The Monster

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THE MONSTER

by

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The Monster

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A partial novel depicting the struggles of a woman named Celia Guardian, who is accused of murdering her brother; she is unsure whether she is responsible or not.
Introduction

About ten years ago, my brother was killed in a car accident at the age of sixteen. My three most distinct memories surrounding that event are of course entirely selfish, as grief usually is. The first is from the day before he died, from the Labor Day family picnic where I saw him for the last time. He had been surly and anti-social the whole time, and as I left to drive back to school (as early as I could get away), I didn’t bother to locate him to say goodbye because, I reasoned, it’s not like I wasn’t going to see him again.

The second was when my parents showed up at my dorm room door at seven the morning after it happened, sat me down on our couch and said, “Your brother died in a car accident.” The very first thought that popped into my head (which I recall because it bothers me to this day) was, “I wonder if his car survived.” I’d always been a little jealous because his car was better than mine.

The third came about a month later, at the dentist’s office. Our family dentist was kind of a busybody, and of course knew all about what had happened. She asked me how my parents were doing, and said, “This must have ripped them apart.” And did not ask me how I was. Which of course infuriated me. Why didn’t I merit some sort of sympathy as well?

Grief makes people fixate. We want to make it about the people we lose, but it’s always going to be about ourselves, because we’re the ones who have to suffer through it. It’s selfish. And it turns us into idiots. We think we’re socially programmed to act a certain way when we lose someone, but we really aren’t. There are very few
expectations, because it isn’t normally talked about. We’re allowed to be sad. A certain amount of license is offered to us, based on our proximity to death. Parents, here, will always be the most pitied, which I’m certainly not arguing against, but the tendency to dole out entitlement to grieve is unhealthy. My mother grieved, and was put on long-term paid mental-health leave from work out of respect. I grieved, and my roommates tried to get me kicked out of our dorm room because I was too sad for them to deal with.

The first incarnation of this novel (or rather, novel-in-progress) was painfully close to autobiographical. It was more therapy than fiction, focusing solely on a woman whose life falls apart after her brother dies. It was a means of coping when the wound was still raw. But I knew it didn’t work because it was more my life than actual narrative, and the story didn’t escalate like it was supposed to. I shoveled the finished draft into a drawer, and told myself I would come back to it when I was ready to turn it into fiction.

Somewhere in the process, it became a story about a different kind of grief. Because the actual event was an accident, it was hard not to look for some sort of blame, specifically in myself. I was definitely an awful driver, and had been a lousy teacher when he was first learning. I wondered, then, how this experience might become something different if my main character isn’t just blaming herself, but actually getting blamed by everyone around her, forbidden to grieve normally because she “has no right to.” The story is partly an attempt to figure out if she’s actually responsible, sort of a backwards murder mystery, but the answer doesn’t determine who is guilty so much as what that guilt could mean about her as a person. Her efforts to deal with loss while deciding whether she is responsible.

Then there’s Richard Marx. Cass’ obsession with the song “Hazard” is from my
own experience, and is retold pretty much exactly the way it happened to me: I thought maybe I made the song up as a child but kept listening for it for years and eventually decided I’d dreamed it or something. Until a few years ago, when I heard it played over the sound system in the restaurant where I worked. I was stupidly excited about it but kept it to myself because…well, it was stupid. But the song fit a little too perfectly into the conflict of my novel (purely by accident; the song came later). Cass is obsessed with it, and has pretty nothing else in his life, so it becomes most of his existence. The Chapmans are all people who never learn to function properly, the mysterious family money an excuse to hide indoors and fixate on the meaningless rather than keep themselves occupied. And Celia is convinced (and really Cass is also) that they are doomed to collapse in on themselves; all of them are, as Hunter Thompson said, “too weird to live.” The outside world calling for Celia’s head on a stick only serves to speed that along.

I stopped the thesis at a point that felt logical to the story, but the novel itself is not finished. I wish I could say I knew where it goes from here, but I’m still figuring that out. Even Celia’s responsibility for this is probably something I’m not fully going to decide until close to the end. I am fairly sure, if she does turn out to have done it, that she will never totally understand why she lost those couple of days, or even why she did it. Several things will have to slowly converge as this goes on: Elias and his letters, Eleanor the girlfriend, Elaine Kessler the Frying Pan Killer. I feel like Jean is going to mysteriously vanish close to the end, and Celia will find herself alone in The Monster (since Daniel has kicked her out of their house by this point) as the novel approaches the finish.
A big part of this, for me, is a question of perception. I followed a news story last February about a female professor who opened fire during a faculty meeting, who, it turned out, had “accidentally” killed her brother with a shotgun twenty years before. When it happened, it was treated as an accident, but the whole thing was reviewed after her rampage and it was then widely discussed as a police screw-up; later violence might have been prevented had it been properly investigated in the first place. Every new thing that came out about her further painted her as a monster, and her whole life was easily distorted to fit this mold. Which is not to say she shouldn’t be judged for her actions, but the ease with which she turned from a disgruntled teacher to an evil maniac in the public eye amazed me.

This is about how I see Celia. Her actions, whatever they turn out to be, are probably reprehensible. Clearly she has something to do with it, even if there are extenuating circumstances and it isn’t outright murder. But from the outside, she has to become a distortion of herself for people to make sense of her, for the media to turn her into news. So in those terms, it won’t end up mattering what she actually did.
The Monster

Celia sits in front of the Death House, in one of her husband’s cars, because it contains her brother’s body and an hour from now will be where his funeral takes place. She’s outside because this is the first time she’s coming home since it happened, and she’s not sure what *it* is. Her brother Cass’s death, yes, but how he went she hasn’t the faintest clue—no one’s told her yet.

Her husband is not with her. He is forty-five minutes northwest in Grand Rapids, working at a law firm whose name she’s never managed to memorize (and she’s tried, every time she’s ever heard it said she has tried to hold on to it). Daniel told her this couldn’t be helped, working today of all days, even though her brother is dead and the funeral is a one-time-only affair. He’ll be in the ground in two hours.

She hasn’t gone in yet because she’s still cleaning the residue of vomit from the front of her suit jacket, and hasn’t fully decided whether her private parts are bleeding through the back of her skirt and might have to be cleaned up first. She is not menstruating. Nevertheless her vagina is bleeding mysteriously, copiously, and she’s not sure if she prepared properly, even though she knew the blood would come.

It seems spectacularly unfair that she is bloody and stained with puke and attending the funeral of her only sibling all on the same day. There’s a strange numbness in the back of her brain, like she’s expecting the full weight of her grief to crush her anytime now, but it isn’t quite yet, is only looming now, and this too is unfair. But no one of these alone would feel fair either, so she decides to forget the injustice and get out of the car.

Her mother is inside. She is already suffering, this being the last of so many
misfortunes in her life. Every morning for the last twenty-two years, Cass has woken up under their mother’s roof, through childhood and grade school and on into his early adulthood, the two of them occupying the house alone for the last eight years. But two days ago their mother woke up and for the first time had to eat breakfast without him, and even this was too much for one woman to bear (Celia grew up there in that giant house also, but she got out when she was eighteen, unlike her brother, and now lives in Holland with her funeral-skipping husband).

Breakfast is intolerable now that her son is dead. Now she only has Martha (Mrs. Talbot) in the house, a woman who lives down the street and has worked as a housekeeper for the last twelve years. Mrs. Talbot carries a bible everywhere and drives Celia’s mother crazy (Jean Chapman is a lifelong atheist notoriously cruel to all evangelists), but she works under the table for less than minimum wage. For this Mrs. Talbot is tolerated, so there will be someone around to cook and clean the giant house when it needs cleaning, something Jean refused to do after her husband left. Now Cass is gone, Jean will have to deal with her alone, though at least she’ll be able to insult Mrs. Talbot mercilessly at an unnatural volume (claiming this is due to hearing issues that have never been officially diagnosed, while speaking normally to everyone else, knowing that Mrs. Talbot will never call her on it) without anyone telling her to be nice.

But Celia hasn’t been home yet to confirm any of this. She was in Holland, 50 miles south of her hometown, these couple of days since Cass passed; her mother told her not to come back until the funeral. Not to spend those days with just her mother and Mrs. Talbot in the house she grew up in, not to get in the way of whatever she might be in the way of. Celia was a little hurt, but did not argue with her. There were only three of them
for years (since Mr. Chapman disappeared in the middle of the night over a decade ago),
and now they are down to two. Both women. All the men have cut and run it seems. Cass
parted for the infinite, and Elias Chapman, traitorous patriarch, went looking for
something he couldn’t find here, leaving late so no one would ask him any difficult
questions.

Celia has a feeling she stinks right now, smells like organic, fungus-like growth
and car rust. If Daniel were here, he would describe the scent to her in ornate detail,
would fuss over her until she cleaned herself up. Would be asking her questions she
couldn’t answer about why she reeks of vomit and blood.

Half the town of Hazard (on the cusp of Lake Michigan, so close it could fall in if
the townsfolk don’t watch attentively) might already be here. The Death House parking
lot and its thirty-car capacity filled ages ago, and the streets around it are lined with
minivans and pick-ups, all American, corrected so badly in their parallel-parking spots
that there are big, almost-car-sized holes between many of them. Hazard is a town
populated by slow drivers and careless parkers, all of them confident there will always be
infinite space for everyone’s vehicles, no matter the occasion. The huge gaps between the
buildings only perpetuate this misconception. There’s room in the downtown area for a
post office, a tiny family grocery store, one dentist’s office with a rotting tackle shop
attached to its hind end, and a couple of churches, and there’s no point crowding them in
seeing as there’s nothing else for which the extra land is needed. Most other businesses
are at least a few miles out of town.

A pleasantly disgusting night crawler funk drifts from than the bait shop. It’s
barely a side business now, a personal thing run by the dentist on weekends for people
leaving town to go fishing.

Standing outside the driver’s side door, Celia forces her clothes into place, smooths down the black polyester tube she’s armored herself with for the day. She smells like puke and iron and everyone will be able to pick up on it, but she decides finally that she doesn’t care. It doesn’t matter today. She will deal with it later.

Her head has been fuzzy for the last few days (the death day Tuesday, today Friday) since her mother called her from home that evening and told her Cass had been dead for the previous four hours and that she shouldn’t come home until burying day, as much as she loved her and wanted her home, and as much as Cass loved her also, and as much as Celia might feel like coming home was the right thing to do. If there was really any right thing to do in these situations.

What did Celia do in that interim, when she knew but couldn’t do a thing about it? She had a doctor’s appointment Wednesday, all the way in Grand Rapids (which she still hasn’t told her husband about, just as well because she doesn’t recall what she was there for, couldn’t offer him much anyway). When she got home she sat on the couch and bled. She’s been bleeding ever since. These things happen, she figures, when one goes to doctors, people bleed for days sometimes, and Dr. Kelly (a new guy, one day only, she couldn’t describe the man for a police sketch artist now if she tried) must have assured her the bleeding was normal, a controlled bleed. She doesn’t have it in her to worry about it at the moment, so this is what she tells herself; the rest can be sorted out later.

Cass was twenty-two when he went (Celia twenty-six). Logically he shouldn’t be dead, and she is too young to be mourning him. Everything is conspiring to remind her that today is going to be fundamentally unfair. No matter the reason for it, the bleeding is
going to keep being a mystery to her, at least for the time being. She could call them on
Monday to figure things out, but from Friday, Monday isn’t looking any easier, might
even be worse, darker and more impossible, and the bleed will likely stop before she has
the will power to investigate.

She will go inside. She’ll ignore the smell of the bait shop and the dead raccoon in
the gutter across the street, and stop despising the people of her hometown long enough
to face the thought of going inside. She will sign her name in the guestbook even though
her presence doesn’t need to be recorded. She’ll do all this when she gets herself
together. For now she’s waiting for a breeze to come and dry the wet sick leftovers on the
breast of her jacket (the worst of it cleaned off but still moist and a little pungent).

An hour or two in here for the funeral. A luncheon reception scheduled after in
her childhood home--that hulk of a house her father bought and named The Monster and
then vanished from one night--and a light meal her stomach is nowhere near prepared for.
And then whatever comes after that, how many years of disarray she has in front of her to
nauseously stumble through.

Celia does loves her brother, although she hasn’t seen him much these past few
years. He is her only brother, her only sibling, and was the only man in her life from
when Elias left when she was fourteen until she left home for college at eighteen. Right
now she knows something in her is probably broken--there are symptoms so far, but
nothing clear enough to diagnose--and in the meantime, her numbness makes her guilty.
The rest of it will come eventually, and until then, she’s grieving the wrong way. And
people will see it on her face and smell it on her clothes.

She tries to talk herself through the doors. She wonders if she’ll be expected to
enter covered in tears, cheeks puffy and streaked with mascara, or if she should maintain a stoic face until the preacher starts spewing scripture, and then explode, curl up into her mother, cry in unison until the eulogy fizzles out and the preacher gives up, overcome by the cacophony of the sole surviving family members in the front row.

She wonders also why she has no idea how Cass jumped to the other side, and why for that matter she is only now on the steps of the Death House, anticipating the gawking that will start the moment she goes in, asking herself this question. Jean has yet to pass that information on. The phone call was brief. “Cass is dead. The funeral is on Friday. Stay there until then. There shouldn’t be any reason for you to come down.” Probably there were other things said as well, some affection, but these are the only sentences she held on to.

Then three days of blur, and the doctor’s appointment. Then today.

But no, there was the fight in between as well, last night, Daniel coming home about eight as he does (too late for a lawyer, isn’t it? who knows) when he isn’t coming home some other unpredictable time of day, and arguing with her almost immediately because she told him her brother was dead two days after hearing herself, just as he came in the door.

“Cass died. The funeral’s tomorrow,” she said.

“Jesus,” Daniel said. “That’s not possible. They never go in that quickly.”

“He died on Tuesday,” she said.

“Two days ago.”

“Tuesday was two days ago.”

“And why the hell didn’t you tell me?” he asked.
“Didn’t think to,” she said. “Will you come?”

Then he called her a couple names--she can’t remember which ones but she’s sure they were ugly--her intelligence and sanity were generally called into question, and he explained once he got the other things out of his system that there were certain obligations he had that day that would make his attendance impossible. Which might somehow have been rescheduled if she’d told him two days ago, but now were completely immovable.

She suspects that he actually didn’t come entirely out of spite, but because she still doesn’t understand his job and has never been able to tell him this, she has no real ammunition to call him on it.

Her struggling with the wood slab (who the hell designed this door to be so heavy?) of course draws attention and as soon as she steps inside everyone is looking at her. A few people are gathered in the tiny foyer, but most of them are spread out in the uncomfortably large chapel, bright orange, diamond-patterned carpet lined with couches, upholstery erupting with enormous pink flowers. The expanse in the middle should be populated by chairs, at least a dozen rows more than there currently are, but it’s seated ambitiously for fifty and likely will not be full. The Chapmans have never been popular locally.

She goes to the guestbook to sign in. She reads the names and waits for the eyes to go back to her mother, who must be here somewhere.

The names on the page exposed: four of them unrecognizable, a couple of teachers from the local elementary school (from the time when teachers still found Cass’ weirdness charming), piles of Talbots from far enough away she wonders what the hell
would bring them here (no one but Martha herself could possibly have met him, so Celia can only assume they’re here to represent Jesus in solidarity), and then a series of foreign names accompanied by Hazard addresses, nosy neighbors. More than seems normal for the son of a family without friends (or family really, beyond her and her mother). She hears enough voices to match how deeply the list has been filled, but still she does not look up.

A pile of paper scraps, computer printouts copied into blotchiness and cut into quarters, sit next to the book. Written on each are his full name (Charles Solomon Chapman), the dates of birth and death, and the specifics of the business, the date of burial, all the information that everyone here knows today, but in fifteen years will have forgotten about when they find the crumpled announcement at the bottom of a musty purse about to be garage-saled. On the back: a poem that was likely written by a twelve-year-old, maybe the granddaughter of the funeral director.

“Though you are gone today
And your body goes beneath the ground
We feel deeply the pain as we say goodbye
The grief is unbearably profound
But we know you are off in Heaven
And that God will protect you always
You will look down upon us as our lives go on
And we will be with you again one beautiful day.”

She stuffs a handful of these into her purse in the hope that on the bad days in the future the bad poetry might be comforting.
When she looks up again, half the room is still staring at her; the other half is a protective wall around Jean, who is standing in front of a couch as though attempting an escape, trapped on two sides by a crowd of middle-aged women in summer dresses and on the third by a wall of chrysanthemums guarding the casket. Celia doesn’t mind the staring, even came in expecting it because these people have no other reason to be here but to gape and invade. But they’re not giving Celia that condoling yet invasive look of congregants who have come to pity rather than mourn. They’re looking at her with something resembling anger. Some are leaning into those standing near to them (in clumps that visibly fail to fill the room, focusing around couches where a few older ladies are resting, leaving big gaps of orange carpet to blind Celia with its incongruity, to remind her of AA meetings). Their mouths curve into sneers, and sharp but indistinct whispers circle the room. No one approaches her to express sympathy, so she keeps standing pointedly on her own, looking around. All of them just staring. Like she wasn’t invited.

She ignores it.

She burrows through that big clump near her brother’s coffin (averting her eyes from it for now) to get to her mother and Mrs. Talbot, permitting herself to be a little inconsiderate. Women in polyester dresses cluck at her as she nudges them out of the way. She knows she should be behaving better, but she can’t. Her brother is dead. She has not seen her mother since the event, and these women for some reason are ungraciously keeping them from each other. These women are not Jean’s friends.

One day only, she thinks. He’ll be in the ground in two hours, and tonight she will be home again. Daniel may or may not ask her how it went. Although she’s been married
to this man for five years, she still doesn’t know enough about him to predict his behavior one way or the other.

Maybe she’s being unfair. Today does not belong to her. But everyone in this room who watched her come in are looking at her like she’s getting in the way of their saying goodbye, like her grieving doesn’t mean a whole lot next to theirs, and certainly not next to her mother’s, and that’s just one more unfairness on top of all the others.

They have always hated her, she thinks. The town of Hazard has hated the whole Chapman clan from moment one, but each subsequent generation has somehow drawn more dislike, for no reason any of them have managed to figure out. Although they could have been sweet on Cass the whole time without her knowing, because it was so easy to be; he was so ethereally, unthreateningly quiet as a child (though odd as well; he made people ill-at-ease when they were obligated to occupy rooms alone with him, preferring him in group or classroom settings, where he by comparison seemed more boy-pixie than child). Jean they could conjure up pity for because her husband ran off and left her to raise children all on her own (though Mrs. Talbot takes her unfair share of the credit for said raising from anyone she can get to listen). But Celia still has the whole ugly burden of the strange Chapman family hanging over her head, all the unpleasantry surrounding them since her grandparents came to Hazard in whatever year that was, and no one is about to forgive her for it even on the day her brother is buried. The local hatred is a mystery. They keep to themselves and own the biggest ugliest house in town, but otherwise have never caused anyone any undue grief.

So maybe these women ought to have stayed home for his funeral if they’re feeling so spiteful, Celia figures, even if the Death House would be stark empty without
all of their judging faces to populate it. But because they had the nerve to show up and act crotchety and badly park their boring cars in all the side streets, she won’t feel bad shoving them out of her way. She’ll say goodbye this afternoon in whatever way suits her.

Celia shoulders through the handful of people between her and Jean. Mrs. Talbot is about three feet away, partly engulfed by a tower of lilies, wearing a burgundy pillbox hat and talking to some churchy-looking women who must be her relatives. Moments ago she was probably pushing too far into Jean’s personal space, fussing over her as she does, and Jean likely told Mrs. Talbot to piss off for a while and give her some room to herself on today of all days. Talbot’s face is contorted with an unchristian grumpiness, and she’s whispering to one of her seven sisters (or how many ever; Celia hasn’t the foggiest what the depth and breadth of the Talbot family could be) that Jean needs all the praying and Jesus she can get in these trying times.

So she might have an biased impression of how dogmatic and intolerant Mrs. Talbot and her kin are, given how little conversation she’s had with the woman in the near decade she’s been employed at The Monster. But Jean has always loathed her, and since this aura of Christianity was the reason most often cited for hating her, there’s been no suggestion of her possessing any other qualities.

Mrs. Chapman is flanked by a half dozen local women’s club members who have never before claimed to be her friends or sympathizers. They draw closer around her as they see Celia coming. One woman in orange (muddy and clashing with the carpet) tries to push her without actually pushing her. Like Mrs. Chapman needs protection from her daughter now that her son is dead. Shouldn’t Celia be the most important person in her
mother’s life at this moment? Shouldn’t these ladies be drawing her into the circle as well, creating a force field around them both?

Her grandparents, Francis and Dorothy Chapman, used to live on the edge of town in a slightly converted barn (after so many years, hay popping out from sealed cracks, mouse droppings with no sign of mice). Her grandfather did odd jobs (she guesses, without ever having been told) until he acquired a tackle shop and then a boat shop on the lakeshore. The locals weren’t entirely friendly to him, though his was the only place they bought their bait, nets and outboard motors, and were even less so when Dorothy, older than her husband and already in her late thirties, gave birth to Jean, their first and only child, while out of town doing God knows what. They left for a bit and came back with a baby.

And subsequently Jean was tortured at school by children who had been taught to hate by their parents, and would at seventeen move out of the old barn house to start her own family with a distant cousin from out of town. He bought her The Monster, a three-storied rambling eyesore a half-mile off from the barn and the lakeshore, and eventually ran away from her.

Now that Cass is dead, Celia suspects he has taken what little magic there was in their childhood home with him. Celia is not entirely sure that The Monster won’t collapse inward on itself.

“Celia,” says a woman with a giant handbag whom she doesn’t recognize and who has no reason to know her name, “I think you ought to let your mother alone.”

“Celia is Cass’ sister, Joyce,” Jean says to Handbag Woman. “There’s no reason she shouldn’t be here. And if people are going to be trouble, maybe I’ll just send all of
you home and we’ll just do all this on our own.”

“How are you doing, Mom?” Celia says.

“I’m alright, dear,” she says. “I’m glad you’re here.”

“Daniel had business that couldn’t be helped,” Celia says. “But he sends his love.” Jean frowned.

Another woman Celia doesn’t know, inexplicably wearing a large floppy hat indoors, asks, “So you and Daniel are still getting on okay?”

“My husband and I are still together, yes. Almost five years here.”

“Seems strange he didn’t want to come,” Big Hat says. “Since this is so important.”

“Why don’t you go see your brother, Celia,” Jean says. “We should be starting soon.”

Celia looks at the shape of her brother sideways, can’t really make out his face in the blur. “I don’t know what to do at these things,” she says.

“Make your peace, darling,” Jean answers, but is already moving away, her entourage flinching out of her path and then following. She veers for the ladies’ room door on the far end of the room, and those who don’t try to chase her disperse in every direction, leaving Celia alone, with only flowers barring her way to the casket.

It’s a relief to see Jean so stoic, but it’s entirely foreign to her daughter. When the last man in her life vacated it, she was hysterical for weeks, investigating her husband’s actions and unable to find anyone intimate enough with him to give her clues, interrogating her children about anything he might have said to either that could have hinted at his impending flight. Both were silent. Neither could recall ever having a
conversation with him lasting longer than fifteen seconds. Neither even knew what he did for a living.

From this distance, Celia tries to piece Cass’ features together in her vision. Has it been so long since she last saw him she can’t reconcile his image from six feet away with her memories of what he looks like? Her stomach churns like she’s going to be sick on herself again.

She approaches, and identifies her trouble making out his features: his face is barely his anymore. Her best guess is something ripped the hell out of it before he died, and the undertakers had to piece him back together for the service to be open-casket. It looks like lumpy clay, and while he was never terribly attractive before his skin was almost angelic in its smoothness, so perfect even during puberty he would come home from school occasionally upset because someone had called him queer. This she could not make sense of; to her he looked more infantile than feminine. Too immaculate to be real.

