas,” I said, zipping Verona into her case.

—

For the first time in a week, it was my own bed that I woke up in and my own silence that I occupied. The rain had come and gone leaving a sauna-heavy heat in the air. It was like a sopped grey washcloth hanging low over the sky, diffusing what light could be wrung from the clouds. I rubbed my eyes so hard I saw sparks and lightning bolts, then checked my phone. Marcus had sent a picture of his blueberry pancakes topped with a banana smile, and I could almost taste the cloying sweetness of the syrup. Then my mom, in her understated way, had forwarded a job description for an elementary school music teacher. I considered my options, though I didn't conceive of them as such. Just more things added to the list of the never-quite-reached, the always-undone.

From the closet, I dug out my grandmother's cigar box, where I'd stored my favorite treasures. It was all the same as I had left it. The lid's cardboard still felt sturdy and attached, surprising considering the years. A yellow rose, pressed in tissue paper, fragranced the box with a sweet decay, and I rotated through the postcards. Written in fading pencil and splotchy black ink, the details could be hard to make out. They mostly featured city sights, aerial views and idealized landscapes, or *Greetings from wherever*. One was a view of the Pacific Coast Highway, from June 1936 (or 8), describing an ideal walk under wisteria blooms. I set the papers aside and retrieved my half-size violin from behind the wooden chest, long relegated to storage. Outgrown in only a few years and forever falling out of tune anyway, I moved on to my dad's fiddle, then to newer and more well-behaved models. But the full boomy sounds I could get out of it were only earned with the accrual of time sunk deep in the wood. It didn’t feel right to sell it or even
give it away. The fingerboard melded to my touch, worn to a white shine over A and E. After so many slides, it needed to be resurfaced though it wasn't worth the effort. And I could still pluck out other chords: B for tending the bar, for being right and true and staying the course. C for see what Turin had to offer, even if it wasn’t on the terms I had wanted. G for go to Atlanta. G for go along for the ride. Open note for the open road.

*Thrumthrumthrum.*

When my manager called, trying to get me to take over for one of the waitstaff, I crawled out of the closet and left the stuff on my bed. I told them I had plans already and sent the next call to voicemail. My empty stomach protested its lack of breakfast, so I got up to cycle through all of the kitchen cabinets for something edible and quick and filling. Cool air escaped the fridge as I stood blinking against the sudden glare. There was only a Kraft pack of cheese, half an onion, and three PBRs that were already there when I moved in a year ago.

I slouched over the counter with a cheese slice, which seemed like the least questionable option, then I called Amanda and offered to bring over biscuit sandwiches if she made us coffee.

Her apartment complex was in the suburbs, so by the time I made it there toasty-warm aromas had already saturated the room from the the morning’s first brew. I dropped the to-go bag on the table and took a seat at her street-salvage dining set made cheery with mismatched chairs spraypainted the same shade of turquoise. Amanda had already tuned out for the morning. Headphones on, she slumped across the table with her laptop in front of her, still wearing club bracelets. I mimed my thanks for the cup, not wanting to
interrupt her sitcom, but she paused the show, detangling cords, and asked what happened.

"What do you mean?"

"You never come over in the mornings. You're here now. It's morning." She raised an eyebrow, just one, a move I could never make seem natural.

"Um, sorry I guess."

She waved her hand in front of her face like a Jedi mystic, then unwrapped her sandwich. "There's an anomaly, a disturbance in the force. What's up."

I blew air across my cup, not even for the steam, just to do something other than respond with the literal and evasive: birds, airplanes, jet streams, satellites. It would have been reflexive, and true, but still a jerk move.

I asked by way of an answer: "Have you heard of the Georgia Guidestones?"

She hadn't, so I described it to her then pulled up pictures on my phone.

“I mean, it's so close by why not check it out. We could do a weekend trip.”

A blob of grape jelly dripped onto the table as she chewed, considering.

“Atlanta's great. I raced an F-Type there a few years ago. Well, I drove next to it for a few seconds down Buford Highway.”

“Sure, but the Guidestones?”

“Eh. Just bring me back a shirt."

I said I didn't think there was a gift shop, but sure. I dressed my biscuit with butter and a little plastic cup of Aunt Jemima.
She studied me over her coffee, which would look serious if not for her most recent mug acquisition, a cup shaped like Dwight Shrute's head. I asked whether it was from the sprinter.

She ignored my question. "You tired? You seem tired."

"Fact: I'm perfectly rested and just fine."

She laughed. "Okay, okay." She put one earbud back in. "I barge because I care," then slipped back to finish her show.

Marcus sent me a time for the apartment tour, and I messaged him back saying I'd just meet him there. I folded the wrapper away from my biscuit and took a bite. I had been right about the syrup.

—

I could thank the movies I fed on as a starry-eyed teenager for the picture I had in my mind. Mild sunny weather, to start. Scarves and whipping wind. Maybe some palm trees and candy-colored sunglasses. Vintage tunes belted at the top of my lungs while my arms swayed. There'd be a convertible top, for sure. I never thought about the moments before though. The mundane details of filling the gas tank, for instance. Being sure not to pack too heavy. Being sure not to pack too light. But movies tend to skip the build-up in favor of the high moments montage, all of it delivered in media res. Reading the journals should have given me a different view of it. I should have known all of us have to get there the old-fashioned way: with many stops and starts and unplanned detours.

When Marcus and I had checked out the apartment, I said it was dimmer than I'd hoped for. He said it's what you'd expect for the price, which was very reasonable. As the landlord showed us around, I tugged on my shorts, feeling too beachy casual, but he
seemed reassured by Marcus' fresh shave and straight posture. He set his cellphone in the wall alcove, the gadget taking up a quarter of the space a landline would. A shrine to convenience. I said I'd think about it, and Marcus took the form for the background check in case we decided we wanted to fill it out later. At his car, he offered to get lunch with me before crashing for a few hours before work, but I waved him off, saying I wanted to walk the area and check out the potential neighbors.

Bouncing on his toes, he said, “This could be really cool, MJ.”

I watched Marcus duck into his car and drive off, waving before I looked up and down the road. We'd have to do street parking, but the lane was wide, quiet, weirdly so for a weekday afternoon. A wind pushed through the trees, shaking down a few leaves, and a drop of water landed on my shoulder from somewhere. I walked up the sidewalk to the end of the block then back down to Bertha waiting for me on the curb. No neighbors to scout. I messaged Véla asking if she was still in town, just wondering if she did want to do a haunted attraction. It wasn't coffins in a field, to be sure, but it presented some degree of mystery.

She called, a few seconds later, saying it was too long to type.

"Em! I can't believe my luck."

I heard a loud gust of air on the other end, her frustration manifesting, I guessed, or maybe just the wind. I let the car idle on the side of the street instead of trying to listen and drive. Swollen raindrops streaked the grime on my windshield while she explained.

“Frank's brother agreed to drive me back since we had a car lined up, okay, put in for time off and everything. Then the guy that was going to loan me the beater? He calls this morning and says he needs it. His car got broken into and needs a whole new door.”
"Yeah, sorry. That happens around here sometimes."

“And he has a second car but his girlfriend won't let him share. So then Frank's brother was going to rent a car, but they're requiring some kind of insurance paperwork that hasn't gone through. So now I'm up a river.”

I was fidgeting with the Tybee Island keychain my mom had brought back from an anniversary trip years ago. The rain pelted bass tones on the roof, and the sun-faded circle of the lighthouse photo spun and spun on its axis.

“How far is it?”

"Eighty hours of walking, unless you have a ride I guess."

"I do, though." A true statement. The Bonneville was still humming along, though almost on E.

"Yeah?"

“I mean, nothing fancy.”

“We can make a whole trip out of it. There's this great lavender farm that makes the best scones and gives out free samples of tea. If you even like scones, I mean. I don't know."

She said the last part in a rush and let the phone go quiet. The steady clop of her boots stopped too, a pause on the centuries-old cobblestones, and I hadn't realized I'd been hearing it. The stones travelled all the way from Europe, providing ballast for ships before being discarded as an afterthought. So much was discarded, in fact, the people built up the riverwalk with them, and when they had run out ways to build, they'd had to start throwing them back into the river, effectively blocking the bay to teach the ships to stop littering the bricks everywhere. It sounded like an elementary school lesson in
common sense. But as my father had told me, you do what you think is best given the knowledge before you. I thought about Marcus' dismissal of manmade wonder, and I thought about how in the grand scheme of the expanse of time and space that the universe wouldn't stop, much less the Earth, much less the country, the state, the city, the street, even the bar, if I dared to deviate a few degrees from the clockwork mechanism of my life.

"I should grab some things from my place first. And some gas would be good."

"Don't worry about the gas, of course I'll fill the tank for you."

Véla's steps started back on the pavement at a quick trot, some of the rhythm dampened by puddles.

"You don't have to."

"Hey, bring your fiddle. We'll tagteam Atlantic Station and make back the money in an hour."

She said she had her own packing to do and would text me their address once she got out of the rain.

The drizzle was coming down pell-mell when I pulled away from the apartment's curb, but by the time I made it back to my own, a few blocks north and to the east, it had retreated into sporadic patters, making me less worried for the drive. I changed into comfortable clothes, then threw a few different outfits into my Patagonia unsure of what look I would need. My green dress worked for restaurants, maybe, but I'd look like I was trying too hard in a park. My father's fiddle had served him well through years of busking so I considered bringing Maggie along, but Verona would be more reliable. My gear included a few songbooks, extra strings and a spare bow, just in case. I'd learned that
lesson when I'd had to saw through a rehearsal with half the hairs broken. I collected the
bare minimum of my toiletries then grabbed an umbrella out of the closet, only one
spoke broken. It seemed like so little. I rotated in the center of the room, looking for what
else I might need, but nothing seemed relevant. The cabernet red of the cigar box still
called from beside the bed. I kicked it a little ways under, out of view, knowing it'd be too
fragile besides also being impractical and pointless. The card deck, though, might be
useful in case we got bored. Past that, I couldn't see anything else worth taking.

Whenever I'd leave Marcus' place in a rush, grabbing blindly for my things so I
wouldn't be late, he'd check me with a mantra he came up with after locking himself out
or otherwise being left at a disadvantage enough times that it got old: phone, keys,
wallet?

“Phone, keys, wallet,” I whispered, patting my pockets. That's all I'd really need.

He'd just disapprove, so I didn't bother giving him a heads up. I'd be back by his
day off on Monday, and he'd be the one gone after that.

I locked my haul in the trunk and picked up Véla from a chain hotel on the
industrial side of town. She had opted for carefully ripped jeans and baggy tanktop, while
I'd gone with a jacket layered over a shirt tucked into cutoffs. Frank's borrowed
motorcycle was parked across two spaces. He came out in his usual uniform of plain
black t-shirt and jeans, though he said he was just on break. He helped with the luggage, a
single huge roller bag with a pastel floral pattern and beautiful copper handles that
gleamed, which seemed absurd next to my bookbag, half-empty and stuck all over with
free patches. I was also embarrassed by the drooping fabric of the ceiling, the torn seats,
the lack of bass or anything in the way of approximating style. But neither of them
seemed to mind, and Véla was already flipping through radio stations, wiggling her shoulders in anticipation of an imagined jam. Frank leaned into the passenger window.

"Just do me a favor and steer clear of cliffs, okay?" he said, honest-to-god winking at his own joke, which Véla knew enough to roll her eyes at. I let myself laugh, a little, though it wasn't even my favorite road movie.

"We'll do exactly what we want to do, I think."

"Oh, boy," he said, and rapped on the glass twice as a sendoff. Véla blew him a kiss, but he missed it, turning away from us to put on his helmet. Véla busied herself with adjusting her sunglasses in the side mirror. Frank straddled the bike and kickstarted it, letting it drift forward as he snapped the buckle under his chin. He roared off in a way my car could only ever aspire to, and a minute later we eased out onto the road—ease being the only thing the Pontiac was up for, really, and I couldn't even say it was open because we'd caught the tail end of lunch hour traffic. It was too warm for scarves, too humid for the windows to be down, and the road dimmed when I tried to put on shades. Rather than sun, we had rainclouds chasing us. But we had the essentials: good music and forward momentum. And you really only need one of those.

We crawled behind the same vehicle, a lifted truck with offset wheels, for the first five miles or so, long enough for the bumper stickers to jumpstart conversation. Then Véla wanted to stop and pose with the pink and grey elephants, the fiberglass sentinels of a fireworks store. We draped ourselves over the trunks and posed, pretending to ride. A few minutes more driving, we were out of town and catching the first highway signs. Véla talked the whole way to erase any awkward spaces, while I made small noises of encouragement and nodded and tried to take in the sights without wrecking.
Véla told me she had grown up in a town just outside Atlanta, a place with one theater and one comic book shop, the latter of which her father owned. He had a collection of CGC-graded Action Comics worth a small fortune that he kept hidden in the back, and this stash had fascinated her—the point system, the rigid plastic, the austerity of it all. The element of the taboo.

“He let me read the reprints off the shelf, but I didn't care about Superman. I followed the stories for Zatara.”

“Is that like Barbarella?”

“They kind of rhyme, but no. Different deal entirely. Zatara is a stage magician. But the twist is he's also a real magician.”

“Ah.” Hence her line of work, I guessed.

Seeing her interest, her dad had gifted her with the first appearance of Zatara's daughter, Zatanna, who had the same skill set. Véla read the next issue, then the whole story arc. Because she had to hang out in the shop for hours after school until her father could close up, she soon read through most of the other major and minor appearances.

“I was such a nerd. I even memorized some spells and half-learned to speak backwards, though I was faster at writing it.”

“Example?”

“Ekoms dna srorrim! Kool, I ma ngiklat sdrawkcab!”

She waved her fingers as if over a crystal ball and cackled as the radio went to commercial break. She flipped through my presets, but the signal was too weak to get much of anything so she turned off the radio. The vents blew muggy air on us, and we cracked the windows for a cross-breeze. Véla's eyes followed the tree line and her voice
didn't waver, didn't pause, when she told me that her father had died in a wreck. She was still young and just barely into high school when it had happened. Her mother had left them to start a new family before that, when she was even younger. So she was sent to a boarding school. Her mother told her it was because it was the best, and it was very good, but it was also because Véla ran around with her old friends, who had weren't as well off, who lived in the wrong neighborhoods, who had the wrong last names and skin colors and accents. After graduation, she moved around, picking up odd jobs mostly in the entertainment industry. Which is where she remembered the Zatanna comics and learned some tricks, made it part of her show.

"And Frank?" I prompted, the only missing piece.

"I went on a double date with a dancer I knew, so she'd feel safe. She ended up ducking out early, too bored to even get a free meal out of it. Moi ended up wandering all over with her date's hilarious friend. She couldn't believe my luck."

"Sounds like synchronicity or something."

"And I don't know how we didn't get mugged five times over, wandering Piedmont at night. But it's like nothing bad can happen with that guy."

Her face was relaxed as she looked over the mown grass and towering line of pine trees, defaulting to a dreamy smile. She tried to hide it when she noticed me notice her.

She looked down. "Anyway, the end."

“That'll be a nice story to tell your kids one day."

“Whoa, who said anything about kids? Getting a little heavy, Em.”
The radio dipped in and out along the way. As we tried to pick up a decent signal, a flirty semi came up beside us, honking and honking. Véla joked about giving him a quick show. Then I noticed something hanging from the guy's GPS.

After a moment of squinting, Véla said, “I think that's a disco ball.”

We stifled our laughs, just waved and let him go past, one last musical honk issuing forth. It was a short distance after Swainsboro, where the white cross memorials seemed to increase in frequency, that I took the exit she pointed out for the lavender farm.

Puddles filled the low ruts of the bumpy path down the drive in a way that resembled lace. The parking lot was empty, though the sign on the door said the shop should have been open. I looked for activity from the wooden front porch steps while Véla tried the back entrance.

“Any luck, Véla?”

“I don't know. I guess they might be closed for a special occasion or event.”

We cupped our hands around the dark storefront windows to see in at the neat rows of tea, candies, cellophane-wrapped treats twined with tiny blooms.

“It does look like it would have been nice,” I admitted.

The store wasn't open for scones and it was too late in the season for blooms, but Véla still wanted to look around. As it was, with the overcast sky and threat of rain hovering in the air, the place seemed a little wild with its quaint decorations and wide gravelly fields. My phone vibrated with a new message from Marcus, asking if we were doing dinner before his shift, but I just said I had to cover for someone and would just crash at my place again. Frown. I followed Véla as we waded our way across the field through tall sparse stalks of buckhorn and ribwort plantain that crowned the grassy area.
Remembering an old school game, I wrapped a flower’s stem around its head and flicked the projectile. My aim went awry and totally missed, but Véla was a natural, landing three shots in my hair. Something soft and woodsly was carried to us on the breeze, I didn't know if it was lavender or not, but I wouldn't have minded spending the night out in the open there. I started to say as much, but a truck was coming up the road.

“Ready to go?” I said, trying to gauge whether it was slowing down.

Whoever it was passed by, but the rain had caught up to us anyway so Véla was fine with moving on. The refreshing drizzle on the walk back turned cold and chilling by the time we made it back to the car.

“Hold on a second,” Véla said.

She took the porch steps two at a time to run up to the door. With two tugs, she pulled the plastic sign off the door.

“Just fixing their hours for them. Here, catch.” She frisbeed it to me from the steps, laughing. Instead of minor acts of vandalism, I had hoped to take a picture of the place, maybe get a wide shot of the fields in lieu of a postcard. But then Véla pointed toward the street. “Hey, Maria. Is that the same guy from before?”

I didn't remember whether the truck had been silver or grey or gold, but this one was a lighter color and it was definitely slowing down.

“Moving right along,” she said.

We booked it into the car and stashed the stolen sign under her seat. Heading up the driveway, I watched the nondescript beige Ram disappear down the road before I started back over the bumps. Véla breathed a sigh of relief as I turned down the road toward the highway. Whether it was the same truck as before, I couldn't tell, but the Ram
did a u-turn once we hit the road, so I urged Bertha into recruiting what little nimbleness
she had left. Véla watched to see if the vehicle had just been trying to find the farm, like
us, but it flew past the entrance to follow on our tail.

“Okay, now that's weird.”

The engine whined as the tachometer strained past its comfort zone, which
admittedly wasn't very large. Véla kept an eye on the truck in the passenger mirror and
said it seemed to be keeping its distance. With other cars joining us on the road as we
approached the highway, I risked slowing down. A van hauling an open trailer bed pulled
in behind us, and we lost sight of the truck as it entered the freeway.

I thought there was something else off about the trip, aside from the creepy truck.
I asked Véla if she knew what I meant.

“What, like roadkill?”

After a monotonous few miles of lane-changes and speed adjustment for hills, I
realized the difference between my hours on the road and my great-grandmother's cross
country adventure. And it was the fact of the road. Form follows function, and interstates
had a different purpose than backways—one was to get somewhere and one was to go. I
wondered if I was already doing it all wrong, not two hours down the line.

We continued northwest another hour, listening to static for long parts of it and
then local DJs with similar-sounding names, maybe a nationwide station deploying a
group of Toms and Andys and Johns to smooth the frazzled crawl of time, had been for
years. Instead of scones, our first meal on the road was dollar fast food burgers. I had
pictured a diner, something I could have described as a “greasy spoon” or “mom and
pop’s” rather than merely convenient, prevalent, with a newly updated façade. But I could eat and drive, at least, to save on time.