But now he’s a mess. His face has been spliced back together in nasty chunks, and then covered up with layers of makeup to conceal the seams where the dead skin couldn’t heal. Like the whole thing had been blown off and no one could remember, reassembling him, what the damn kid looked like.

Jean said nothing about his face falling off in her phone call. It would have been nice to know before she saw it. But she’s here now, and she’s starting to agree with her antagonists in the room that she shouldn’t be, not knowing what really happened to him. She has failed her brother irrevocably by not troubling to find out the cause beforehand.

She pictures his face exploding before she can stop herself. Peeling effortlessly
off from his skull. Did someone do this to him? What human could have? Or else he did it accidentally himself. Either way Celia feels like a bad sister for not knowing and not asking. It would do no good to ask now, since any right-minded citizen standing nearby would chew her a new one for admitting to coming in blind. Maybe she ought to leave. Maybe she really doesn’t belong here.

She moves a little too close to the body and leans in, and then she can’t move, even though people have started staring anew behind her. She examines the folds. She tries to mentally map the errors in topography on his new face against photos in her head. There are valleys and dunes there that don’t belong, that don’t square with how the human face is supposed to come together.

She’s reminded of the day they went exploring in the abandoned barn house, years after her grandparents had died and left it empty.

Francis and Dorothy Chapman--who had come out of nowhere and moved into their barn on the edge of Hazard but close enough to the waterfront that Francis could walk to his tackle shop and bicycle to his boat shop when he could afford a bicycle, who had one daughter and kept her indoors until she married her cousin and moved into The Monster--went on vacation a month after her wedding and were found dead 48 hours later in a bed and breakfast in Traverse City. Lying in bed next to each other. Utterly peaceful. Like they had made a pact, now that their daughter was gone, enjoying their first and only vacation, to stay in this moment by holding their breath forever.

A broker, after their passing, found the barn house wet through from the humidity off Lake Michigan, stinky with mold, and people in town finally began to wonder: why had anyone built a barn here in the first place, where any crop would obviously drown?
No one could remember a farm or a house nearby, or even previous owners. The mysterious barn came to be blamed on the Chapman family as much as any other of their oddities was. When the realtor gave her the bad news, Jean chose to leave the structure there rather than allow someone else to level it, and let it decay back into the woods that surrounded it.

Several years later, Celia and Cass went exploring inside it, and Cass fell from the second floor and into the remains of a rotten rocking chair, ripping a chunk out of his forehead on contact. It healed in a week and left no scar. Jean took him to the doctor only after it was gone, wanting to prove that she had at least one miracle child under her roof. He healed like no one did. His skin was like water.

Celia knows that Chapmans do not die like this. They melt into the next world. They vanish entirely. There are stories Jean used to tell of distant, earlier generations Celia would never meet who were swallowed by the sea or found motionless and curled up at prayer, caught in invisible headlights as their spirits drifted on to the next, or, after some unexplainable fire, not recovered at all. They come from nowhere and leave abruptly. They do not require surgery to be displayed in an open casket. If there is a body, it remains unnaturally intact. Even the standard livor mortis, the blood in the body sinking earthward and pooling under the skin, fails to occur. The cheeks flush and the fluids evaporate.

Here, something’s ripped Cass up into unpleasant pieces that resist sliding back together. Without any visible stitches, since being glued back into place can’t hurt him now. No muscles to contend with underneath.

Celia tries to recall what she learned about phrenology in middle school (a craze
she went through not long after Daddy didn’t say goodbye), what the shape of the skull can convey about a person’s propensity for deviance, and wonders if this same science could be extended to the way in which Cass’s face was jumbled together. Did his facial features, the ones that formed his inner structure, tease the skin into more accurate positions when the surgeons were reassembling him? Was his perfect complexion only the outermost level covering a map of his real personality?

On his surface there are lumps and divots but no lines, nothing precise anyway. Topography can’t solve the problem because there’s no concentricity to these hills, no flow to the way the skin bottoms out and starts upward again. It deadends in spots (like on the Christmas tree of their youth, whose back space, facing the wall, Jean deemed unworthy of ornaments, so the branches faded into a big ugly bare expanse that would inevitably get noticed by visitors, who then saw nothing else). In other places it changes its mind, goes up and stops, up and stops, then barrels down like a condemned ski slope, only to crash into an ear or a jawbone. Around the lower jaw at one point, it’s shaved back along the lips so deeply it looks like a flood zone. A spot to avoid during a heavy spell of rain.

It’s possible this isn’t him (sort of, she can only hope), and all the pricks in the Death House today and even her mother haven’t noticed yet, some imposter is trying to pass his corpse off as her only sibling. Of course the absurdity of this suggestion shames her. Maybe he’s just buried beneath an excess of flesh. Maybe they couldn’t find all of him, and some of this is just transplant skin, kept in the freezer by the mortician in case of thoroughly foul deaths.

She is an ugly human being. She is able to imagine the separation of his skin from
his body so easily she must be a monster, must have outlived her brother out of sheer cruel natural selection. She feels the need to prostrate herself. She will ask her mother the cause of his death so it will hit her properly. She will forget the townsfolk around her and let go of herself. She will stubbornly cling to her brother’s suit jacket, so even the priest will be unable to dislodge her (she will hold on tighter each time he oversteps his bounds and brings Jesus unnecessarily into the dispute), and she will move only when her mother comes and whispers ambiguously, “It’s time, my love.” She will reflect, over the course of the next painful decades, on the disfigured remains of Cass’ face and lament that it has superimposed itself on every other memory she has of him. All recollections of playtime she has in her head will mutate into images of her and a horribly mutilated baby brother, the skin still glued as it is now but blood seeping through the cracks, seeking out the invisible breaks.

She touches his over-styled hair and the room seems to groan. She thinks she hears the word “wrong” but decides she must have invented it. Or someone must be exaggerating their disdain to the point of meanness.

That afternoon, in their grandparents’ old house, they behaved horribly, disrespectful of the old people they’d never met, pulling old abandoned knickknacks from shelves and throwing them at windows that were too thick and half-melted to break. His face blurs in her mind as it sweeps down from the second level and smashes hard into that rocking chair. But this time, as she replays it, instead of healing, as though acted upon by supernatural forces, he bleeds and bleeds, the fluid finds corridors to freedom, refuting everything she thought she knew about cosmetic surgery. Possibly his skin has actually liquefied, and the blood is not coming through breaks in the façade but simply
floating to the surface, like oil on water. For the memory to turn back into what it was, she must get home so their mother can fix him up. So Cass can re-solidify like candle wax and stand silent in the corner of the doctor’s office as Jean rubs the boy’s recovery in the face of medical science.

Someone beside Celia says, “I’m so sorry.” She looks up and it’s Kelly Macguire from high school, whom she hasn’t seen since Kelly started procreating a few years ago.

“Thank you,” Celia says.

“How are you handling it?”

“I don’t know,” Celia says, because this is still true. “I’m very upset. He was only twenty-two.”

“What happened?” Kelly says. She leans in and touches Celia’s shoulder with an intimacy that suggests they were friends in high school. Were they? Celia liked her enough, but isn’t sure if etiquette permits Kelly to offer her affection, or her to return it, to hug her as she’s tempted and hold her hostage next the body. Kelly smells uncomfortably of disposable diapers.

“You haven’t heard about it?” Celia says.

“We’ve all heard a lot of things, and no one wants to pry.” Kelly’s hand is moving across her shoulder and to her neck in a way that seems but can’t possible be sexual. She exhales a little too abruptly.

Celia says, “I don’t know either. My husband and I don’t live in town, and my mother’s in no hurry to discuss.” She sees that Jean is back from the bathroom and sitting on a couch about ten feet away from them. Mrs. Talbot keeps passing her tissues, which she holds for a few seconds at a time and then stuffs between the couch cushions. When
Talbot reaches to dispose of any used ones Jean waves her hand dismissively and turns to someone else, someone different each time.

She does not, at any point, drop her eyes on her daughter, and after a couple of minutes this looks intentional.

“So you weren’t in town?” Kelly says.

“No.”

“You weren’t staying at home last week?” Kelly is practically wrapped around her now.

“No. I live in Holland. We have a house there.”

“And where’s your husband? Craig?”

“Daniel. Working. He feels awful, but it was simply unavoidable. I know it was really hard for him not to be here. They were quite close,” Celia says. She doesn’t know why she is lying about this; her husband and Cass were friendly for a while, but the last time they went out together they returned surrounded by deeply unsettling silence, and Daniel refused to explain. Since then he abstains even from Christmas gatherings. But Kelly can’t possibly know this, so it makes no difference.

“And his work is…?”

“He’s a litigator,” Celia says. This is shifty as well. He is affiliated with the law, as far as she knows. His work is notoriously absent from their one-sided conversation, his persistent talking at her.

“So he’s in court then,” Kelly says. She touches Celia’s hair, then flinches backwards apologetically.

“I don’t know everything about it,” Celia says.
“Well, I wish you luck. Your mother has suffered so much, more than anyone should,” Kelly says. She nods, and Kelly moves away and is overwhelmed by a group of women twenty years her senior. All of them start hissing away.

Celia rubs the smooth wood of the casket to find any accidental knots that might have been missed in its construction. Strains of organ behind a screen to the right of the casket falter for a minute, then find the next page of sheet music and press onward.

Suddenly, her mother is behind her and saying “Celia, you need to sit down,” and she gestures at a priest who has appeared out of vapor, frowning at her. “You’ve been here for twenty minutes now.”

Where did the minutes go?

Where are those last few days that brought her to this casket and erased everything since the phone call? She was talking to her mother at the phone in her kitchen, and there was a doctor somewhere in between, and now she is smelling rosewater and touching cold disfigured flesh. Jean pulls at her, and she breaks free.

The front row is a single armchair big enough to swallow Jean whole, her back a wall of upholstery to everyone behind them, and for Celia, there’s one of the same folding chairs that are ranked in lines of ten through the smaller portion of the room. Townsfolk (primarily women) have come out in droves to observe but there still aren’t enough bodies to occupy all the available spots. Are there not enough souls left in Hazard (a city shrinking for the last twenty years) to fill the room?

And so many women, many at the age or close enough to it to have tormented Jean Chapman as a girl, prodded her until she dropped out of school and retreated to her barn. All of them evil bitches in Celia’s eyes, whether this is accurate or not, whether
they said a word to her mother back then or even knew her during their adolescence. In this town, as families multiply and disperse to other places, funerals rarely see more than twenty mourning faces per corpse. Here Cass has pulled out at least forty and even then the room seems disrespectfully open, like the couple rows of additional seating are set out to make a somewhat unkind point.

The director comes up to show Mrs. Chapman a piece of his own invention, a tissue dispenser built into the right arm of her huge chair.

Jean regards the transparent white wisps coming out and asks, “Is there a better one for my daughter?” Instead of making eye contact, she looks at the folding chair next to hers.

They are surrounded by cushy, well-worn furniture, and yet he says, “I’m afraid not.”

Jean thanks him all the same. She sits, and the rest of the room follows.

The priest looks at Cass to begin, to make the transition from the actual dead person—who for all he knows, since they’d never met, was in fact an atheist, or the sort of weirdo who slaughtered and consumed virgins in the basement of The Monster right under his mother’s distracted nose—to a eulogy that will consist primarily of Bible passages. He cringes, then aims a controlled smile at Mrs. Chapman. She is looking at her son.

Jesus Jesus forgiveness Promised Land our Lord better place. Charles continues to live on inside us and with Him always. This is what Celia culls from the priest’s speech, only partially listening. Jesus makes better company than all of you, loved ones or not, and he’s got an in places you can’t even fathom the dimensions of. But Jesus forgives
you if you’re feeling a little selfish about all of this; you’re only human, obviously.

When he finishes or tapers off at least, he gestures at Jean, who abandons her tissue armchair and approaches the podium. Her hair, Celia notices for the first time, is not slicked back with hairspray as she originally thought, but clotted with the weight of several days’ skin oils. She hasn’t showered. Her red wool suit has faded considerably in the twenty years since she bought it, and is going moist at the armpits. She forgot to apply makeup this morning, and her blank, blotchy skin looks like it’s drooping down her face, starting below her eyes. Her eyes themselves are bright white. She has not been crying today.

She doesn’t speak right away. Instead she turns away from the onlookers and toward Cass. She watches. Stands so eerily stationary Celia suspects she might be figuring out how to pass with him to wherever he has gone. People start to shift in their seats.

Right when Celia is sure she’s going to have to get up and do the same thing her mother did to her, sneak up on her and let her know she can’t just stand there forever (and in fact Celia moves just slightly and someone in the back chokes on their own breath waiting to see what she’ll do), Jean’s hands find the rims of the podium and she arches into it, surveys her neighbors, and says, “Grief is always an ugly thing.”

She pauses. “It only brings out two things: pity and blame. We learn who we love after, and we learn who hates us for no reason, and who will push on us culpability for something because someone has to take it, even if it’s nobody’s fault. We don’t like it when we can’t make someone pay for our pain, or for someone’s else, when ours isn’t as great. But in all cases we are finding ways to claim our grief and other people’s by
deciding who gets to own it, who gets to be sad and fall apart, and who has to go back to their lives. And how long they deserve to be upset, if they get to drink themselves into oblivion for a certain length of time or just behave badly. After a couple of months, though, it’s just selfishness, it’s just us feeling sorry for ourselves. And then if we lose someone we love, like I lost my son here, we’ve got to put the blame of it on someone else, because then it’s not something we did wrong, or someone else or God or even the person we lost, if they weren’t being as careful as they should have been. Death is nothing if not preventable. Someone always made it happen, or could have stopped it.

“No one’s to blame here. Charles died. I love him and will miss him very much. He died like his grandparents died, except that they were in a bed they paid for, in a hotel in Traverse City, and they were on vacation, and so I guess it was nicer for them. Who do you call to task when you stumble on an elderly couple who died in their sleep? Then it belongs to no one. I will miss Charles. That’s all. People will say things like they did with my parents, but no one has the right, and any of you who feels like making trouble shouldn’t be here today. Those of you who knew my son are allowed to grieve. But that’s all you get. You don’t get to own any part of him and you don’t get to be angry at anyone. Let’s all of us let the poor boy go.”

By now Jean is looking only at Celia, and Celia feels she should apologize to all of them for her. Cass being dead must be someone’s fault; how do you end up with a face that messed up without some sort of negligence involved? But because she knows nothing about it she can give no consolation. She should have called her mother back sometime in these last few days to try to make sense of it.

“Celia,” Jean says. “You have something you wanted to share.”
Celia stands. This is news to her; her mother must have asked her to say something and now she is advancing from her seat and she has nothing to give. What does she remember about her brother? Suddenly nothing; suddenly, her mind is empty. What was Cass doing with his life these last couple of years? Did he ever tell her?

When she is standing in front of all of them, she finds in her hand folded sheets of computer paper which she apparently took out of her purse on her way to the front, without realizing she was doing it. Her head is fuzzy. She must try not to be sick again, not at this moment. She unfolds the paper. She reads.

“This is Cass’ blog, entry from July 17th.” Each face in the room contorts as they mentally count the eleven days since this date passed.

“Listened to ‘The Night the Lights Went Out in Georgia’ 17 times tonight and it makes much less sense to me now than it did 3 hours ago,” Celia reads. “I picture Reba’s singing voice coming from a 15 year old girl in cowboy boots and fringe--parentheses suede--and I figure she’s as confused as any of us, because she has killed her brother’s wife and her lover, and at the end is letting her own brother hang for the crime. What does this mean? The sister--parentheses Reba--singing here and expecting us to sympathize, only reveals herself at the end of the song. Everything before that is her brother’s mind, when he comes back to town from doing something mysterious and finds that his wife has opened her legs for everyone in town, including his best friend, and then disappeared with her boyfriend. Then he finds the best friend dead, and he’s caught holding a gun in a scene that is so sitcomy it’s impossible to swallow. Wouldn’t basic forensics be able to intervene here, backwoods or no?

“Then there’s Reba. Suddenly she’s the protective sister who’s responsible for
everything and is caught by no one and who killed the friend and the wife out of familial
vengeance but then lets the brother die, lets him take the blame. I’ve spent hours trying to
fish out the motives here, wondering why a girl goes to the trouble to kill people she has
no vested interest in and then let her own flesh suffer for it. Short of looking for the devil
here singing this little pop country song--parentheses and don’t country music fans
despise the devil and love the Lord? This is what Talbot has led me to believe, end
parentheses--I can’t figure this out. I picture only the brother standing behind his sister as
she sings, waiting with a shotgun to finish off her part of the story. Ugly stuff, I know.

“I’m going to get out of this town soon. Hazard only gets smaller, even as I’m
waiting for Richard’s replies. I’ve written him letters and Capitol Records says they can’t
help me out here, but I still think he knows what’s happening in his own songs and he can
tell me if it’s murder or not.

“There is a story that the local historical society--parentheses one old woman who
smells like shoe polish--tells about how we came to be called Hazard, and I don’t know if
it’s apocryphal or exaggerated, but I find it oddly comforting. An Anishinaabe tribe
living farther north told a group of English trappers that there was a spot on the Lake
Michigan coastline that had really good fishing, but that was so low and so wet some of
their men got sucked into the swamp and were never seen again. Only the most inedible
plants thrived there. For some time, the tribe had tried to find their way through the muck
in order to get to the fish, which were populous and of course grossly oversized since
they’d been able to live undisturbed for so long, but finally they decided they had lost too
many men and declared it a forbidden spot to all of their people. Their word for it
translated to ‘The Hazard.’ The trappers decided this was nonsense, and when they found
the place and set up camp for weeks and lived like kings, they declared that God was on
their side, and the natives had only been swallowed by the earth because they were
heathens. They lived on here, and many more settlers came to join them.

“I’m sure some people would argue that naming the town Hazard was their way
of spitting in the face of the Chippewa people who couldn’t deal with a little mud. But I
see a lot of holes in the story. Were there Anishinaabe this far south? Or English trappers
back then, when most of them were French? How is it they could communicate with the
native tribes and manage to do what so many others couldn’t, namely translate their word
for this place instead of just garbling the Ojibwe word for it? And why, ultimately, were
they so goddamn special?

“My theory is God has a sense of humor and He’s waiting for just the right
moment of complacency before he gobbles the whole city whole, or the coastline falls
into Lake Michigan.

“I’m still wondering if there’s something Richard Marx knows that we don’t.
About Nebraska or anything else for that matter.

“Note to Eleanor to check up on me this week. Make sure I’m still here if you
don’t hear from me….

“I need to make it to the river, and leave this old Nebraska town…” Celia

Celia, during all this, tries her best not to listen to herself, but what little she picks
up is horrifying, so inappropriate for this occasion she’s not sure why she continues to
read it. She doesn’t know where the paper came from or why she brought it or why this
was her choice to read at Cass’ funeral (or was it hers?). She is afraid to look up,
especially at Jean, who is likely glaring at her.

She turns to the casket again. His face looks worse now than when she was this close a half hour ago. “Goodbye Cass. We love you.”

She goes back to her seat. A glance at Jean betrays nothing but calm in her face. Her eyes find the others by accident for a moment before she sits down and several of them look either devastated or furious.

Organ music starts. The priest seems shaken; his back is rigid in a question mark shape aimed at the podium, and she realizes there must have been more to his own send-off, but the woman in the organ room heard the voices stop and jumped the gun, and now the service is over whether he likes it or not.

The funeral director comes out again, this time his face cold, and he says to the group, “You may now come up to view the body in single file rows, starting with the back. The family will remain here for the line-up.” Those who are the farthest away from them start to shuffle forward.

“Don’t stay for this,” Jean whispers.

“Why not?” Celia says.

“Just wait in the bathroom until this over.” Jean continues to face her son. “This wouldn’t be worth it.”

Celia wonders if she should take her mother’s hand, but is terrified of touching her, terrified of what Jean might do. Instead, she slips out to the bathroom, and as she does, Jean stands up to greet the wave.

The bathroom is empty. At the counter, she sees in the mirror that the blood has soaked through the back of her dress. She douses the fabric in water and scrubs the red
out of it in an awkward looping motion, then climbs on to a stack of paper towels she’s made on the counter. Listens to people crying outside the door. Wonders if there’s blood on her folding chair out there.

She can’t wrap her brain around Jean’s assumption that enduring disdain from a handful of local women could somehow be worse than waiting alone with her thoughts.

After five minutes she can’t sit anymore. She is bleeding and doesn’t know why, and has a feeling she will not stop anytime soon. Her stomach has been churning for hours. Her brother is dead. Her husband is miles away, and has elected not to say goodbye with her today. She cannot remember printing off the entry from Cass’ blog. She’s not actually sure she knew, until she pulled out that paper today and read its heading (a heading in pen so she must have put it there, copied it from the internet?), that Cass had a blog, one he plugged away at until at least a week before he died. One he filled with nonsense. How did he care so much about Reba McEntire songs? Who the hell is Eleanor?

It seems likely he made the whole business about the Anishinaabe up. It sounds like bullshit. The history of their town is much more dull, with its sparse inhabitants and its near-extinct body of marine life (most of the fish and even the plants by the coastline were fished to death or poisoned by unknown toxins years ago; if her grandfather had lived to see the end of it, his businesses wouldn’t have).

She knows it’s only been five minutes and it’s too soon to come out, but she goes anyway, ejecting herself from the counter and flailing slightly from sudden dizziness, then off toward the door.

Oddly, the mourners have all left when she reenters the chapel. Only Mrs. Jean
Chapman remains, abandoned wife and daughter, mother of only one now, leaning over her dead son’s disfigured face and--whispering? Is that the hiss of bad plumbing, or Celia’s mother grabbing on to something that is much too far away at this point to retrieve?

Celia waits to invade this exchange for a little while longer. She has walked in on a family meeting to which she has not been invited. This is not a new thing; mother and son have always been closer, Celia an afterthought by choice, ignoring the two of them before they could (and would) do it to her, fleeing mentally because her father’s method wasn’t available to her yet. She doesn’t know what she hoped for today, seeing her mother again, standing in front of her as the only other one remaining. She is still alive, if bleeding profusely. What is her mother holding on to when she has better things still around? Hasn’t she stayed when everyone else has left? Hasn’t Celia been faithful in ways no one else was able to be?

Jean looks up at her daughter finally, her face solid and cold. Her only daughter. Celia guesses at her expression. They looking at each other and they are each each other’s last, the only ones left, the only Chapmans in the world. Up until a few days ago, Jean must have assumed she was safe, that there was no chance of her losing anything else, trusting the odds of her own misfortune. Left by her parents, left by her husband, yes; but even one of her children after all this is injustice. And the one Chapman left besides her is no longer a Chapman.

Celia’s married name is Guardian. Celia Guardian. She hates it. Their mailbox in Holland says “The Guardians.” Some nights, she contemplates smashing it secretly so Daniel will be forced to buy a new one without their surname on it. The Guardians. Like
a boring moralistic superhero league, just the two of them.

Now that the others have left and they are just the two of them alone with Cass, her mother has let herself go. Her face is angry. She’s swimming in it.

“Maybe I should stay in town for a few days,” Celia says. “Daniel won’t miss me. I could dig out some clothes from storage. I’ll just wear sweatshirts, and we can spend some time together.”

“I don’t think so,” Jean says. “But it’s nice of you to offer. You should go home.”

The place is quiet. Even the director has probably gone home. Celia watches her mother staring back at her. The old woman is tired.

“What happens now?” Celia says.

“The luncheon at the house,” Jean says. “No one’s going to the gravesite. Too far out of town.” Celia nods. She knows there is no burial plot within twenty miles where Cass wouldn’t drown. Every parcel of land earmarked as a final resting place in the last several decades has had to relocate all its waterlogged bodies within the first few years of opening up shop.

Celia can’t remember the last time she was inside The Monster. As with everything else today, she is unable to find certain links in her brain.

Jean kisses her son one last time and says, maybe, “See you,” too soft for Celia to be sure.

Then she walks toward her daughter until they are very close, only a couple of feet apart. Jean’s face is red. She regards Celia like she’s not sure why both of them are here, and at the moment Celia thinks she is inhaling to speak, she comes in to hug her in a way that is too stiff to be strictly maternal.
“I love both my children,” she says. “Very much.”

There’s a jolt and Celia’s lungs for one awful second collapse under her mother’s weight, and then they separate and Jean is already moving toward the door. She doesn’t look back. She does not try to capture the last moments of her son’s image behind her eyes and hold them there to prevent everything she sees after this from replacing it. She does not suddenly go blind with grief.

In the foyer, Jean stops to say, “Stay here a while and say what you need to.” Then she’s gone.

Is this moment supposed to be frightening—the only one left in the room (possibly the building) with the empty vessel which once contained Charles Chapman, born twenty-two years and eighty-seven days ago, four years and forty-two days after her. They were the two children of a woman so puzzled about their relationship to her that she occasionally revealed inappropriate things about her life to them, after her husband bailed, in moments when she forgot they were only children. Cass was a man for a while, but most of his life was a child, generally innocuous but occasionally so strange to his sister he could administer acid reflux with his gaze, turn her digestive system to goo, but all of this was when she was still young and still had to live with him—now that he is a corpse instead of her brother, is he a kind of threat again?

She moves in to find the place where their mother must have touched him, where she reset his hair. It looks even worse now than it did before the service. His hair mysteriously is as dirty as it was when he was thirteen, when he thought girls were more interested in nice clothes (and maybe magic tricks, depending on the girl) than basic hygiene. And though he turned into a religious bather in high school and covered his face
in cleanser as thick and iridescent as rubber cement several times a day (and then the peace talks began with his pores around nineteen), here he is again, as shiny and clumpy-haired as ever.

Reverted to a thirteen year old. To the age he was when he and Celia had the argument that ended in her yelling and him with a busted lip, the talk she hadn’t let herself think about for ages, which was followed by them not speaking for three years. She was with Daniel by then. The tone had changed for all of them.

This she remembers, although she chooses not to linger on it today. She grasps instead at their childhood, but all she can find is that day in their grandparent’s barn.

He suggested (or she did) that they check out where their mother grew up, since no one would bother them and neither was sure Jean ever cleaned it out; it was possible there were things in there that were either interesting or forbidden or both. Maybe both came up with the idea and someone simply was the first to put on their shoes. They rode their bikes to get there. Celia wedged the door open with a stick, since the house was still locked but the back door had started to rot through, was moist enough to crumble. The wet, the ubiquitous wet, had already started to consume the place.

They began in the kitchen. Old dishes still occupied the cupboards, covered with steam and dust and mouse shit. There was a single plate in the rusting kitchen sink, strangely clean. They were only in there for about ten minutes. Celia pulled things out of the cupboards and tossed the couch cushions (why was everything so goddamn wet?) from their places so she could dig down inside it. She found things with her hands she didn’t want to identify, and wiped her fingers on the curtains, tracing brown streaks on the fabric. She was looking at a damaged photo still in its frame on the wall when she
realized her brother was not with her. She thought he had left her in the house to deal with the ghosts alone until she heard his creaky feet on the floorboards above her.

In retrospect, it seems like he went up there immediately, knowing he had to fall, wanting to get it over with. The story was going to end with him hitting that rocking chair and bleeding everywhere, and there was no point stalling to try to avoid it.

They didn’t speak. She didn’t see him before he fell. She didn’t hear him say anything before the half-second growl that preceded his sickening crunch against the wood. The only piece of furniture that had remained intact despite the humidity. The only object that had made it to high ground.

Jean found the children before they found her. They were thirty feet away from the barn walking and Celia was sort of leading, slowly. Cass wasn’t much help, since his eyelids were shut tight against the blood. Jean found them, said his name calmly and, incredibly, carried him a quarter mile back to The Monster. She was not upset or even angry. She didn’t get worked up until a few days later, when all signs of the injury had vanished.

Celia went back for Cass’ bike the day after (she had grabbed hers and walked it home when Jean found them), but there was nothing where he’d left it. She returned and told him it had been stolen. Jean Chapman, indignant that her son had suffered so much injustice in one day, bought him a new one. A better one.

Celia reexamines her version of it a few more times. Each time, she acquits herself of any wrongdoing. Given the situation, given their positions and the speed of it and how covertly he had slipped out of her notice, there is no way she could have stopped it happening.
She apologizes to him anyway. “I’m sorry,” she says, louder than necessary because no one is around and because he can’t hear her anyway, “for whatever I did wrong.”

This is the moment the funeral director returns. He has probably heard her talking.

“We have to take the casket to the cemetery now,” he says. “I’m afraid I’m going to have to ask you to leave.”

“Can you do that?” she says. “I thought we got all the time we wanted with our loved ones.”

He frowns at her. “The workers are hourly. They’ve been waiting outside, and they need to be done by six.”

This information seems unnecessary, particularly to the bereaved. She considers fighting him on it, directing at him all the accumulated frustration from the women today, allowing all the drama to seep out of her, tearing up and screaming, “Why are you picking on me?” But she walks away. Does not think that one last look at her brother might have done her good until she’s outside and it’s too late.

Outside, there are a half dozen men sitting on two pickup trucks, almost certainly Cass’ pallbearers and gravediggers. They watch her disdainfully, she assumes because she’s kept them waiting to do their work. They have families they want to get home to.

She finds Daniel’s Explorer exactly where she left it. It squeaks at her as it unlocks. When she opens the door she finds the puddle on the driver’s seat she missed on her way out, blood that during her time inside has dried and turned brown.

What will Daniel have to say about this? How does he feel about the sanctity of car upholstery? What form of compassion does he deem appropriate for mistakes made
while grief-stricken? Would he have treated her differently a month into their relationship, when they were in college, when he still demaned his space but had a nasty habit of showing up at her apartment when she already had plans?

She gets a towel out of a plastic storage tub in the back and folds it into the puddle so she won’t have to sit on it. She starts the car. The workmen, instead of going inside and beginning their tasks, are still sitting in their truck beds, watching her. One man speaks to the others out of her earshot, but no one answers him. They sit motionless as she pulls out of her narrow spot and off toward The Monster, and are still there the two times she lets herself look at them in her rearview.

The road to The Monster is oddly dry and empty. Everyone has deparked from in front of the Death House and gone to the luncheon or gone home. Many will be seeing the guts of the place for the first time, and will not hesitate to deconstruct it as they eat their way through the provisions. Where have the Chapmans been hiding all these years. What’s so great about their big ugly house that they never come out of it and associate with the rest of us.

When Celia arrives, Jean is standing on the porch. Waiting. Looking more tired now than she was twenty minutes ago. The house, as always, looks like it’s being eaten by the trees surrounding it, like an aerial view would turn the woods into the mouth of an enormous gelatinous beast, closing around its unsuspecting prey. The yard is full of empty cars, their tires coated with leaves someone forgot to rake up ten years ago. Even though she grew up here, Celia forgets the house every time she drives away from it. Each time she returns, it’s more sprawling and ugly.

Is her mother smoking? It’s getting dark unnaturally early for this time a year, but
there seems to be a stream of smoke coming from her side, where her hand is. Jean Chapman does not smoke. She takes too much care of her children. She spent many years angry and now suffers chastely the loss of her husband, as though he is just as dead as Cass was today. She releases what frustration she has remaining on her housekeeper and otherwise has no energy for bad habits.

Celia gets out of her car. She is still bleeding and still feeling sick, but she is coming home, and even with the rooms full of more people than have ever filled them, it belongs to her in a way they will never understand. This is her childhood home. Jean is her mother. Cass was her brother, and if her father had stuck around long enough, he would be here and he would belong to her too.

She should come home for a while, no matter what her mother says. To correct the imbalance of family this latest absence has created.

She gets out and walks toward Jean, ready to tell her this. But instead Jean comes to her, starts away from the house to meet her in the driveway, and as they reach each other they’re joined by two local policemen in wrinkled uniforms. Celia sees immediately thereafter that they’ve brought their squad car with them, and that she somehow missed it as she pulled in, even though it was right there, ridiculously obvious. She wasn’t looking for it, of course.

“We’re sorry, Mrs. Chapman,” one of them says to Jean. “We don’t want to intrude, but we have to.” Both men are over forty and thick around the middle. The man who spoke has a crew cut sliced too flat across the top, is sweating profusely. The other man hasn’t shaved his scraggily white beard in the past few days, and is monitoring the driveway like’s he waiting for someone else to arrive.
Jean nods and drags off her nonsensical cigarette, her cigarette that shouldn’t be there.

“Mrs. Celia Guardian?” the first one says.

“Yes?” Celia says.

“We’re with the Hazard Police Department,” he says. His partner stays silent.

“Hazard has a police department?” The officer doesn’t answer, but Jean nods again.

“I’m afraid we’re going to have to take you into custody,” he says, and before the sentence is finished the handcuffs are off his belt and he is reaching for her wrists.

“What for?”

He doesn’t speak at first. His face indicates she ought to know this, that this is a test she ought to have studied for. His breath comes a little too close to her face as he cuffs her.

“We’re arresting you for the murder of Charles Chapman,” he says. They lead her to the squad car. The one places her in the backseat while the other stands guard behind him, waiting for her to resist.

A circle of mourners have materialized around her. Several of them are taking pictures of her in rapid succession, dozens of them apiece. *Who brings a camera to a funeral?* she wonders.

All of this is some sort of mistake. Cass died three days ago. Where was she that afternoon?

Celia glances out the window at her mother. Jean is calm, has put out her cigarette and is now watching without expression as they prepare to cart her off. She lost her
parents, she lost a husband, she lost a son, and now her daughter is being taken to jail.

She is the last one standing.

“Sorry to interrupt your funeral,” the arresting officer says from the driver’s seat as he pulls off, almost absurdly disdainful.

“It’s not my funeral,” Celia says. The Monster shrinks to nothing behind them as they drive away.
Introduction

There is no right way to cope with death. No matter what your religious leaders say, no matter what your friends say, no matter what anyone tells you: there is no guidebook for the correct approach to grief, no list of steps that must be taken to achieve closure and really move on from loss. Losing a loved one, particularly when that loss is sudden, jolts us from our lives and our everyday manner of looking at the world, and puts everything on hold so we can grieve in the culturally acceptable ways. We arrange funerals, we attend wakes, we listen to eulogies, and we prepare a place for their bodies to rest with peace and dignity. We do what we can to make their transition a respectful one, and whether they can no longer see us or they are looking down on us from Heaven, we display love in whatever way we can. We make sure they are taken care of.

But when this is all over, who is still around to take care of us? Sure, we have our friends, our family, our coworkers and church congregations, and they will offer whatever love and support they can. But no living person is capable, no matter how attentive they are, of filling the gap in our days that is left behind when that person dies. They are gone, yes, but we’re still here, and that means learning how to have a new life without that person around us, how to discover a view of the world that does not include that special someone. We spend so much time and energy constructing our lives so carefully, we put all of the pieces together, and yet there will always be moments when those pieces are rearranged beyond our control. All our carefully laid plans are taken away from us.
It is important that we never fully let go of our loved ones once they’ve passed on. Our memories of them, the mementos we retain and the pictures we put on our walls, all those lovely things that are still here even if that person is not--they are vitally important. They make us who we are as much as they represent who he or she was. The way in which they continue to burn in our minds should demonstrate how meaningful they are to us, and also that only the people themselves die, not our love or memories or experiences. The most difficult, and yet the most important, part of grieving is looking through the aftermath of our sorrow for the “us” that is still left standing. We can only find peace with our loss when we relocate ourselves.

One of the great misconceptions about grief, the thing we are least likely to admit to ourselves when we are dealing with the worst aspects of loss, is that our suffering comes from the actual death of the person, from that person’s physical absence in the world. And of course this is where the tragedy begins; we would not be in pain if the person we loved were still around. But the root of our grief is not pity for the one who’s passed on, but pity for ourselves. We grieve for the way in which that loss will upset our lives and our feelings.

I do not mean to say that grieving is selfish. Some part of the process is a profound disappointment that the loved one will not be able to go on living their lives. This is a fundamental part of losing a loved one. Loss here is not simply us losing them, but also them losing the rest of their potential lives. This is unfair, it is tragic, and it may even call into question our whole worldview, how we perceive justice in fate and through our higher power. We may never fully recover from this part of it, and perhaps attempting to do so is futile, a fight against a natural force that we will never vanquish.
We will always feel that the dying are deprived of something MORE, even if they live a long full life. It is never the right moment to die. There is simply not enough time in this world.

But as I said, this part of our feelings will not go away. Since it will never be fair, we must learn to live with it even though we will never really come to terms with it.

The larger, the more overwhelming and the more difficult issue to cope with is the big portion that consists of us mourning for ourselves. This is the part that creates the hard uphill battle to ultimately find closure, but only after a long and ugly fight.

When someone dies, we cannot know precisely what happens to them. For those of who believe in something higher, we hope that there is some beautiful place that awaits the dead, that will offer them that missing justice taken from someone who leaves us prematurely, who dies too young or without sorting out the important things in their lives. This brings us comfort, and even more, we can hope that it gives them some, to dull the pain of being pulled from this world.

For others of us who may not be particularly religious, we at least view death as the end of a journey, the point where the consciousness leaves the body and all being is severed. This is not a very nice thought, but it is better than the concept of damnation or even continued suffering. They have nothing more to trouble them, because they are no more. In either case, we like to think that death is a release, a dissociation from whatever negative things they dealt with in life or even in the process of dying, whatever regrets they might have. They are no longer around to deal with those regrets.

We, however, must go on regretting, even if our loved one’s life has ended after a long illness and that death has brought them some relief. Their pain is over, but ours must
go on and on. The reason we struggle so much with how death affects us is because we
don’t want to think of ourselves as selfish. We don’t want to believe that it is, in the long
run, more important for us to focus on our own pain instead of the loss of life that our
loved one has suffered. It is hard to admit that we grieve because we are losing more their
place in our lives than them specifically, the space they occupied in our days and our
memories, and the void they leave when they are no longer filling that role they had for
us. It sounds insensitive. It sounds narcissistic. But it isn’t. It’s the central core of grief
for all of us, and we cannot move on until we recognize this and start working for
ourselves.

We spend our lives building a house around ourselves, metaphorically speaking.
That house is the foundation of our existence. It is made up of the people we love, our
family and friends, our homes, our memories, and all the experiences that make us who
we are. And while we don’t lose memories themselves except under unusual
circumstances, we do sometimes lose the people that are important to that structure, and it
makes us feel like a piece of us has died, like we are no longer whole without them. This
emotional “wholeness” is essential to our well-being. The same way we must recover
after we’ve lost a job or a relationship has ended, so must we piece ourselves together
when someone we care about dies. When we get a divorce, no one thinks we’re being
selfish when we do things for ourselves in order to regain a sense of stability. The same is
ture with grief. The essence of recovery is finding ourselves again.

This book is intended to help you with exactly that. While no one’s experience
with grief is identical to anyone else’s—we will all feel it manifest itself in different
ways—we can all benefit from this process. It consists of a series of exercises intended to
help you put back together the parts of you that are lost when you lose someone, and to make yourself feel complete again even without that person by your side. It will not be easy, and it will not simply happen by sheer will power. But, the sooner you try to make sense of your situation in a healthy and exploratory way, thus releasing your emotions positively, the sooner you can feel like you again. Trust me: it’s how your loved ones would want you to feel.
The sheriff threw the book at Celia a couple of hours ago, through the bars of her jail cell, saying someone had dropped it off for her so she would have something “comforting” to read while she sat around waiting. “Since you must be scared,” he said. She didn’t appreciate the irony of the literal book throwing, though she figured the sheriff did.

She didn’t like the title and didn’t touch the book for over an hour, and then out of boredom she picked it up and read the introduction. Looked at the jacket information, its small vanity press credited on the back. Celia hasn’t heard of the press or the author, and can only speculate that her mother dropped it off and the cops just didn’t allow Jean to see her.

Never before this has she had problems with time, with judging its shifts and guessing its movements, but in her cell (one of four on the premises, all of them empty but hers, Hazard a largely crimeless town) there is one small slit of a window near the ceiling and all that comes through it is darkness. Reality has sort of gone out the window (her tiny jail cell window) since she got here and taken her internal clock with it. On weekends, she assumes, there might be one other cell occupied by a drunk so stereotyped in his sway and slur that even the arresting officers ignore him out of shame. They are lifelong watchers of Andy Griffith and know that a drunk in the tank implies that all of their guns have no bullets, that they are meaningless lawmen.

But tonight is Tuesday. The only person of interest they’ve brought in is a woman who might have killed her brother but probably didn’t. Slow crime day. They haven’t even questioned her. The only officer on duty looks nineteen. The sheriff is around somewhere, but he doesn’t seem to know what to do with himself.
She isn’t at all sure what’s going on right now, except that she’s been arrested, they claimed that Cass was murdered and that she is responsible. She can’t make sense of this, so she’s trying not to think about it. She’s thinking instead about the mark that must be on her forehead from the book hitting her in the face, though she can’t see it because her jail cell isn’t equipped with a mirror.

Who knows how long she’s been here. Who knows how long she will be.

She calls for the man on duty. “Hey,” she says. He looks at her nervously from his office. “Hey!” she says. Louder this time.

The cells are a circle in a room that might have been a large utility closet before the iron barred doors were installed. The front area is two heavy doors opening to a desk and a rubber tree plant and carpet folding off the floorboards, the intake desk big enough across the slim horizon of the room that it might be intimidating if its open hours weren’t nine a.m. to two p.m. only on weekdays, clearly posted on a marked sheet of copy paper on the wall. There is a short hallway coming back from the front like an aisle in a library’s stacks, which is flanked by three offices, no names on the doors, one of which looks out onto the lines of the cell bars, so the night guard can keep an eye on any detainees while checking his email every ten minutes on a computer that makes humming sounds like an old refrigerator.

Nineteen-Year-Old, the name she’s given the night guard, still has his hands on the keyboard, deciding whether to look at it or her. He taps at it a couple of times. He pauses. He taps again. He is shamelessly gaming on duty. She shouts at him a couple more times.

Sheriff Willis (his name like a TV character’s, his face a dense and fleshy cartoon) appears from what must be his unlabeled office on the library hallway. They didn’t even give him a nameplate for the door; the office isn’t even officially his. The injustice of all this, for all three of them. Sheriff Willis doesn’t get his own desk, Nineteen-Year-Old must fight the great multiplayer fight with divided attention, and Celia has been arrested for a crime she did not commit. Where is the good Lord when you need him?

“Mrs. Guardian,” Willis says, moving closer to her slowly and giving her that cop eye he must have seen in a movie. “We’re not ready for you yet.”

“Was my mom here?” Celia says.

“Why?”

Celia picks up the grief book she’s been reading. She thinks about throwing it back at it him dramatically, but knows that won’t help her cause with him (since she’d like to go home eventually and he probably has some say in this), and even if she did do it she wouldn’t aim right, it would bounce off the bars and the sound would reverberate impotently, and she’d come off a petulant child. Instead she waves it at him.

“Did she drop this off for me?” she says.

“Mrs. Chapman hasn’t been in,” he says. “And I doubt she will be. She knows what you did same as the rest of us do.”

Celia frowns. Jean is tired. She has led a hard life. The whole thing is unfortunate.

“Who did bring it for me?” she says. “My husband?”

“Haven’t heard from Mr. Guardian either. Some lady dropped it off.”

“Who?” Celia has no friends in Hazard. She also does not make a habit of reading
self-help books, though she tries to read everything else.

“How the hell should I know?” he says. “She just said she wanted to help, and figured it might be scary being in here.”

“It isn’t,” Celia says.

He makes a noise from outside the English language and then walks back around the corner. Nineteen-Year-Old isn’t even looking at her, knows the sheriff doesn’t care what he does this late because his job doesn’t mean a whole lot in the scheme of things (neither of theirs does really). Most nights he guards empty cells or cleans up the puke from the drunks, who are more sleepy and putrid than whimsical, and have more often wrapped their cars around trees than simply disturbed the peace.

Celia is confused that the sheriff “knows what she did,” that he has assumed totally that there is a connection between her and Cass’ death, and at this point he has failed to discuss it with her at all. She has seen the crime dramas. She understands how basic evidence discovery is supposed to work. The authorities know how he died (or do they? there was no autopsy, as far as she knows), and something in it must have suggested homicide, and something further must say she had a hand in it.

None of this makes sense. She was in Holland at the time (probably) and she has no idea what happened to him. She’s not in here for logical reasons, all things considered up until now. And whether proving her guilty or clearing things up, the police should be talking to her. Beating a confession out of her. Suspecting her until she leads them down the correct path, her diligence ultimately earning their respect.

But Sheriff Willis is hiding in the office that isn’t really his. She can guess about him that he has only seen one dead body besides this one, his mother God rest her soul
when she passed away (seven years ago November), and his police training might well have gone only as far as bicycle theft.

Arresting her after the funeral but before the luncheon must certainly be an act of pants-pissing desperation.

But then again, he knows what happened to Cass.

“Hey!” she says again.

Nineteen-Year-Old doesn’t look up this time, exhales like a teenager and taps more vigorously at his keyboard.

“Hey!” she says a little bit louder.

“Shut up lady,” Nineteen-Year-Old says, but quietly enough that his boss cannot overhear.

“I want to talk,” she says.

He ignores her again. He has no crime drama aspirations, and talking deviates from his job description.

“Sheriff Willis!” she says, so loud this time her voice claws its way up her throat.

“I want to talk!”

There is nothing for a while. Then he reemerges a full minute later from his office.

“Yes?” he says.

“Do you have an interrogation room?” she says.

“We have four jail cells,” he says. “Should I bring a chair?”

“Make him close the door,” she says, gesturing to the third wheel in the office across the way.
“Why?” he says, but Nineteen-Year-Old has already disdainfully obliged. His tapping reaches a new urgency as it echoes off his side of the door and leaks through the window glass. He is a man on a mission.

“Tell me how Cass died,” she says. “My mother didn’t tell me.”

He looks at her. “No,” he says.

“It looked bad from his face,” Celia says. “If it helps, I don’t know why I’m here.”

“We arrested you for murder,” he says. “We’re detaining you until we can transfer you for arraignment.”

“That doesn’t happen here?”

He thinks about it. “Nothing happens here,” he says.

“You’re not supposed to be interrogating me?”

“Do I need to? You got things to say?”

“I love my brother,” Celia says. “I have no idea what happened to him, but I’m very upset he’s dead.”

“You don’t look so upset,” he says.

“I haven’t gotten used to it yet.”

He looks like he’s contemplating leaving again. Instead he says, “It was ugly, really bloody and disgusting. The ugliest thing I’ve seen in my life, and I have a deer processing shop I operate out of my garage. So much blood.”

“Was he shot?”

“You tell me, ma’am.”

“My mother’s not coming?” she says.
“We have men examining her home right now,” he says. “I imagine she’d like to be around for that.”

“The funeral luncheon was there today,” she says. “What, did they eat around the crime scene?”

“And do you know where the crime scene is?”

“My mother hasn’t told me anything,” she says. Celia thinks maybe she’ll read more of The Plan once he’s gone because this whole thing is starting to unsettle her brain.

“We had it taped off,” he says. “Different part of the house from the wake. We didn’t care for the whole setup, but Mrs. Chapman wanted it at home.”

So. The Monster had eaten him after all.

“Did you need to ask me questions?” she says. “I was in Holland. My husband might have been working, but I don’t know what time of day it was so I couldn’t tell you for sure.”

“We’re putting stuff together right now,” he says. “You can’t tell us anything interesting. But we know you weren’t in Holland and it’s pretty clear you were the perpetrator.”

“You don’t believe I was home?” she says.

“We know you weren’t home.”

Celia sits down on the cold bunk sticking out of the wall. She does not answer him. Until this moment, nothing about her gaps in memory scared her; she’s been blaming it on grief. She knows she’s not responsible, but she knows just as well she can’t tell him with certainty where she was. She feels sick and even wishes Daniel were here,
mysteriously, since he wouldn’t be doing much.


“I know,” he says. “Mr. Guardian has been notified of your whereabouts, but there’s a detail on your residence in Holland as well. Holland City Police.”