In terms of excitement or adventure, we caught up to the Mustang we saw before exiting for food, and it stayed on my bumper until I shifted to the passing lane. It zoomed past before I’d even completed the lane change. One of many in a rush. A police cruiser had just passed me though, and the Mustang sped up behind it before slowing down to the speed limit, in a show of good behavior, and switched to the passing lane. It rolled forward, toeing 80, just under the legal speed. Once it managed to nose past the cruiser, though, lights flashed on; the Mustang had to pull over. Véla and I shared a high-five over this, seeing justice served so summarily.

If I was itching for backroads before, the Guidestones addressed that concern. We exited a conga line of high speed traffic in exchange for a slow dance with a single Corolla, brand new, chugging down the road at exactly five miles under the speed limit. I liked the few random houses that sat alone, well back from the road, in the middle of bright green fields with no neighbors or visible driveways. They looked transported there as if by some benevolent tornado, the light hitting them just so like the Kinkade paintings in thrift stores.

The turnout for the Guidestones parking lot almost surprised us even though we knew what we were looking for. A gravel lot announced the site instead of an official sign. I counted a dozen cars already there, three different states on their license plates. People milled around the stones, taking pictures, video, or just quietly reading the inscriptions. A riding lawn mower, moving in effortless zigzags, trimmed the miles of
field surrounding the site. We stretched our legs by the car, thinking it weird not to feel
the road under our feet but also enjoying the break.

The monolith somehow seemed both smaller and larger than I'd expected. I liked
the neat geometry of the structure while Véla liked the incongruity with the surroundings.
The granite was local, though, so I pointed out that it could be called a re-arrangement of
the natural order. It was still overcast, the cloud cover wrecking any chance of testing the
lunar component with shadows. But we read the six slabs and adjoining pieces. The
eighteen faces of the stones were written in twelve different languages. Véla located the
obvious typo ("pseudonym"), what some speculated was an anagram for the owner's
name, and we talked about some of the other aspects of the mystery: the bizarre website
complete with flashing animations circa 90s Geocities, the ongoing conspiracies, the
intermittent graffiti and the cryptic updates. It's the first three commands that stir up all
the controversy, she explained. About population control and monolingualism. Otherwise
they would have been long forgotten.

"And why bring up what sounds like mass genocide anyway? Not the most
compelling marketing strategy, if you ask me."

I pointed to the last stone placed. "I wonder if it's the mystery that was supposed
to keep people interested." It offered facts about the stone's physical dimensions—weight,
height, composition—but avoided the real questions. "There's no trail back to a specific
group campaigning for a cause, no date on the time capsule. It's like it's waiting to be
finished."

The groundskeeper had parked the mower near the monument, his hands full
carrying a rake, a pouch of tools, and a big bucket of soapy water. He overheard my
statement and made a passing comment about how I was right about them not being finished.

Véla clapped her hands at the idea. “Are there going to be more stones added?”

He set down the bucket of water, pushing up his sleeves. “I can't rightly say, but we got a book back at the museum by the man who built these, something he'd authored years after the attraction went public. He says he wanted more stones with other people's rules, not just his.”

He eased himself into a kneeling position to sort through the tool pouch, saying how he can't find anything, and I caught his rake as it started to tip over.

“Thank you kindly. Can I ask where you two are visiting us from?”

“Oh, not far. Savannah.”

“We're practically neighbors. I took my wife there a few years back to do some sailing, nice town.”

He located the stiff wire brush in his kit and moved the bucket closer to one of the stones. While Véla excused herself to circle back to the dedication tablet, I carried the rake along and asked if the stones were vandalized often. For some reason, I saw it as a strictly urban feature, born from the temptation of all the blank walls mixed with bristling discontent. It surprised me to hear that it happened in rural areas as well, just part of the basic urge to express.

“For this part of the country they are. What those kids are thinking, what anyone's thinking with all this lawlessness I don't know. Vandalism used to be a word I heard in the movies. Now it feels like every other month. We had to set up some cameras last year. Yes, we had to set up some cameras to watch some rocks.
He shook his head. “I should have retired years ago.”

“Yet you're still here.”

“I seen better days, but I'm putting up with these.”

He dipped the brush into the cleaning solution then worked at removing the geometric tag, just a circle bisected by an upward pointing arrow. The blue spraypaint had dripped all the way down to the base.

I asked him how long he'd been around, to see the place change so much.

“I came on in '85—when I replaced the man who did the upkeep before me. He was only here a few years before eloping, going up north to Romance, West Virginia. It'd be a great story to tell, except last I heard he was twice divorced and living with his mother. Me and mine, we've been together forty odd years. Met at a little diner in Royston, where we both grew up, and maybe it isn't called Romance but it's close enough. Forty odd years. Not many people can say that these days.”

“Wow. Long time.”

“You're telling me. I almost didn't go through with it.”

“Why not?” I readjusted my grip to use the rake as a support, leaning on it.

The tag had faded to just an outline. The groundskeeper looked around before dropping back onto his heels.

“Well, the day before we were going to meet at the courthouse I hit the road. Didn't care where I went, just wanted to go, go, go. Ended up in Reno, at a roadhouse off I-515, and I slept all day and through the night.”

“You don't sound like you were in the best shape.”

He dipped the brush back into the bucket and resumed scrubbing
“No—when hospitality came by, I pulled myself out to a bar, to drink away my money. A woman named Gilley owned the place; she had a mechanical bull she let me ride for free, probably for laughs. I was one sorry piece of work,” he said, laughing at himself.

“But you're here and not Nevada.”

“At closing time Gilley turned the bull on to buck me off. I picked myself up, puked up my guts in some scrub grass, and found a payphone outside, gold-plated.”

I shook my head. “Only in Nevada.”

Only a shadow of the graffiti left, he dropped the brush back into the water and hoisted himself up.

“Never drank a drop again. I did a 380 on that one: went back around to where I started and then 20 degrees on. I shaped right up.”

“Now that's a story.”

I handed over the rake and waved before rejoining Véla, who was texting Frank about the stones.

In the far field, a stud of horses grazed in the grassy pasture, and I couldn't help thinking of Stanwyck for the second time that day. I also couldn't help thinking, even with the overcast weather, Marcus just saw some rocks here?

“I don't know about the rest, but I agree with one thing here. 'Make room for nature.' It's the only thing repeated, so it must be important.”

Véla lifted her eyes from the phone. “You've got a point there.”

“Hey, look,” she said, then, and turned my shoulders towards the monument. The clouds parted and, for a moment, we could see a shadow run down the foundation, a
straight line clearing the sundial. Then it closed back up. We looked around to see who else saw, but there was just a couple with a camera and a lone guy texting.

When we got back in the car, she asked whether I’d filled my mystery quota yet.

“I’ve got room for a little more if you do.”

She directed me to take a slight detour, for a famous bridge that’s supposedly haunted. The legend says a woman and her baby drowned there, the woman a foreigner, the baby born out-of-wedlock, maybe both. Their carriage fell off (or was driven off) into the river one night, never to be seen again but always heard and sometimes felt. We sat, car off and silent in the middle of the bridge, reciting the spooky incantations, Véla even said hers backwards for added effect: \textit{ybabruoydelliki}. We had heard a kind of whine after the road transitioned from dirt to the iron construction of the bridge. But it wasn't ghosts, just the mechanics of suspension, maybe a mismatched resonance somewhere like the wolfy sounds my half-size elicits when I reach for C# on D—the notes tremulous as a howl. After a few minutes in silence, we tried to scare each other, but it was hard to take seriously.

Going northwest out of the countryside, we lucked out hitting I-85 right as rush hour was wearing off and the street lights flickered on. The radio stations came in stronger, and it was Haydn’s farewell movement on NPR that escorted us into the city. An energetic piece and astounding in many ways, it was played with a full orchestra that slowly dwindled, the players leaving throughout the piece until just two violins are left to close the show: Haydn and his concertmaster. Once we left the highway, though, I had to turn it down to hear the turns to take. The house was located in a gated community, and Véla got the code wrong the first three tries but finally got the arm to raise. A rusted
orange sun was setting into a wash of blue clouds when we pulled up to a boxy mansion. It was done in a neoclassical style, the left side boasting a Juliet balcony, and I counted at least eight columns on the front to frame the extra-wide entryway. Two barrel-shaped sky holly plants reached the roofline, softening the corners of the structure.

Véla did a few toe-touch stretches before scanning the hydrangeas, retrieving the key from one of those fake rock things. I popped the trunk so I could hoist my backpack out, and Véla's luggage took both of us to wrestle it to the ground. She pushed open the front door and smiled, “Home! For a little while at least.”

If I was going to keep track, I'd say we had logged five hours and thirty-seven minutes, 326 miles, and three stops. Zero scones.
When Maria Ward hit the road, here's how it happened: she rode into town and marched into Edmund Calder's office that week, intending to demand he corral his wild young employees from terrorizing her and others when they were about their business in town. She intended to give him an earful except, instead of finding the father sitting behind the carved mahogany desk, there was the son, back from boarding school. As the eldest, Cain was expected to take over his father's company one day, but when she walked in he was twirling a pen over a map, looking out the window. Maria found a sympathetic ear in Cain. While away up north, he had adopted a boulevard style complete with pearl spats. That is, he'd come up with his own plans which were at odds with the factory-running future his father had planned for him (at least he's not a bootlegger, her parents would say). His draft card for the second war, signed in 1942, cited his occupation as land speculator. Maria's complaints would give him a reason to boycott the whole paper mill, on moral grounds, something that would irritate Edmund but nonetheless he'd have to respect. The company instituted policies to improve worker conditions so Cain might yet be swayed to take over. But in the meantime, Maria taught Cain petty betting games in his parlor while he told her exaggerated stories of his time at Deerfield. They started courting like a pair of mating cranes—highly performative and awkward at best. Until one party, when Maria stepped outside for a break to find him rocking on the porch. Another runaway. He was smoking his father's cigarettes, and she
took one when he offered just to show off. When she choked on the inhale, he said she
didn't have to, that they could just sit.

She could tell he was agitated from the way he tapped his foot on the porch, and
the thrum of his anxiety went down into her bones too. She waited, offering him her
silence until he figured out what he had to say.

“Be worthy of your heritage,’ they told us at school. But is it worthy of me?”

He told her about the poem his mother had named him after, by a French author
she had read at her own boarding school. “To the heavens, climb, the poem commanded.
But she and my father, they chain me to these grounds.”

Maria covered his eyes with one hand. “What grounds? I don't see any grounds.”

She guided him from the porch swing and tilted his head up. From their position
on the steps, the horizon seemed a sumptuous stretch of constellations as bats winged
overhead.

In a year's time, they were seeing each other every spare moment to spin out wild
plans, wild nights to come. And the year after that, they went to dinner at a restaurant
he'd chosen—not the best, but certainly with the coziest corners and dimmest lights. He
didn't entice her with promises of leisure or offspring or rich food. With a businessman's
acumen, he alighted on the one thing that might interest her: heading west, where he
wanted to make a name for himself in San Diego. Put it on the map right alongside Los
Angeles.

“Can you imagine it? America's Finest City.”

He read the excitement on her face, took her hand and placed a ring on it, and that
was that.
At home, her mother examined the stone. “Is that Burmese?”

Maria didn't know. Guests crowded around in congratulations, and during a celebration toast Maria saw how the overhead lights caught at the cut gem, the polished gold of the filigree setting. In spare moments she held the ring up to the light again, until she caught an image of herself in a mirror and saw how foolish she looked.

Her father, cleaning his glasses before he retired for the night, just nodded. “Yup, you have that boy sillier than a silkie.”

Accustomed to a certain quality of accommodation, Cain Calder had wanted to whisk his bride away by train, ideally in full view of the Savannah natives and with much fanfare. The local track could take them as far as Jesup, where there was a courthouse, and then they could continue on west via the Luxury Texas Star. Maria Ward went along with everything until this spectacle was brought up. She knew her mother would have gasped at the prestige of the train's name, the wealth it implied, but Maria was thinking about how this was the only trip of this kind she was likely to make. The one time they had taken the train to Atlanta, everything had passed by so fast it gave her whiplash trying to see it all.

She held her tongue the first time the plans were laid, still wrapped in the gauzy shadows of his sitting room, a heavy stone on her finger. When he brought over train schedules and rolls of maps for them to pour over, Maria waved them off. Instead, she made list after list of what to pack in the two pieces of luggage she owned. A scrap: “Summer and Winter outfits. Shawl mother knit and Athens dresses. Hat. Comb. bathing suit?. Photos of everyone.” Not a bad list, as lists go. Though in the end, it all fit in only her train case.
On the porch steps, before they told her parents their plans, she mentioned how she would so love to take a car. She felt his arm tense behind her shoulder.

“And it’s true it would be the more sensible way,” she said, eyes on her hands, her hands limp in her lap.

"An electric?"

“Not ex-actly. We need a car that can go a long distance. One that can go fast, and an electric can’t go either very far or very fast."

Cain relaxed, then let out a barking laugh. She didn’t know anyone whose mirth had more volume behind it, when he let it show.

"You want an eight cylinder!"

He squeezed her shoulder, then standing, kissed her roughly on the mouth and strode off the porch in almost the same moment.

“I knew I’d found the right girl,” he shouted behind him.

The swing still creaked beneath her as she called out, “Where on earth are you off to now?”

“I’ll be back ‘round tomorrow with a car. Sensible.” His laugh carried him over the yard, and she felt uneasy though she’d gotten her way. It was decided: they’d take the Dixie Over-land Highway straight through to San Diego.

The Dixie Over-land ran from one ocean to the other in an unbroken yawn of macadam. Etching a 2,671-mile line across the land, it was the shortest and straightest route of its kind in 1924 and the only one open year-round. Major and minor cities dotted the route, and the nation's first drive-ins, service stations, and motels popped up to
accomodate the growing vehicle traffic. Mobile America. Everyone was driving, which meant everyone was leaving somewhere or soon would be.

The trip would end up taking two weeks longer than Ed Fletcher's four-day sprint from San Diego to Savannah, and many days longer than it would have taken by train, but they were not out to break speed records, after all, just to get across the country in one piece.

—

If Maria had picked up a newspaper on her way out of Isle of Hope, she might have read two headlines. Namely, that the first facsimile photo had been sent over city telephone lines in Washington, D.C. And, second, that Rebecca Felton, of Georgia, became the first woman elected to serve in the Senate. The position would only last for 24 hours, but it was the idea more than anything. Felton was quoted as saying, in smaller type on the second page of the society news, that she hoped to pave the way for more women in leadership. She was still the only woman from Georgia to serve in the Senate.

Maria brought a single book with her, something Hetty pushed into her hands before she waved from the driveway in farewell. It was a reprint of some lurid, fantastical work, which described California as a mythical island full of warriors and riches. Loosely based on the conquistadors, it detailed how they had found great wealth after conquering the southern countries, making any battle seem possible and America another land waiting to be subdued. Ronnie gifted her with a big book of stamps, saying to write from wherever she ended up. Wherever. The word was as sharp as the snap of okra to her. With her parents, she knew her mother would cry and not mean it, and her father would not cry though he would want to. Her mother dabbed at her cheeks with an unrolled
dinner napkin, embroidered at the corners with a cornucopia. Their set reserved for
autumn. She hadn’t realized the time had passed so quickly.

True to his word, Cain returned with an V8 Lincoln touring sedan. The company
had once made aeroplane engines before discontinuing production in favor of
automobiles. Some might argue they were still in the business of flying, if on a different
scale. The rear passenger compartment was appointed with courtesy lights and glove
boxes, spacious enough for their few pieces of luggage and service necessities. Prepared
with an auto jack, oil, and spare parts, they set out early on a Friday. Maria had tried
reading aloud a small passage of the book as the countryside unfolded, to convey a sense
of excitement and gratitude. She wanted to share some of what she was finding out about
where they were traveling, what kind place it was and what stories were told about where
they were hoping to put down stakes. But Cain gave her a stern look, if one of inexorable
patience, and she remembered he wasn’t the sort interested in conversation with his
dinner. And so she tried to settle into the quiet folds of the journey, to watch and to listen.
They suffered a tire blowout on a washed-out road in Hawkinsville, and she stood by,
waiting to pass him tools when he called out their names.

The first brief, official stop was the courthouse town of Buena Vista, to get the
marriage license officiated. She wondered if the town in California came first or the one
in Georgia, and which one deserved the name more. Cain stopped the car in front of the
big marble bank for the notary, and Maria rolled down the windows to tilt her head up at
the wide fan-shaped windows. Built in 1906, she realized it was just as old as her. The
building doors were forever open with a stream of customers coming and going.
From her perch in the car, the streets didn't seem too different yet. There were streetlamps and faded signs and advertisements in the windows.

A young man, maybe fourteen, walked past with a pack tied over his shoulder, trying to hitch a ride to Atlanta. She made eye contact, and he took the opportunity to come over, ask if she was headed east. She told him she was sorry, but they were heading in the opposite direction.

“You know, you have a lucky face.” And here she’d always heard the opposite. He saw her willingness to listen and took his opening, shuffling tarot cards. Maria was thrown, for an instant, back to another life. She thought of the stranger’s presence like the dye pack that came with their margarine, spreading in bright uneven streaks. But of course lots of people used cards. He couldn't have a whole industry.

“But you're worried. You’re frowning here and here,” he said, gesturing above her nose. “Because you've invited trouble into your life and now you're running from it. You will go far, and only then will you find what you are looking for.”

“Why should I believe that?”

“Let me tell you.”

Using the car door as a support, he wrote a series of items on a scrap of paper then crumpled it into a little ball. He told her not to open it yet, so she held it in her lap.

“What's your favorite color?”

“All of them,” she said, laughing.

He laughed, too, then. “You have to choose one.”

“Okay, red.”

“Your age?”
“18.”

“How many brothers and sisters?”

“Two.”

“Brothers or sisters?”

“Brothers.”

“Okay.” He rubbed his hands together. “And what do you want most? Good health, good fortune, good family, or a good life?”

Cain came out the bank doors, business concluded, and shooed the kid away from the car.

“Oh, he was just showing me a trick.”

“I’ll show you a trick,” he said, straightening the wrinkles in his suit before he cranked the engine. “What's your name, kid?”

“Eddie.”

“Well, Eddie, bet I can tell you where you got your shoes?”

Maria looked at the grey work boots, the laces so ragged it was a surprise they didn't disintegrate before her eyes. She didn't know where this was going, but she wanted it to end before it started.

“I'm not even sure I know where I got them from, Mister“

“On your feet,” Cain told him, tapping him on the chest. “You got them on your feet. See how that works? Just be friendly about it and you'll earn some dimes.”

As they drove away, Maria opened the paper in her lap. It read R, 18, B – 2, GL. She'd watched him write it before she said anything, and wondered how he managed it, what the trick was. She turned around but he was already gone, maybe already catching a
ride on down the road. And she hoped he’d end up somewhere as warm and mythical as where she saw herself headed.
Once she had closed the door behind us, Véla felt along the wall until she found the light switch to turn on the recessed lights. A double set of stairs flanked a huge foyer with a modern art sculpture anchoring the center of the space. I followed her lead and took off my shoes in the hall, so we didn't track dirt on the snowy carpet. The walls were striped white and cream, with dark wood and small pearl accents throughout. An inoffensive *Home and Gardens* style. She led me up one side of the staircase and off to the left wing, hoisting her luggage up by sliding it on the steps. We stopped at the door to last room on the right, at the end of the hall, an impression of white on white on white with drops of gold: the knobs to the dresser, a faceted lamp, the chandelier.

“Will this do?” she asked.

“Yeah, yeah, this is fine. I mean, it's great. Thanks.”

“Cool. Bathroom is the door at the end.”

She told me she'd take the next room over then closed the door behind me.

I put my keys on the dresser, then my bag and violin on the loveseat in the corner of the room. I wondered who was just sitting around in a bedroom lounging for nothing, then jumped backwards onto the bed. There was enough room to do a butterfly freestyle in it. The sides were still out of reach when I laid perfectly in the center and stretched my arms and legs out. My childhood twin bed had managed to follow me from apartment to apartment, and Marcus just had a full. Oversized mattresses existed in that nebulous
realm between MTV’s *Cribs* and architectural magazines. I rolled over and put my face into the faux fur blanket scented with traces of some night-blooming flower, sweet and ephemereal.

Rolling over, I stretched and wiggled my toes before taking my phone from my back pocket. I searched for the Guidestones’ official website, which Véla had described as a self-styled “Carnival of the Apocalypse,” but it was gone, as so few things ever really are, at least on the web or as far as my technical skills regarding the web were concerned. Whatever neon exuberance had been there was erased by official reports and secondary sources. But on the upside, I had a message from the bar about a check waiting for me, and Marcus had sent me a goofy line drawing, saying it looked like a liver but was supposed to be a heart.

I knocked on Véla's door to ask about dinner.

“Come in and get a look at this. *Five* Hermès scarves. Isn't that insane?”

“I kind of like them. They're so feisty.”

She flourished the stained-glass silks as though for one of her magic shows then knotted one around her neck into a bib.

“Ready to get some food? I'm starving.”

We heated up the box lasagna we found in the freezer and opened a bag of salad mix. Véla found parmesan shreds in the refrigerator, then selected a bottle of wine from the bar while I looked at the pictures on the refrigerator. It was a family, the parents and two younger children, all of them dark-haired and straight-teethed echoes of each other.

“Is it okay for you to open that?”
“Sure, we can help ourselves to whatever. The owners said to make ourselves at home.”

I handled the wine key while she opened the cabinet doors next to the fridge to reveal a flat-screen mounted inside.

“Okay, now that's extravagant,” I said.

I gave us both a five ounce pour and took a seat at the counter bar stools.

The TV came on to an entertainment channel, talking about two starlets who were actually BFFs, one known for her style and the other for her comedy. Like that was news. Véla turned to the music stations for background noise, and when she got to the jazz station I told her to stop.

“This is my favorite Monk number. See how meandering it is at first, the familiar repetition, almost mild? Then the trumpet joins in and you know who you’re really dealing with.”

She closed her eyes, really listening, and swayed a bit with the rhythm as she said, “I do see it.”

“So, tomorrow?”

“Saturdays are go days, right? I'm thinking Beltline, depending on the weather.”

I set out cork coasters for us, unsure of whether the marble was sealed. “Sure. Just following your lead.”

She swirled the wine in her glass, watching the legs of alcohol run down the side. “I'm really glad you came. This house would have been way too big without you.”

“This house is huge. Who lives here again, Véla?”

“Just Vee, please. My name's actually Veronica, ugh. My dad was an Archie fan.”
“Vee, then.”

She smiled, and raised her glass toward mine.

“Cheers, to the magician and the fiddler,” she said.

“Cheers,” I agreed, as we served ourselves huge slices of warm pasta.

—

The morning was announced with darkness and rock music, so I was momentarily thrown back into my own room. I threw my hand up to bang on the wall at Vico but instead hit a padded headboard. Oh, I thought. The industrial blackout blinds had done their jobs too well, and it was almost noon when I made my way out of bed. I called out of work, which you could get away with doing a few times a month but I rarely took advantage. No messages or smiley omelettes from Marcus yet, but I figured he'd crashed after work. Véla—Vee—wasn't in her room, though the media center was blasting classic hits. I found the bathroom with a stack of towels waiting on the toilet, figuring they were meant for me. A freestanding tub stood in one corner and a walk-in shower enclosure in the other. Instead of clawfeet, the tub had rounded stubby modern things that made it look part of an oversized game of jacks. The nozzles for the shower faced all sides, but after pressing every button I only managed to get two to come on. I bathed with a stream of water pouring straight down and another pulsing on my side, a succession of small karate chops on my ribs.

Wrapping myself in one of the towels, I wiped at the fogged mirror. A circle in the center had already dissipated from a heating element on the back. I shook my head at myself, wondering how I ended up in a house like this.
“Rorrim,” I mouthed to my reflection, then pulled my hair back into a high ponytail.

Downstairs, Vee was swinging her legs at the bar sipping coffee as she flipped through a recipe book.

“You training to be the next Iron Chef?” In the daylight kitchen, the appliances gleamed with unfamiliar brands names and mirrored finishes.

“Oh, hey, you're up. Did you need something for breakfast or did you want to get something while we're out?”

It was an odd concept, after going along with Marcus' extravaganzas. I checked in with my stomach, but it was fine.

“Just some coffee, thanks.”

Before we left, Vee wanted to coordinate our look. I was going to go with jeans and a t-shirt, which seemed safe, but she said we had to stand out. She looked through the clothes I had brought, my restaurant dress and slacks and some shirts, and she said I had style but no structure.

“You can't neglect image.” She held a flowy lace dress against me, gauging the size. “Try this with some bracelets, you'll scream Stevie Nicks.”

“I need to play, though. Jewelry would just get in the way. And isn't Beltline by a park?”

“Oh, here we go.” She tossed me high-waisted black shorts with long zippers down the side.

“Joan Jett, I'm guessing?”

“Bingo.”
I ended up in the shorts plus ankle boots and a t-shirt—grey for some visual contrast, but not too much, and plain so it wouldn't dilute my image. Vee knotted the shirt at my waist and I kept tugging it down. She had also wanted my hair to hang down around my shoulders but I drew the line there. It had to be out of my face. So we compromised on a bun. Vee chose a leather crop top for herself, with a grey skirt and wedge heels. She came up with a name for us, V-N-M, like venom, but I said that was reaching.

I drove us out to the closest MARTA station and we took a train into the city. While it shunted us down Ponce de Leon Avenue, we talked options for the routine. I told her I could do *The Godfather Theme*, which caught a lot of people off-guard because it was usually played with an accordion, and she suggested she draw the crowd with some linked card trick while I played to the twists of the game: something contemporary and pop-y when it seemed to be straightforward then switching to mischievous when she was leading them on.

A guy in a Braves jersey sitting crossed-arm in front of us overheard our discussion.

He turned around in his seat, said, “Hey, want to hear a joke?” But when someone says something like that, you know they're going to tell it whether you say yes or no.

“A student asked his teacher, how do you make a violin sound great? His teacher said, throw it in the trash and buy a piano!”

He chuckled, proud of himself, then answered a call. I pity-patted Verona.

We took a bus the rest of the way into the city, then walked the last few blocks. The weather was a little stuffy, humid and still, but the sky had cleared. We completed a
full circuit all the way around the triangle perimeter of the skate park, skirting the ramps and bike trails as we scoped a spot. A unicyclist named Ryo was packing up for the day and handed us a flyer for a concert that night. There seemed to be steady traffic, so we sat down on the concrete to wait to take his place, a huge Charlie Brown piece painted on the ground beneath us surrounded by various sketches, tags, phrases.

“Let's take a picture,” Vee said, pulling out her phone. She used the camera to paint her lips crimson, then did mine for me. Holding the camera in front of us, arm high in the air so she could get Charlie Brown in the group shot, she snapped a few different angles so she could choose the one that came out best. “I just sent you a copy,” she said, typing.

We did coordinate, our outfits reading as permutations of each other. And with our dark sunglasses and aura of moody threat, I'd say we stood out, though I couldn't say to what effect. Maybe in the way of CAUTION letters on a sign. The look seemed harsh, and I reconsidered the wisdom of Stevie Nick's soft boho, just so we didn't scare the crowds away.

Véla the Virtuosa set up her equipment while I checked my tuning. When we were ready to start, she set her hat down and asked if I had any fives.

“Seed money,” she explained. “You plant it in the hat to play off the hive mind. But best not to go too high or it looks fake.”

She drew in passersby with an anti-gravity trick, and I played one of Ligeti's concertos to introduce a feeling of vertigo—softly, though, softly. Once we saw people were staying, we bantered with the crowd, asking where they were from and whether they'd run into Tony Hawk yet. Maybe people were drawn to our edgy looks, the promise
of something sharp and sweet like cinnamon. I switched to “Smooth Criminal” as Véla launched into some linked card tricks, then amped it up to a Paginini caprice when she started some of the flashier moves—in one case a literal flash of flames between her thumb and forefinger that surprised everyone, even me. The half-circle around us oohed, nothing but guests. After pausing to tighten a loose string, I played us out with “What a Wonderful World,” sentimental but true in that moment. What was always so special to me about a performance was the way boundaries of personal space eroded as people crowded in close quarters, dropped their shades and forgot to avoid eye contact. Many filmed or wanted pictures with us, and we kept getting asked our handles. Véla scattered her business cards on the ground in front of us for the taking, and I remembered too late what the banjolele player had said about a sign.

Everytime someone asked me my name, I'd have to spell it for them.

“Maria Pellerin.” Then it became, “Maria.” Then, “MP,” which Véla drew on my shirt pocket, inside a heart, when someone offered a sharpie. Insta-brand.

In 45 minutes, we made a little under $200. Three more sets, with the pre-dinner crowd even more generous, netted us a cool grand for the day's work, a $500 split. My shoulder ached, but in a nice, clean way. The money almost covered my half of the deposit fund, so I felt especially justified in the trip.

We strapped on our bags and she took me to Piedmont Park for a street food festival. We celebrated with paneer wraps and a veggie bowl while debating the unicyclist's flyer. The paper was glowstick pink with a melty font, with three bands playing in an hour at a bar called Airlines. It said NO COVER in three different places.

“So do you think there's a cover?” I asked Vee, who smirked into her vegetables.
“It's only about five blocks from here. I'm game if you are.”

We touched up our lipstick then walked over, ambled and strolled. We weren't in a hurry, and she gave me a guided tour on her favorite shops along the way, highlighting the dessert places. With all the inside scoop, she ducked us into fancy chocolatier shops to snag the free samples.

As we went west to east over a crosswalk, a man passing east to west eyed us up and down then walked backwards to keep us in his sights.

“Goddamn, you look hot,” he called to us, but we didn't know how to respond, not that a response was what he even wanted, not that I could place what he expected, if anything.

The address on the flyer led us to a blank door that blended in with the brick between store fronts. We missed it, went back, started to miss it again, then followed a large group up a flight of narrow stairs.

We fumbled in the dark for our IDs and coatchecked our bags, then climbed through an airplane door built into the wall. It emptied out into a shoebox of a room, the bar at one end, a stage on the other, and the dance floor a long rectangle in between. Heavy grrrlpower stuff played that would pair well with Unicorn Typhoon if they were still around. A singer with Punky Brewster hair kicked at the floor, screamshouting.

Ryo leaned over the bar, his shorts exchanged for a deerskin vest with jeans and cowboy hat. He spotted us and raised a hand, but we were pushed forward to an open spot to the left of the stage by an amp. The music boiled and I didn't know what to do with my hands, until I saw no one else knew what they were doing either. The bass pounded in my ears, concussive, but I didn't really want to move away either. Vee waved
her arms and bounced on her toes. Her mouth moved and I thought it was to the lyrics until she moved toward my ear. I just made out the word “bar” and shouted back, Sure.

We hugged the wall and followed it to the back of the room, where she told me the trick was to talk at normal volume, directly at the other person's ear, rather than trying to be heard over the other noise because it'd never work.

“Gotcha. Drinks?”

She told me about how she used to love nights like this, but Frank wasn't into club energy. He liked to swing dance, though, so she'd learned some moves so they could go out and Charleston, and she just kind of forgot about going out alone.

“I can't picture Frank swing-dancing,” I said. Then, “Actually I can.”

As we stood at the counter waiting for the bartender's attention, a woman with flaming red hair approached me. She smiled with her eyes half-closed, giving her a cat-like appearance.

“Hey, my name is Sarah but people call me Sarah.” Was she trying to be funny or was she just drunk? I couldn't tell, but we introduced ourselves as well.

“I liked your dancing out there. Can I buy you a drink?”

I looked at Vee, and she didn't miss a beat.

“You can if you buy me one too.”

“Yeah, of course. Are you two sisters?”

“Half-sisters,” we smiled.

She gave the bartender our orders to put on her tab. I told her to choose for me, wanting to try something new, and I ended up with a funky mezcal drink sprinkled with chili powder and cilantro rock salt. It wasn't bad.
A friend of Sarah's joined us, already soused, and she kind of rocked forward in place before catching herself, and she did this over and over. Sarah tried to ignore her and asked me how long I was in town, what I did. She knew one of my favorite Bogart films, so we exchanged some lines, laughing. When the friend's eyes wouldn't stay open, though, she said she had to go but asked if she could she have my number.

“Yeah, I'll give it to you.” Vee interrupted, holding up her phone.

Sarah squinted further. “Is this just going to go to a pizza place?”

“No, this is to my place, where she's staying. Seriously.”

When she said the number, Sarah put it in her phone.

“Well, I'll call,” she said.

“It was nice meeting you,” I offered and when she'd left, I'd asked Véla what the number went to.

“It's Frank's. I'm texting him now. He's going to get a kick out of it.”

It would have been kinder just to say no. I told her I also didn't see the problem with giving her my actual number, because it was just talking and she was nice. Who cared?

“Everyone wants something, Em. You just have to figure out what it is.”

She asked what I wanted and I told her I didn't know.

“Good place to be,” she said. “You should keep it that way.”

Crowd circulation put us next to Ryo who hugged us, asking if we had any luck ou there. We told him about our full hat, and he high-fived us, said we needed to celebrate. He disappeared behind the bar then came back with a tray, two clumps of powder on it and a spring-loaded contraption.
“I don't even know what that is,” I said, motioning to the spread.

“This one is cacao with raspberry, and the one on the right is with ginger. Definite kick on that one.”

“Okay? What do you do with it?”

“You snort it. Best way to experience all the endorphins. So who's going first?”

Vee looked at me and I gave her a look like, You owe me.

I chose the ginger, because if I was going to do I was going to go all in.

Ryo had me kneel down on the concrete floor and he talked me through when to inhale. He had this gentle force to his voice and his hand on my elbow steadied me. As I understood it, the machine would essentially launch the powder into my sinus cavities. The bands changed, and the music shifted from staccato lyrics to wordless anger, sharp and guttural, and there was less dancing, more shoving. I wondered if people were having fun or performing it. Vee nodded for Ryo to go ahead, so he released the spring and I snorted. I stood up, eyes watering, and took deep inhales to clear my nose. A chocolate miasma subsumed me like a Wonka Factory outtake. I was one of the naughty children who had fallen into the river.

“How was it?”

“A sensory experience, as you said. And I'm pretty sure I'm going to be sneezing cacao for a week.”

Ryo took a pinch then looked at Vee. She said, “Maybe in a few minutes?”

“Coward,” I sniffed. And I thought she was the fan of chocolates.

We left when the band played more of the same and went in search of a late night snack. On the walk to the MARTA station, we saw a neon sign of a noodle bowl, which
seemed to float over the dark alley. We stumbled into the shop, empty, about to close, but
the owner motioned for us to take a seat at the counter. While he made our orders, he
asked about what we were doing and where we were from. Vee mentioned her hometown
and the comic shop, and the owner said he actually used to get his comics from there. He
gave us a plate of potstickers, gratis, and the ramen was the perfect balance of broth and
noodles. I felt a little of what Vee must feel with Frank: like nothing bad could happen.

“Krog Street,” Vee said. “That's where we need to go next.”

She puffed on the end of a straw to send the wrapper flying toward me and gave a
smile that lasted only a flash.
In a rush to reach the end of the road in California, Cain had counted on making it as far as Selma by nightfall. But two more flats and a steaming engine had put them behind schedule despite the clear weather. Maria, for her part, was happy to stop anywhere and see anything, though she found herself sleepy with the distance and the dropping temperature of the autumn night. But the hard conditions of the road in addition to the general sense of upheaval had worn her down. Since Buena Vista, she had fought off the half-dreams by rolling down the windows at regular intervals to take in the air, searing and crisp and fragranced lightly with pine. Rather than road signs and mile markers, it was the density of buildings that established the rhythms of the road: forest, farms, a few shops and a cluster of houses, then farms and forests all over again.

While the car bumbled along as best it could, brown rabbits and white-tailed deer motored away in powerful displays of limbs—as if extended in competition or in show. Maria liked seeing the crumbling entrances to old estates and guessing where they led, who had lived there, what kind of life, while Cain chuckled to himself at the colorful advertisements passing on the right. Burma-Shave hijinks were still a few years off ("Free! Free!! / A trip / To Mars / for 900 / Empty jars!")), but in the meantime ice-cold Kist and sandwich triangles from Texaco called out their abundance. Look how much there was to buy—look how much was waiting around the next curve of land or crest of a
hill. Maria watched the sights cycle past until she could no more, when the dark blanketed the countryside and her eyelids fell heavy.

When she blinked back awake, the streetlamps were just flaming to life along an intersection of three wide avenues anchored by commercial buildings at each corner. So was her introduction to the tidy industrial town of Montgomery, where they would have their first overnight stop. Hernando de Soto made camp along the river for a week in the fall of 1540, while two hundred years later a Scotsman by the name of James McQueen settled there and married a high-status member of a local tribe, either the Alibamu or Coushatta. Considerably more charmed by its prospects than de Soto, he erected a trading post that drew visitors from as far as Milledgeville. Optimistic early developers called the town New Philadelphia, and they even left a site open on the highest hill for the future capitol. Later postcards would depict the white-capped dome of the state house as visible all the way from Commerce Street, by way of Dexter Avenue looking east. Illustrating the opposite view, some cards framed the grand seven-story Exchange Hotel behind an American flag flown high over the cast-iron fountain in the center of the square. The bird's-eye nature of the scene turned the streetcars into small boxes, quiet in their chaos, and a line of Model As parked along the street blurred with perspective into simple diagonal slashes. It was on one of these postcards that Maria, in a cramped and hurried hand, had complained to her brother John about waking up to this view. Though pleasant enough in its symmetry, it meant having slept or nodded off through Columbus, Tuskegee, and Talladega, not to mention Auburn, once described to her as the loveliest of villages.
The shutting of the car door had startled her awake, and she looked around to find herself alone in the fading light. Cain's hat lay on the seat beside her and, when she reached over, the driver's side yet retained his heat. She put a hand on the wheel, just to feel the steadiness of the circle, then pulled her shawl closer. Out the dusty glass to her right, the shadow of a tall building loomed, and to her left the expansive street stood mostly empty. She wondered at the hour. Cain's voice reached her from the back of the car, and she turned to find he was only a few steps away conferring with a gas station attendant over a map, their breath visibly roiling between them as they exchanged words at a clipped pace.

When Cain climbed back into the Lincoln, he cursed and tossed the Auto Trails book at the floorboards. Realizing Maria was awake, and shivering, he took both her hands in his and blew on them, chafing them between his own.

"What do you say I have a pair of silk gloves made for you. Better, two. A black and a cream."

Pulling away from the caress, Maria retrieved the discarded atlas to smooth away the bends in the cover and make sure the pages weren't torn. "Well, let's get to San Diego first and see if I even have need of them."

"You can wear them while gardening for all I care. Just wear them."

"A garden could be nice," she said. "A small one."

And he said, "You can have five or ten or none. Whatever the size."