There’s the nausea again.

“I’m going to get some sleep now,” she says, and lies down on the cot to demonstrate.

“Someone’ll be in for you in the morning,” he says, but doesn’t leave right away. She’s trying not to look at him, but she can still feel him glaring down at her.

“We do know you did it, Mrs. Guardian,” he says. “We’re dead certain of it. And we get everything pieced together, we’re going to make sure you pay for it.” His eyes are watering. “Your mother is a good woman, no matter what anyone says about her. She doesn’t deserve this.”

He looks like he wants to throw another book at her, if only he had one on him, but instead he goes away again, and the place returns to computer tapping and the breath of the building.

She lays there hyperventilating (slightly) until maybe an hour later, until the sheriff passes by with a briefcase and doesn’t give her a glance, and the front door makes its opening sound, the pour of the bugs screeching from the trees outside, and then closes itself to quiet again.
Being born into The Monster was no easy life, or at least this was Celia’s belief when she was living there. The state of Michigan wasn’t angry yet when she was born in the early eighties, but already in Hazard the fish were disappearing, the same way the Big Three would leave the east side of the state in the following few years. There was a feeling then that what little heyday possible in a town on Lake Michigan with an unnatural allergy to civic growth was now over and gone. People who grew up here were heading south into some town or another, or packing up their lives and taking the ferry across to Wisconsin, on the less brutal side of the weather. Or if they held out because everything they had had always been there, their children would taunt them until they could get out themselves, and when they could would simply move to Grand Rapids and find Plainfield Avenue fast food jobs. The tourism, previously consisting of Michiganders willing to drive twenty miles tops for water recreation, died completely when the fish moved on and the shoreline turned even swampier for no discernible reason. It encroached off the lake and turned half the city streets to sludge, slopped its way through the cracks of home foundations, turned basements into septic swimming pools. People would have simply stopped building basements if there was anyone still building.

The barn house was half-liquefied when Celia and Cass broke into it, and that was twelve years ago. They didn’t talk about it that day when they were there, only afterwards. How did their mother grow up there? How did their ancestors think that was a house?

The childhood they invented for Jean was all wet socks and drowned mice under her bed. They pictured her trying to sleep at night through the sound of her bedroom
walls melting around her. Neither of them had ever met their grandparents, but they imagined them to be Germanic immigrants as simple and confused as the foreigners in any film they’d ever seen, in long skirts and coarse trousers, like they had emigrated from another time as well. Francis was bearded and constantly pulling his suspenders back to accommodate the straightness of his spine, and was incapable and unwilling, with the intensity of his modesty, to go into his daughter’s room to fix all the damage the 150 percent humidity had caused. Dorothy indoors always, always cooking meals and scrubbing the gunk from the floors, so insulated from her new country that her English never coalesced; she wept that she could not tell her English-speaking and German-impaired child how to cope with her impending womanhood. Jean was a tragic children’s book heroine who had ended up in the barn out of the cruelty of fate, who, rather than being born there, simply woke up in her barn bed one day, unable to speak to her parents and equally unable to escape.

They speculated that their grandparents were not in fact Jean’s parents--they were her adopters, her prison guards--but the children still found a way, as they were pitying their mother’s wet childhood, to romanticize them as well. Cass wished he could have met Francis because he assumed the old man’s ocean adventures, his days in the ship rigging as they crossed from the Old Country, must have translated into his bait shop expertise in some ambiguous way. Working for pirates, or maybe just cargo sailors, had translated to a passion for outboard motors and tackle.

When asked about this, Jean said, “Your grandfather was terrified of water. He never fished once. He picked it all up by accident. A hundred miles away, he could have been an autoworker.” But this was only one answer from a mouth which scarcely gave
answers; on the topic of her parents’ lives before Hazard, otherwise she was irritatingly mute.

Celia’s fascination was different from his though. She was usually the one sitting on the other side of the living room watching *Full House* while Cass filled the room with his questions. She was definitely not interested in hearing anything that might trick her into thinking her mother’s youth was beautiful or culturally remarkable. She was willing to see her grandparents as foreigners, their homeland someplace more magical than their moldy house implied. But further than this, she preferred to put herself in Jean’s place, shove her out of the fantasy, and suffer on her behalf the way Jean must have suffered, locked in the tiny-windowed back bedroom in the soggy, rodent-infested barn. They had trapped her up there. They released her only for school and let her dinner slosh through a narrow hole in her bedroom door. Celia had not gone upstairs when she and Cass went exploring, would have refused to even if he hadn’t ripped himself up, because the missing door hole would have shattered her vision. She wanted to imagine that sort of childhood torture, but only by capturing it solely for herself. She never saw it happening to her mother, and thus never showed Jean any specific pity for it, or asked her any questions herself.

Deep down, she knew her grandparents were good hard-working people who had loved Jean and were very upset when school was difficult for her. But growing up in The Monster, which her mother always kept extremely clean, and which, from its place on the top of the hill, was too high for the water to eat away at it, life was so boring it hurt. Celia wanted awful things to happen to her so her life could be more interesting.

It seemed clear when she was a teenager that this was why her father ran away,
wanting to make himself scarce to give her something to be happy about, even though she’d never said anything to him about it. And the event was devastating for all of them, but it seemed especially unfair to her. Like he had left her more than he had Jean and Cass combined. He had left to help her, but also to teach her that wanting horrible things to happen was the foolish desire of people who don’t really understand what it means to have horrible things happen.

Jean was seventeen when Elias came from wherever he came from, a mysterious man in his early twenties with a vaguely Kentuckian accent. He was a distant cousin whose parents had somehow arranged with Francis to let him come stay with the three of them, sleeping for a while on the couch in the barn until Francis fixed a spare room for him behind the bait shop. After Elias learned the trade, he took control of whichever store Francis couldn’t stand to be in on any given day. Jean always helped her father, and so was always in the store Elias wasn’t in. She saw him only as the ghost figure who sold tackle while they were watching the boat shop, and vice versa.

The two of them only talked a couple of times late at night, when he was still occupying the barn living room couch. She would go to the bathroom and he would still be awake, way too late for someone who had to be up for work at four in the morning to meet the early fishermen’s needs. They never discussed anything interesting; she was always half-delirious with sleep, and the conversation was gone from her memory by morning. She decided that this meant he was boring, that her memory couldn’t be bothered to retain his words.

After he moved out of the house, she didn’t think she would miss him. He was
odd and asked a lot of questions, and was not good-looking in any way a
seventeen-year-old girl could understand. Francis called him Ellie for whatever reason,
but only in the boy’s absence, the one joke at his expense even as he praised his ability to
keep both locations perfectly clean at all times. She liked that he was in the same places
she was but never simultaneously, like they were interchangeable in their duties, even
though she could never learn enough to run either place by herself.

And then, the way she told it, one afternoon she went to the wrong store to work
and found Elias there instead of her father. In the space of an hour, before she realized
Francis would be wondering where she was and left, she managed to fall in love with her
distant cousin and he presumably with her, and instead of escaping to college as planned
she dropped out of high school a couple months before graduation and married him. Lord
knows how the Chapman parents, who had invited Elias into their home and given him a
decent-paying job, felt about his theft of their daughter, or if they simply figured it was an
acceptable sacrifice to ensure someone would be in control when Francis retired.

But here again the newlyweds defied expectations, and instead of holding down
the family businesses, Elias bought his young wife an enormous house recently vacated
by one of the first Hazard escapees (the first ominous jumpers from the ship) with money
that appeared from nowhere, an act at the time Jean had taken for a miracle. She hid in
The Monster even though she hated it and called it names even in her husband’s
presence, intentionally decorated it to look grotesque and spatially confused, some rooms
so full it was impossible to get around the furniture, others planted with a single couch
and a floor lamp and nothing else.

Francis and Dorothy kept living in that barn house and never saw their daughter
because she never came out, and Francis kept running the shops on alternate days even as they hemorrhaged money because the fish were leaving, and then the old couple went to Traverse City and died in their sleep.

Elias handled the family finances at the end, which, he explained to Jean, had consisted of next to nothing even after he sold the stores and liquidated stock to pay off their debts. The barn remained vacant, collecting property taxes until it was condemned, and the house and the land turned to mush, flushed back into each other until the whole thing was one big ugly soup of history, a chunk of earth Jean showed no signs of missing. Though she may have missed her parents. She rarely talked about them.

Elias then put two children inside his wife and she obediently pushed them out and raised them, and ten years after Cass was born he ran away. No one ever pieced together why. Celia liked to tease her mother about all of it, the parents and the barn and the cousin/husband, even though she knew it was cruel, even though he was as much her father as he was Jean’s spouse. She cursed her mother numerous times about all of their ridiculous names, the whole family something out of fiction from a different century. Jean had hers pushed on her by her parents and Elias his too (he shortened it to Eli for most of the time he was with them but even then it sounded archaic), but she perpetuated it through her own children as well, gave them elderly-sounding names that elicited the same contempt in school that Jean had gotten for having the parents she did, for living in her house.

If Celia ever has any children, she decided once, she will supply them with dull, popular names; their enrollment in the Holland Public Schools will save them from any
torture from the family reputation accumulated over the years in Hazard.

But of course Cass isn’t moving the family line forward any now, and Celia is in jail and not conceiving anytime soon.

Several times in the night in her cell, she tries to remember the sensation of Daniel’s hands on her to comfort her, but she cannot recall them ever having been there, and it takes her a while as she lies there to find in her brain any time they’ve come into contact with each other since they got married four years ago. He’s fucked her since then. She’s sure of this. But now she is cold with her amnesia of it.

Instead she has to wonder about her brother, how she got here and what suspicion of her guilt might now put her in prison for him. What is her culpability in all this? How could she have killed him, ripped the blood out of him like any indifferent psychopath, tortured and murdered the sibling she loved?

She knows she was in Holland that day. Her mother called her from home to tell her Cass was gone for good. Mrs. Talbot crying unhelpfully in the background. The next day Celia went to the doctor. Now she is bleeding. She is waiting in a jail cell for someone to explain why she’s here, why she’s really here and not why they think she’s here, how she could possibly be in Holland and not there at the same time, how she could turn her only sibling into gore and death and still be home to get her mother’s call of notification. There is no measure of sense left in the world.

She digs through her past for anything that could indicate any violence against her brother, any motivation, and can find only one thing. It was fifteen years ago. She
wonders if the police could possibly make a case out of mistakes this old.

He was seven, and she was eleven. There wasn’t much playing in their childhood. Celia read a lot, and sometimes Cass listened to her read aloud, and they were nearly always together but also nearly always not speaking to each other, as though they were absorbing each other’s silence in a way unnatural to children.

Celia hated The Monster as much as Jean and as much as Elias would come to as well, but Cass alone had some intimacy with the place. He found hiding places no one else could. Sometimes he would go missing so long Jean would start crying as she called for him, and his name sounded like strangulation coming out of her, like she was screaming for help, and then he would come from nowhere and ask her, “Are you looking for me?”

“Where have you been?!” she would ask him.

He would name a room she had already looked for him in, but would refuse to offer up where his hiding place was. He concealed himself like an escaped hamster. Scurrying to places humans didn’t think existed.

But that day, he told her he’d invented a game.

“You put a blindfold on me and lead me around, and I’ll go where you tell me to go,” he said. “You can talk me around the house.”

“You didn’t invent that,” she told him. But she blindfolded him anyway.

The Monster back then seems a different beast from what it is now. Now she forms maps in her brain based on the trajectory of her movements through it when she was a child: the way she rounded a corner, the number of hyper-extended leaps it took
her to scale the stairs. But even past the amount she’s grown since then, the space inside has expanded and rearranged, like the walls can stretch, like the rooms can swap places. Celia has had dreams that convinced her utterly that her bedroom was on the other end of the house, or was not indoors at all, was instead an isolated plywood box buried back in the woods. An ATV’s drive away from the main building.

Her best guess, what seems to be the most consistent floor plan, is comprised of three floors, the top one awkwardly smaller than the others, master bedroom on the second, Cass’ bedroom on the third. Celia’s moved from second to third and back a few times during the course of her childhood, since there were too many rooms to fill and too few children to fill them. Rather than decorate or assign these extra rooms, Jean left them empty, or dropped one couch or one table into it and nothing else, where no one would use it. Making it easy for Celia to change her mind and relocate her bedroom any weekend she was so inclined, to abandon one room and make her parents help her haul all of the furniture and furnishings and replace them in the new room as close to identically as possible; everything about her old room would be erased. Thus the confusion in later years. Thus the inability to remember where her place was in the chaos that the Monster hallways created, the sensation of being led in to corners there was no way back from.

Celia refused to leave her room to pee once the lights were off at night. Cass bumped through the hallways late and made noises that sounded supernatural but were usually just his whispering, guiding himself aloud to wherever he was going. She knew this rationally anyway. But she could never convince herself of it with enough to confidence to go out and see for sure.
She made fun of him for talking to himself, and he said he wasn’t.

“What were you doing?” she said.

“Just talking,” he said.

Another time she asked about it and he said he had slept through the night, had not even stirred to flip from one side of the bed to the other, had slept so well it was unnatural and his dreams had been long, boring stretches of walking and staring. So clearly he was not in the hallway making noises at any time. She called him a nasty name even though she believed him. Even though she knew it was actually The Monster muttering to itself.

That afternoon, they started outside his bedroom. He owned the one door in the house that locked with a rusty, L-shaped key, and he kept it locked for no specific reason she could figure, since there was nothing to lock inside and no one to lock out. They were poised to start, standing outside his door. He did a lot of this, standing right there. He liked to lean into the doorframe until someone came up, like he was in a noir movie standing on a street corner waiting for the protagonist.

“It’d be too dangerous up here,” she said.

“I’m going to be the one with the blindfold on,” he said.

“Let’s go down a floor,” she said. The game was already making her nervous.

They went down the stairs to the second floor and stopped at the bottom, where she wrapped the handkerchief, which he had folded into a thin long strip of wadded fabric, around his eyes, tangling the ends partly into his hair and tying up the oily, blond strands with the blindfold. She pulled a little, expecting to hear him yelp.

“It’s good,” he said. The boy felt no pain. It was unfair that someone at the height
of that accident prone period of childhood could be so impervious.

And too, it was wrong how young hair so infrequently washed could smell so mysteriously clean. His head wafted vanilla and attic mustiness. Like he slept in a cargo trunk instead of a bed, one used to store bamboo and old dresses. It even changed from minute to minute. Sometimes he stank like little boy, and these were the times she didn’t mind being around him. When he didn’t smell human or look human or act human, all those things he did in small moments (he jumped down ten stairs in one go once and somehow didn’t fall and break his skull against the opposite wall, it was ridiculous), he could just keep to himself for all she cared, no matter how bored he got in that locked-up room of his.

The strip of red paisley was now fastened over his eye sockets, sealing them who knows how tight. His mouth puckered like he was contemplating, his red thick lips like an angel’s on a face that young. She looked above and below the edge of the cloth to check any leaks in it and see how he’d react.

“Are you moving?” he said. “It feels like wind.”

“Can you see me?” she said. She ran a lap around him.

“Just a shadow, for a second,” he said. “Also you brushed against my leg.”

They stood there. Celia listened for their mother in the bowels of the house. The kitchen was at the end of a hallway that didn’t make any sense, distant from everything else (sometimes Celia went venturing down it convinced that this would be the one time she wouldn’t make it, that the hallway might lengthen exponentially and trap her). Though it wasn’t time to eat or cook, she figured Jean would be there standing sentinel until the next meal. Sometimes she would sit at the kitchen table and wait like a
powered-down robot, plugged in at seven and noon and five every day to cook and then
sleep again. Even so, if she heard them playing, she’d get concerned and come up.
Playing was not a common sound in The Monster.

Celia knew that he was the one in the blindfold, and he was the one who
supposedly couldn’t see anything, and the rules of the game were not so complex that his
ten-second explanation hadn’t been enough for her. Nevertheless she stood there waiting
for him to give her instructions. Worried that she might somehow find a way to do this
wrong.

He understood. “Now you lead me around,” he said. “Tell me where to go, and
I’ll go.”

One gaping expanse of a bay window lit up the stairwell at the end of the hall.
The atrium had always looked too open, but she liked that if you stood at the top of the
stairs and leaned forward you could pull yourself up and brace yourself on the window
ledge (for a couple of minutes tops before your arms got tired and you risked rolling to
the bottom) and try to measure the expanse of the back woods with your eyes. It ended
eventually on Lake Michigan, farther than the children could comfortably walk without
getting lost, but from here it looked like a woods so big someone could go into it and
march forever and never emerge onto anything other than more trees.

From this end of the hall she could see light at the other end peeling open the drop
as the stairway bloated the space in all directions. Up to that point was just a straight
stretch of shaded wood-paneled walls and identical bedroom doors, all closed. The most
boring stretch of hallway in the whole house, in all of America.

“Go straight,” she told him. He obeyed.
It was immediately exhilarating that one action followed the other, that she could say it and he would go. Each step he took was a foot extended slowly and planted firmly on the plush carpeting, so frequently vacuumed it had developed bald patches. His arms were unnaturally at his sides and on each thigh, like he was lifting his bionic legs from one spot to the next. She couldn’t understand why they weren’t out in front of him looking for walls. How it was she could say “go” and he would trust her enough to leave his arms out of the equation.

She kept a couple feet behind him and set her gait in synch with his. Once she crashed sideways into the wall trying to go as slowly; she didn’t have the balance to hold that one leg suspended in the air in anticipation like he did.

“You okay?” he said, one leg still curled airborne in front of him.

“Fine.”

The farther he went, the more the elation drifted. He was just going straight because she had ordered him once to do it, and since the hallway went one unwavering direction there were no corrections to make. He marched and she followed. It started to bore her. She thought to suggest they start over and go to the first floor, where there were turns and furniture and low-flying ceiling lights, but she didn’t. Afraid he might be annoyed.

The hall was twenty-five feet of walls and doors, and he held his position straight and steady right down the middle, oddly so, and it felt like it took hours to get anywhere near the end.

“Are you sure you can’t see?” she said.

“You told me to go straight,” he said.
And then he was approaching the stairs and it was time to issue a new order, but she couldn’t figure out how to word it right. “Stop” was all wrong. She didn’t have the skill to guide him down steps, even with the most measured instructions. “Stairs” certainly wasn’t going to help him, and with that one he’d probably just make fun of her.

It occurred to her that she could just say nothing. And he would find out on his own. And now it was in her head, she couldn’t get it out of her. Just say nothing. Let him figure it out himself. See if that intimacy he had with The Monster would be enough to save him. See if he had learned the exact number of steps it took to get from one end of the hall to the other. See if the sunlight from the big window leaked through his blindfold, or he was cheating after all.

Let him fall down those goddamn stairs and see how stupid he looked.

She expected him to say “Celia? What now?” anytime. She knew that he knew the hall would have to end sometime, and she would have to tell him where to go next. But he stayed silent and didn’t stop walking. Each step light, careful. None more measured than the previous one. Like he assumed the hallway would graciously continue on forever as long as he treaded lightly on it.

The image that came into her mind then was so clear it stuck with her for years while the rest of the story blurred, certain elements rearranging themselves or mixing with others. The kids weren’t allowed to see gory movies at that age and neither of them had ever so much as needed stitches. But right then, as he was inches away from the ledge of the first stair, she had a half second’s picture of evisceration so detailed and graphic it could have no basis in reality, so far was it beyond what she’d apprehended about anatomy, so exaggerated was it for a short, carpet-padded drop a dozen steps
downward. Bones torn and popping in a percussive series of breaks through the skin, jagged and trying to work their way free. Guts almost gelatinous spewing from a deep gash in his side created a sharp object that had appeared from nowhere, a javelin of molding that jolted free from the wall and stabbed into his abdomen. One purplish organ, who knew which one, slurping out the hole and Slinkying to the next floor landing. A cartography of cuts to the skull, as though someone had gone at it with a jigsaw, and oddly fuchsia brain matter just gushing out his ears, a geyser of viscera that had until now been restrained by the layer of bone wrapped around it. And the face was just gone. So much blood there were no features left to see, all the horror and shock of these injuries lost under the red, if he was still alive to feel it. It was hard to say.

Only half a second. Her access to this level of destruction, to an extent she had never thought remotely possible or had even tried to explore, terrified her. It was justice that this was the image that repeated itself whenever she heard murmurs in the hall at night from then on, some creature half her brother and half a betrayed ghost pirate scouring for revenge. Sometimes she saw a peg leg. Sometimes he was a ten year old, and sometimes he was seven feet tall.

Whatever this image was and wherever it came from, it was enough. He still had one step of safety before he would properly breach the edge, yet she yelled so loud it bounced off all the surfaces of the atrium, “Turn right now!”

He turned like he’d already been turning, like her order was almost an insult (since he was already going that way), and took one more step, not nearly as gracefully this time, and abruptly hit the wall face first. His nose crunched, or maybe she imagined it did. He turned around and looked at her, still blindfolded. That bright red streak across
his eye sockets, and a trickle of blood draining from one nostril. His eyebrows aimed
down in an attempt to meet between his eyes.

“Ow,” he said.

Celia started screaming first. Cass might not have screamed at all.

Jean appeared at the bottom of the stairs so quickly it was like she’d been around
the corner all along. She must have been doing something, but still she was on top of
them immediately, meeting them at the top of the stairs because neither of them was
moving her direction.

“Ceel!” she called right into Celia’s face, inches away, so close the words were
wet coming at her. Ceel was what Jean called her when she was younger, for no good
reason, as though her real name (chosen by Jean in fact) was too much for her mother to
say. She could have tolerated if it didn’t sound like “seal.” But Celia always heard the
animal name and was endlessly waiting to have fish thrown at her.

“What are you screaming about?” Jean said, even though it was more loud crying
than screaming. She’d forgotten she was doing it, so then it just turned into heavy,
watery, disgusting breathing.

“Cass hit his nose,” she said. Jean looked at Cass and saw the blindfold and didn’t
seem to recognize him right away. Cass was still for some reason wearing the cloth over
his eyes and flexing his lips back and forth trying to keep the blood from seeping into his
mouth. Celia wanted to yell at him to take it off or simply to do it for him. But she didn’t
dare touch him.

“Charlie?” Jean said.

“I ran into something,” he said. Still wearing the blindfold. Like he was waiting
for execution.

“Stay put,” Jean said, and went down to the bathroom and came back with a gooey mass of soaked tissues, and went at his face with them until the worst of it was gone, and then kneeled down and held another dry wad of them against his nostrils. They all stood there. Cass breathed so deeply through his mouth that the sound echoed off the windows.

“What happened?” Jean said.

Neither of them spoke.

“Why is he wearing a blindfold, Ceel?” Cass blew his nose into the tissues and Jean wiped it clean, folded the tissue and put it back in place.

“We were playing a game, where I had to lead him,” Celia said. “I panicked. He got too close to the steps.”

“Are you okay?” Jean said. They both answered yes.

“Why don’t you go downstairs and read,” she told Celia, “and we’ll go get him cleaned up.” She had Cass commandeer the tissue against his nose and went around him to untie the handkerchief which was still on his eyes, not pulling but feeding the strands back through their knots. Cass blinked as it came free, the light coming to him for the first time in ages, like half his life had been spent underground, and he looked around the atrium still blinking, sweeping all possible sights inside him, seeing them through this brand new lease on life he had.

He smiled at Celia. Not in that way that little boys do when they make trouble, because this was not a face Cass ever made; he could make trouble, but he never did so with any trace of it in his expression. It was a fun smile. One he wiped when Jean was
looking, since their mother would only worry about grins emerging after any kind of head trauma. If she saw him looking happy, she’d be bringing him to the emergency room. But he was unshaken.

Celia was still scared shitless after from the crunch sound when he hit the wall, either the cartilage or the plaster but either way nothing good. And the ease with which he’d stayed inside his blindfold, as though he was hiding in it.

Both Jean and Cass later insisted it wasn’t her fault, that she had just made a mistake in judgment, had a slipped moment of depth perception, but she knew better. She saw, as they hadn’t, the ugliness that would have come if she’d spoken a second later. Or, even if it was impossibly exaggerated, the ugliness her brain had produced, which was even worse. It was almost evil. She was not the most imaginative of children, but how those body parts and tissues had pieced together in her head, how they’d fleshed into each other just long enough to be brutally ripped apart. She was a monster.

Celia has never been much of a hoarder--every time she decided she was done playing with one of her toys forever, she asked Jean to take it to the Salvation Army so it wouldn’t take up space in a room where it couldn’t be useful--but since she could read and up until now, she’s collected books. Books filled her bedroom and then started occupying other rooms, which Jean and Elias didn’t mind because the rooms were empty anyway, and they are now mostly in The Monster, her older collection anyway, because Daniel said he didn’t want to set aside so much space for books she’d owned since she was a teenager and earlier, books she can’t remember acquiring. She reads in bits and pieces and knows a large amount of little things, not enough about anything in particular to be useful in any way. But she never got rid of any of those books because someday she
might come back to them, the ones she’s read a dozen times and the ones she’s only read the first few words of, because the words will always be there and that makes them permanently relevant.

Her favorite at that time was The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy by Douglas Adams. Because it was funny, yes, but also because it implied something that went well beyond the space of the pages, a compendium of knowledge so endless that it wasn’t really a book, more a whole universe wrapped between covers. That it preceded and predicted the internet only made her hate the internet when it finally arrived. They were both in constant expansion, but the Guide had had the courtesy to confine itself between a beginning and an end. The internet was too much. Anthe parts that made her angry couldn’t be ripped out and thrown away (not that she would ever do this sort of thing with her books, but it comforted her that she could).

After the blindfold game, after Cass’ face had been bruised for a week--though he only rubbed it from time to time as though resetting it and never said anything about it specifically hurting--the guilt of having almost killed him or at least pulled him to pieces was still too much for her. Cass didn’t blame her and Jean didn’t blame her and Elias hadn’t even asked about the mark on his face, but Celia could feel a whole house full of guilt. It filled all those empty rooms and swam up to the attic and leaked out the cracks in the window sealant and spewed out the never-used chimney. She had done something terrible and changed something vital in their lives, and now she was responsible for doing something to right the situation.

So she gave Cass her copy of The Hitchhiker’s Guide as penance. It seemed like the only proper response. She understood nothing about religion or any prescribed
notions of morality outside what came to her organically. But that afternoon, she believed she had stolen a piece of Cass’ soul when he trusted her to guide him and she nearly ran him down a flight of stairs, and the only amends was giving him a part of her own soul in return. This book was exactly that for her, her absolute favorite book, and with it she could give over all its associations, she could promise to never read it again, she could deny herself access to the world that had allowed her to make sense of the universe in ways that spending all her time in Hazard kept her from doing. It hurt desperately in the closest way she could come up with to feeling her organs leak out her skin (as her brain had done to him). At least without literally doing so, and she was not brave enough to hurt herself in that way.

Those images had terrified her.

She did it the night she came up with it, in the living room after dinner with the whole family sitting and watching *Family Matters*. She’d wanted to be dramatic with it, but the task was awkward: she was standing and presenting the book to him, he was sitting on the floor in the corner, where he always sat in the evening because it was outside the periphery from the couch, and her arms weren’t long enough to bridge the strange gap between them.

“I want you to have this,” she told him.

“What is it?” Jean asked.


“That’s very nice of you,” Jean said. Celia finally kneeled down, and Cass accepted it.

“Thanks,” he said. He put it in his lap, and the family went back to watching
television. Celia sat back down, but she kept watching each of them in turn. She expected something grander, something transformative, some recognition by anyone in the room that she had offered up a deeply meaningful sacrifice to him, that this meant she loved him to an extent that ought to be recognized. This was not the act of someone who enjoyed causing suffering.

Elias hadn’t been paying attention. He was reading a biography of Nixon and hadn’t looked up to see any of it. Jean had immediately re-submerged in *Family Matters*. Cass still had both hands on top of the book but looked simultaneously unaware it was there.

When they went to bed, Cass remembered to bring the book up with him, but nothing more was said on the subject.

She was still determined. As he headed up to his third floor bedroom, she caught him on the stairs and said, “You’re too young to read it now, but I think you’ll really like it sometime later. It’s my favorite.”

“Thanks,” he repeated.

Celia never saw the book again. But she thought about it every night. She waited for several years for Cass to go back to it and someday surprise her by mentioning, “Yeah, I finally got to that book you gave me. Loved it.” It was unfair to expect much, she knew, buying someone clothes they hadn’t grown into yet, but the promise of wearing them someday she thought should still be there. And he reached the age where it was at his reading level and then passed it, and still it didn’t come up. Eventually she stopped wondering when he would tell her he’d read it, and started feeling desperately guilty for the object itself, for the betrayal she now figured she’d transferred to it. She had
invested so much in that book, and she had passed it on to Cass having no reassurance that he would ever touch it again, and now it was decomposing in his bedroom, if he had not actually thrown it away at some point. She knew it made no sense to hurt that much over a thing, but it hurt her nonetheless.

She still thinks about it from time to time. It still hurts occasionally, like a lost pet surrounded by poignant memories that come up in association with strange stimuli. She’s kept her word and has never gone out and bought another or reread the book since then. It has been sixteen years. Douglas Adams’ jokes still pop into her head from time to time. Frequently she can’t identify them as such, and will think maybe she has been really clever, or is recalling conversations she’s not sure ever happened.

Now she’d have to dig through his bedroom to find out if the book is still around. Since she’s never been inside it, has in fact respected his wish for privacy for over twenty years, it’s unlikely she’ll be breaking that rule anytime soon. It’s also unlikely at this point that the authorities would release her just to settle a childhood fear.

If they’re extrapolating her motives for murder from this incident too, if they have somehow put enough together to figure she’s got reasons to want to hurt him, drawing their attention to any lingering Douglas Adams-related resentment would not be a good idea.

She is not concerned that she had anything to do with his death. She loves Cass. But this long night alone in a cell stinking of wet concrete is doing nothing to soothe her stomach.
She does sleep eventually, and wakes up expecting her arraignment any moment. It’s light outside now. They’ll be transferring her to another facility. She cranes her head up off the cot and finds the Nineteen-Year-Old has retired for the night. There’s the sound of keys, which she assumes woke her up.

And here’s the sheriff now looking poorly rested and not quite clean and full of the anger elected officials and lawmen always have (she’d tell him to take it down a notch if she wasn’t eager to stay off his bad side). He looks down at her, hitting her with more of the disappointment from last night. She doesn’t understand it, since he has her behind bars and all, and there’s no more to be upset about on his end.

Then he says, “We’re releasing you for the time being. Your husband’s here to get you,” and the face makes sense. And she momentarily feels bad for him.

She’s not sure why Daniel was told first since it concerns her a fair amount more. It takes a couple of minutes for it to sink in that she’s actually free now and won’t be tried for Cass’ death after all. She is tired and can’t focus on anything in particular now. Today looks to be shaping up just as unfairly as yesterday did (she is still a woman mourning, albeit reprieved), and every day will continue to be unfair for quite some time.

Daniel comes in and stands by the sheriff, dressed in a suit and tie that is too much for the occasion, and he’s frowning at her. Which is to say, *I send you off to one simple funeral and you can’t bother to not get arrested after. What am I supposed to do with you?*

“At least they’re letting me go,” Celia says. Some necessary perspective on the situation.
“You’re not being charged,” he replies. “We’ll talk in the car.”

The sheriff cracks the lock and lets her out. He steps back out of the couple’s way and watches them from his place by the cells instead of following them out front, maybe because he doesn’t want to see her head outdoors again, but more likely because he is waiting to see if the two of them will exchange some sort of traumatized affection.

They don’t. Daniel hits the front door first and doesn’t even hold it open for her or look back to make sure she’s following.

There’s a folded copy of today’s Grand Rapids Press on the passenger seat when Celia gets into Daniel’s Lincoln. He must have stopped for breakfast early this morning.


She gets in and holds the newspaper in her lap. Thinks of the puddle of blood she left on the driver’s seat of her Explorer (Daniel’s Explorer really). Daniel secures his seatbelt before starting the ignition.

“Do I have to ask you if you were involved in this?” he says.

“Do you?” she says.

“I shouldn’t. But it’s looking a little unpleasant.”

“Honey,” Celia says. “They released me. The arraignment was cancelled. Right?”

“They released you because they don’t have enough evidence yet to indict you,” he says. “Whether they put enough together or not in the end is irrelevant. This does not look good.”

“I didn’t have anything to do with this,” Celia says. “I was in Holland the day it happened. Ask my mother.”
“Jean is refusing to talk to the police. She would have kept them out of the house too if she wasn’t legally required to give them access to the crime scene.”

“My mom doesn’t like having new people in The Monster. She almost never had visitors when we were kids.”

“You should take a look at today’s paper,” he says. He picks it up from her lap and transfers it into her hand, holding his eyes on the road. As usual, his head is almost against the ceiling; he had always been too tall for the vehicle but stubbornly bought it anyway. Most nights he gets home from work, and the hair on his cranium has been pulled up into unflattering, oily clumps.

There are two photos facing up at her from the page, one of her being handcuffed in the driveway of The Monster, the other her being folded into the police car.

“You are already news, dear,” he says. “Whether legal action is taken against you or not, your life is going to be different now. Our lives, in fact.”

The photo caption reads: Celia Guardian, 26, arrested outside of the Chapman family home in Hazard.

The headline on the other side of the fold, when she flips it over: Holland woman arrested on suspicion of fratricide.

Celia reads the article, but can’t retain large pieces of it because she’s wondering what funeral attendant, which of the women who appeared last night suddenly prepared with a camera, emailed her photos to the Press and suggested perhaps that a talk with Sheriff Willis might yield some interesting results.

HAZARD, MI-- A Holland woman was arrested on Friday night in an investigation of the murder of her brother in Hazard Tuesday afternoon. The details of
the crime have not yet been released by authorities, but Sheriff James Willis of the Hazard City Police says that the suspect, Mrs. Celia Guardian, 26, has been brought in pending further investigation. She will be arraigned Saturday morning at the Kalamazoo Criminal Court.

The victim, Charles Chapman, 22, lived with his mother Jean in Hazard, who was reportedly not home Tuesday afternoon when the crime occurred. Mrs. Chapman returned from running errands to find her son unconscious and in critical condition in a back hallway of the house. Emergency services were called, and technicians pronounced him dead upon arrival on the scene. An autopsy was performed on Wednesday, but the coroner’s report will not be released until next week. The police say that there were clear signs of foul play and are treating it as a homicide in anticipation of the report.

No information has been released as to the details of Guardian’s involvement, but Hazard Police forces say that they have sufficient evidence to charge her with murder.

“The evidence is overwhelming, though we cannot share any of it at this time,” Sheriff Willis told the Press staff when contacted for comment on Friday night.

Born and raised in Hazard, Guardian currently resides in Holland with her husband. As of Friday night, police were still searching her Holland home. Neither her husband, Daniel Guardian, nor any members of the Chapman family could be reached for comment.

A service for Charles Chapman was held in Hazard on Friday at an undisclosed location. Guardian was taken into custody at the Chapman home during a post-funeral reception.

Jean Chapman has asked that any donations be made in Charles Chapman’s
name to the Hazard Historical Society.

“Did they call the house about this?” Celia says.

“I was in Grand Rapids last night,” Daniel says. “If they arrest you again, I’ll find someone from the firm to represent you.”

“They released me,” Celia says. She doesn’t look at her husband. Her eyes run off the page in her lap and over the dashboard; he’s stopped in a parking lot in a town she doesn’t recognize. She can’t recall the sensation of the car stopping underneath her.

“For now,” he says. “When this went to press last night, Willis still assumed they’d be bringing in enough to charge you. Otherwise, I doubt he’d have talked to them when they called. And now he’s going to get hit hard if he doesn’t pull this together and make a case against you. They are not going to let you rest on this.”

“Can we go home?” Celia thinks that sitting still in the car feels like lying down in that jail cell.

“Not yet,” he says. “We should go get something to eat. And we should talk before we get to the house. The police might still be there.”

Daniel looks so tall right now, his hair folded into the car roof, that she nearly feels sorry for him, even though she might be the more pitiful of the two of them at the moment, dirty and still in her mourning clothes. He fights between slumping and correcting his posture, peeling his scalp off the ceiling and righting the curve of his back. His torso reaches farther than it logically should but his legs don’t fit his frame, are almost silly in their shortness. On the rare occasion that Celia drives the Lincoln, she has to pull the seat back to rest comfortably against the pedals, and she knows the whirring of
the automatic adjustor as he resets it for himself with her in the car is embarrassing for
the both of them. Yet his suit fits him so perfectly (he is vicious and thorough with his
tailor), she is comforted, almost able to ignore his refusal to sympathize with her over her
brother’s death. This hardness and attention to detail means she is no longer reading
self-help literature in the Hazard City Jail.

   Though she did remember to bring *The Plan* with her when she left. Thank God.

   “I did not have anything to do with this,” Celia says. “I don’t even know how he
died, because my mother didn’t tell me. I don’t think she wanted me to know. In any
case, I’m not doing very well with this. I need you.”

   “Maybe you should call Jean when we get back,” Daniel says. “Maybe I should. It
couldn’t hurt to get some clarification on this. She could be keeping the police at bay for
her own weird reasons.”

   He pushes the newspaper off her knee just far enough to flap his fingers
affectionately against her skirt.

   “We’ll figure out a strategy,” he says.

   He puts the car in drive again after a few seconds of this touching, and pulls out
into a narrow, two-lane street that leads them into the downtown of somewhere, wherever
they are. They pass a “Welcome to” sign, but she doesn’t see it fast enough to catch the
town name. As with all the towns in this part of Michigan, though, she can mentally
predict a small eggy-smelling diner in the middle of a couple dozen buildings, all about a
century old. She is comforted when Daniel confirms this fact by parallel parking in front
of one.
As he was supposed to do, because he was her husband, Daniel never liked the sound of Elias. Of course, she told Daniel about him the first night they were alone together, in her small apartment a quarter mile off the campus of the small public university they both attended. They had an intro French class together, which Daniel was nearly failing before he grabbed Celia after class one day and asked for her help.

“I’ve never taken any French and I’m not even interested in learning it,” he said. “I don’t know how I ended up in here.” Which was a lie. He was in the class because he’d taken one semester of it in high school after he was told by an advisor that colleges look for foreign language experience on applications, and when he found this was a lie, he meant to stop there. But then the academic advisor in his dorm told him law schools looked for foreign language experience also, proficiency even, and so he was back in here, retracing the path he’d half-heartedly begun two years earlier. And he noticed the excess of women around him, and remained for their presence. And then realized he wasn’t quite prepared to make choppy conversation in French like the rest of the students and he’d have to get help.

One in-English, pre-class exchange with Celia, her words, “I’m a freshman but I’m got my own place, my mom is paying for it,” and he decided that help should come from her specifically, whether she was any better at it than him or not.

It wasn’t all that unusual that Celia had an arrangement with her family along these lines. Their school was full of 2.5 GPAs, but most of the students were second-generation upper-middle class, whose parents hadn’t gone to college themselves but had made money largely by accident, and celebrated by buying their children violently yellow Mustangs and sending them to the best school that would accept them.
Many of these students were guys who wore school-colored sweatshirts, and who oversold the cost of rent for their six-bedroom shared townhouses when negotiating for help from their parents, and spent the leftover cash on cases of PBR. They were the types who told their friends they weren’t concerned about their class attendance records and test scores because they weren’t responsible for the tuition. Their lawns were like festering wounds turning to goo as the sun brought all of the spilled beer from nights before to a simmer. The changes in shade in the grass, frequently to bright reds and oranges, were neighborhood mysteries.

This, of course, was not Celia at all. Her apartment was on the first floor of a two-story brick complex of twelve; her windows sat three inches above the ground. When Daniel saw it, he recognized immediately what she probably was: an awkward middle-achiever whose personality didn’t fit the dorms and whose family could afford to put her elsewhere.

At this point, though, Daniel was already looking to the future. Seeing her as a potential conquest, quiet now signifying no drinking problems five years from now. Single bedroom apartment now meaning keeping to herself later on, when he would need her to do just that, the expectation that his own space would always be as sacred as hers. Also, despite the fact that he’d only done it seven times since his first time a year before, and really was still learning, he’d already developed the suspicion that a girl who wants privacy in her living space might also be into the loud, spreading-out, watching-porn, switching-positions-several-times kind of sex.

He told her all of this after they got married. Out of love, wanting to show his good will. He had found her possible weirdness charming back then, thinking that
differentness in adults always turned out to be a good thing, simply a validation of all they suffered as teenagers (though he hadn’t himself, and he was quick to inform her of this). What he didn’t add, and what Celia had to figure out on her own, was that he had expected the weirdness to wear down or at least smooth out as the charm of it faded. Like she was only acting this way when they met because she was trying to get his attention, and would scale it back once they were involved. Instead the weirdness stayed, is now not charming anymore, and at this point he is angry about it. Although there is no way to articulate this without sounding heartless, he holds it against her that she never subdued her personality for him. So, instead of saying it outright and risking her feelings and getting blamed for lack of consideration, he just stays mad about it and keeps it to himself as long as he can manage it.

That first night together, he was on the alert for anything that might give him some clue as to what breed of kept student she was, the crazy and ungrateful kind or the withdrawn and slightly helpless. Celia picked up on his attention to all of her belongings, his request to be shown around as soon as they entered, even to the bathroom, his desire to get his own glass of water from the kitchen and then open all of the cupboards instead of asking which was the one where the glasses were stored. She didn’t mind at first, because she accepted it as his charming weirdness as well. She guessed that he was only partially there for French assistance, and would probably rather spend the night talking and eating pizza rolls than actually studying.

So she made pizza rolls, without asking, and when she put the plate of them on the floor between them he started eating without comment. He asked her questions, mostly about her classes but about her hometown as well.
“Hazard?” he said, and laughed. “Is it like Hell, Michigan? Does it have a lot of ridiculous gift shops?”

“It’s a fishing spot,” Celia said. “My grandfather had a bait shop there for years until all of the fish died.”

“Like half the lakes in the state,” he said, and stopped laughing. His tone was pitying, like the fish death was part of her own private tragedy. The fish were her grandfather. The fish were her childhood.

He touched her leg. As soon as he asked about the rest of her family, she told him about Elias.

“Or Eli, which is what he preferred to be called,” Celia said. “Until he left, and my mom just went back to Elias out of spite.”

He dug deep into the story of her father, in its chronological order. She began with his disappearing, but Daniel jumped back to the beginning, how he’d treated her, how he’d treated her brother, if he’d ever been mean to Jean, what he’d done and where the money came from and how well they’d lived, and then finally, how everything changed once he was gone. She told him mostly the stories she remembered of the two of them interacting, where in fact most of the memories were of him filling quiet space. Him silent while everyone else spoke. Him working in “insurance,” as she was told as a child, though she never got additional details and she only knew that he went out during the day (disturbingly similar to what Daniel does now). By the time she got to the point of him leaving, she was displaying more emotion than she actually felt--she slowed her speech like it was a struggle to fetch the words from inside her--and he placed his hand on her shoulder just in time for the climax.
“I’m sorry,” he said. “That sounds awful.”

They had sex pretty quickly thereafter. Celia concealed that it was her first time, and it was too dark in her bedroom for him to notice any blood. She can’t remember now what the transition was in their talking between Elias and sex. It seems unnatural looking back on it, that one led to the other somehow. For years she’s omitted large pieces of the story of their meeting when telling it to others. But now they’ve been married long enough and their relations when they’re out together are sufficiently distant that no one asks anymore how they first got together. Not wanting to hear whatever possibly sweet encounter had led finally to this apparently rotten marriage.

Every day after that and up until now, Daniel has been deeply angry about Elias and what he did to her family, far more upset than Celia was even when he first left. Originally she assumed his venom was out of protection of her, but more recently it’s gotten more personal for Daniel, even accusatory. As though he’s not entirely sure that Elias didn’t leave him as a child instead, or that Celia isn’t planning a bolt along similar lines. When Elias comes up in conversation now, it’s usually as they’re fighting over something unrelated and trivial.

She’s largely hindered discussion of her father with him since that first day she gave him away. The concept of Elias at some point became twins, and Celia and Daniel have each been raising their own twin for years and turning them into whatever children become when brought up a certain way. If the two Elias were suddenly put in the same room, no one would recognize them as the same Elias split in half, come from the same idea of a missing father. She wonders if there are perhaps more, largely different Elias roaming around out there as well that she might never know about.
Cass, on the other hand, Daniel never gave much thought. The two of them saw each other infrequently and, after the day of the mystery fight between them years ago, Daniel has expressed no more opinion about him than that he was weird. This is, in fact, the interesting consensus of all those who have not lived in the same house as Cass.

Daniel kept his eye on the wrong Chapman man. He fumed over his wife’s missing father and every connotation that came out of him, when Cass was the real trouble all along. Charles Francis Chapman. Twenty-two years old. Compulsive blogger, occupant still of his childhood home and bedroom. And now, legally messy murder victim. This is how she assumes Daniel sees the details shaping up.

The waitress delivers Daniel his coffee. He always orders coffee in places like this, not so much to drink it as to sip at it, and then make fun of its mediocrity. He prefers his complimentary, rusty-tasting tap water, which is definitely worse because it has nothing to mask the chemicals like the coffee does, but he ignores this, drinks at least two or three glasses of it anyway. Leaves all but an inch of the coffee and refuses every refill the waitress offers.

This used to be amusing for both of them. He made jokes when they were first a couple, they would tease the coffee heartlessly together, and sometimes even the server got pulled into taunting it.

Now he just frowns angrily and sometimes even mutters to himself, like the crotchety old man he is determined to become. She is not invited to be a part of it, unless she accidentally overhears his complaining. His censure of the woman who brought it to him. And the establishment who shamelessly serves the stuff. The manufacturer who
produces and delivers it. And the sort of Midwestern town that buys it and gulps it down and as a general populous makes no effort to replace it with something better, some more fulfilling way to live their lives.

“Is there something about being poor and living in a shithole that makes people unable to taste this garbage? Or is this considered a delicacy around here?” He says it just loud enough for their waitress to overhear, and he knows it.

“Then you shouldn’t order it,” Celia says. They’ve been together seven years, married four, and she has never made this suggestion before in the possibly hundreds of times he has gone through this ritual of his. But if they’re going to be caught arguing in public, it might as well be about this instead of the alternative.

“I’m proving a point,” he says. What the point is and to whom it’s being proven is still ambiguous.

Celia thinks she may have been in this diner before, but it’s more likely that this is simply following the model of every diner in this part of the country. There are newspaper stands by the door, racks for local papers and “Cars For Sale” catalogs, a corkboard above them flyered with church events and school fundraisers and jet skis for sale, which is then next to a dry erase board stating the day’s soup and breakfast specials in illegible green ink. This larger dining room is carpeted like an elementary school classroom, the top layer peeling and bunching up from water damage. Another dining room off to the side is for heavy breakfast shifts. A long plywood handicap ramp extends from its entryway toward the middle of the dining room; the two steps that used to lead up to it are still underneath. The whole place does smell like eggs, as she expected, and ammonia, and apple juice, and mayonnaise.
Their booth was close to the back corner. Celia’s bench looks likes it’s been in a knife fight and come out on the losing side.

Daniel pulls a portfolio from his briefcase, opens it to a notepad, and poises a pen over the top line. “I think we should come at this prepared,” he says. “First of all. Were you in Hazard on Tuesday?”

“No,” she says. She holds her glass with both hands. She is determined to drink as much soda as she humanly can before they leave this place.

“At no point?”

“No.”

“The police seem to think you were at your mother’s house that day,” Daniel says. The pen is still poised. “So something here doesn’t make sense.”

“I was in Holland all day,” Celia says.

“They also claim to have specific information that you were not, actually,” he says. “And because they can’t possibly know if you simply weren’t at home, they must have evidence suggesting you were specifically somewhere else.”