She smiled at his earnestness, then at the wrinkles in his jacket, his mussed hair. He tried to fix his appearance before laughing away the effort. He tucked the book into the dash and took up her hand again.
"We could be on our way to your Eden as early as tomorrow morning, except there doesn't appear to be a single garage in town willing to open before Monday. It's a conspiracy, I think." Cain dropped his voice and looked around at the shops in the square, as though they were actively plotting that very moment and might overhear.

"Or an opportunity?" Maria said

He considered a moment. "Yes, why not. We can make up for it out west, really test the engine. I imagine the roads will open up a good deal."

"I mean to see the town. Really, if you're so impatient that you can't enjoy the way over, then we'd have been better off taking the train."

"Of course," Cain said, gathering the overnight cases from the back. "You're absolutely right. We'll see about bedding down for awhile, find somewhere to clean up. Ease our way into blazing trails and so on."

"A bed and a bath. Now that sounds dreamy."

"Well, dinner first, then a bath. Then bed."

On checking in, an aging clerk informed them that the Exchange was large and well appointed, with eight black attendants on call. His chin tilted up when he said many considered it the best hotel in the state. Cain asked for a single suite for two nights, then without a pause signed the guestbook as Mr. and Mrs. Cain Calder. Maria had known but not understood how fast his name would come to stand for both of them. She looked to him for some acknowledgement of this first display of matrimony, tangibly recorded in ink on cotton rag, but Cain had moved on to going through his wallet for payment.

In their room on the third floor, he loosened his necktie and slumped in an overstuffed chair. From his languid repose he repeated the clerk's praise, more to himself.
than to the room. He voiced how glad he was for such places so they wouldn't have to suffer too many discomforts during the trip. Maria didn't bother pointing out that it was the same type of claim her mother would dispense to comfort wayward travellers spontaneously stranded at The Roost: the best in town, the best in the state, the best south of the Mason-Dixon. It all depended on how far away the visitors were coming from and how much hyperbole Eliza could get away with. Maria had only ever said they were one of the most peaceful, which was probably true considering the relative remoteness of the island afforded by the rivers. As for the Exchange, the rooms were rather sumptuously done with Lux toilet soap in the bathroom and richly-detailed gilded wallpapers, so she guessed the boast wasn't too far off from being truth. But there was no radio to listen to—no banter between Billy Jones and Ernie Hare in the evening, no news from the *Eveready Hour*. Only the occasional horn erupted from the intersection below, and she found she missed the ripe smell of the river flora.

After seeing their things stored in the room, they went back downstairs to ask after any sightseeing recommendations. The manager at the front desk ticked off the standard sights on his fingers such as the fountain, the capitol, and the confederate monument. On hearing about their empty stomachs, he also confessed there were two diners only a little ways up the road. One called itself "Montgomery's perfect kitchen" and the other was his personal favorite, a grill known for its lively atmosphere frequented by all kinds—bankers, politicians, railroad men, and shopkeepers. Never a dull conversation. Whereas Maria wanted to see this buzzing place in action, Cain thought it best to just have the kitchen prepare a small dinner and considered it a waste not to take full advantage of the amenities.
They were directed to a large banquet space furnished with hardwood and chandeliers. They were guaranteed a quiet meal, with only one other couple in the dining room. Cain observed them, noting the woman's close-cropped golden hair held in place by a jeweled fascinator, her date's handsome face still somewhat soft with youth except for the ruggedness of an eyepatch. They shared a plate of caramels between them.

Maria took sips of ginger ale and looked around the room while Cain brought up the shops they could see. He saw her disappointment and reassured her. "We'll check out the diner tomorrow, over lunch." He talked about the years of exploration before them. The waiter freshened their drinks, the glasses having dropped to less than full.

At that moment, the kitchen door swung open with the cook bearing their dinners along with a spicy riff of jazz momentarily soaking the room in Spanish tresillos, a fluttering rhythm of three notes played in the space of two. In later years, Jelly Roll Morton would even proclaim that "if you can’t manage to put tinges of Spanish in your tunes, you will never be able to get the right seasoning, I call it, for jazz."

Maria wondered aloud, laughing, "Are we in New Orleans now?"

The waiter shut the door to dampen the noise and apologized, explaining how there was a tobacco store directly behind the hotel where the teenagers hung out because that's where the musicians were and where the musicians hung out because that's the only place open late.

Knowing what to listen for, she could still detect the high notes of the tune, and her ankles jigged up and down in an itch to dance. It was the other couple who stood up first, though, to foxtrot their way around the tables. The woman pulled the swinging door
open over the protest of the cook, just settling down to a smoke break, while the waiter resigned himself by pulling chairs against the wall to create a makeshift dance floor.

"Doesn't this remind you of one of your father's parties?"

"Much better," Cain said. "He's not here."

"Was it Fletcher Henderson we first danced to?"

"Something like that."

He spared his steak a long glance, but he stood up to offer a hand to Maria. They, too, started at a sedate foxtrot, the steps gliding and smooth. But Cain, watching the way the man held his partner, pulled Maria too close. His hand went low on her waist, tugging her off balance. They tripped over each other unable to find the right distance. As the call and response of the brass and reeds climbed, the bands back then always trying to sound big then bigger, Cain and Maria retreated into a easy shimmy before moving into a lindy hop that sent them careening all around the room, spinning away from each other only to twirl back a step closer, falling into the frenetic steps they'd cultivated in their early yearnings the year before.

It was only when the musicians stopped to switch to another set that the other couple called for some water. Cain and Maria took the opportunity to take a seat back at their table, flushed, their hearts beating in their ears, feeling both embarrassed and pleased.

The waiter brought out their plates again, kept warm in the oven, while the blonde pulled her date over and borrowed chairs from the next table.
"I was so worried we'd be the only ones kicked out on the streets," she stage-whispered as the waiter worked to straighten the furniture. Her accent had a European lull to it, though Maria couldn't place where she might be from.

"Constant trouble, this one. Good thing she's with a vet." The man tapped his eyepatch and winked the visible eye. He produced a flask from his pocket and took a long draw before offering it around the table. Cain contributed a pack of Pall Malls and, after bringing around tall glasses of water, their long-suffering waiter provided a complementary pitcher of Bevo for them to share, which was promptly spiked.

"Cheers to new friends," Cain said. "Almost worth the reheated steak."

The woman introduced them both, saying they were on their way to Chicago then back home to New York. They couldn't wait to get back, hating to travel. The men discussed the finer points of medium rare meat while the women exchanged smiles.

Chicago and New York: those places that loomed large in the public consciousness but Maria had only ever experienced secondhand, in comments or pictures or movies.

"Have you been to the Savoy? Paradise? Trianon?"

"Yes, yes—and not yet, but very soon."

"You dance beautifully. Have you and your husband been together long, to practice?"

"A lifetime, it feels. You know, I couldn't help noticing before, when you came in—your hat is just darling," the woman said.

"Oh, thank you."Maria lifted her hand in self-consciousness before lowering it.

She asked, "That flower—what's it called?"
In truth, she knew it was a fiery camellia posed off center on the pillbox, and that her mother had had the whole thing made in Atlanta, of wool and silk, to match the red stone of her engagement ring in one last extravagance before the wedding. But somehow it seemed a risk to know too much, or to seem to care.

"This thing? I'm not sure. I just liked the little ruffled petals. Crêpe, I believe."

"No, that looks far too plush for crêpe. Charmeuse, possibly?"

Her own hat was smaller, but it featured an effusive mixture of lace and peacock feathers threaded with bright jewels of peridot and tourmaline that matched the beads on her dress.

"And where did you find yours? It's so colorful." Maria asked after it less out of genuine curiosity than to fill the silence, embarrassed by the attention.

"Quebec. A birthday present come early," she said.

"The trip or the hat?"

The woman let out three quick trills of a high laugh, light as a songbird and just as pleasant. "Both, I suppose. Though I hadn't thought of it in those terms."

She took up a cigarette holder and fit a roll in one end, the line of it complementing the angularity of her body, a series of hard horizons and triangles. She produced a gold lighter from within a small bag, lit the cigarette herself, then looked off a little ways in the distance.

"I always thought of style like a mask you put on. A kind of soul you could borrow for a while."

"That's a nice idea." Though Maria wondered where and if your soul would wait while you were busy with the other one.
The woman fumbled with the clip to her hat, and for a moment the whole table stopped to watch, worried she'd set her dress on fire with the ashes she let fall down the front of the fabric. But she got by without incident or scorching.

"Here, try this."

Maria likewise unpinned hers, and the women modelled the articles they exchanged. The husbands drifted back to their own conversation, meandering and easy, largely fueled by the clear liquor the man kept flowing between them.

The woman pulled out a compact and checked her reflection. The grey of the hat clashed with the summery shades of her hair, and the camellia stood out like a stain, giving it an odd imbalance, a harshness.

"This looks a bit like an English garden on me. But I almost look nice, Catholic. Here, do you."

Maria tilted her head to see the glimmering hues tucked behind her ear, and the feathers had a nice weight as she shook her head back and forth.

"I look ready for a more adventurous night than I've had."

"That's understating it. Just add some lipstick, a shorter hem, and you'd give Greta a run for her money."

"It's a very flattering piece," Maria agreed, handing over the mirror. She also returned the hat and let the woman carry the conversation while she turned to her lukewarm meal.

When Cain's plate was empty and Maria's halfway so, the lights in the room seemed to dim or maybe they were all just growing drunk. In any case, the cook shut down the kitchen and the waiter presented them with the check. The man suggested they
join them for cards in their room, but the Calders begged off because of the travel and the late hour. Maria disclosed with a shy smile that they were newlyweds, and the couple exchanged significant glances full of raised eyebrows and a rounded O of the mouth.

Cain and Maria were cajoled into a last drink, and the man insisted on adding their check to his bill, as a thank you for the charm of their company and a belated wedding gift. Cain left the tip, a sizeable one, what the waiter might make in a week's time, and they all said goodnight at the stairs, bleary-eyed and warm and a little happy.

Cain and Maria each had a leisurely bath to wash away the day's grime and grit, and they were fragrant and damp as they prepared for bed. At the dressing table, she combed her hair into a glossy cloak that obscured half of her face.

"Only you, charming thing, could get us a free meal in a new town," Cain said.

"He was just being generous, and very drunk."

"Because she adores him."

"Or because of the whiskey habit. She says his eye pains him a great deal still, from leftover shrapnel. I imagine it's as therapeutic as it is an excuse for a good time."

Maria gazed at the view across the square, half-illuminated by gaslights, before letting down the blinds. If she strained she could still hear the bass trickling down the street, even as the clock struck eleven.

"I wonder whether you'll be able to sleep with all the noise," Cain murmured into her neck, bending low.

In light of his generally brisk nature and unerring sense of focus, especially regarding their ultimate destination, she had worried about their first night together, and the nights that would come after. Hetty had whispered stories about her older sister's
friends, and she would have read the advice books detailing how "rapacious passions may speed consummation beyond the realm of delight." There had been some urgency to their first stolen kisses, but wasn't there always smoke at first flames? His hands pulled her hair back from her face, over her shoulders, and she closed her eyes to receive his lips, maybe hoping he wasn't the rapacious kind. Instead, she felt a cool loop of metal go around her neck as he placed a gold chain there, a weighty pendant coiling just below the hollow of her throat.

"Are you surprised?" he asked, though he could read it plainly on her face.

"Yes, yes I am."

"Imagine if your hair was shorter, like this."

In the mirror she saw how the necklace was highlighted with her hair pulled back, rays of sunlight on a field of wheat. The gold filigree of the pendant echoed that of her ring, a matching set, something he would have had to coordinate and plan for. Pulling aside her dressing gown, he adjusted the chain so that it sat in a perfectly symmetrical V, the clasp at the back. He turned down the bed lamps as he led her to the covers, but even in the dim light the center stone glowed, like a drop of wine or blood or mercury.

This is as far as I can take you, though I know that over the course of their first week together, Cain would give Maria seven wedding gifts, one at each of their stops: a necklace being the first, then a matching bracelet, perfume imported from France, a gold mirror, a boar-hair brush, a music box, and an engraved pocketwatch.

And Maria would find that she could sleep just fine with the noise. She would say she was used to waking with the birds, when there were birds to hear. As there were the city sounds, though, it could now only be called five in the morning. She felt rested
enough considering the change of scenery, the disorientation of place, but she stayed in bed until Cain roused on his own, so as not to disturb him. He seemed to sleep deeply enough, but she hadn't yet acquired the surety of movement that comes with prolonged intimacy. It was eight before he stretched his arm with a yawn then moved it over her, half pinning her down, and then it was nine before they made it to breakfast. He teased her about her concern with leisure on the trip, and the meal became an exercise in who could eat the slowest: the plodding slurp of porridge or a minute spent cutting a single grape in half. Their new friends hadn't appeared yet, perhaps sleeping off worse or maybe even making it out to the sights earlier in the day. Though they agreed this was unlikely.

She dressed in an airy dropwaist shift, adding a light shawl for the sun. Cain beamed as she donned her magpie gifts, the ring and necklace, though they felt like too much. Was it Coco Chanel who said the key to balance was to get ready as you wanted and then take off one accessory before leaving the house?

"Is it too much?" she asked aloud, and he responded, "No, not too much."

Their first stop was only a short walk down the stairs and out the door, to the tiered fountain of seated and leaning figures. Three herons were arranged at the bottom, wings folded in reprieve, while Hebe crowned the fountain. The goddess of youth was often portrayed as cupbearer for the gods, and she was poised with one arm holding a jug aloft and the other held low with a cup, as if prepared to give tremendous relief from thirst. The clerk told them it was built in 1885, over an existing well where the Alabama natives used to congregate. While the Fitzgeralds had emigrated to Paris by then, this was where a towheaded Zelda Sayre would have played as a child, perhaps even jumping in the fountain with as much abandon as she did the one in Union Square—if with less
scandal attached. Maria walked the full circumference to see the fountain from all sides, while Cain watched the cars zag past and turn down the streets.

Their second stop was at the mechanics, to ask after their own car and the tune-up. They commented on the town's quiet and the man said just wait until cotton season. With all going well they started down Dexter, toward the capitol grounds, where they could see the state house and confederate monument, but their new friends were in the street, just waving bye to someone. They walked over to greet them, surprised. The woman was still wearing price tags, having run out of the store, and the man pulled Cain away to talk in low tones, leading him down the street.

"Just going to see a man about a dog," the man called over his shoulder, laughing.

The woman guided Maria into the store, picking through the racks to select a series of metallic and jewel-toned dresses in Maria's size or close. She had the clerk start a dressing room for her, next to her own, while Maria kept looking, grazing the delicate lace and opulent velvets with her open palm. Everything seemed so expensive, and she didn't foresee an opportunity to wear any of it, like at balls or abroad. At the sales counter, a radio was turned down low, and when she leaned close she heard a marvelous voice broadcasting cures for everything from the common cold to the troubled mind. It was a California doctor, M.D., Ph. D., and D.O., advertising "Springer's peerless psychic pellets" guaranteed to go down better than horse pills and cover more symptoms for more woes than Hamlin's Wizard Oil. It sounded like something out of a pulp magazine, and she listened, transfixed.

While the clerk folded merchandise by the door, Maria turned the volume a smidge higher and pretended to look through a nearby rack of cocktail dresses, the kind
one might buy for a certain type of nightclub. In a final bid for sales, the voice on the
radio claimed Springer's pellet could do so much as to transform a ninth-rate country
fiddler into an Ysaïe. After this advertisement, a live broadcast beeped in for a dirigible
making a pass over the town at that very moment, on its way to the airfield to the west.
The USS Shenandoah, flying from New Jersey to California, would make stops all along
the country for refueling wherever there was a mooring mast. Montgomery was well-
equipped for the visit, the town long fascinated by and supportive of flight technology,
with an aviatian repair depot and flying field used by the Wright Brothers' early
experiments a decade and a half earlier. Maria started toward the door, a short dress with
strings of clinking gold beads in hand before she remembered. She handed it to the
salesclerk and asked her to put it in the room for her, then she stepped outside to watch
the zeppelin pass.

Only a small crowd paused on the street, because most who knew and cared had
planned to greet the ship at the airfield. The sun was high, and she shaded her eyes with
her hand until she saw the oblong mass drift into view. If coming events cast a shadow
and past events leave an imprint, then the trajectory of the dirigible did the work of both.
It gestured to the high-flying aims of the future while showing the pall it'd cast over the
earth when those aims turned to ash, just as the age of the airship would come to an
abrupt end, in a confusion of flames. In the moment, though, there was the thrill of flight
and sky and maybe even music.

In some museum my father had taken me to as a child, probably for the free air-
conditioning, I read that Orville Wright loved playing the mandolin. And thinking about
Maria Ward's travels, I wondered if there was some connection between music and flight
after all. She had been born at the start of the Aerial Age and grown up during the Jazz Era. And it was thousands who took up DeSoto's expedition as their own, making for the west, for the sky. For gold—if not mined exactly, then the kind found dripping from necks and wrists. There was the arc of the gold sun setting in the evening, and the cascade of golden champagne clinking down a pyramid of glasses, and the gleaming gold leaf of embellished architecture, from the stamped street numbers to soaring high-rise curvature. A time of gilt and glamour, which until this point had been largely out of reach. To be sure, the Roost would have hosted its share of visitors with flashy lighters and wives who would dare with sparkling dresses, but most outfits were simple and light, meant for staving off the summer heat. And who knew yet what it was this new era was trying to stave off—boredom or whim or fear.

As the ship grew in size it grew in speed, too, so that by the time it was close it seemed to shoot overhead. The flight overhead lasted only a moment. The twenty or so people dispersed, and when Maria went back into the store the woman was still trying on dresses. But the radio had been turned off so the clerk could take a telephone call.

Maria found her changing room and slipped into the gowns chosen for her, shorter on fabric than she was used to and deeper in contrast and shine. She liked the soft florals of the dresses her mother got from a local store, found it hard to picture herself in the shimmering uniform of flappers and socialites. But she also admired the smokey eyes of the dancing girls, dark as pandas, making them seem at once soft and fierce and sleepy.

She finally came out in a show of yellow luster, jingling with each step, and the salesclerk nodded approval. The woman came out with her choices and set to work gathering pairs of shoes that might match their dresses. Maria was slipping her feet into
glittering t-strap heels when the men found them, brown packages secured under their arms.

Cain took Maria by the elbow, laughing, "I can see I needn't fear you buying the whole store. Is that all you've found?"

"I'm not sure if this is the right look. I don't resemble myself," she said, feeling for the weight of the necklace at her throat.

"You look like you all right. Just dipped in gold."

"And is that what you want?"

Cain, having set enough fishing lures alongside his father as boy, recognized a trap when he saw one. "What about an ugly dress then?"

He picked through a stack of folded fabric and pulled out a flannel covered in a field of ducks, set over a plaid pattern.

"That," the clerk interrupted, pointing, "is a bedsheet. I assure you, we don't sell unfashionable dresses here."

In the end, Cain bought the gold dress and the shoes and a pair of silk hose besides, though Maria changed back into her cotton dress so they could take lunch at the diner. The woman bought the same velvet gown in three shades, plus a new handbag. The couples parted ways outside the store, with many promises to have drinks and cards together that night before their paths diverged.

Over burgers the size of baseball mitts and creamy-cold shakes, Maria reminded Cain of their plan to walk the two miles to the capitol and back, if it wasn't too hot after lunch, and she also told him about the airfield they could visit. When Cain joined the line of business men outside for a social smoke break, she tucked the necklace into her dress.
She commented to the waitress on the empty seats and sedate atmosphere, wondering if they'd found the right place, and she was told she was lucky to have just missed the lunch crowd. She nudged the shopping bags under the counter with her foot, thinking how they'd come just too late.