The clock over the kitchen presentation window—the short-order cook’s upper body behind it wrapped in an unhealthy amount of steam, his arm appearing under the heat lamps occasionally holding a plate, then, abandoning it, swallowed by the window again—says that it’s 11:32. There is only one other table in the restaurant that features an actual person eating food, a couple other tables whose dishes haven’t been cleared, and the rest are slowly filling with curdled retirees coming for lunch way too early. A few take copies of the Press from the crate at the door and ask the one waitress, Jenny, to add the price to their bills.
Celia figures it’s simply a matter of getting all of this talking sorted out before someone notices her--the incongruity of her face in the paper and her presence in their town, out of jail and still presumably a murderer--then calls the police and informs them that a mistake has been made. Before the local force maybe tries to pick her up again, and then she’s back on a cot reading her grief book.

“I was at home,” Celia says. “My mother called and told me about Cass in the afternoon.”

“What time?”

She thinks about it. She knows it happened at some point anyway. This much is certain, even if nothing else is. “In the late afternoon. 5:30? Or early evening.”

“This is important,” he says. She can see the words upside down in his too immaculate, almost feminine handwriting: “JEAN called.” The pen is hanging around the air over the “d.”

“Probably six. I hadn’t eaten yet,” Celia says. “Actually I didn’t eat at all.”

“You were probably upset,” Daniel says.

“I was upset,” Celia says. She thinks she was. The phone call is clear, while the feelings after blend. When did Daniel come home that night? Did he at all?

Then it returns to her, the one thought that came up when she replaced the phone on the receiver, and that immediately followed the repetition in her brain of Jean’s voice saying “Charlie died this afternoon”: *I wonder what happened to the key.* This being the L-shaped key that opened his bedroom door in *The Monster*, the last door before you hit the last wall you could possibly hit, as far as you could go until there was nowhere else, one of only two dead ends in the house. He carried it around his neck for a while when he
was younger and after that she didn’t know where it was; she only knew he still locked that door and so still must keep the little key with him. Did he stop locking it when she moved away? If he were locking it against her, she could always visit someday when he wasn’t home. The room is probably locked even now.

She does not believe they would bury him with it. Since there is no use protecting anything now. Since belongings don’t mean much after we’re dead.

After this, she started crying when her mind switched abruptly to: This is not the sort of thing normal people think when they lose the people they love. Not because she was sad yet, because it was too soon to be really, only minutes after hearing it. It was because she didn’t want to be the sort of person that would think the wrong thing at that moment. Because, if she wasn’t ready to believe that Cass was dead, or understand it, or had to fix whatever it was that was not working inside her head, she wanted to be utterly blank until she remembered how it was supposed to hurt.

She got a stomach ache then. And yes, Daniel did come home, hours later. And she chose not to say anything. Or it didn’t occur to her that she should.

“I waited for you to come home,” Celia says.

“Why didn’t you tell me right away?” Daniel says. This is slightly angry.

“You didn’t come with me to the funeral,” she says. “I think we’re even.”

“That makes no sense,” he says. “In fact I’m definitely glad I wasn’t there when you were arrested. I’d rather the press didn’t have my picture.”

How long will it be, she wonders, before the world outside of Hazard recognizes her husband as well?

“I was upset,” she says again. “It didn’t occur to me to tell you when I heard
because I was upset. My mother told me not to come home before the funeral.”

“Did she say why?”

“She said it would upset me even more.” She’s not entirely sure this is true. Daniel wrote this down. “Did she tell you when you should go home?”

“She told me when the funeral would be,” Celia says.

“Do you think she holds you responsible at all?”

“Of course not.” In her memory, Jean smoking in the driveway. Jean looking like nothing in particular as the cops came to get her, not the least bit surprised.

“Did she say anything when they took you in?” Daniel says.

“Nothing,” Celia says. “She just kind of watched.”

They both turn to see a man in a quilted jacket too heavy for the weather come in and pick up his paper and sit down two tables off. Celia waits for him to open it but he doesn’t. He looks down at it folded in front of him and waits for Jenny to come over to him. Daniel is distracted in a way that he is never distracted, and his eyes are on her even as he faces Jacket Man.

“Your mother thinks you’re involved somehow,” Daniel says. This isn’t a question.

“I don’t think so,” Celia says.

“The police also claim that she’s expressed suspicions about it,” Daniel says.

“They’re making it up.”

“That’s a possibility,” Daniel says. He writes this down as well. “Did you talk to Jean when you were at the funeral home?”

“Not really,” Celia says. “But she invited me to the service in the first place. She
gave a whole eulogy about how no one’s to blame for this thing.”

More writing. “If she didn’t invite you, people would know to be suspicious.”


“Jean Chapman is not going to rat out the last member of her family, whether you
killed someone or not. Even if you killed her son.” Daniel at last surrenders his pen to the
tabletop. “More than likely the papers will know this soon too.”

He drinks a half glass of water to indicate careful thinking. He says, “The two of
you are going to get eaten alive.”

Jenny brings over her breakfast and his lunch, her over-medium eggs and dry
toast and his Philly cheesesteak with onion rings.

Daniel was a vegetarian for a few weeks in college and blamed it for the excess
sleep he was getting, eleven hours at least every night before classes and still he was
crashing. She never saw this eleven hours herself, but she believed in it when he told her
about it the same way she did everything he said, because his voice always sounded full
of truth to her. Whatever the cause of it, though, he stepped back to the omnivorous diet,
but still favored vegetables he knew to be extremely healthy but repulsive tasting. This
habit sustained itself long past school. The vegetable steamers he’s gone through in the
past few years, the knives he’s worn and replaced in all that chopping through Brussels
sprouts and bok choy.

The smell of deep fry, which he never indulges in, turns his stomach now but
makes him a bit sex crazy, a little more likely to bruise some skin-level bone of Celia’s
against floor tile or bed frame during his pursuit.

As he eats it, this first cheesesteak in who knows how long, it leaves orange stains
at the corners of his mouth which must feel like saliva instead of what it is, the kind of cheese that has no resemblance to cheese. The onion rings burn his mouth and he hauls air in through pursed lips between bites to cool it, but pushes through both voraciously.

“I think you should take me through your day, what you remember,” he says. “So we can put together an alibi. If you have one.”

“Do you think I did something?” Celia says.

“I am at work all day,” Daniel says. “Are you going to eat?”

Celia looks down at her food and glares back up at him a little too dramatically.

“You should eat,” Daniel says. “People will watch us if you don’t.”

She takes knife and fork to her eggs until the yolks bleed everywhere, then blends the whole thing into a bleeding yellow mess. Chicken fetuses. Little baby chicks at some point in their gestation cut short and refrigerated and just clear gelatin encasing yellow sacks, perfectly round bright bags of genetic material. She wipes the toast with it and eats.

But Daniel is right. Jenny is standing by the kitchen behind the counter--the long Formica counter without a single person’s back facing them, all the solo diners occupying their own tables--and she’s between orders and she’s watching them. Not their food but their faces, observing them as if worrying she will miss something.

“Do you love me?” Celia says.

“I do,” Daniel says. “But we are all capable of anything, as human beings we are monsters who destroy things, and anyone can kill another person if properly motivated. Even if that’s not what I think, that’s what they think.” He looks at Jacket Man. Jacket Man looks back. “Please tell me what you did that day.”

“I don’t remember,” Celia says.
“They’re not going to believe that, Celia,” Daniel says. “It was four days ago.”

“But I don’t. I don’t know where I was or what I did or anything. My mother called me. That’s all I remember.”

“Nothing,” Daniel says. “Of the whole day.”

“It’s terrifying,” Celia says. Though at this point it’s sort of a relief. She doesn’t want to see Tuesday, and if she could give it to Daniel without having to see it herself she would.

“What time did you get up?” Daniel says.

“Nine?”

“After I left,” Daniel says. “They’re going to think that’s important.”

“Why?”

“Because no one can account for when you actually got up,” Daniel says. “I’ll write you said nine. When did you leave the house?”

“I’m serious, I don’t remember,” she says. “Or if I did at all.”

“How much time did you lose?”

“I remember being awake in the morning,” Celia says. “My mother calling me that afternoon. You getting home at night. I don’t have the rest. Or, for that matter, pieces of the last couple of days.”

“So, multiple periods of time where you don’t remember anything?” Daniel says. He isn’t writing. He’s looking at her in a way that he’s just now inventing, in a way that resembles nothing she’s seen from him before. Which is remarkable. They haven’t been married too long, but there have been a lot of unpleasant looks in four years.

The closest she can compare this to would be the face he used to make through
the wedge of the slightly open door of her apartment in college, on those strange days when he’d call her and preemptively tell her she couldn’t come over to his place, that he was busy with something unidentified. And so she would plan to do something, sometimes social things but usually just used-book shopping expeditions that would end in an evening of basking in dusty piles that cost her no more than fifty a trip, dozens of books. Then during this reflection he would show up and demand to be let in, and when she said that now she was busy, she was the one with no time to have her space invaded, there would be that face.

“That’s how it’s going to be?” he would ask.

And because she didn’t understand this question and in fact found it deeply disturbing, like he knew the rules but was simply keeping them from her, she would let him in. And he would make fun of her about her book piles until she pushed them into a back room already overwhelmingly full, and heated them up some pasta so they could settle in for the night.

“Yes,” she says. “I didn’t think it was important.”

“It’s important,” Daniel says. “Do you remember more after your mother called than before?”

“About the same,” she says.

“So maybe it’s just shock,” Daniel says. “You’ve already lost your father. Your family’s had a hard ride.”

“Our family,” Celia corrects. He never sees them, but he bought them when he married her the same as he bought her, subscribed really to the whole package.

Particularly since Daniel’s family is an absent mass of people scattered around
Pittsburgh. Celia met his father only once and this because the man came to Holland for
two days on one occasion and spent all of it but a single dinner exclusively with his son.
He packed only sweat suits and wore them the whole time. His guest bed was remade and
he was out wandering on foot by himself through their neighborhood by six both
mornings.

“I don’t know them,” Daniel says. “I never met most of your family.”

“Those ones I don’t know either,” Celia says.

“We should go home,” he says, and takes a couple more unreadable notes before
putting the portfolio back into his briefcase. He goes up to the counter and asks Jenny if
he can pay the check. She takes him to the register but keeps watching Celia, as do
several others in the room, even those whose food is already chilling in front of them.
The locals have sniffed her out.

Daniel returns but doesn’t sit. “I have a few calls to make when we get back.
We’re going to get you in to see a shrink. There’s a doctor who works with our firm on
referrals. He can help us sort out what happened that day.”

They go out and get in the car again. Daniel notices the book for the first time.

“The Plan: When They’re Gone and You’re Still Here,” he says.

“Someone left it at the police station for me.”

“Someone left it?”

“Sheriff Willis threw it at me,” Celia says. She points to a mark that may or may
not still be there.

“He didn’t say who brought it for you.”

“No.”
Daniel starts the car again. “It’s better you don’t have contact with anyone you
don’t know for now. People will hunt you down.”

Neither of them speaks. As always, Daniel sits for two minutes waiting patiently
for the engine to warm before he shifts it into reverse.

“Daniel,” Celia says. “I really need to hear that you know I didn’t do this.”

“I don’t want to talk about that anymore,” he says. “We’ll work with the doctor.
That’s going to help.”

“I’m your wife,” Celia says. It feels stupid saying it, but at this moment it seems
necessary.

“I haven’t forgotten,” he says.

The ride is another hour after that, but the car is quiet.

Before she was a murder suspect, before she was a wife, before she was a history
major at college (one who didn’t finish a degree but majored in it nonetheless), Celia was
a preteen who had a strange fascination with the English Tudor royal family. Back when
there was no TV series on the subject and the only movie available was the old *Anne of a
Thousand Days*, Richard Burton as Henry VIII sweeping past Anne Boleyn in what was
largely her story, her injustice. A European history teacher of Celia’s that taught almost
nothing about Great Britain somehow found a way to include the list of Henry’s wives in
her curriculum, and in fact make a mess of their stories (proving what Celia had always
suspected: that grade school history teachers often fill in the blanks of their memories
with their own lies, assuming it does no harm to keep a group of seventh graders from the
truth).
So she read up on them, the books she could find and understand. And she
decided a little too early in her life that the Chapmans, like the Tudors, were a family that
came out of nowhere and could easily end back there, and sheer will power would
destroy the family where nature fell short, on the rare occasion it did. Elias was still in the
house then. Cass was still alive. But somehow, the inevitable was already apparent. The
Chapman family had an instinct for killing the family line with no outside help.

Henry VII, she read, rather than coming from some inbred royal line, appeared
from merchant stock, married nobility and made himself king by dethroning Richard III,
the monstrosity who was deformed in all his paintings, the awful end note to the hundred
years of battle between houses, the War of the Roses. When Henry VII took the throne,
his children would soon spread to France and Scotland, and only one daughter, Margaret,
would manage to keep the line going, even as it was swallowed by the Scots. So it
became something else, something distorted but at least no longer Tudor.

And Henry VIII succeeded the Seventh by default; his older brother died, Henry
stole his wife, and so came the beginning of the end. He had a half dozen wives total, one
dead after the other, apart from the two who made no effort to produce children and thus
escaped unscathed.

All the children who came out of these unions were a mess. Their mothers cast off
or dead, spending their youths raised by nurses, numerous health problems (even the
male bastard child didn’t make it to adulthood), and all of them one more step toward the
end of the line. Edward VI: dead by sixteen. Mary: married herself to a Spaniard and
dead of a tumor disguised as a pregnancy. The only one to attempt to keep the line going.
Elizabeth accepted the inevitable and refused to have children, instead let the family line
end 120 years after it began. After only three generations.

Celia and Cass are the third generation of Chapmans to live in Hazard. No one knows exactly where the family was before that, not even Jean. The only distant family Jean ever met was Elias, and she married him, maybe to gain some insight as to where she came from. But this had illuminated nothing. Elias told her his family lived in Kansas, but no one ever met these relatives, and Elias himself never visited them again once he was married. They were a line that came from nowhere; the only physical remnants which linked the three of them to anything were the barn and The Monster, one barely a house and the other nearly a castle. Celia was fascinated by the fortresses the Tudor courts cycled between, the buildings they trashed before moving on each time to another dense, wet location. How it must have felt to linger in one of those places past the point of comfort, to smell the walls as they got dirtier and the rooms more lived-in, the pull as the local livestock population was whittled down by the feeding of all those attendants. How dramatically the quality of life swung upwards when the court finally relocated. And what it must have felt for those household staff contained by each building, made to stay and clean after everyone else had moved on.

Her mother has made it, yes, but Celia is the last of the line. She won’t call herself Elizabeth but she feels something is coming, husband or not. Or she’s Mary, but there’s no powerful sister to come after her. And she’s bleeding.

The interest in the Tudors was unhealthy when she was a kid, and she’s largely moved on from it since high school, has collected books on more varying topics. It has been years since she thought about it, until today.
In college, Celia found a night job where she could just sleep, at a desk in a computer lab full of the kind of machines she’d never seen anywhere else, computers whose OS’s had foreign names, beasts brimming with software capable of sending the screens into some archaic formatting, fluorescent green on black, blinking cursors. The daytime attendants were on staff to help any computer science majors who had questions, but Celia’s job was essentially to watch them through the night and make sure none of the devices caught on fire. This was explicit in her job description: *make rounds every thirty minutes to log temperatures and make sure nothing is on fire*. Even this she learned to fail at pretty quickly because the stillness of the hallways in the middle of the night lulled her into a state of complacency, suddenly provided her—who as a lifelong reader believed she had a good work ethic—with an excuse to curl into her desk and abandon homework and vigilance for the chance to sleep while getting paid. It was too good to be true. All her time sheets were manual; she told them what hours she worked and they printed her a paycheck. Nights with single patrons were still quiet because these were computer nerds hiding at 2 a.m. in another room so she couldn’t see them coding. No one who might think to steal anything frequented that part of campus.

But by the time she should have been a senior and close to graduation she was spending more hours sleeping in the lab and fewer taking and studying for classes, and her progress toward graduation pulled back to something awkwardly slow, three to six credits per semester, and she just couldn’t finish since most of the credits were superfluous to any degree program. The school ignored her sloth because Jean paid tuition out of pocket. The end, if she were looking for it, would have retreated further and further.
Meanwhile Daniel, whom she was not so much dating as stumbling into in her apartment repeatedly, enjoying sex with on a regular basis, plowed onward and was always working. He described particular classes but declined to discuss his major, saying it was “up in the air” even as it was approaching law in an ambiguous way. There were classes and classes and tests and papers and textbooks for an indeterminate amount of time, and then suddenly he was done.

“I’ve got a job in Grand Rapids,” he said. “Maybe we should discuss the changes this is going to cause in our lives.”

What he meant by this was that he wanted to complete of a discussion that had been going on for months now but which had never gone beyond speculation, on the logistics of their getting married now that they had been involved for a while.

“How long has this been going on now?” had come from Daniel, even though he knew how long, but this was a necessary lead-in to “Maybe we should look into getting married before too long.” And Daniel had looked into it and gotten back to her with the state laws and the marriage license requirements, and what the cost would be to hire a church and a preacher if they were so inclined, and how they might bypass the reception and spend more on going to Paris for their honeymoon because Paris is less gaudy than the Caribbean.

But up until the Grand Rapids job came through, no specific plans had been made. It was all the boring spelling out of the possibilities of some pleasant future which they might reach after they got through the red tape and hopefully enjoyed their two weeks in Europe.

Daniel was clearly dissatisfied that she wasn’t chiming in on the subject. He
seemed to be managing fine producing ideas and answers all on his own, and she could
share in his vision without exactly participating in it. But as far as actually doing any of
it, she figured she’d been a college student with her night job in mid-Michigan for years
now and she had no inclination to stop being one anytime soon. Daniel was talking
moving here. He was wanting to begin something totally different, something a lot more
serious than him showing up to her apartment unannounced and asking her to cook him
food or offering himself to cook far less labor-intensive food. He had a new life building
inside him and he expected her to be a part of it.

“I’m not finished with my degree,” Celia said.

“If I wait for that, we’ll still be living here in ten years,” Daniel said.

“I don’t know yet what I want to do with my life.”

“Career-wise?”

“Yes.”

“Do nothing,” Daniel said. “We’ll be comfortable on my salary. You can spend
all day at the library reading if you want. You can transfer down there and go to school
for the rest of your life.”

Somehow she always thought that if she ever left school it would be to go back to
Hazard and rot there like the rest of her family had. Cass was already at the point of
finishing high school and settling in for the long haul in The Monster himself. Years of
reading popular history books about the Tudors had made this idea oddly comfortable to
her.

Now for the first time it was occurring to Celia that she was in a relationship with
a man who was in no way related to the Chapmans, a proper relationship, and now he
was suggesting she could live someplace else in some other kind of life, and that she might not die in Hazard.

It was exhilarating. She was forgetting, at the time, that Mary had married the King of Spain.

“What do we have to do?” Celia said.

Daniel as usual made all the arrangements. He closed on a house as he was putting together a ceremony with a justice of the peace (the church ultimately had been scrapped in the interest of efficiency), one of his law friends the witness, not a family member on either side in sight. When they got back from Paris, the new house was already lightly furnished. The only thing left was to clean out her apartment and move in her stuff.

Although Daniel was none too keen on most of her stuff.

This was the house they were coming back to this afternoon.

Only later did Celia wonder if he had managed to complete a law degree without her noticing, and if a person could possibly do it in that short a time.

Their residence in Holland has always seemed too bright and too open compared to The Monster: two floors, two bedrooms, two bathrooms, his office. The first floor was an expanse of cream carpet and chrome kitchenware, 60-watt bulbs reflecting off so many glass doors. A backyard so treeless and well-kept it could be a golf green. No matter how long they live here, Celia always feels like the house was just built last week. She expects to see drywall dust on banisters, shredded carpet fuzz along the molding. Plastic tracking on the major walkways. Sticky wrap around the toilet still, which will
turn out to be disconnected from the plumbing if she tries to use it. Sinks and kitchen appliances attached to nothing, as though they are all about to float away.

The problem is the place is too clean. Too clean and too carefully lit, every corner split open and eggshell white, even on heavy dark nights.

She has looked back in previous years on her employment at the computer lab and thought, I could still do that. I could work even, without sleeping, do actual physical or mental labor. But Daniel loves her not working. He is full of praise for her ability to keep things clean to an extent that seems impossible, to find new recipes and put them on the dining table magically (realistically, all stolen from the internet or the occasional terrifying old cookbook), talking them up and making weird appreciative noises as the food washes across his tongue. Then he mentions how much he loves one of a half-dozen boilerplate meals she makes regularly which are simple and unchallenging to his taste.

He is always encouraging her to do something with herself, as long as this something isn’t holding a job.

There’s a table in their entryway with nothing on it except unopened mail, and once it’s opened it goes elsewhere, but otherwise the surface is vacant 23 hours a day. Celia does not and never will understand this table. A table that almost never holds things isn’t really a table. It’s a part-time table at best.

Whereas in their second bedroom he has given her bookshelves, and she fills them. New shelves appear, and new books appear to occupy them. Emptiness is a problem, and the solution is filling. Book buying is the closest thing she has to a job, and she works at it, reads so much to keep up that sometimes it makes her sick to do so much reading, some days she can’t eat she brims so much with reading. She finds a new meal
to prepare instead and picks at it and waits for Daniel’s inevitable enthusiasm.

“Cooking this much must make eating disgusting,” Daniel says, touching her back. “But I love this stuff.”

On the drive in (the asphalt in the driveway, like the rest of the house, so new it must secretly get resurfaced on a daily basis), Daniel stops at the mailbox and leans out his window to it, cannot reach and so backs up in the road and makes another go, pulls out their stack of envelopes and misfolded glossy coupon packets and plops it onto the grief book in her lap. She in turn drops it on the entryway table as they come in, where he will attend to it in about forty-five minutes, as if the damn things have to cool in the meantime.

He catches her surveying their open first floor like she’s remembering a place she lived many years ago, and kisses her on the cheek, trying now to be soothing.

“You are home,” he says. “I’m going to call Jean.” And he goes upstairs.

She checks if there’s anything for her in the mail. There is. She takes it upstairs to her book bedroom. Sitting to read it at the desk Daniel insisted on buying for her (if only to ensure that there would be some space left so that the books will be unable to take over, someplace where the books can actually be read). Although Celia has never met anyone who sits around reading at desks and told Daniel as much when he got it, seconds before she thanked him for always doing such nice, conscientious things for her.

The letter, as always, does not have a return address. Only the sending address, labeled to “Mrs. Celia Guardian” as it has been all those times since she got married. The handwriting is careful and precise, but the lines consistently lean down to the right. Always written on an angle, in transit to someplace else.
Dear Celia,

I broke into an abandoned hotel today. I’m not usually the breaking and entering type (which you know), but I’ve heard some stories from the locals, and a man I met stationed at the outpost in Garmisch told me to come to Berchtesgaden and specifically the Berchtesgadener Hof. It’s a hotel here that the American soldiers were given to rip to shreds after the Nazis lost the war and Hitler lost his stake in this little town. I got some history from my friend, some from the shop owners in town that speak English (there are only a few), and piecing it together, I really wanted to see the place, this hotel that has come down so far in the world.

The locals don’t like to talk about it, but it’s common knowledge that Hitler spent half his time in this town. When he wasn’t in Berlin he was here, and he built himself the Kehlsteinhaus, the Eagle’s Nest, but didn’t go up in it because the only way up is by elevator and the old bastard was hopelessly claustrophobic supposedly. Nazi leaders when they were visiting stayed in town, frequently at the Berchtesgadener Hof. For 1930’s Germany, the Hof was pretty classy. Right at the foot of the Alps, clean air, good food: the way they all wanted Germany to be seen everywhere else in the world. Dignitaries lodged in the giant suite on the fifth floor.