They walked a lasso around the capital, stopping at the notable sights on the way. Many signs would describe Jackson as complex, a word meant to soothe the fact of orchestrated genocide. Maria and Cain would take a late dinner, then join the couple for proper dancing at the club behind the hotel, refinding their rhythm in the deep hours of the night. Sunday, Maria would want to visit Carnegie Library, but she would be talked into playing cards with the afternoon only punctuated with a trip to the barber. Maria wanted her hair set in a bob, and when the hairdresser said "Take all this?"—the scissors level with her chin—she said, "Yes, all that." She expected to feel different, liberated somehow. She even expected the chill from the cold fingers of the wind about her newly exposed neck. But until she was sitting in the chair, watching the fine clumps of hair accumulate around her, she hadn't thought of the stories her mother told, when they were alone and she was near a mirror, about how she'd once had hair untouched by scissors. How she'd spoken in a different tongue until it had been shamed, beaten back to somewhere dark inside her, crouching in secret at the bottom of her throat. And when she tried to drag them out, she found all the words with any power had fled, leaving only their shadow behind. *Powwow. Hominy. Caribou.*
CHAPTER 13

MIDWAY | 38°07'53.6" N, 84°41'42.3" W

We took the MARTA to my car then the car back to the house, and when we pulled up Frank was waiting for us on the porch steps, a duffel next to him.

Véla knocked him back with her hug, wondering how he'd gotten there.

“Job finished up early, so I figured I'd hitch here and surprise you.”

Vee opened the door for us, and we were all careful to take off our shoes at the entrance. I followed them into the den, where Frank turned on the switch for the electric fireplace and began searching the built-ins.

“This part's new. Did they remodel?”

Vee flipped through a coffee-table book. “Oh, yeah, always changing things up.”

Frank found the boardgame cabinet and pulled out a deck of cards, which Vee immediately turn down.

“Can we do something that's not work, please.”

I vetoed Monopoly, wanting to actually get through a game, and Frank just didn't like the word Yahtzee.

“Trouble it is.”

He cracked open a window for air, and we heard the distant splashes of someone else's pool party, grilled meat smells drifting to us in bursts that made our stomachs growl even though we'd just ate.
Vee was the first to land a piece on homebase, then Frank, but I kept popping ones and twos so it was slow going. When everyone had made it around the board at least once, Frank thought to set-up the portable turntable. He called out album names that I thumbed up or down. I said yes to Beach Boys and no to Arnie Shaw before remembering Vee's comment about Frank's mythical dance skills. She had to drag him up from the floor but he got into it, snapping his fingers as he twirled her around. She stood on one leg, braced against his hip, as he dipped them down low, then sliding her under his legs then back up with a hop. They had moves, practiced and effortless.

I applauded, but my interest ended there.

“You try now.” Vee's breathing was deep but even.

“Pretty comfy here, actually.”

Then it was her turn to call me a coward, my heart's only open sesame.

She walked me through a basic routine, as she called out the parts to a beat. My feet caught under me, trying to catch up at a misstep, but we managed okay.

“Keep doing that. Now, I'm going to go under my left arm, you go under my right, and then both our right arms are going to slide down.”

We tangled ourselves in a bowtie pattern then slid back, the knot of our arms dissolving in a smooth twist that sent us twirling out and in.

“A few months and I'll be ready for America's Got Talent, right?”

Vee har-harred as she went in the kitchen for the leftover wine, while I crawled over to the cabinet for the poker deck. The cards stuck to each other like they'd never been used, and the stiffness made it hard to shuffle. My deck, upstairs, was broken in but didn't seem worth going for.
“You play?” Frank asked.

I'd gathered the basics but wished I knew the serious stuff. He said he could teach me sometime, then wanted to know what appealed to me about the game. I tried to explain about the inherent fluidity of winning and losing, how the hand you were dealt didn't matter much because it could all change in a second so it really came down to staying in the game.

“And why do you like it?”

“Same reason. Because every card is a surprise.”

His mouth went to my chin first, missing. Then he shifted up to my lips where they ground my own against the sharp points of my bottom canines, his tongue heavy and thick as it slid around my mouth, searching.

I pulled back, tasting blood. “Not cool, Frank.”

He stood in one movement, not using his hands, just one fluid heave up as he crossed the room. He didn't say he was sorry, just that he would be back in a minute.

When Véla returned, holding two goblets, I was still wiping at my face.

“Where'd Frank go?”

“Bathroom, I think. Thanks.” I drained the glass, trying to wash away his taste.

She told me about Krog Street bridge and all the cool art, tried to brainstorm ways she could work the violin into the routine, maybe make my neckrest disappear or a string. I said yes to things I didn't entirely hear.

When Frank returned, he asked what we were all waiting on.

“You're move,” I told him, meeting his eyes.
I had a second glass of wine and finished the game out, winning with six good rolls at the end. Vee congratulated me on the lucky streak, and I managed to sort my face into a smile. Said I needed to recharge for tomorrow so I'd just see them in the morning.

Brushing my teeth, I read through old messages on my phone. I typed one up to Marcus asking if he wanted to meet me for dinner before work, figuring if I left around ten I could be home by four at the latest. I realized he would wonder why I was still awake, though, so I waited to sent it until morning.

I curled up on the far edge of the bed because I felt stranded in the center. Slivers of light shifted around the window's edge as car headlights flashed past. My keys called to me, by my boots downstairs—a small action I could take. But I knew it wasn't rational. It was running. The air-conditioner kicked on, and the rhythmic static helped me relax into a half-sleep, until I heard Frank and Véla stumble up the stairs. Their voices bounced down the hallway as they shushed each other, sometimes lapsing into giggles. Drunk, I suspected. Their footsteps came closer and panic fluttered up my throat, but their door opened then shut behind them and mine stayed closed. I breathed deep, and tried to drift off, but the giggles turned to growls. My ill-luck, again, but they couldn't know I was still awake. Some kind of elaborate roleplay filtered through the wall about cult leaders and their dizzy dreamers. I put a pillow over my head. They couldn't know. The wall directly over my head vibrated with a slam, shaking the headboard, and they couldn't know. I moved to the loveseat, keeping my phone beside me, and breathed deep. That I could control.
My alarm went off at 9:45 so I could have time to make the bed then leave. I had trouble recreating the hospital folds, but it was a passable effort. Gear packed, I brushed my teeth in my room, without water, just swallowed the grit. I checked directions to home to make sure the arrival time hadn't changed. I sent the message to Marcus, then opened the door to the hallway, listening for noises before stepping out. Humidity lingered in the bathroom but otherwise it was empty. Véla's room was also empty. I tried not to look at the unmade bed. I followed the hallway to the top of the stairs. A light spilled out across the landing, from a room on the other side of the house I hadn't been in yet. Music played at low volume, I thought maybe more classic rock. Peeking in, the impression I got was an array of clothes, spread across a bed and dumped on an armchair. A succession of disembodied shirts flew across the grey room.

I set my case and bookbag by the stairs, knocking on the doorframe once I was sure it was just Véla. “Hey.”

“Oh, good, you're up. See all this stuff they're trying to get rid of?”

“Yeah. Can we talk?”

She held up a box Dymo-labelled “donations,” saying how wasteful.

“Here's one for you.” She tossed a ball of fabric my way, and I caught it in front of my face.

“I really don't need anymore clothes, but thanks.”

“Will you please just try it on?” she said, and I realized she knew and was trying not to. “Please.”

The part in me wanting to run took a step back toward the door, and the part in me wanting to make it right said, Sure. We spent a few minutes trying on outfits, matching
up the sets by type of show. Bright prints for retirees, black jackets for young
professionals with Beamers, denim for bros and couples and all ages. Ready for a
national tour, we said. Our game of pretend.

We were wearing fluttering tropical dresses, mine a light blue pebbled fabric and
hers yellow crêpe, when I said, “You know you're too good for him and all that, right?”

“Doesn't matter.”

I told her of course it does. “How you can stay?”

And she just gave me the saddest look. Not sad for her. Sad for me.

“Yrros,” she said.

We sat, shoulder to shoulder, while I tried to find the words or even the song,
until we heard Frank at the top of the stairs, stomping toward the other hallway before
turning back toward us.

He dumped our shoes in front of us. “Gotta make tracks, Max.” Then he vanished.

Véla said shit under her breath then was on her feet throwing things in the closet.

I asked her what was wrong, but she just said to help her. When everything was
shoved in, the bifold doors just closed. She cut the lights and her music, then checked the
hallway. While I tugged on my shoes, she slid my case and bag toward me from the top
of the stairs. Footsteps, heels and dress shoes, clacked from the foyer's marble entrance
before dampening on the carpeted stairs.

She pulled me down the hall to a room on the right, maybe the master suite.
Double doors opened onto a Juliet balcony, where she activated an emergency ladder to
let it dangle from the ledge.

“This is your plan? And my clothes—“
“—Forget it. Just go,” she said, keeping watch.

I climbed over the railing, onto the rungs, trying to figure out how to scale a ladder with with one hand holding my case. I eased myself down while Véla followed after, telling me to speed up. Using the inside crook of my elbow, I alternated step-stepping and grabbing with my free hand but Véla was hurrying down too. Her foot came down on my hand, and by instinct I let go of my case to catch at the rung to free myself. Verona fell, and my heart skipped as it hit the mulch below. I double-timed it the rest of the way down. At least one crack ran down the corner of the hardcase from where it'd bounced on the pinestraw, but Véla was already pushing me to the driveway where Frank had driven up my car. The back door handles were rusted, so it took a moment's panicked jiggling before I could dive in. We drove off in a cloud of my tires' smoke and ghostly faces, confused on the balcony. I escaped in a borrowed dress, a passenger in my own car.

Outside the community's gate, Frank took a series of jerky turns, checking the rearview every few minutes. He drove, under the speed limit, down a road that ran in a parallel line next to the interstate. A squat concrete barrier topped with a line of thin chainlink was all that isolated us from the wider highway. As he piloted us somewhere north, the car was silent and I didn't trust my voice. My hands trembled with adrenaline's aftershocks, and I didn't trust my voice. The radio turned on, jolted by some fault in the wiring, and it was then Véla spoke for me.

“Can we pull over somewhere?”
Frank looked at her, she looked at him, and neither said anything. After a minute
he pulled over, into the empty parking lot of a bank. Closed on Sundays.

They got out of the car and I held my hand out for my keys, but Frank had turned
away.

“Can I talk to you,” he said, pulling Véla toward the ATM overhang, keeping the
keys in his hand.

“Why didn't you check—“

“I couldn't have known—“

“If you hadn't—”

I heard them fighting, low at first, hisses that become sharp and tremolo. I leaned
against the driver's side, not wanting to hear. I focused on I-75's hum behind my head,
trying to pick out the *whoosh* of semitrucks and the showy throttle of racing bikes,
counting the time between sounds.

She walked away first, yelling for him not to follow her. Frank threw his hands up
and crouched against the machine. She sat on the bank's step, her dress pooling around
her, face in her hands. It was them on opposite sides of the parking lot, me and my stuff
with my car, which was a fine triangulation except I still couldn't go. I pushed off the
driver's side door and headed over to Véla, boots clomping on the pavement.

“You okay?” I didn't have any tissues to hand her, so I patted at her back.

“You're right. He's such a....” She gave a harsh laugh. “Mother warned me. And I
didn't listen. That was her, by the way, back at the house.”

“Yeah. What happened to house-sitting?”
“I was sent to boarding school because I wouldn't leave Frank when she told me to. And when I landed on my ass in the streets, she wouldn't lift a finger. A TV in every room and she can't help her daughter?”

“So, you break in? To what, steal some stuff?”

An emphatic no, she shakes her head back and forth. “I'm not desperate or stupid. It wasn't about stealing anything. I just...” She scuffed her shoes at the ground. “I liked imagining her life, seeing little pieces of it. I never got to know her, not really.” I remembered seeing her look through the recipe book, maybe also why she had been going through the clothes.

“I get that,” I said.

“She was supposed to be gone until Wednesday. I thought we'd have fun and no one would know or care. I thought I'd get away from Frank for a while, too.” She hitched up the bottom of her dress to show a fist-sized bruise, just fading from purple to green on the inside of her thigh.

“What did he do?”

“Nevermind. You were planning to drive back, weren't you? This morning?”

I turned my face toward the highway cars, wishing I was merging with the flow.

“I don't want to cause trouble for you two. Just thought it better if I was on my way.”

“No, I don't want to cause trouble for you. Don't worry about me.”

We squeezed hands then met Frank back at the car to talk about our next moves. Frank said he had another job lined up, in Louisville, and that's where they were heading next.
“You staying, Maria? Or are you going?” When he asked, Véla kept her eyes on ground, rubbing at her arm. She wouldn't look at me.

“You're going, too, Vee?”

She nodded. “But it's cool if you want to leave.”

Frank started to protest, saying why should I, but she stopped him.

“Let her go if she wants to.” She risked meeting my eyes then. “Hey, VNM reunion tour later?”

“But she shouldn't drive,” Frank said. I held out my hand for the keys, and they dropped from his hand. As he leaned from the hip to pick them up, metal flashed from a clip on his waistband at the back. “I mean, emotions are running high here.”

Movies had taught me switchblades were show weapons, easy to disarm and things you're more likely to hurt yourself with than anyone else, but that hadn't been a switchblade. The clip had ended in a point then flared up to a thick base.

I stilled, looking from Frank to Véla and back.

“If you want to go, Maria, by all means.” He dangled the keys from an index finger, his arm held close to his body.

“Louisville,” I said. “Could be fun.”

Véla offered me the front seat, but I declined. Said I'd enjoy not being in the driver's seat for once. I stared up as we turned back on the road, Frank tapping his thumbs on the wheel. I poked up at my sagging ceiling a few times then, wanting to get the bad news over with, opened the catches on my case to assess the damage. The wood at the bridge had split and Verona's soundpost wobbled. My father would know of some temporary fixes, but that depended on making it back to Savannah.
“You feeling better?” Frank said.

“Yeah, yeah. Maybe let's turn on some music?”

When Frank was momentarily distracted with merging lanes and figuring out the right connector, my hand slid down to the front of my seat, toward my backpack and the lifeline of my phone. I leaned over, pretending to stretch my legs, as I reached into the pocket. The zipper had come halfway open and when I swiped around my hand met air. I leaned over farther, bobbing my head to the music to disguise my worry. Véla listed some weird sites we could stop at, like an abandoned Little Caesar's statue or the grave of an old civil war horse buried with full military honors. I asked questions about Louisville's street scene and suggested some songs. But the phone had just fallen to the far bottom corner. I inched it to the top of the bag while outside the window we kept pace with a white hatchback, a kid in the backseat. We just looked at each other until Frank overtook the car and switched lanes, complaining about the lack of up-and-go to the engine.

Véla read off a sign proclaiming the largest sex store was at the next exit, though it wasn't specific about whether it was the largest in the city, the state, or the world. I laughed as I slipped the phone out. The Georgia-Tennessee stateline passed and I hid it under the folds of my dress. The Bonneville's gas mileage was shit so we'd have to stop soon, somewhere there'd be a bathroom. I drooped my eyes and leaned my head against the window, pretending to rest. The fabric fell over the raised power button, and I pushed against it, my hand limp on my lap. Peeking through my eyelashes, I moved the dress enough to see the screen. Black. I didn't drop the dozing ruse, but I did uncover the top of the phone, pressing the power button directly, held it down, but nothing. Bertha ground
along in low gear as we started up the steep grade of a mountain whose name Johnny Cash borrowed for a title.

“Hey, can you turn this up? I love this song.”

Some indie tune filled the cabin, the lead singer gravel-voiced as he flatlined the lyrics. I worked at tearing the threads holding the faux pocket of the dress closed while pressed against the seat by gravity as the car climbed and climbed. Frank took the exit for Manchester, TN, to fill the tank, and I slipped the phone inside the pocket. When I bent toward my bag, saying I'd get my card, Frank said not to bother. I got out, stretched my foot on the curb.

“So thirsty. Anyone want anything to drink?” Véla said she could go for an Icee if I'd split it with her and Frank handed me a twenty so I could get us all one.

I locked myself into a stall before taking out the phone and trying the button again. I remembered charging it last night, the cord tangling with my feet on the loveseat, but when I took off the backcover the mystery was solved. The battery was gone, rendering the device paperweight or ballast. The soap was out, but I turned on the water anyway, an exercise in futility. The bathroom's fluorescent lights drained my skin of color and I stared down my reflection, daring it not to cry.

Frank had the driver's door hinged open so I could hand him the cup. He wrapped both hands around the drink to take it, trapping mine, and I resisted yanking my hand away. He asked me to run back inside for napkins.

“Some in the glovebox.”

“They're here. Let's go already,” said Véla.
He released my hand. “Good to be prepared.” We waited as he wiped away condensation.

After the phone, I suspected other things would be missing too. Over the course of a few hours, I got the top of my backpack unzipped and freed the inner pocket's flap of its velcro, the latter of which took a painstaking half-hour as I drummed up talk and tore at it a fiber at a time. He'd been haphazard; my wallet was cleaned of all its cash and my emergency cards in the main pouch, but he'd missed my debit card stuffed in an outer pocket between punch cards and fortune strips. I was betting rent had already come out though. The leftover bit of change in my pocket, from the drinks, took on the dimension of Powerball winnings.

After the bypass that would funnel us into Kentucky, Frank left the interstate for two-lane backroads and highways as the sun started to set and more cops populated the roads. Véla stared out the window, inscrutable, and Frank jittered his leg back and forth. I lost count of the miles of green farmland and wide pastures, the cows lying with their legs tucked beneath them. Véla asked the car whether it was them standing or sitting that meant rain, but no one knew for sure.

When they got out for the next gas stop, I stayed in the car to run a hand along the seam to my seat and feel around the storage pockets. They stood outside the store, arms crossed and glancing at the car. My foot knocked against the store sign under Véla's seat, stolen way back in Georgialand. I pulled it out, running my fingers over the grooved letters to mourn our sidetracked trajectory. If only there had been scones. The next grab my fingers landed on plastic, duct tape, string. They had gone inside, so I hooked a finger around the wrapping even though I really already knew what to expect. Scenes from
Scarface and The French Connection floated to mind: Tony Montana at his desk, Sal Boca at the Copacabana. The brick was lighter than I expected though there was a solid heft to its compactness. My stomach heaved thinking about the headlines my parents would read: Amateur Violinist Implicated in Drug Bust or 3 Arrested in Shoot Out at Farm; Cow in Critical Condition. I didn't know whether many shoot outs happened in agricultural states, but I didn't want to find out. I kicked it away from me and rested my head against the window for real, feeling nauseous. Of course Véla knew. Seeding the hat. Shill, plant, accomplice. The miles unfurled beneath us, the sky churned with dark clouds, and I lost track. The fields turned almost hypnotic with the undulating waves of neat rows. I wondered how the farmers kept it all in check, thinking about my mother's gardens she'd try once in a while. Planter sticks would mark the plots but, inevitably, the mint would invade the oregano, and the oregano the basil, all of it eventually turning to riot.

—

It started with Véla criticizing Frank's driving, the way he'd keep accelerating even when he knew there was a brake coming up.

“How can you not anticipate the stop? You're just wasting gas.”

He did the asshole thing and just braked even more. It took four hundred miles but, as expected in any enclosed space, the mood finally turned stagnant. We each turned inward to our own miseries.

Frank and Véla bickered over the lack of A/C, the windows, the two working radio stations, and just to disrupt the tension I asked, “So what's the long game here exactly? Hm? My violin's not even rare.”
“Lou-ie-ville,” Frank said, enunciating real slow-like as he looked at me in the rearview. “It's just a little trip.” Feigning dumb, which I could have taken anything but.