When the Americans came, the Hof stayed in business only because the Americans stayed, because Berchtesgaden was the chosen spot for one of the handful of American military bases set up in Germany. Suddenly Hitler’s retreat from Berlin was a tourist destination for American men in uniform, and the Hof was kept exclusively for soldiers coming on furlough with their families. The locals hated them but knew they could have suffered worse after everything went down, and so decided to be generally grateful for the commerce the Americans brought even as their lives were invaded. The Americans half-destroyed the place, but they brought their money and the brass put in a disco and there was a pool, and when you were this far away from home, you weren’t going to be choosy about how old the bathtubs were. You were going to have a sense of humor about vacationing where the Nazis used to.

Then, after about fifty years, the Bavarians decided they’d been nice long enough and the government asked the Americans to leave. By 2000, the base was shut down, the
soldiers shipped out, and suddenly for the first time since the war, the local economy wasn’t doing so great. Suddenly everyone missed the invaders they had always quietly disliked. And no one wanted to buy the hotel they had ruined. The place was so dated that no non-military tourists would pay money to stay there. Not to mention it had always been kind of a sleepy town, full of that nineteenth-century Bavarian charm. Most of the tourists at this point were elderly Germans who were looking for accommodations that had been renovated at any point since the 30’s. That maybe didn’t seem to be full of angry, bitter ghosts. Whose history managed to disregard that stretch between 1917 and 1945.

So the place has been empty since the Americans left. The government tried to recoup losses by selling off beds and nightstands, any toilets still serviceable and saleable, and left only the things that couldn’t be torn out or that were in such terrible shape no one would want them. They pulled the wiring out of the walls. Left bathroom fixtures in chunks, didn’t worry about what they accidentally destroyed because everyone knew the whole thing would come down eventually. Who cares what the inside looked like when they were done? Only the locals who lived in the cheap apartments on the outskirts of town have to look at the place now even from the outside.

Then the place sat empty for a long time. There was water damage. Huge slabs of old paint came off the ceilings and left ugly white clumps in the carpets, and no one was around or cared enough to clean them up.

The crew emptied the hotel so quickly, many of the doors still had keys left in the locks after they left. Since there was no point in returning them to reception. Since no one would ever go looking for them again.

All the outside doors were padlocked, so I climbed in a back window. The locks were a precaution to keep teenagers from bringing other teenagers there for sex, but no one was terribly concerned about vandalism or theft. The building had reverted to city property, and they were happy to forget about it until they had the money and the energy to tear it down.

I took pictures. I always take pictures. The electricity was cut, so there were dark hallways and directions I didn’t want to explore on my own, ghosts or no ghosts. The upholstery on the couches that got left behind was all rotting off the frames. Mirrors were
peeling. Guest rooms were littered with new orifices from sinks and toilets that had been yanked from the walls.

And (I could not make this up, since I have never been a very imaginative man) there was a stone tablet in what was probably the billiard room before--the carpet was torn where old pool tables were dragged outside--and it was on the floor, likely because someone had knocked it off the shelf over the fireplace. I don’t speak German, but I’m assuming the dates on it were when the builders broke ground and then opened the place, in the late nineteenth century, probably around the time when, somewhere else, Adolf Hitler was being born. There to tell all its early Nazi guests the history of the place. I’m not a believer in signs. But that stone was busted in half pretty much exactly down the middle. Like that was the whole story of the Berchtesgadener Hof and everything anyone had ever expected from it had broken in two.

That sort of heavy-handed symbolism usually doesn’t get to me. But you weren’t in that room alone with that tablet. You didn’t see the empty registration booth, the back cabinet still open and all the room keys, the ones that weren’t left upstairs somewhere, scattered across the floor.

I took every last one of them with me. Including the one to the Dignitary Suite. The old iron key that Himmler may have used. That Eisenhower could have touched.

Moments like these, it hurts to be alone with all that ugliness. If you were with me, we’d simply marvel. How so much past could be trapped in one forgotten place. Alone, it was just ugliness.

I’ll be back in the U.S. soon. Traveling there is less painful.

His name is always signed at the end with the same oversized script.

Eli

No one’s told him yet that his son is dead. And without an address to reply to, he isn’t going to find out about it anytime soon. He’s been writing her for years, but she’s never written back, no matter how much she would like to.

The letter goes in a drawer with the others, and Celia goes back downstairs.
“I talked to your mother,” Daniel says. He’s sitting at the dining room table, the overhead light turned on unnecessarily, with his portfolio notepad open in front of him. “I taped it. I’d like you to listen to it, and then we can go over it.”

Celia sits next to him. He presses a button on his digital audio recorder and places it between them on the table. His voice comes out clear, composed, like he’s reading from something, although he definitely did not have time to write any list of questions before he contacted her. Jean sounds faint. It sounds, actually, like she’s smoking again. A million miles away.

“DANIEL: July 28th, 12:11 pm, phone conversation with Jean Chapman from Guardian residence to Chapman residence.

[Phone rings three times.]
MARTHA TALBOT: Chapman residence, Martha speaking.
DANIEL: Mrs. Talbot, this is Daniel Guardian, Celia’s husband. I wonder if I could speak with Jean please.
MARTHA: She’s lying down. She wanted me to stop answering the phone, but what if the police call again?
DANIEL: This is important. Celia’s been released, and I need to discuss some things with her.
MARTHA: Hold on.
[Several minutes of silence. Scraping as another phone extension is picked up.]
JEAN CHAPMAN: [to MARTHA] Go hang up the other one. [into phone] This is
Jean.

DANIEL: Hello Jean, this is Daniel. I want to say I’m very sorry for all of this, I know you must be having a very difficult time right now.

JEAN: [coughing]

DANIEL: I’m very sorry for your loss.

JEAN: I manage fine.

DANIEL: I’m glad to hear that. [rustling] Of course I’m not calling just to share my condolences, I--

JEAN: You weren’t at the funeral.

DANIEL: Sorry?

JEAN: Cee came by herself. To her brother’s funeral.

DANIEL: I’m afraid I had work that couldn’t be avoided.

JEAN: Certainly.

DANIEL: Celia didn’t tell me about it until the night before.

JEAN: That’s not much of an excuse.

DANIEL: I’m sorry. As I said. But this is not a personal call.

JEAN: Yes?

DANIEL: I’m calling to ask you some questions about the afternoon… the day that it happened. The 24th.

JEAN: I would rather not talk about that.

DANIEL: I understand that, Jean, and I am deeply sorry for your loss. But the fact is that Celia has been released from police custody--

JEAN: She’s home?
DANIEL: Yes. And the police are not pressing charges right now because they
don’t have enough evidence to indict her. To bring her to trial.

JEAN: I know what indict means.

DANIEL: But I still think it would be a good idea to retain legal counsel and to
make sure we have all our facts straight in case this comes back again, which,
chances are, it will.

JEAN: I do not have anything to say about it. I have lost a son.

DANIEL: All the more reason to sort this out. You and I, I’m sure, would both like
to get this worked out so we can get past this and move on with our lives.

JEAN: Our lives?

DANIEL: No one wants you or Celia to go through any more than you have to.

[a clicking sound, like a disposable lighter lighting]

I’ll just go ahead then. Were you at your home the entire day of the 24th?

JEAN: No.

DANIEL: How long were you out of the house?

JEAN: For a while in the afternoon.

DANIEL: About when did you leave?

JEAN: I don’t know.

DANIEL: An approximate time.

[pause]

Okay, so how long were you gone?

JEAN: A couple of hours.

DANIEL: When did you come home?
JEAN: Late in the afternoon.

DANIEL: Now, I know this is difficult to talk about--

JEAN: He was dead when I got back. In the back hallway.

DANIEL: He was dead. The *Press* seemed to think he was still alive when you got there.

[pause]

Was anyone in the house when you got back?

[pause]

Did you call the police immediately?

JEAN: Yes.

DANIEL: When they arrived you were alone?

JEAN: It was only me and Charlie the whole time.

DANIEL: You told them this?

JEAN: Yes.

DANIEL: Do you recall what kind of questions they asked you?

JEAN: They wanted to know if anyone else had a key. If I had seen Mrs. Talbot.

DANIEL: What did you tell them?

JEAN: That the bitch was probably in church like she always is, but she wasn’t meant to be in the house that day.

[a clicking noise, a phone replaced on its cradle]

Finally she hangs up.

DANIEL: What did you say about the keys?

JEAN: This house is a vortex. Keys get lost.
DANIEL: Does Celia have a key?
JEAN: Ask her yourself.
DANIEL: Did you tell them she did?
JEAN: I told them keys get lost.
DANIEL: To your knowledge, was Celia in your house or in Hazard on the 24th of July?
JEAN: You are the 30th person to ask me that in the last several days and I am sick of that question.
DANIEL: The answer is no, then?
JEAN: The answer will always be no.
DANIEL: Did you call Celia the evening of the 24th?
JEAN: Yes.
DANIEL: What did you discuss?
JEAN: Ask her yourself.
DANIEL: She’s having trouble remembering what you discussed. She said that you called to notify her about Cass, and to tell her when the funeral would be.
JEAN: I did that.
DANIEL: You told her Cass was dead.
JEAN: Yes.
DANIEL: What was her reaction?
JEAN: As her husband, you should really be discussing this with her. I feel your priorities are in the wrong place right now--
DANIEL: I am doing this for her. Was she upset when you told her?
JEAN: She lost her brother. She was upset.

DANIEL: Did she seem surprised?

JEAN: Do you mean did she already know he was dead?

DANIEL: I--

JEAN: Did she already know because she killed him, is that what you’re asking?

DANIEL: I’m just asking what her demeanor was.

JEAN: Do you think she killed him?

DANIEL: Of course not.

JEAN: Because these are all things you should be talking about with her.

DANIEL: You talked to her that night. Your perception of her behavior is legally relevant.

JEAN: And you realize, obviously, that all of these questions are not new. That the police have already thought to ask me everything you have.

DANIEL: So they know you called Celia to notify her that her brother had passed?

JEAN: Are you aware how my son died? Do you know what state I found him in?

DANIEL: I’ve heard something about it, yes. And again, I am very sorry. Did you tell the police you called her?

JEAN: Yes.

DANIEL: And did you tell them that she had no previous knowledge of it, that she was clearly very upset?

JEAN: Yes. And they released her. The matter has been dropped.

DANIEL: For now, Jean. They’re still investigating. As far as I know, Celia is still their prime suspect.
You invited her to the funeral yesterday?

JEAN: Yes.

DANIEL: You told her she was welcome to come?

JEAN: She’s his sister, I don’t see why she wouldn’t be.

DANIEL: Did you tell her she was not welcome to come down before then?

JEAN: I told her it would be better if she didn’t.

DANIEL: Why?

JEAN: I knew it would be hard on her. I thought she would have been better off with her husband. Who should be comforting her.

DANIEL: No other reason?

JEAN: I guess I was wrong there. You haven’t been much help.

DANIEL: She told me the night before the funeral, Jean. What was I supposed to do? I am being helpful now. Did you think there were other reasons she shouldn’t come home beforehand?

JEAN: My house has been full of policemen. It would have been hard on her.

DANIEL: Were you trying to protect her from any suspicion they might have about her involvement?

JEAN: She’s a big girl. And they tracked her down anyway.

DANIEL: When she came to Hazard.

[pause]

JEAN: I’m going to go lie down.

DANIEL: I’ll call you if I have any more questions.
JEAN: I’m telling Mrs. Talbot to take the phone off the hook.

DANIEL: That seems unwise.

JEAN: Tell Celia I love her.

[phone clicking off]

DANIEL: Jean?

[pause]

End of phone conversation with Jean Chapman, July 28th.”

“Any initial thoughts?” Daniel says.

“I probably should have called her,” Celia says. “She didn’t sound really happy to hear from you.”

“She never does. Did anything she said surprise you?”

“I’m sort of surprised she managed to bully Mrs. Talbot off the phone,” Celia says. “But then aren’t Christians supposed to mind their own business?”

“I mean did she say anything you didn’t know about.”

“I didn’t know he was dead when she got home.”

Daniel makes a note, but still says, “He wasn’t. Or at least she called 911 and told them he was still breathing, but the EMT’s said he was dead when they got there.”

“Well I wasn’t sure it happened at home at all.” The hallway to the kitchen and dining room from the rest of The Monster is long and turns unexpectedly. She used to think she’d never find the end walking down it, even as she knew exactly where it was. She has fantasized about dying there, lost and forgotten. And Cass was there that
afternoon (it was the afternoon, she thinks), dying, listening for the sound of Jean returning with groceries, knowing she would have to take them to the kitchen. She would have to walk past him.

“So you haven’t received any details at all about it? Jean didn’t tell you anything?”

“She told me he was dead,” Celia says. “And that the funeral would be Friday.”

“You didn’t wonder how he died?” Daniel isn’t taking notes now. He is aghast.

“I don’t know,” Celia says. “I don’t remember thinking about it. I was just surprised.”

“Were you surprised?” he says. “Completely surprised?”

“Are you asking if I ever expected him to die?”

“I’m asking if you didn’t have to ask her because you already knew,” Daniel says. He stands up. She doesn’t understand why he’s standing, and then sidling towards her, and then putting a hand on her shoulder in a way which could not possibly be construed as affectionate.

This is the moment, so unnatural in its timing that it seems it can’t really have happened, that the doorbell rings. Neither moves. Daniel must assume he imagined it, an interruption they both might have hoped for and then heard. Except they turn to look at each other, waiting for the other to say something (“that could be the doorbell”) which wouldn’t be Celia’s answer to Daniel’s possibly angry question, and their mutual confusions means it must have really occurred, that the sound actually came from their front door.

And then the bell rings again. Daniel releases her shoulder and heads for the door.
A voice echoes into the dining room from the entryway, female and upbeat:

“Good afternoon, sorry to bother you, my name is Kim and I’m from the Grand Rapids Press and I was wondering--”

“This is private property,” Daniel says.

“I just thought I could ask you and your wife a couple of questions, just a few minutes--you’re Daniel Guardian right? pleasure to meet you--and I’ve talked to Sherriff Willis and of course he’s got his own opinion but I think it’s very important to our readers to hear your side of this story--”

“There is no story,” Daniel says, almost inaudible where Celia is. “There was a misunderstanding, and Mrs. Guardian has been cleared.”

“You are her husband, right?” The sentence hangs in the air. Daniel pauses, maybe waiting for more.

“Yes, I’m Daniel Guardian,” he says. “I can assure you there is nothing Celia can offer here. She is deeply upset about her brother’s passing and would like to grieve in peace.”

“Of course, I understand,” Kim says. “Sherriff Willis told us this investigation is still going on, your wife hasn’t been cleared yet, they’re just letting her go as they gather more information--”

“I’m sure you understood him wrong,” Daniel says. “I think you should leave. That would be the respectful thing.”

“But, if I could just have a couple of minutes--”

“We will call the police if we have to.” Celia hears the door closing, somehow quickly yet unslammed; he’s obviously been practicing his firm but polite door closes.
He comes back into the room. At some point in the last few minutes he loosened his tie and turned his hair into an oily misshapen mess, pushed it too hard in a direction it didn’t want to go. He stands behind her. The doorbell rings again. His breath catches. And it rings again. They both wait. Celia wonders if the woman will stay there forever, who else might come after her. It rings seven more times in the next several minutes, and they wait. Tires turn in the driveway, finally, and he sweeps back into her line of vision.

“This is not easy for me,” he says. “Not at all.”

“My brother just died,” Celia says. She stands. “I just got arrested for it. You get that this is harder for me, right?”

“Celia,” he says. “I love you. But you have to understand that you’ve dragged me into this too. And I had nothing to do with it! I didn’t get myself arrested, and I was working the day this happened, and now the press knows my name just as much as they know yours-- I’m tied up with you, I’m your husband--and now my life and my career are going to change, and I did nothing wrong!”

“Neither did I,” Celia says. She thinks she hears the doorbell ring again, but it’s nothing. Daniel doesn’t move, just stares back at her like he’s about to empty everything out of himself that started building up last night when his wife didn’t come home and he found cops in his foyer, invading his privacy. “No matter what the police are saying, I did not hurt Cass. And you’re my husband! Shouldn’t you know that about me?”

Daniel thinks. “You’ve been different lately,” he says. He walks into the kitchen abruptly. There’s rustling in the cupboards, but he continues talking, raising his voice but still somehow coming off civil and rational, just louder, like he’s trying to talk over a waterfall. “WE DON’T SEE EACH OTHER MUCH, SINCE I’M ALWAYS
WORKING. SOMETIMES I WONDER, ‘DO I REALLY KNOW HER? DO I KNOW EVERYTHING THERE IS TO KNOW ABOUT HER?’”

He reenters the room, holding a glass of scotch Celia wasn’t aware was in the house.

“While I would like to think that I know you well enough to assume that you wouldn’t kill anyone, especially not in your family, especially completely on purpose--no accidental shotgun blast or running him over with your car--I’m not sure I do know that. I don’t mean to hurt your feelings, and I’m sorry if it sounds like I’m accusing you of something deeply ugly and offensive. But the police have evidence that strongly suggests, if not fully proves, that you are responsible for your brother’s death. Not just manslaughter, not just an accident, but actual Murder One, murder with intent. From my line of work, I can understand that mistakes could have been made here, it could only be circumstantial, in a small town the level of law enforcement competency is going to be questionable. But even after four years of marriage, a man has to wonder: what is he coming home to at night?”

Celia is sitting down but she doesn’t remember getting there. She remembers, moments ago, listening for the end of his paragraph and feeling the intense weight of everything, ever, pressing down on her feet.

“If you think I could have killed my brother,” she backs over the consonants hard, “killed--my brother,” she holds his eyes and he doesn’t flinch at the words, “why are you asking me all these questions, and getting ready to defend me?”

“Because you’re my wife,” Daniel says, and gulps at his scotch.

“You’d think that’d be enough to clear me in your mind too.”
“I don’t think this is about our marriage right now,” Daniel says. “Or whether I trust you, or any of that. This is about damage control.”

“Even if I might be a murderer,” Celia says.

“At some point we will deal with that,” Daniel says. The last leg of what must have been a three-shot glass goes down his throat. “If you have any culpability in this, it’s better that you tell me. I can’t represent you, but I can help in some way. By dealing with your mother and keeping you informed of your rights until such time as they arrest you again. If that happens. In terms of what it means to us as a married couple--I’m not interested in that for right now. Any public suggestion of marital discord would only add more circumstantial evidence to their case.”

“I know I am not responsible,” Celia says. “At all. I was not in Hazard that day. I didn’t see Cass for weeks before he died.”

He watches her. “Until you can say for sure where you were,” he says, and pauses to see if this has changed. It hasn’t. “We can’t say that with any certainty and expect it to fly. ‘I wasn’t there but I don’t know where I was’ is not a legally acceptable alibi.”

“Well, you know what to do about this,” Celia says.

“I do,” he says. “And I would like you to cooperate with me.” He sits down. He places another weirdly timed hand on her thigh, near the knee. “Right now, I need you to think of me as legal counsel instead of your husband.”

Incongruously with this statement, his hand moves up her leg a few inches.

“In order to advise you, I need you to tell me if you remember anything--honestly, think hard here--anything, that might lead them to believe you had a hand in this. Anything you might have been doing in Hazard. Any motivation they might conceive of
you having to assault him or to kill him. Anything Jean might have told the police that she would not tell me, or want you to know about. Anything, Celia.”

Celia realizes that, no matter how much she is tempted, now would not be the best time to ask him if he is actually a lawyer. If he somehow managed to sneak through law school without her noticing. She remains curious. But bad timing.

“It is actually important that you don’t lie to me about anything you might have hidden up until now,” Daniel says. “Because I’m your husband. Because I might judge you.”

“I’m not afraid of that,” Celia says. She puts her hand on his against her instincts, because she figures this is what he expects her to do. “But I could use a husband right now.”

“I’ll be more useful to you this way,” Daniel says. “You wouldn’t like me as a husband under these circumstances.”

“Then you should probably take your hand off my leg,” Celia says. He doesn’t, so she knocks it off herself.

“Don’t be a child about this,” Daniel says.

“It’s unprofessional,” Celia says. “A lawyer would never do that.”

“If he thought you needed some impartial sympathy, yes he would.”

“I don’t need impartial sympathy,” Celia says. “Because right now, my husband is trying to be my lawyer immediately after my only sibling has died in some awful way--and I still have no idea what happened to him, since no one will tell me. And a husband would be showing me he’s on my side, instead of trying to get me to confess to murder.”
“That would be a lot easier for me,” Daniel says, and his hand finds its way back to her knee but his jaw is tensing around his words as they come, “if I knew you were telling me the truth. And, in fact, I know that you’re not.”

“Maybe I should go to my mother’s house for a while,” Celia says. She hides her face in her hands. “I don’t know if she wants me there. But maybe this isn’t the best place for me to be now, if I’m living with someone who says he loves me but isn’t sure whether I killed someone, even though I keep telling him I didn’t, and he should believe me about this.”

“That is exactly what you shouldn’t do.” He brings in his other hand and it’s on her other knee and he squeezes; she’s not sure if he’s intending to hurt her, but he is. “The cops will be there. And it will look like you have a reason not to continue on with your daily life like nothing’s changed.”

“But something has changed,” Celia says. She crowbars her fingers under his hands, but he doesn’t move. “You know that, right?”


“Cass is dead now. My mother and I are both very upset.”

“And everyone saw you at the funeral,” Daniel says, relaxing his grip. “That’s enough. The normal-person thing to do now is move on with your life.”

“And spend every day by myself at home grieving, that’s normal?”

“I think that would look better.”

“And I think it makes me look worse,” Celia says. “It makes me look like a crazy person who doesn’t care about her family. Either way, I don’t think I want to be here. Unless you think you can be nicer about this.”
“What do you want from me?!” He pushes his chair back hard as he stands up, then grabs for it clumsily before it hits the floor and sets it right again. “I’m trying very hard to do what’s best for both of us, especially you, even though I am just disgusted right now. I have no idea what I should think of you anymore. I have chosen to stick with you on this, even though I think I have the right to demand answers from you. I think you owe me that. A good wife would tell her husband where she was the day she was accused of murder, for Christ’s sake! She would tell him honestly everything she was doing, and either acquit herself of suspicion or own up to what she’s done.

“And I’m offering to stick with you either way! I’m helping you even though you might be a murderer, because you’re my wife. I don’t want to forgive you for this, but I’m trying to be sensible here, because I know we can work this out between the two of us when you’re not facing criminal charges, when there aren’t reporters camping out on our lawn. I’d rather wait and have the ugly ‘what does this mean to our marriage’ conversation when the media won’t find out about it and then hunt us both down asking if we’re having problems because you killed your brother. As a husband, I’m doing the best thing you could possibly hope for right now.”

Daniel goes back in the kitchen and something smashes. She forces herself not to flinch, even though her husband is not a man who normally breaks things out of anger, and stands instead of following him, goes and looks out a window on the front of the house. The reporter must have left a while ago.

“AT LEAST,” he calls, coming back into the dining room, where she rejoins him, “I can pretend I don’t believe you killed him, or at least had something to do with it! A different kind of husband would have taken you to that goddamn funeral, and then kicked
you out and filed for divorce the moment you were arrested!”

“You should trust me,” she says, pushing the calm into her tone. “You should love me, and you should have gone with me to the funeral, and you should have been outraged when they arrested me, and you should have told that reporter that the police ought to do their jobs and figure out what really happened, instead of torturing his family.”

“You,” Daniel says, “shouldn’t take for granted that I’m doing what I am. We will sort out the legal issues now, and we will figure out what to do about this,” gesturing mysteriously around him, “at some point later when this isn’t going on anymore.”

Daniel leaves the room, and she stands still. His feet plod up the stairs, and she keeps standing. A door shuts so gently it sounds like he spends a full minute latching it, and she stands. A few minutes pass. She wonders when she’s going to see him again. She wonders if she wants to.

She goes to look out the front window again. Still no one, but she has a feeling they will be here soon, that there may be a couple of other locals as well, when it spreads that she’s out. She knows if she opens the front door very slowly, if his door upstairs is shut and he’s occupied with something, that he won’t even hear the gasp of air coming in from outdoors; he may only catch her absence if he hears the car departing from the garage. And he’d have no way of catching her, since their other car is impounded.