“Hey, I've gotta go. Can we pull over?”

“What, with the horses? There'll be a service station down the line.”

“I've been holding it since we got on the parkway.”

“Jesus, Frank,” Véla said. “Just do it already.”

He pulled over onto a plush green ledge, by a field bounded by wooden posts running in either direction. I took a handful of napkins with me and hopped the fence to find some tall grasses and glanced back at the car, evaluating the line of sight, having to go over a small hill before I couldn't see it anymore. I got on my knees, close down to the damp ground, and searched for rocks, stones, sticks, a working cellphone if it happened to appear. A cluster of empty bottles leaned against a tree, and I measured one against my pocket. It wouldn't work, but I wrapped it in the skirt of my dress and held it like I was gathering the fabric from my knees. That I could maybe pull off. A buzzard circled overhead, taking its flight for granted, and I headed back toward the car. My hand stayed to my side, bunching the folds, and I crested the hill at an angle to hide my right side. When I didn't see the car, I dropped the bottle and ran down the hill. My Patagonia and case were lying at odd angles away from each other in the grass and Frank and Véla had vanished. Bertha, too.

And just like that, subito! I was left alone with my virtue.
CHAPTER 14

WAY DOWN AROUND VICKSBURG | 32°18'50.7” N, 90°54'22.7” W

With thoughts of the Shenandoah soundlessly gliding to California while she burned the hours in fitful sleep, Maria woke early on Monday morning and stretched to find the other half of the bed empty. The covers had been straightened and half-tucked, but minty sweet traces of eucalyptus haunted Cain's pillow. He had evidently risen and dressed in the dark so she could enjoy the comforts of sleep a while longer. She considered luxuriating in the space, the silence, the momentary solitude, but curiosity beckoned, as it always did. Out the window, she saw Cain talking on the street corner with the mechanic, and she guessed from their gestures that the repairs were completed on schedule. Meaning they would be on their way soon. She was just securing the last of her stays when Cain eased through the door, balancing a breakfast tray. He declared the Lincoln road-worthy once more: coils tightened, fluids topped off, tires checked and double-checked. They agreed to a light breakfast and a lunch basket for the road, hopeful about finding a nice picnic spot. While he prepared the scene, complete with clipped carnation in a thimble of water, Maria smoothed her hair down and felt the back of her neck, newly exposed. She took coffee and jam toast for herself, leaving the orange juice and rolls, his favorites. Cain busied himself with packing their few scattered things while Maria sat down to the dressing table to finish her make-up. The last touch was an extra layer of cake mascara, brushed from a pot. The dark kohl turned her eyes moonless and startling, even to herself.
On the way out of town, Maria reminded Cain to ask for directions to the airfield. The concierge set them off southwest and a farmhand pointed them the rest of the way to a shortcut, down a road beginning to be overrun by weeds. They had driven for about a mile when a wide puddle mudded the path, and they had to stop to gauge whether the car could make it over. Maria kicked stones at the water, Cain poked at the edge with a stick, yet it was impossible to tell the depth at the center. The farmhand was gone when they turned back around, but back at the main road they found a sign pointing the way to what was speculated to be the oldest cabin in the state. Maria read this sign aloud but otherwise stayed quiet, keeping her eyes ahead. Cain checked his watch, measuring the minutes against the distance left to cover, then pointed the car toward the lush alcove of blooming hydrangea. Only a short distance down the path they found a wooden shack locked and boarded for safety, but a neighbor, coming in from a walk, said they were welcome to peek in the windows at the decaying wood and cobwebs. Next to the steps, an embossed plaque detailed the few known facts. It was Colonial, and it had been hewn by an early settler after marrying a local and having five children with her.

The neighbor spat tobacco at the ground as he filled in the gaps with what he'd heard growing up. The settler, seeing they were running low on food in the middle of a harsh winter, had left to try his luck at hunting, leaving behind his native wife and the children. On returning a month later, he found them dead or dying, the youngest having been stricken with fever and the rest infected or succumbing to hunger. Rather than wait for a spring thaw or shovel into frozen ground, he buried them under the floorboards. Sold the cabin and remarried a white woman. The bodies only found when the floorboards started rotting and conservation efforts tried to replace it. The man couldn't
say whether there was ever a proper burial. Both Cain and Maria looked down at the slats they were standing on, wondering, when the man admitted he was just messing with them; they’d been given graves and unmarked headstones behind the house some years before the war. Maria passed the tale onto John, in a private letter, adding that history had to be neatened and prettied, indeed, to fit on a sign.

The road west took them over 205 miles of dirt roads and through the swamps of Louisiana, the red and white stripes of the Dixie Highway posts flagging their way through Selma, Meridian, and Pelahatchie. This last name, they gathered, meant something like crooked creek or hurricane creek or maybe something else entirely. The town was small but they’d learned, no matter the population size, you could count on cemeteries and gas stations— everyone had to go, had to eat, had to die—and so they had stopped to refuel. As the attendant filled the car, they asked about the name but he couldn’t give them a definite answer, just the handful of guesses. Birds split the sky as the car rumbled past shacks sloping to ruin on the same plot of land as grand column-lined manors, and the houses were punctuated only by squared-off fields of crops and the occasional cotton duster.

They had hoped to make it as far as Ruston, but searching for the airfield had put them a ways behind schedule. Maria called out the names of the motor hotels and auto camps as they passed, spotting them first. She thought they were darling hubs of industry, a microcosm of the road in themselves, but Cain wasn't sold on the communal atmosphere. So they continued on as the sky darkened, the sun sinking behind ivy-choked oak just as they crossed Bovinia's railroad trestle. Vicksburg welcomed them with miles and miles of green vines, more than Maria thought possible, what must have taken
centuries to grow as it crept year by year, stretching a few tentative leaves an inch at
time. Or maybe this was a year's vigorous growth, and the green world was more
industrious than she'd ever be.

The city itself was an exercise in crescendo and decrescendo, a series of hills
interrupted by the great caesura of the Mississippi before flattening out to a green stretch
of Louisiana on the other side. They located accomodations by driving down the main
thoroughfare and stopped at the first place that seemed both lively and comfortable. It
was unclear whether they realized it at the time, but they'd chosen the famous Hotel
Vicksburg, convenient in its proximity from the new rail station and popularized further
by the musicians and bands who played upstairs. On checking in, they were told they
were taking the last room, which wasn't their best but still very comfortable. Cain said it
would do just fine, and he took the key after signing their names.

The corner room faced the brick wall of the neighboring drugstore on one side
and, on the other, the tracks. When the trains came, shunting along the raised platform
directly across from them, the room would fill with thunderous noise that seemed to
shake the very air. But the taps ran, as promised, and the pressure was nice. Reclining on
a plush chaise, Maria wondered if they could spare a few days to explore the caves still
standing from the Civil War, on the outskirts of town, and Cain said they'd better see if
they could get a room on the other side of the hotel first.

As they were dressing to take dinner at the club upstairs, Cain presented her with
the next present. He was a study in casualty as he draped the bracelet over a cut-glass
decanter, saying he found it and thought it might belong to her.
He watched for Maria's reaction as she ran her fingers over the heavy gold links crowned with red roses and emerald accents for leaves.

“It might,” she said. She had wanted flowers that would move with the breeze, that would fade at the first frost rather than be artificially kept. Not that he wouldn't give her those, too, she knew. It was just a sense, or a worry, that Cain would one day ask the impossible from her—to adorn his arm, to be owned and shown and merely seen. Or maybe not even seen. There was the wife and all the children, buried under the cabin.

He raised her wrist to bring it to his lips, kissing it with a gentleness she knew he could not afford to show often. By the time he fumbled the clasp closed, any morbid thoughts were all but brushed away, and she gave him a bright smile as she preened in the mirror for his benefit. The bracelet slid up and down her arm, a loose weight.

On entering the dining room, a line of hats at the bar turned to appraise them, her in the Montgomery dress, him in a charcoal suit and matching tie threaded with gold accents. A space opened up for them at the end of the counter, and they dined in a corner facing the rest of the room. Maria noted the rapid turnover of patrons as they scattered to their various plans, a constant scurry of activity. Some carried bags, evidently stopping for a meal before catching a late train, while most had buttoned themselves up into evening wear to make the most of the night. George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*—recently released and composed in a rush to the rhythms of a train journey—it would have been an appropriate soundtrack. Raising his voice over the crowd, Cain talked with the man at his elbow as they waited for their food. He brought up the wedding, their travels so far, and his eventual plan to develop San Diego. Their barstool buddy tipped back his hat and said he'd just come from Palo Alto, on his way to Birmingham for
business and Florida for golf. It came out that he had a cousin in San Diego that had just
gotten his aviator license and was looking for land. The men talked money while Maria
watched without appearing to be aware, listened without appearing to understand, and
laughed at all the wrong jokes.

When the conversation slowed, Cain gestured to their empty glasses.

“Let me take care of those.”

He called the barback over and asked if there was a bottle of anything stronger to
be had, but he just got a headshake in return as he continued polishing the counter. Before
a refill of the cheap sour wine could be sloshed into their glasses, Cain brought out a
green bill rolled into a short tube. He tapped it on the counter, saying he could have
sworn he was told there was something. The barback looked at the cash then glanced over
his shoulder, thinking, but then just said they must've lost it.

At this, Maria raised her eyebrows and pursed her rouged lips together.

“Ooh. Do you wager?”

“Like dice?”

“My mother taught me a ritual, once, for finding lost things. I bet I can find the
bottle for you.”

“Sure, give it a shot, lady.”

The barback crossed his arms while Cain busied himself with lighting a cigarette,
trying to guess at what she might have planned.

First, she made a show of taking off her necklace, lifting her chin to show off the
long line of her throat and letting the pendant bob down into the neckline of her dress
before reappearing. She looped one end around her pointer finger before taking the rest of
the chain into her palm. Her hand rotated to show she was holding the entire length, then
she let it drop to swing wildly over the counter. They followed its movements with their
eyes until it settled in a metronome motion, moving northwest to southeast, northwest to
southeast.

“The locker in the far left corner?” she guessed, and the barback grinned. He was
so pleased he even forgot to take Cain's bribe.

“I never could believe in any of that stuff,” he said, pouring their drinks. “Like
how the hotel is supposed to be haunted.”

She secured the chain around her neck once more. “No need to believe if it's real.
I'll find it or I won't. There's ghosts or there's not.”

After sharing a drink with them, the Palo Alto man took down Cain's address and
said he'd send a telegraph to his cousin

“I'll tell him who can get him properly zozzled.” He shook Cain's hand up and
down twice, raised his hat to Maria, then merged with the crowd.

“Only you,” Cain said, guiding Maria toward the club space. “And you know, I
don't believe Eliza taught you that.”

They arrived upstairs as the band was already wailing, the room foggy with hours
of smoke and talk. And of course there'd be hours more, for those who wanted to see and
be seen. They jittered around the floor, making their way to the back where the air was
clearer and they could almost hear each other. They did some dancing, with Cain looking
at the people and Maria looking around the space.
They drifted toward the window side, where a row of tables were set up for card games. A line of hats and shadowed faces moved up and down in the high-key lighting, and Cain took a seat when one opened up saying, What the hell.

She smiled and stood at his side, blowing on the shuffled deck like dice when offered to her, as a joke. He was dealt a high two pair and threw more bills into the pot, and one of the men folded.

“I thought you were supposed to be lucky,” the man said, taking off his grey silk hat and tossing it on the table.

“For me,” Cain interjected, and the table laughed.

The stranger took out a Marlboro for himself and offered them around the table. Maria, still reeling from finding him again, there, halfway across the continent, accepted as well.

“Why, thank you.” She held the cigarette in her hand, feeling foolish.

She recognized him like an old song, a favorite tune turned distant memory—she could recall the melody and most of the lyrics even years after the song had fallen out of use, but she could never get at the same feeling again. And he didn't recognize her at all. She was suddenly conscious of her put-on face and ironed hair, the jewelry which flashed under the house lights, her arm across her husband's shoulders.

As for Cain, he was busy gauging the rest of the table for tells to care overmuch about what she did. When the stranger went to smoke on the balcony, she followed. Dancers parted for the them, and the music dissipated into the open air leaving only a sense of percussion behind.
The stranger flicked open the plain flint lighter, the metal now scratched and dull with age. He held the flame for her, cupping it in his palms until she accepted.

She bent her elbow, letting the lit cigarette dangle from her fingers as she had seen in ads.

“Did you ever get around to learning Patience?” she asked, turning her face up to him.

And then he knew her.

“Maria. What are you doing here?”

“I could say the same.”

“I grew up in Mound,” he said. When she shook her head, he pointed two fingers toward the water. “East. Near the levees.”

The music stopped, the band taking a break from their set, and the street noises filtered up to them.

“Maybe we'll drive through.”

“We?”

“Cain and I.”

“Cain. Is that your husband?”

“We're touring the Dixie Highway in a beautiful Lincoln. It has these wide seats and just about the easiest crank I've ever seen.” She realized she was talking very fast and raised a hand to her hair, smoothing it.

“I don't reckon you will. Drive through, that is. It's a small little town.”

She nodded, raising the cigarette to her mouth. But she held her breath, scared how her lungs might betray her.
The trombonist, who moments before had dominated the stage, intercepted them in the crowd. He was still sweating from the spotlights and mopping at his forehead every few seconds. He shook Maria's hand, engulfing it in a firm, if slippery, grasp, then clapped an arm around the stranger.

“Didn't know you'd be in town, son. What are you doing in these parts?”

“Getting along. Maria, this is Lazy Lou.”

“Because Big Lou was already taken,” he explained, reflexive as a slogan.

“I know Maria from my time in Georgia. Now don't let your guard down around her. She's got quite the aim.”

She told Lazy Lou how much she enjoyed the set and excused herself, leaving the men to catch up. In the ladies' room, she put out the smoldering cigarette and stood in front of the mirror with the other women adjusting straps and curls and glittering in the night. Thinking nothing, hearing nothing. When the band started back up and the bathroom had emptied, she pulled out her tube lipstick to retrace her smile.

Through the jumble of bodies, she found her way back to the table. Cain had loosened his tie and relaxed in his chair.

“You look as tired as I feel,” he said, pulling her to his lap.

“Perhaps you better turn in soon,” one of the men said, shoving money their way. The other wiped beer off his whiskers and agreed.

“Perhaps we will,” Maria replied, counting coins. “How is the game going?”

“Made back our dinner money and then some.”
“These boys let you win?” Maria stood at the stranger's voice, watched as he slid back into his seat. He rolled his sleeves once, twice, before cutting the deck. Brooks Brothers, she knew. Size 16 ½-35. “I'm going to have to fix that.”

“You're welcome to try.”

And he did, winning with a straight. Cain swore and had one of the other players shuffle the next hand.

“You look familiar.” He squinted at the stranger under the dim bulbs.

“May well be, but I can't say the same.”

Their roles soon reversed; Cain won the next round and grew confident, some would say reckless. He raised and reraised until all their money was on the table.

“No. No, I know you.”

He was still trying to place him as the last hand was dealt between them and a royal flush toppled Cain's full house. He congratulated the stranger, employing the Savannah way: in the face of tragedy and unpleasant circumstance, always uphold a veil of beauty. Maria noticed he was sitting straighter though, muscles tensed.

“My father, he had trouble with you, didn't he?” he said. “Distributing papers at the factory. Talking to workers.”

“Something wrong with talk?” It was a dare more than a question, the stranger looking him full in the eyes.

“Something wrong with confidence tricks.”

The stranger put a hand on the winnings. “Just helping some folks, maybe at the expense of a few others, but that's the way of the world. The night doesn't set the same on everyone.”
“You're right about that,” Cain said, pushing his jacket aside to show the holster of a Colt Peacemaker.

The stranger leaned back in his chair.

“No, you take your money. But we're going to turn in now and say our goodbyes.” He drained his drink then took Maria by the hand.

When she asked how much they lost, Cain played with the ring on her finger, twirling it. “I should have known. It's not proper to play cards and certainly not with his kind. Let's not mention him further.”

Cain turned in for bed, but she said she going to ask for warmed milk at the desk, to help her sleep. She paced the halls, hoping to see the stranger or maybe not. But in the end, she stole down the steps to find him still at the table, drinking with the other two men. He was always easier to find than she expected.

“Mind if I have a seat?” She reached for the deck. “I believe it is my turn.”

“You ever get around to learning poker?” the stranger drawled.

By way of reply, she sent the cards from one hand to the other in a smooth arc before shuffling them together. The stranger said only that she had nothing to prove to him.

“Lady wants to play,” Whiskers interrupted. The other man dealt them in, eager to see what would unfold.

“All right. I'll wager half of my fairly won profits. And what will you put down?”

Maria set her bag on the table. “Premium Volland leather,” she explained. “It's all I have.”

“Not all.”
Maria touched the jewelry at her throat, paused. But she nodded.

The men laughed, looking from the pile of money to Maria. “Sure seems like a deal to me.”


The stranger pushed his other half to the center, another raise.

“Bracelet too?”

Maria agreed.

Another flop, and they raised again. The stranger pushed all his money forward.

She shook her head, when the stranger looked at her ring, and asked him to name anything else.

“Your beautiful little car?”

And she nodded.

“You don't have to.” The stranger lowered his voice and touched her arm, with one finger, as he did on the porch when it was just them and the frogs instead of a full table. “Maria, we can call this off.”

“The car,” she said, and motioned for the showdown.

The hands fell out, with the stranger holding two pair from pocket aces. Maria held trip sevens, making it a narrow win but a win nonetheless.

Whiskers looked from hand to hand, checking, while the stranger adjusted his hat and nodded.

“Just what did I say.”

Maria pocketed Cain's lost earnings in her bag, but left the rest in the center of the table, turning away from the stranger for the second time in her life.
The next morning, Maria and Cain waited on the barge for *The Pelican*, the transfer steamer that would carry them over the Mississippi and allow them to continue on their way. She endured an hour's unsettled agitation, first in the waiting then in the transit, as she checked for the hidden winnings in her purse. She would tell her husband, later, at their next stop. They wouldn't drive through Mound. The diaries would never mention the stranger again, and Maria would never touch another cigarette.
CHAPTER 15
INTERMISSION | LOCATION UNKNOWN

There was the road and there was not the road. There was home and there was high adventure, and I could see how both would lead me astray. It didn't matter which way I went.

My phone, deadweight since the morning, gave an empty kind of comfort. Not that I knew who I would call. Thinking of the movies, I started to thumb my way down the road but dropped my arm. Aside from the fact there was no one around to see, it also seemed like a high flag of need and vulnerability. Whether it was stubbornness or self-preservation or necessity, I'd walk it.

To distract from pitying myself, I shouldered my backpack and case then counted my steps. I hoped Véla was wrong about the rain, but the sky broke open before even a mile passed, a summer cloudburst. The tall grass caught at my legs, and there was nothing glamorous about my itching ankles, the cold creeping into my bones with each step. The sun had lowered a quarter way down the sky by the time I made it to a town large enough to offer a motel/diner, a joint venture with a single gas pump. One sign read No Tell Motel and the other No Whiner Diner. On step 7,937 and counting, the humor eluded me.

The nightly rate was more than I could afford, but a hot meal and glass of water wasn't out of reach with my bit of convenient store change. Lost, drenched, and nearly broke, the holy trifecta of the down and out—I knew what I must look like: half-feral and
vagrant. But I set my bags under the booth and slid in, grateful for the place to sit and be still. The cook, serving as the diner's waitstaff too, brought over a menu flipped to the dollar specials. Another customer, a local probably, called him by name and motioned to turn up the volume. He told me, “Take your time,” already turning back to the TV, and I thought maybe I wasn't the sorriest thing the road had brought him.

I glanced over the items, but my stomach wanted everything and would be happy with anything. Instead, I squeezed water from my hair as I listened to the news recount the chance of measurable rainfall, the cold front we were in for, the November gales come early. The meteorologist's dress was beachy yellow, perhaps meant to contrast with the storm grays of the green-screen clouds behind her. My damp dress and soaked boots would have blended in better. The cook came back, towel slung over his shoulder, and I ordered the first thing I saw under five bucks: the daily sandwich chalked on the board behind the counter, plus something called a chanana malt so as not to look cheap. I made a show of taking out my phone, as if to text, and when he turned away, I felt in my dress pocket to make sure the folded bills were still there. Sure, and just as thin as I remembered. Another foolishness, but it couldn't be helped.

I had the shake as an appetizer while I waited, formulating my next move, imagining Marcus' surprise when I tell him it's Kentucky I'm calling from, not downtown. My mother's worry lines, my father's disappointment. I finished the tenderloin sandwich, bread slices sogged with butter, then the fries and side pickle spear as I formulated a plan. My wet clothes dripped a puddle on the laminate floor, and a stack of napkins did little more than spread the water in a slippery pool so I gave up. After three water refills and a trip to the bathroom, I could no longer draw out the meal. I handed the owner my card,
which got declined as I thought it would. I smiled and told him the address must not have updated yet, giving him my last ten instead. I asked for quarters back in change, which I pocketed. When I'd go out to the mall with friends, my mother would press two quarters into my palm, *Because you never know*. And I had held up my phone and said, *Um.*

Another misstep. I left a dollar tip at the booth before slipping out to the line of payphones outside the motel. I saw no choice but return, head hanging. But before I set off on this impossible journey, what was my life anyway?

So this was how an adventure ended. It had been a foolishness on my part, listening to others when they said I shouldn't leave, and more foolishness for listening when they said I should.

All I had wanted was to go somewhere, but I had pictured it as colorful and endless, a beach ringed with starlight and song. What I got was a hardscrabble strip of nothing on a backroad highway with the heavy leer of lights blinding me when trucks passed. A construction tarp blocked the exit number, but my best guess was still east of the Mississippi and yet a few miles south of Louisville. Heat lightning flashed in the distance, snapping across the sky in a way that I never saw back home. With no trees or buildings to break up the horizon, you had no choice but to confront the sky on all sides.

I waited for my turn at the phonebox, the only one working of the three outside the drained pool, planning to rehearse what I'd say. The short line shuffled forward. I gazed at the collection of beer bottles tangled in hose, all of it stranded in the deep end for who knows how many years, and when my turn was up I stacked my things by the box and shut the door behind me, still uncertain of the words.
"You going to make the call or not?" A large man with torn-off sleeves knocked on the scratched glass, posing the question. I recognized him from the booth behind mine, where he'd been cutting a stack of pancakes into small triangles. I gave him a thumbs up and turned around, pretending to dial.

Not a minute passed before there was another knock behind me, but I pretended not to hear. A woman's voice now trying to rush me along, saying "Excuse me, hello?"

I pushed a quarter into the slot as the knocking increased, holding a finger up over my shoulder in the universal sign of *not yet, not now*, then I pushed in a dime and closed my eyes. The change clinked down, and the dial tone sounded in my ear as I wondered how I could explain.

I held the phone in my hand and dialed.
CHAPTER 16

MINEOLA AT MIDNIGHT | 32°39'50.9" N, 95°29'20.6" W

The high moment of Maria and Cain's journey didn't come at a place like Truth and Consequences, which only constituted an overnight stay and praise for the warm meals after a long stretch of grocery fare. Nor did it come at El Paso, with the excitement of a border town. Nor after misreading a trail marker and following the Bankhead highway for a hundred miles through Texas. After Ruston, Tallulah, Shreveport: it was in sleepy Mineola, 80 miles east of Dallas, where the exciting episode happened.

After Vicksburg, they had stopped at a service station to lunch, and Maria had dashed off a note to home saying they were well and happy. *A thousand miles and still going*, she said, and they drove until just before dark to end up in Mineola. A gas line and railroad terminal, along with improved highways and roads, did much to spur the town a skip into the future. Though the postcard wasn't from The Beckham Hotel, where big bands were known to have played, and there was no word of whether they danced, perhaps having had their fill of the atmosphere, they did visit the Select Theater. Opened by Mr. and Mrs. R. T. Hooks a few years prior, it was then one of the oldest in Texas. This was where it was said that Cain Calder tried to kill a coyote (or dog, or bear) and deafened himself in the process.

They had ridden Trolley Car no. 26 to a late showing of *Forbidden Paradise*, the silent feature where Clark Gable made his second film appearance in an uncredited role as an extra. The costumes and sets shined, Rod La Rocque clasped Pola Negri with tender
adoration, and the movie put them in good spirits. They remained in their seats for long
after the end title card and exited the theater to a street thick with fog. Maria adjusted her
shawl closer to her shoulders and leaned into Cain as they strolled down the street toward
their hotel. They were near where the public well stood, now paved over, when Maria
saw a shape moving in the distance. She pointed as it stalked the center of the street, a
black-tipped tail swinging behind it.

“A coyote,” Cain said. “What is it doing here?”

What Lewis and Clark called a prairie wolf, it was another victim of widespread
ttempts at extermination in North America. Poisoned, shot, trapped, bludgeoned, gassed,
sniped from helicopters and strung up by the hundreds, they had been feared and hunted
across America. Except instead of going the way of the buffalo, they used their howls to
learn where other coyotes existed or did not exist. And where they did not hear a call,
they themselves went. When their packs dwindled, the size of their litters increased, such
that if three out of four coyotes were killed, triple that number took their place. And so
they thrived and scavenged, spreading a new Manifest Destiny.

Golden eyes shined in the moonlight. Voices could be heard around the street
corner, but foot traffic was light at that hour and they were alone. Saying he'd take care of
it, Cain drew out his gun, what he'd purchased especially for the trip on hearing about
travellers robbed and left for dead after driving down a seemingly deserted road. The
animal came close enough for them to see a grizzled grey and white underbelly, rows of
teeth in a tapering mouth. He moved in front of Maria and strode forward several steps.
The animal paused. Cain brought the gun level with his shoulder and sighted.

The hammer came down with a clank.
And he fired.

Except nothing happened. Maybe dust from the road had gunked it up or maybe something else. Whatever the reason, the discharge had been delayed for several seconds after the trigger was pulled, and pressure continued to build behind the cartridge. The propellant burned, enough so that the bullet was pushed out of the barrel a few seconds later. Only the gun was no longer aimed at the coyote but pointed to the heavens, near Cain's head, as he lifted it wondering why the gun hadn't gone off and the coyote hadn't dropped. *Kerrangboomcrash.*

The Colt's mild recoil only curled the gun upward in his hand, but the report—the report was violent and immediate, a concussive assault on Cain's hearing. The Colt's roar issuing sideways and forward, it is likely Maria would have been deafened too if she hadn't been standing back. Cain experienced a loud ringing in his ears that would not go away and it was through layers of gauze that Maria's voice called to him, then to the street for a doctor. The gauze turned to cotton, and the cotton turned to foam. He put a hand to his head, stumbling as he lost his equilibrium. He bent over, violently ill on the stones.
My mother's phone rang two times and on the third I turned around to see a baseball-cap clad Blanche Devereaux strong-arming the guy with the torn sleeves, his muscles bulging in protest.

“I looked out my truck, and there goes this one walking off with your stuff.”

“Honest mistake,” he grimaced.

I hung up the phone, taking in the strange scene. “It's not worth much anyway. But thanks.”

She shoved him and said, *Some thief*. We walked over to the diner and I sat with Roxann as she ate the full breakfast plate (“kitchen sink extra”). She told me about getting started in the trucking business twenty years ago, driving team with her husband until they wrecked.

“We stopped pretending after that,” Roxann nodded. No more SoCo tucked in the dash or night caps. She joined a program, divorced her husband, and she kept driving on her own, only thing she knew how to do. She got a midwest regional route when it opened up, to take care of her mother who lives on the property. Three thousand miles a week was good, more just makes you crazy.

Sliding my water glass between my hands, I communicated a rough outline of my life so far and more recent events, leaving out the sad details, but she still patted my arm.
Her truck is shiny black, recently washed, with custom pink pinstripes down the nose. She wears a matching pink vest over a black shirt, her road uniform. She was putting up for the night, hoping the weather would clear enough so she could repair a cold water leak come morning, and in the meantime she was happy to get a room for me too.

“It's amazing what a little time and space will do you for,” is how she put it, so I accepted, promising to pay her back. In an enterprising spirit, I plugged my phone up to the charger and the charger to the wall. It wouldn't work without the battery, but I felt productive for having had the idea. I showered off the road grit, then set my boots and soaked things to dry on the big air-conditioner ledge with the controls set to Mach 5.

All other options proving out of reach, modern cable could newly enthrall me with its the convenience. In sticky-damp jean shorts and grey shirt, now emblazened with my initials, I had just flipped to the tail end of Back to the Future when Roxann knocked on the door to say dessert was here. We ate big slices of refrigerator pie at the desk in her room, sporadic lights glancing off the first-floor windows as varying engine sizes idled, a whole concert just outside the door. The weather cooled off and stayed dry, so we moved to the picnic tables outside where she taught me Gin Rummy after I volunteered my deck.

She turned the yellowing faces to the light, said “Those cards look older than me, and I don't know who that says the worst about.”

While sipping glass bottles of Sprite, we played two rounds, and I almost beat her the second time. After I extracted a promise for an early wake-up call, we parted ways for the night. The harsh lights of the parking lot flooded the window making it hard to sleep. I filled the ice bucket, pushed buttons on the soda machine, walked the grounds.
In the motel’s office there was a dial-up computer for customers, restricted to email and business functions, but it also had three kinds of Solitaire on the desktop. I looked around, making sure the clerk was still clicking around his own computer, then did a search for cons and micro-cons, looked up terms like drug runners and mules. I wondered where I fit into their scheme—surely it was a scheme—but it's not like I had money to be swindled out of, or a large estate to sign over. What could I have offered? Trust, support, maybe lend some legitimacy. But there was no question I could search that would tell me the answer. Checking my inbox instead, I found apartment listings my mother had forwarded, plus a job description at an elementary school for a music teacher. Like I wanted to spend my days on tortured little camptown trudges. Pictures of LOST flyers and milk cartons flooded my thoughts as I started then deleted two emails. I sent off a quick message to my mother, first, writing that I’d gone on a weekend trip and had car trouble but I’d figured it out and would be travelling some more. To Marcus, I just said I’d lost my phone and would tell him about it when I could, there was just too much.

I thought about the headlines I'd imagined for myself only yesterday. I thought if I could just get to California, I could rewrite them and I would have gone somewhere.

Clara Schumann wrote in her diary about wanting to be a composer but feeling like she shouldn't want anything of the sort. She was able to believe she had a talent for it, because of her father's early encouragements, but soon she was tricked into the same invocation that had set many to ruin before her and would continue to do so for long after: “there has never yet been one able to do it. Should I expect to be the one?”

Véla and Frank, they had taught me one thing: I had been wearing list slippers when I should have been wearing stomping boots.
I checked my bank account and found the electric bill had come due, 
overdrawing the account for ten dollars. My pocket still held $2.45, meaning I had about 
negative $42.82 to my name. In my everyday financial landscape, my grandmother's 
gifted savings bonds were near nonexistant, intended only for emergencies because they 
had twelve years left to accrue interest, but if this didn't qualify I didn't know what 
would. I had to get my password reset, first, then with one eye squinted close I clicked 
the button to redeem. Done. It'd be in my account in 5-7 business days. Forty or so 
dollars worth of potential interest were forfeited but it was a small price, I thought, for 
breathing room. If I was keeping track, I would say I had been on the road for three days 
and three nights. 1,042 miles, minus one car and an injured violin.

In the morning, Roxann rapped on the door and yelled that she'd be at the diner. I 
used the office phone to contact my insurance and police, then it was my turn for the full 
breakfast, turned ravenous with the night's deep sleep. Roxann just had oatmeal and 
coffee, explaining she tried to only eat junk after 9pm.

“Hose's good and tight now so I was going to be heading on. You're welcome to 
ride the rest of the way to Romulus, I wouldn't begrudge the talk.”

I was heading west, though, so I said I'd appreciate it if she could drop me off on 
her way through St. Louis, the last major city before she turned north to Hannibal, and I 
figured I'd be better off where I could get find a battery and see about repairing Verona.

Standing next to the truck made me feel very small and climbing up into the 
machine's belly I felt even smaller, like a toddler in grown-up shoes. Roxann said it made 
hers feel just the opposite. Her CB handle used to be Top Shark, because she never backed 
up her truck and thought she shouldn't be expected to. Tired of dealing with off-color
remarks, she switched to Rhubarb—for the color and her preferred choice of pie. For the five hours I accompanied her, I went by Violin Lady. Saturday Night bantered with us over the radio and I wondered if it was the disco-driver from before, lights forever spinning across his dash. I was surprised when Nobody and Nobody's Girl debated with me over the finer details of meantone tuning, as Nobody used to play the piano. He said he always found Bach's *Tempered Clavier* a little unnerving. And there was Big Texas, who said he used to monitor the web for Langley. Got three pedophiles, he said, proud as a button.

I will say that on the way out of Louisville we saw a car being loaded onto a tow truck, and I wondered if it was Bertha, giving out at 150,000 miles. How many Bonnevilles the color of mud-water could there be in the state? If it was Véla and Frank, they'd abandoned it, though. An orange sticker flagged the door, no owners in sight. But the police would have to sort it out.

As we neared the end of I-64 and questions about my plan came up, Nobody's Girl said she might know of accommodations.

“My friend's son-in-law runs a place for backpackers and the like. Just let me see if I can get him on the phone.”

The son-in-law, intrigued by my situation, said he'd try to work something out and to come on down. So Roxann dropped me off at The Adventures of Tom Sawyer Youth Hostel, a four-story brick walk-up festooned with jasmine. The engine idled as we said goodbye, and I had her write down her mother's address so I could pay her back.

“Or you could just write. Send me some postcards, wherever you end up.”
And she passed on her personal road rule: befriend animals, and beware of gods and men.

I followed the signs for hostel registration and found a curving front desk covered with Post-its and cards. Several laundry baskets were scattered or stacked behind it. I shook hands with the owner, Joel, as he showed me around. Twenty bucks a night and two dorms that could hold fifty people. The bathrooms sparkled. There was a shared living area with an old flip-top piano and oversized map of St. Louis. Two couches crowded the space, one tweed and the other tufted leather, plus a variety of chairs. He asked what I thought, and I said it seemed like home already.

Trying to figure out what I had to trade on, I told him about my employment history: the drive-through and playing and bartending.

“Well, I don't have use for a musician without an instrument and we don't carry a liquor license. Can you clean?” So I told him about my grandmother's geese, not to mention my Karate Kid skills, and he thought we could make a deal. There was an apartment above the kitchen where I could stay in exchange for mopping the bathrooms, washing the bedding, and keeping the eating area clear of food, mess, anything that'd attract bugs. We shook on it. I was by far the oldest in the hostel, most fresh out of high school or close to it. They would have a fun gap year then go to college, while I'd gone and failed. So the first week I hung back, hid in my little borrowed room. They invited me into their drinking games or gave me recaps of their day exploring the hip spots in the surrounding neighborhood. But I just wanted to know where a luthier was, and maybe a reputable car dealer.

One of the other guests, a trombonist, overheard my dilemma.
“Is that a flute?” he said. Then before I could answer, “Just kidding.”

He told me about his own plans, which was like the Etch-a-Sketch version of mine: a three-thousand mile trip from Ocean City, at the start of Route 50, straight across to Sacramento on the other side. He was waiting on his Airstream to be repaired then he'd see what the next curve in the road brought. It was the version I'd have wanted to do if I'd planned this or if I'd had anything in the way of style. He pointed out a music repair shop on the big map for me. Six miles away, it would be a two hour walk or an hour's bus ride I could barely afford at the moment. Kneeling on the leather couch and leaning over its back, I stared up at the map trying to find the easiest route in terms of memory more than effort.

“Come on, kid.” Joel grabbed his keys off the hook behind the desk.

On the way, he pointed out the Italian place that serves toasted ravioli and his favorite deep-dish, where he eats far too much for his own good. We passed Cherokee Street, which had been actively pushing for street performers, and he also said I might check out the stadium before/after games, especially if winning puts everyone in a good mood. And, last, I shouldn't leave without trying a slinger. From his description, it might have been a distant relative of the full breakfast. I noted the car lots on the way, most full of freshly washed new or pre-owned types, delivery tape intact. Clunkers with four-digit prices written in window marker was more my speed though. But: violin first, then car.

Unfortunately, Verona was pronounced dead at the scene. She could be repaired, yes, but it would cost more than I'd paid in the first place and would never sound the same. After a lecture on the delicacy of the instrument and the respect it demanded, the shop owner said he could maybe offer some trade-in credit for the two bows, and I said,
If that's how the cards must fall. As the money hadn't made it to my account, I said I'd have to come back unless he took credit. He started to rattle off card merchants, but I said I meant the old idea of writing someone else's name down and just knowing they were good for it until they weren't.

“You want me to give it away?”

“No, but I'm saying you can make the radical decision to embrace an ethos of trust and solidarity that will only bring you closer to your fellow man rather than let yourself be subsumed by a cycle of fear and distrust.”

“You think giving an $800 violin away will be transcendant.”

“Not giving, loaning. I just gotta make some cash, man.”

“That's what I'm saying.”

He traded me a $100 student violin kit and softbody bag for Verona, the bows, and hardcase, saying I could always trade up once I had experienced the radical idea of money.

The air was balmy, sun-soaked, and once we returned to the hostel I sat out on the 2nd floor balcony to practice with my newest companion. A slow and sad “Twinkle, Twinkle” with vibrato effects served for the test run, but the pegs kept coming loose, the tension going out of the strings. Even so, I walked to Cherokee Street the next day because I was impatient, because I was hungry, because I wanted to see if I had been deluding myself. I wore my MP on-brand shirt and jeans then set up near the corner of a barbeque joint's shaded patio. Where my experience on the street had been, up until then, joint efforts largely founded on existing crowds, here I knew nothing. I started with a lively mazurka that attracted some glances, but the hat—or, in this case, a rinsed peanut
butter jar—remained cold, even with my $2 seed money. My sawing grew aggressive, knife-sharp syncopations meant to say I mean business, I can do this. When that didn't work, I tried the songs my dad had played, the 70s and 80s hits, but they were too old now or I was doing something wrong.

So I stopped to read the crowd, watching where the performers went and how the shows were set up, and I played a little of everything. Testing hypotheses. If people looked at my hands, serious stuff. Lots of passersby, czardas. Joni Mitchell and her lovelorn songs netted me the largest crowds, perhaps because it was a familiar sight: the girl, the heartache, the always-quest for love. But I wasn't here just to fall back on that tired line. The next day, I tried something new: I set out three empty plastic jars, again, rinsed of peanut butter. On the first, I'd written “Bach,” on the second, “The Doors,” and the third, “Surprise.” Something classic, something modern, etc. When someone put a tip in the Doors jar, I'd play “Come on Light My Fire,” and from Bach the richly layered Chaconne. The wild card I'd mix up, but the Pirates of the Carribean theme was a popular option. The kids would jab each other as if with fake swords, and the adults would walk a little jauntier or maybe laugh at suddenly being thrust upon the Black Seas on their lunch break. A few knowledgeable musicians would put a dollar in the Bach jar and be surprised when I obliged with such a complex piece, tipping more. Even better was playing DJ and splicing the songs together, turning on a dime between Morrissey's chorus and Bach's sweet saraband as the guests got into bidding wars.

After the pre-dinner crowd, though, I ran headlong into a mirror: a young girl cavorted in a pink dress while her father played acoustic. It was an old story after all. I dropped a twenty into their case and watched, wondering what wasn't in the picture.
Where was the mother. What hadn't I heard when my parents said they wanted better for me.

Before returning to the hostel, I detoured to an electronics store for a battery and the grocery store for a salad of something. On the route back I saw a car lot, just thinking *too much, too much, yikes, way too much.* When I saw her. My heart skipped a beat. Skies opened and so forth: a cherry red AMC Rambler. I wandered in, circling the vehicle, and a salesman asked me if I was lost. I wasn't offended; I wouldn't try to sell a car to me either. But I told him I just so happened to be in the market for a new steed and this one had caught my eye.

“Good eye. 1965, mint.” He said, “One owner car. I can let you drive it off the lot today for twelve large.”

“Twelve hundred?”

He wrote the number on a yellow pad and showed me. Averaging for slow days and boom times, at roughly $180/day meant... I'd be in St. Louis forever.

“Is there an exception for true love?”

He nodded. A $100 discount. “But I can't let her go for anything less than 11-9.”

I sighed, said I'd think about.

—

Here was the part where I had to tell my mother I was hitchhiking across the country, and my father that I followed in his footsteps after all, the ones he tried to erase. Where I told my boyfriend I'm not dead, I just didn't want to come back because if I did I'd feel defeated and never leave again. And that would kill me. What I loved about the road was the lack of demands, the way I could get up early and wander the streets or I
could sleep in and the sun would just wake me in a different way. One wasn't right and the other wrong.

“What about your job?” my parents said. I kind of had one.

“And what about your apartment?” Paid until the end of the month.

“What about us?” Marcus said, and that I couldn't answer. Just said I needed time.

He got the wanderlust thing, said we could take a road trip when he was done with the program, a long vacation, but we both knew it wouldn't be the same.

They wanted to know that I was okay and I said *really*.

On my balcony, I played some ragtime because I wanted to hear something soar already. Ocean City called up to me and said I should come out from under my rock. I ventured downstairs, and on the leather couch we invented riffs in place of chatter because I didn't know the right words anymore. Another one of the guests sat down at the piano and played brutally, but no one could hear her: the piano had long fallen out of tune, and none of the keys made a sound. But it was a beautiful performance nonetheless.

I mentioned the rejection from the *Conservatorio di Ives*, what'd started all this, and Ocean City said he'd spent a year in Rome.

“I figured I was there, so I had to check out the art. And under the angels playing trombones, I found all these saints and martyrs, thousands of depictions of pain and suffering on display. And I had to ask myself, what did spending a year looking at men nailed to crosses do for me?”

“So... you don't think I'm missing out? Ruining my life?”

“Maria, you're fine.”
At the end of the week I had my repertoire down despite a few broken bow hairs. I'd also retuned the thing countless times, but I had gas money to make the drive. And when my savings bond earnings dropped into my account, with a noleable splash, I walked back into the violin shop.

The student kit was down to a $50 trade-in, the cost of a week's depreciation.

“Can you take care of nothing? Look at the bow. You monster.”

“Yes, yeah. I'll take the Yamaha. And a Roland Cube.”

For outside, I needed the new and electric, something that was light, that could take an amplifier. I also sprung for a travel case with a strap on the back, in case I ever have to choose between climbing a ladder or saving my violin again.

When I returned to the car lot, the same salesman was there, playing a game on his phone.

“Oh, you. Back for love?”

“Oh, yeah. Next best thing. And under one large.”

I bought a fourth generation Subaru Legacy for $999—a dollar away from one thousand, always just out of reach. The salesman said it needed a thermostat, but the transmission was sound. The paper tag was good for a month and I paid the insurance for six.

I waved bye to the Rambler, but somethings just weren't meant to be.

When I told Joel I'd gotten my feet back under me, he made sure to have breakfast to-go for me, an order of slinger so I wouldn't miss out. Ocean City shook my hand, told me good luck going 'til the end of the road and maybe he'd see me there.
The day I drove out of St. Louis, the Cardinals commenced an eight-game win streak that took them to first place in the National League Central Division, and I thought maybe I was ill-luck after all.
CHAPTER 18

ALAMOGORDO AND ON | 32°49'26.6" N, 106°16'36.7" W

The diagnosis from the town's physician was that Cain suffered extensive damage to the inner and middle ear, which are areas that, when affected, usually result in permanent injury. The doctor supplied him with a yellow pad and freshly-sharpened lead pencil, and the only thing he jotted down was, *How long?*

Cain wanted to delay the trip until he was well enough to drive. He wrote, on several pages, *Just wait 'til I get my hearing back.* Or, *When I'm 100% again.* Or, *Just wait.*

It's not that he thought Maria didn't have the strength to crank the car, the skill to drive it from one point to another, or any ability otherwise required to safely conduct a gasolene car. He knew she did and could. But he had a role and he was bent on fulfilling it.

When he asked, *Weren't you scared?* Maria jotted in reply, *Nothing wants to fight & if they do it's in the name of sumthing (sic) else.*

Like survival, she thought. Hunger, affection. John had taught her that coyotes, along with raccoons and the like, they only attacked if they were sick or being threatened.

They stayed for a week, so he could convalesce. Maria wanted him to get out of the room and see the depot, maybe, just go for a short walk. It wasn't like his legs had been affected. Yet in the wake of the accident he collapsed into himself, as though being unable to hear the world meant that he was shut out from it entirely. Cain stopped
communicating. He wasn't mute, but he'd lost his desire to speak. And Maria finally said they had to be moving on. That she would to drive them the rest of the way.

It wasn't that novel of an idea. Blanche Stuart Scott, Anita King, Amanda Pruess, Alice Ramsey—only four years older than Maria was then—Emily Post, Edith Wharton. All women who completed cross-country drives. It was a woman who had invented the windshield wiper, after all. In 1916, the Girl Scouts even initiated an “Automobiling Badge” for driving skill, auto mechanics, and first aid, while a few years later Henry Ford hired women workers at his factories, promising equal pay, if “so they could dress attractively and get married”. The Mustang, now a muscle car for teenage boys full of bristling hormones and machismo, was initally marketed toward women.

Maria drove slowly, as they left Mineola, and Cain looked out the window at a scenery without soundtrack. They stopped to watch a band of wild horses, a beautiful red roan among them, and he said nothing. By Alamogordo, his mood still hadn't improved.

Cain spread his thumb and pinky out, curling the other fingers in, then tipped his hand back and forth near his mouth. The universal sign for I want a drink.

“Fine, feel sorry for yourself,” she said, turning him back to her mouth. “But I won't watch you wallowing.”

He went to the nearest speakeasy, raging in silence, and Maria left him to it.

She went back to the hotel room and slept badly, getting up to look out the window every few hours and listening for steps in the hall that never came. Early the next morning, she found him lying on his back in the dirt, where he'd fallen in his drunkenness, the dirt and desert air settling on him like soap scents.

She helped him up into a sitting position and he sat there, breathing hard.
He said, “Maria. I'm sorry. I need your help.”

In their little rented room, Cain gave her the next present. A music box. He wound the little pin and learned how to watch her face for the song instead.

The rest of Texas was pasture, jumbled boulders and tumbled weeds and dark towers flashing in the night. There was the moon over Tucson. The Hope Highway to White Sands, like a beach without water. Yuma, El Canto. The bad weather and country roads throughout New Mexico, catching them in a series of cloudbursts. But Maria took them straight on to San Diego as she said she would.
On the way out of St. Louis, I stopped for Nadeau, Kansas, where my ancestors had been given land. Because maps had forgotten the location, it was more of a best guess sort of thing as I pulled into Jackson. There was the desolate flatness and the pride and obstinancy of people, but none of them mine. I wish I'd felt more.

Then on, through Dodge City and a detour to Boulder, then an hour's marvel through Monument Valley. The sun descended around the Utah mountains in a blaze of wonder, but the night left more to be desired. I worried for the elk crossing signs every few miles, the unambitious reach of my headlights, the few cars around and the ones that were there blazing past me. I scanned my eyes across the road to stay alert but grew sleepy anyway. A road sign blinked orange, *CECI EST UN TEST*, and I was sure it was delirium. My eyes blinked wide like Betty Boop, and I had to pull over.

Well off the road, near a fence post, I leaned my seat back, locked the doors, and tried to sleep. An hour or a few minutes passed before noises rustled outside the car. I wondered about the rural version of the urban legends about hooks in doors and unwanted passengers, and I gripped the car key between my fore and middle finger, a jabbing weapon. I also remembered that things only attack if they're sick or if their brains see no other option. So we breathed the night air together, me and whatever was out there, my eyes wide and fearful until they closed and opened to wild rabbits hopping
through the grass. When I turned my head, I found a whole line of cows watching me
from the fence. My wendago merely chewing cud.

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I switched to I-15, crawled through Vegas traffic, and after Fallon the roads got
curvy, which thrilled me and made the songs on the radio louder, more meaningful, but
soon the roads turned straight and redundant again. When it turned dark, I was sick with
the straightness of it all and wanted to stop for a rest.

The sign for the exit was set well-back from the road itself, so as soon as you saw
the sign you had to wonder where the road was, and only after wondering could you find
it. I had imagined it as a popular stop—oh, look at the weird name: Zzyzx Rd—but I was
alone. The exit pointed me down to who knows, fifteen minutes of hugging the base of a
rocky hill and dizzy with the wide salt flats of the Mojave on the other side. The reward
was radio evangelist Dr. Curtis Springer's abandoned spa resort, opened on land he didn't
own. He squatted on 12,800 acres for decades. Now home to a desert studies center,
Zzyzx was meant to be “the last word in health,” and it was for forty years until the
government closed it down. The compound was fringed with lush palms and pools of
water, a beautiful harbor in the heat. I sat swinging on the Boulevard of Dreams, where
there were two playground sets. The seats moved in the wind, and I with them. Kicking
my legs up and up and leaning back, I felt sure I could pull the trees right out of the sky.
At the far end of the boulevard, the empty concrete hulls of the health baths reflected a
bright blue back at the sky. Something like haint blue, I suspected. I climbed down into
one of the tubs with my Yamaha, even though or maybe because there was no electricity
for my amp.
The intro-to-theory course had given me passing knowledge of John Cage, enough to know 4'33”, the controversial silent movement. Then, my eyes had glazed over while reading “Lecture on Nothing” as I had tried to finish it after working late, and I had failed the quiz. But I understood a little of it now. I allowed myself an hour of music, with nothing playing, and learned to listen for the song by watching the strings.

Springer hawked a miracle antacid that was mostly baking soda, but I liked to the think he made a little magic despite himself. The Boulevard of Dreams was real, after all. I thought that for those who could afford fifteen minutes on a road to nowhere, the reward was immense.
Two weeks and three days later, Maria and Cain saw a high blue sky over the Pacific Ocean and were home. They rented a cottage and marveled at the sugar pines and redwoods, fairy bells and coastal woodfern, but also the plants that grew crooked and strange. They learned the secrets of chapparal, how it seeks fire and comes back stronger for it. They exchanged old pleasures for the new, like the splendor of a September morning in the mountains of California. The blue- and red-shirted miners a feature of the landscape as much as the warbling vireos, all of them wanderers from the whole broad earth. They organized their lives around different units of time. The time of transit, the time of rest. The time of adventure, the time of fear. Time of ripening and waiting, time of releasing. The first rain of the season. The last bloom of oleander.

In a year, they found a house on a high hill with sandy soil. Maria grew agave and rosemary in place of tomatoes. There was the adventure show some years after that and a minor local celebrity as “the voice on the radio.” Cain must have gotten in touch with the man from Vicksburg, for he earned a pilot’s license issued by the Federation Aeronautic Association of the United States. When they invested in a small aeroplane instead of indoor plumbing, she just said, “Because you can't go to the mountains in a bathtub.” Cain purchased a Tiger Moth and then later a Stinson Reliant. While the minor highs and lows have been lost to history, there's the year her oldest son died after driving through the guardrails of Santa Monica, and a few years after that when her husband was shot
down over Germany. I was still digesting the fact of these tragedies in such close
quarters. He had been drafted as a bombardier then reupped to attend pilot training in
Texas. Going into the Army in 1942, he had served in the Air Corps until his plane was
shot down in October 1943. But time goes on. Maria reconnected with the Larson boy
that lived across the bridge her whole life. There were no children, but they remained
married until his death in 1972.

*What a trip we have had,* she wrote. John sent his own postcard, in the later years,
saying that since Maria left, he was going to leave, too, for Iowa City.

But she lived. She died. That's what we can know for sure.
From first step, San Francisco was a fighting city, the streets either trying to buck you off or drop you to your knees, and so I knew we'd get on well.

I had followed Route 50 to its whiplash conclusion in Sacramento, just having time to read the word END before the road dumped me out onto I-80, no end at all but a reconfiguration. Driving until the Western terminus of the old Lincoln Highway, I stopped before I fell into the water, appropriately, at a beach called Land's End. When the tide receded, you could still see the husks of ships who dashed themselves on the rocky coast in their great surge forward.

My great-grandmother's grave, or what I thought was the grave, wasn't kept up. The ground shifted around it, and I wondered who was there at the end. I wondered what she saw. I wondered if anyone else had bothered to come out here.

Maria's epitaph: Rather at once our time devour.

My great-grandfather's grave was an hour's walk to the National Cemetery that took me along a winding ocean cliff. I remembered reading somewhere that the term wanderlust came from the German verb for hiking, that it literally meant “desire to hike.” Just wanting to go higher, to see further. The wind tangled my dress in my legs as the path brought distant landmarks to my sight, like the bridge, the prison island, the treasure island, the nameless shoals.

Cain's epitaph: Off we go into the wild blue yonder
Their epitaphs read like an ongoing conversation across the years and miles.

I felt a pang and thought it was sadness, but really it was the sound of my heart being heard for the first time, and it wanted to swim in a new ocean.

Did Maria Ward know, when she set out for San Diego, that she'd remain restless and settle further north, in San Francisco, then a little further in Sacramento, but only in the loosest sense, that she'd run her whole life and never stop, that she'd die in a rented room? If I had known, when I set out, would I—but what does it matter. I remain convinced it is the most useful skill of all, to be able to float. The sun's heat licked the saltwater from my skin as I walked to the shore. With the wind around my legs and the flat blue of the sky immense above me, a giant blanket seemed to be tumbling down to Earth. And merrily merrily merrily it fell.

END
WORKS CITED


APPENDIX A: GENEALOGICAL REFERENCE CHART

1 Carselowey, Eliza M. M. (b. 1884 in Tahlequah, OK  d: Nov 1956 in FL)
   + Ward, John (b. 1880 in Isle of Hope, GA  d. 1954 in FL)
     - John Jr. (b. May 1903 in Isle of Hope, GA  d. 1978 in IA)
     - Hugh Lewis (b. Aug 1915 in Isle of Hope, GA  d. 1995 in Savannah, GA)
2 Ward, Maria (b. 15 Dec 1906 in Isle of Hope, GA  d. 1974 in Sacramento, CA)
   + Calder, Cain (b. 10 Nov 1906 in Atlanta, GA  d. 1943 in Germany) (m. 1924)
     - Leon Alvin (b. 9 Jan 1925 in San Diego, CA  d. 1940)
     - George Hugh (b. 1932 d. Feb 1987)
   + Larson, Ronald (b. 1903 in Isle of Hope, GA  d. 1972) (m. 1946)
3 Calder, Ruby Leigh (b. 1928 in Sacramento, CA  d. 3 Apr 1984 in GA)
   + Rawls, Alan (b. 1921 d. ?) (m. 1944, div. 1964)
     - William John (b. 1945 in San Francisco, CA)
     - James Lee (b. 1947 in Savannah, GA)
     - Lois Paige (b. 1955 in Savannah, GA)
     - Jodi Faye (b. 1958 in Savannah, GA)
4 Rawls, Emma Lynn (b. 08 Mar 1953 in Savannah, GA)
   + Pellerin, Mercer Louis (b. 23 Mar 1951 in Iberia Parish, LA) (m. 1978)
5 Pellerin, Maria Joanna (b. 22 Jun 1985 in Savannah, GA)
APPENDIX B: SONGS FOR THE ROAD

(AN INDEX OF MUSIC PLAYED, HEARD, MENTIONED, INVENTED,
RECALLED, SUNG, HUMMED, OR OTHERWISE EVOKED)

Alison Krauss – “Two Highways” (1989)
Arlo Guthrie – “Mail Myself to You” (1962)
Bach – Sonata No. 1 in G minor, BWV 1001 (1720)
Biber – Battalia (1673)
Bird and Diz – “Passport” (1950)
Beach Boys – Pet Sounds (1966)
Bob Dylan – “The Times They Are A-Changin’” (1964)
Boston – “Foreplay/Long Time” (1976)
Britney Spear – “Stronger” (2000)
Carter Family – “Wildwood Flower” (1935)
Cyndi Lauper – “Girls Just Want to Have Fun” (1983)
Ennio Morricone – “A Fistful of Dollars” (1964)
Eric Clapton – “Key to the Highway” (1970)
Ervin T. Rouse – “Orange Blossom Special” (1938)
Europe – “The Final Countdown” (1986)
Frank Sinatra – “Come Fly with Me” (1958)
Friedrich "Fritz" Kreisler – “Mozart Violin Concerto No. 3 in G major, K.216” (1946)
György Ligeti – Etude No. 9: Vertige (1985)
Henry Mancini – “Moon River” (1961)
Jacques Offenbach – “Belle nuit, ô nuit d'amour” (1864)
Jarek Stanislav – Přesezený (2009)
Jimi Hendrix – “Voodoo Child” (1968)
Joan Jett – “Celluloid Heroes”, “Roadrunner, USA” (1990)
Joe Esposito – “You're the Best” (1984)
John William – “Jaws Theme” (1975)
Johnny Rue & The Blahs - “Static/Fog” (2010)
Joni Mitchell – Hejira (1976)
Leadbelly – “Alabama Bound” (1909)
Led Zeppelin – “When the Levee Breaks” (1971)
Massenet – “Meditation” (1894)
Metric – “Help I'm Alive” (2009)
Miley Cyrus – “Can't Be Tamed” (2010)
Mountain – “Mississippi Queen” (1981)
MP – Music for Mermaids LP (2011)
Nancy Sinatra – “These Boots Are Made for Walkin’” (1966)
The Nationals – “Daughters of the Soho Riots” (2005)
Neil Young – “Ohio” (1971)
Nine Inch Nails – Pretty Hate Machine (1989)
Richard Strauss – “Also Sprach Zarathustra” (1896)
Sherman Brothers – “It's a Small World (After All)” (1964)
The Sounds – “Home is Where Your Heart Is” (2009)
Tegan and Sara – “The Con” (2007)
Theelonious Monk – “Straight No Chaser” (1967)
Unicorn Typhoon – Glitter Milk Spilled Rainbow (2007)
Unknown – “Banjo Pickin' Girl” (n.d.)
Woody Guthrie – “This Land is Your Land” (1940)