She puts her shoes on and heads for the entrance. She has the door unlocked and starts to turn its knob before she sees that the wrought iron key holder over the entryway table has been stripped bare. He’s hidden every house and car key on the premises, and she knows they were there when they came in, that he must have done it on his way
upstairs. It seems impossible that she could hear that upstairs door latch, but did not pick up on the sound of the keys brushing against each other as he retrieved them and swept them into his pants pocket. How carefully he must have silenced them and how effortlessly he got them upstairs.

For a moment, she remembers why she married him.

When they were in college, Daniel turned pouting into an art form. It began as something in the vicinity of annoying but slowly reconstituted into something so perfect in its timing and delivery that she could find infinite stores of pity for him. She could even convince herself, when he said something cruel and vitriolic and then stormed out of her apartment and did not return or answer phone calls for days, that she had done something really awful, something so self-involved she ought to be using his period of silence to brainstorm potential amends.

She knew back then that she was not perfect. Sometimes she started arguments, or did something that could be construed as unfair to him, and sometimes she simply didn’t want him around. She cheated on him once with a guy whose name she cannot remember. But this was when they weren’t dating so much as constantly colliding in her apartment, always waking up in her bed together. And because she saw no evidence that she and Daniel were specifically dating, she accepted a ride home one afternoon from an American History to 1865 classmate and then somehow, hours later, found herself sitting in his apartment on the edge of his kitchen sink, already pretty drunk, and strategizing, as she made out with him, how to prevent him from swallowing her face, as he was clearly so intent on doing.
She didn’t intentionally cheat. Not really. In fact, she thought making out and then sort-of sleeping with The Shark Kisser might push Daniel to the point of self-reflection. When she told him, he would look at her, possibly with a puzzled frown on his face, and ask, “Should I be upset? I’d rather you not have sex with anyone but me. And I’d like to be in a relationship with you—I’m not sure why we haven’t talked about this yet.”

And she would say, “Yes, we should be in a relationship,” and they would kiss and then, after a reasonable twenty minutes or so of basking in their new boyfriend-girlfriendness, they could laugh about The Shark Kisser and his giant mouth and mediocre lovemaking together, and compile a list all of the reasons why the life the two of them had put together so far, in terms of romantic and sexual compatibility, was so much better than anything either could have found with someone else, if either of them had any inclination to be with anyone besides each other. This scenario struck her as both logical and even conceivable, given what she knew about Daniel until that point.

But when Celia told him about it he was simply absurdly angry. “How could you think that was okay? How did it not occur to you how really unfair that was to me?” he said, and she told him she didn’t know, that it just hadn’t for whatever reason.

“We’re not in a relationship, are we?” she said, expecting him here to recognize the logic of her stance.

“Does it matter?” he said. “If you’re sleeping with one person, you owe it to talk to them before you go off and fuck someone else.” Which she took to mean that she was “sleeping with” Daniel, and with anyone else it could only be “fucking.”

“It’s not like I could have called you to check,” Celia said.

“You could have mentioned that you were even thinking about it,” Daniel
insisted. “You could have said, ‘Hey, I just wanted to know if it was okay if I fucked somebody else, and if that would bother you.’ And obviously I would have said no. Since then we would have to stop sleeping together.”

“Are we going to stop then?” All of this seemed so backwards to Celia, so against any sort of reason.

“Don’t you care at all?” he said. He went off to the bathroom and did something kind of loud with the medicine cabinet and turned the faucet on full blast for several minutes, and when he came back out he was dripping with tears.

“You get that I’m right about this, don’t you?” he said. His voice was phlegmy, and he sounded girlish in a way she hadn’t seen yet but would certainly see again.

“Maybe we should talk about being exclusive,” Celia said. “If this bothers you so much.”

“It should bother you too!” Daniel said. Dishes rattled in the kitchen sink as he bumped into a wall in the process of angrily walking back to the couch where she was sitting, which is where she’d been sitting, calmly, since the conversation began. “You should have thought at the time, ‘This is a horrible thing to do to Daniel. If I care about him at all, I’ll tell this asshole I’m not interested.’”

“Why would I call him an asshole? He’s a nice enough guy, if a lousy kisser.”

“The point is, it shouldn’t even have struck you as an option. You should have thought about it. Doing it without even contemplating how it might hurt me makes you a bad person.”

It seemed to her that doing it and knowing it was hurtful would make her a bad person, and doing it without knowing it would make any difference to anyone not there,
simply meant she did not know Daniel as well as he expected her to know him. Or she didn’t belong to him, and he didn’t understand this.

“I don’t know what you want me to do here,” Celia said.

“I wish you cared enough not to do what you did,” Daniel said. His tone unnervingly placid. Like they were discussing how tragic it was that certain people in the world could afford food when others couldn’t.

“That doesn’t help me now,” Celia said. “What would you like me to do now? We can talk about rules. Maybe discuss what we both think this is.”

And then he just got his coat off the armchair in the corner, slung his backpack over a shoulder, sighed pointedly down at her, and walked out the door.

After which he was out of reach for four days. She called him a couple of times, left a voicemail once, but heard nothing back. It didn’t take long for her to figure out that he just wanted her to be wrong, to grasp her wrongness and swim into it and let it almost drown her, to fill up so much with her wrongness that it would traumatize her and stick with her for ages, would project behind her eyelids and stay there every time they saw each other, so that everything she did in his presence was influenced by it. And she could manage this. Logistically, it was simple.

The trouble was, she didn’t think she was wrong. She could hold on to his idea of things inside herself and push that up every time she did anything that involved him, but then what would come with it would be her own persistent confusion, her inability to understand how it was possible for a person to cheat on someone if they’re not in a relationship with them. The equation seemed so simple, and yet Daniel was throwing in invisible variables from levels of math with which she had no experience, and these
unknowns would just hover there without getting solved because she could not make A equal B, no matter how hard she tried.

Eventually, one afternoon, she found herself driving to his dorm, and though he would not let her in, would in fact only stand in the cracked doorframe and occupy the space with his arched body, he did offer to listen to her. So she said, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have done that.”

“I know you shouldn’t have,” he said, smiling through his disapproval. “But I forgive you. Just think from now on.”

“I will,” Celia said, knowing that it was not that simple, and it would only become more complicated over time.

After that, he picked up, consciously or not, that he could vanish for a while and she would come to him, and if she wasn’t actually wrong per se or if he was totally in the wrong himself, if he hid, it had the power to make him right, because being right didn’t mean that much to Celia. She embraced her wrongness, as long as she didn’t have to give him more than an apology. Sometimes he even sought her out to get it, rather than waiting for her to look for him. But this setup kept things simple.

The issue of actual relationship status, though, was never resolved. Not until each of them signed their marriage license, and then it didn’t matter anymore.

Celia goes to her book room. Daniel installed a computer on her desk and connected it to the mysterious internet in case she could get anything useful out of it, in case it might make her buy fewer books and read more material online. But she hates the internet, and so she almost never turns it on.
This time, though, she does. She has always suspected that the internet is actually full of answers, full of responses to a great compendium of other people’s questions, and that maybe if she ever had any interest in those answers, she could go find them there. But they have never interested her, not until now. If you create questions and then pair them with answers, she reasons, you don’t learn much. Education comes from reading about things you aren’t that interested in, things you know so little about that you have to work to develop the ability to formulate the questions.

But this is the only question she’s ever had whose answer seemed important enough to bother.

She goes into the *Press* website and looks up the article she read this morning. Of course it’s there, the pictures in digital quality, her face no longer a smear but clean and distinct. The article is flanked by 150 reader comments, the first of which says: “the BITCH got out this morning!!!! my frend works for the police in hazard, and he saw her get out, also sez they definitly now she did it but somebody hire up was making them let her go, claimed there wasn’t enuf evidence to put her in jail, but its BULLSHIT, shes gonna fucking get away with kiling her brother, shithead cops,”

She can’t decipher the comma at the end. Is the sentence finished somewhere else?

And they go on:

“your full of shit!!!! who told you that?!?!?!”

“FIGURES. FAMILE PROBLY HAS MONEY.”

“my frends a guard there, spent the nite watching the bitch screaming she didnt do it, he todl me all about it”
“but why? if they know she did it how could they release her? i want to know what politician she has in her pocket, who helped get her out.”

“no shit. i googled her and her husband. Hes’ with some big time law firm in GR.”

“the cops said they didn’t have enough to hold her, but I dont beleve it. if they arrested her, they must know she did something. what kind of cops do they have in that town?????”

“Thats the same place where the frying pan lady came from, [Wikipedia link to ‘Frying Pan Killer’], cops fucked up their too, I bet their all donut eating fatsos who sit around and get payed and dont actually solve any crimes, they probly lost the evidence, they probly lost the body!!!!”

“whos the frying pan killer?”

Celia is wondering this herself.

“yeah i wonder if the cops are gonna get in lots of troble for letting her go after they knew she did it. is the press even gonna have an article about it? ya think they even KNOW??”

“WHERE IS HAZARD… DETROIT?”

“who cares, another stupid little redneck town where the cops let peple get away wit whatever shit they want cause there all inbred, there cousins there dad or whatever”

“look at the wiki link. she killed her husband with a pan in the 70s and never went to jail for it, cops couldnt find the ‘murder weapon’ tee hee”

“didnt the guy who wrote the Willy Wonka book right some story about that.”

“that’s matilda and she didn’t kill her husband she was a little girl who was
“not Talking about that asshole. a diffrent one.”

“she’s also a real woman who lived there and murdered her husband, i guess it was a real mess he was all fucked up wen they found him and it took a long time to figure out it was even him and not a burlglar, just *read* the damn link LOL”

“if this chicks husband is a lawyer he probly paid someone to get her off, or lose some important documint.”

“She’s going to rot in HELL no matter what she does. God punishes people even if humanity doesn’t.”

“if enough people come forward theyll have to do something, u cant just get off if you killed someone, her own brother, how did he die?”

“probably with a frying pan, shes a copycat killer”

“may poor Charles Chapman Rest in Peace.”

“It doesn’t matter if she goes to jail or they execute her or she never gets caught, she’ll pay for it, her life is over because there are always going to be people who will keep talking about what a sick human being she is and no one will ever look at her the same way again.”

It doesn’t seem possible that so many people have already condemned her, all from a comment on the message board of a moderately-sized newspaper.

Celia types “*SHES INNOCENT*” into the empty box at the bottom and send it into the void, then bookmarks the Wikipedia link about the Frying Pan Killer and closes the page.

*
Neither Cass nor Celia was terribly close to their father when they were young. Elias didn’t speak much and kept away from all of them, read in his bedroom, worked long hours, fixed things outdoors. Celia pitied her mother because, from a child’s perspective, even from a product of the marriage, it looked like Jean had made a mistake somewhere. Or at least that Elias was failing in some areas in which he’d previously excelled, that he had waited on her when she was a teenager and then backed off complacently once he’d caged her. She remembers thinking this as a child, though she may also be merging her husband and her father in her mind, as she assumes most married women do if their fathers stick along enough to be compared.

But, in all fairness, Jean always acted so unconcerned back then, so surprised when Elias came home at night, as if holding back the inclination to say, “Oh you? I wasn’t expecting you back again. That was nice of you.” They weren’t romantic. He did nice things for her from time to time, and she happily raised the children. She watched TV with him, and he went to bed at eight o’clock every night and was gone by morning.

Then he did finally leave in the middle of the night, when Jean must have assumed he was simply going to the bathroom or getting a glass of water. He had stayed for so long and come home so many times and offered her smiles for her many home-cooked (if bland) meals, she could take his presence for granted. But this sudden departure, this quiet trip to the bathroom that ended with him driving the family car out onto the main road and off to wherever, was just rude, was unprecedented in its impoliteness. For weeks after, her frustration with him sounded like road rage, like he had cut her off in traffic instead of abandoned her.

“He couldn’t have left me a note?” she yelled at no one. “He couldn’t have given
The pastor at Hazard Church of the Nazarene called around noon the next day to let her know that Elias had knocked on his door that morning and dropped the keys to the minivan in his hand, had told him the car was in the church parking lot and if Reverend Casey could call Mrs. Chapman and ask her to retrieve it he would be much obliged.

Reverend Casey had asked him, “Are you alright son?” although he was several years younger than Elias. Elias had told him he was “just fine” and then took the steps back down to the sidewalk and headed for the edge of town on foot. No one saw him again.

Jean’s prolific swearing mercifully waited until the phone was on the hook, so the pastor didn’t hear it. Then she called the impound and told them the minivan was theirs if they wanted to tow it. An hour later, the car disappeared after its owner, presumably at the hands of the tow guy, but Jean never bothered to check.

Celia didn’t miss her father exactly. It didn’t make sense to her to miss someone who just happened to be someplace else, even if she did suspect he wasn’t coming back until well in the future, if at all. He just wasn’t around. And he had pretty much never actually been there when he was there, unless you could count him sitting on the couch with two-thirds of his face behind a book and adhering to a bedtime never more than three hours after he got home from work.

She can remember sometimes he would go up to the attic to retrieve things and dig through storage, and he would invariably emerge with another book or a gadget that looked like it couldn’t possibly serve any function no matter how hard it tried. Cass
occasionally noticed and climbed up after him and sat six feet away on the intersection of two crossbeams and watched him dig. And of course Celia would only hear about it later when Cass said something about it, or she would see them coming down the stairs together and put it all together herself. This only happened a few times, but to prepubescent Celia, it was happening *all the time*, happening *constantly*.

One time Celia followed him upstairs on a Saturday, because it was two in the afternoon and she reasoned he had to be going up to the attic, and then he didn’t stop until he was at its entrance, that big hole in the ceiling past Cass’ locked bedroom, and he climbed up and glanced back and said, “Yes, you can come up.” So she did. She didn’t like ladders, but she followed, and she sat on one of the beams big enough to hold a thirteen-year-old and watched as he opened three or four boxes and lifted the contents out into neat piles, and then replaced them when he got to the bottom. In the middle of the last box, he pulled out an electric razor and said “Okay, all done,” and then he cleaned up and they both went back down.

She knew then that there were more interesting moments in his life than that one, but at that moment, she understood perfectly why Jean wasn’t too put-out letting her husband keep to himself. There was nothing much to see.

Then a couple days later, she took this a step further, decided this boring ritual was intentionally misleading, and convinced herself that he was actually carefully concealing his mysteries from his family, and his forays into the attic were just misdirection. He could be interesting if she could see how he spent every moment of his day, if she collected the details of his work and his research and the times he was simply absent from the house for extended periods of time without explanation. Those hours
were full of something.

She was still thinking about whether to investigate this or not the night that he left them.

At about midnight that night, her bedroom door opened. Her door was never opened at night, since she still had trouble walking down the hallway after dark, even as a teenager, and no one else had reason to come find her that late. She thought this time that she was hearing Cass muttering to himself in the hallway again, though as always this could also be the lumbering of the pirate she’d been picturing for years. It was an image which decomposed as she got older, his skin rotting off the muscles beneath as her fear grew more out of step with her age. And then she realized it must be Cass, because the figure in her doorway was the size of a ten-year-old boy, and he only stood there a couple of seconds before he asked, “Can I come in here for the night?”

“Why?” Celia asked, still full of adrenaline from the sudden sound of the door pivoting on its hinges. She pulled the blanket toward her face to cover up nothing in particular.

“I just don’t want to sleep by myself,” he said. “I had a dream.”

“My bed’s not big enough,” Celia said. This was only partly accurate. It was only a twin, but they were both slim, waifish children; they could easily have pulled their knees into their chests and still had enough space for the both of them. But no one else had ever been in her bed, and the thought of sharing sounded miserable.

“I brought down a sleeping bag,” he said. And she could see now: there was the mass of stuffing leaning against his calf.

“Okay,” she said. “You can sleep on the floor.” The floor in her room was
perpetually clean and open. All her junk was stored in other rooms of this house, but this one she kept almost monastically tidy and spare. The walls were bare and echoed whenever she spoke.

Cass came in and shut the door behind him, and then spread out the bag quietly in the dark. She didn’t hear the slice of the zipper going up or down. She pictured him in the dark locating the thin opening and sliding into it, the sleeping bag a slowly inflating balloon.

“What did you dream about?” she asked. He had told her once that he never had any remarkably bad dreams, that even falling into a dream abyss just felt pleasant when it happened, since he knew there was no ground to threaten him at the bottom. This was unfair. With his hall-pacing and his mumbles, he gave her enough nightmares for the both of them.

But he didn’t answer her. She heard what could be a poorly feigned snore, and then steady breathing.

“You’re not asleep already,” she said, but he didn’t say another word. She got used to the rhythm of his breath, and eventually even thought how nice it might be to share a room with that breath all the time, how soothing that might be. Then she fell asleep again.

The door would re-open about two hours later. This time it looked like it could really be the pirate—he was the right size anyway—but then the man was dressed simpler and wasn’t speaking, just watching her. Her whole body seized. At least, she told herself, wheezing, her eyelids rigid, Cass was in the room with her this time. The rational part of her, which had no control over whether he actually turned out to be an anachronistic
pirate or not, reasoned that he would do nothing to her with him in the room. No witnesses when ghosts or monsters came, this is what she’d learned about the world. No risk of one person running off to get help that way. She kept waiting for him to do something, wondering if it would be better to hide herself entirely under the blanket and risk an unforeseen attack.

Then he said, “Celia? Are you awake?” And it was her father.

“Dad?” she said.

“I’m sorry I woke you up,” he said. He was wearing a jacket. His hair was under a baseball cap she’d never seen before. She had never thought of her father as a man who wore hats.

She looked down at where Cass probably was. He was a black lump in the darkness on the other side of the room. There was no way Elias could see him from the doorway. Window light eased in from slightly down the hall, but she could hardly locate him herself, knowing to look for the silhouette of a sleeping bag. The mass stayed immobile; Cass did not turn to face the open doorway or even grunt at the noise. He was still sleeping.

“You have to be quiet, honey,” Elias said. He had never called her honey, and only rarely called her anything. “I don’t want to wake everyone else up. I need to ask you an important question.”

“What?” She pulled the blanket away from her face; she knew she looked stupid with it up, as if she was obviously, from her posture and the pale strip of forehead between the fingertips holding the blanket up, expecting a pirate to come into her room.

“Well,” he said. “I’m going to have to leave. It’s hard to explain.”
“What do you mean?” Maybe this would be the mystery she’d been suspecting. Occasionally he would leave in the middle of the night and go someplace interesting. Maybe the question would have something to do with asking her opinion on places to eat in the middle of the night along the Michigan coastline.

“I’m leaving now and I’m going to be gone for a long time,” he said. “And I’m probably not coming back. Your mom and brother don’t know about it, and I don’t want them to find out before I get out of here. But I wanted to know if you’d like to come with me. I’d like you to come. But we’d have to leave right now. You’d have to get up and get your stuff together real quiet and then we’d have to sneak out so no one would hear us.”

“Where are you going?” She looked at Cass again. The sleeping bag still didn’t stir.

“I can’t tell you yet, not if you’re not coming with me, just someplace else,” he said. “Someplace fun. And I do want you to come. But you have to decide now.”

“You don’t want Cass to come too?” she said. The moment she did she wished she hadn’t. If he was awake, the answer might not be nice for him to hear.

“I’m not leaving your mother all by herself,” he said. “And I want you to come.” She heard a noise, but it might only have been Elias’ coat shuffling in the door frame.

“I don’t know about this,” Celia said.

“I know it’s a quick decision to make, but it’ll be fun, I promise. We’ll go lots of interesting places. But we have to go right now.”

She wanted something interesting (painful, horrible, exciting) to happen to her. She had since she was little. But suddenly even getting out of her bed seemed like the
most terrifying thing in the world. And maybe The Monster she’d always hated was the only thing keeping her safe, and this was a good thing.

“I don’t think I want to,” she said. “I think I should stay here.”

“Okay, I guess,” he said, so swiftly and casually she was a little hurt. “You don’t have to go. But if you stay here you gotta be quiet about it. You can’t tell everyone you saw me, or that I talked about taking you with me. Stay here in bed.”

He picked his suitcase up off the floor; the metal clasps on the handles rattled slightly and the zippers clinked against each other. It was loud enough, she thought, to wake people up, maybe Cass anyway, without her help. Maybe he was breaking his own rule because he wanted someone to stop him.

Then he said, “Well, I love you. I hope you have a nice life if I don’t see you again.” And he shut the door. A couple minutes later she heard the car start up and go into reverse almost immediately, so it crunched as the transmission shifted. It was out of earshot before the engine could be anywhere near warm.

She listened to herself breathe for a few minutes, and listened for Cass.

“Cass?” she whispered, so low he might not have heard it even if he was awake. He didn’t answer.

She tried to fall back asleep, even though she knew she never would. She might never sleep again, might sit up every night waiting for her father for the rest of his absence, for the man she’d never been all that fond of, simply because he’d taken the trouble to ask her and no one else. She kept listening for the car coming back and Elias changing his mind.

About an hour later, as she was drifting somewhere on the edge of consciousness,
she thought she heard Cass say “Celia?” But then she was out, quickly enough that she felt guilty about it when she woke after daylight. In the morning she decided she’d probably dreamed it, that maybe there was really nothing to feel bad about. By then, Cass and the sleeping bag were already gone from her floor.

And pretty soon, Jean was yelling the house down and making phone calls to everyone her husband had ever met, and there was no peace for years after.

She didn’t ask Cass if he’d heard. But she caught him looking at her sort-of sideways much more after that. He would hold her gaze, if she caught him and stared back. He would linger, and frown at her a little deeper.

It is unfair she had to feel guilty about it for so many years, she thinks. It is unfair she can’t be proud that Elias chose her even if he did so for no discernible reason.

Jean opened boxes of profanities she’d never cracked, went on tirades about his inadequacies as a husband so littered with cuss words it made Celia flinch. During the weeks immediately following, she dug through what little Elias had left behind and dialed every phone number she could find in his handwriting under the guise of tracking him down. But if a personal acquaintance picked up, she forgot her questions quickly and spent 98 percent of the conversation condemning him to hell, rants usually only terminated when the other party finally hung up on her. She told her children about the insufficiency of his lovemaking and penis and affection, as though she didn’t know she was speaking to them, and often she wasn’t; stories about particular blowjobs or quick finishes tapered off as she wandered from room to room. And to add to everything else, she was suddenly in control of the family finances and was initially terrified he’d left
them broke, but in reality they were flush with years of accumulated wealth and well-handled investments; if he had taken anything with him, he had left most. Still, she was so angry that Elias had provided for them financially and then run off when there was no concern of his family ever having to struggle, but couldn’t stick around for the rest of his familial obligations. She called a financial advisor at a firm in Grand Rapids and hasn’t given the money a thought since then, so ill-equipped was she at her age to fend for herself, because this was the first time she’d been responsible for doing so.

In Celia’s opinion, Jean was coddled by everyone for an awfully long time and might even be better off without a husband. And Celia escaped the blame for any of it; Jean had no clue she’d been left in the dark even as her child was made aware of the situation. And there was no use searching for a man who’d taken pains to fall off the radar.

But as for Cass—he may or may not have heard his father ask his sister and not him to accompany him, and would have to deal with the emotional fallout of that knowledge. He certainly couldn’t pass the information on to Jean, since their mother had enough anger in her system as it was. Celia let herself think for a couple of years that he more than likely hadn’t heard it, that he’d been sleeping off his first nightmare ever and hadn’t recognized the sound of the door creaking; he could sleep through a nuclear holocaust if he had to.

But still she made herself be nice to him, particularly when she started getting letters without return addresses from far-flung postal codes (she told both mother and brother that she’d picked up a few pen pals through a school program). The children had never been close (constantly in each other’s presence, yes, but actually in a
uncomfortable orbit with one another, an orbit of quiet), and suddenly that bothered Celia. For a while she took an active interest in his life, did homework with him, asked him questions she knew he wouldn’t give answers to. There wasn’t much reciprocation on his part, but she didn’t care. She made herself be persistently, annoyingly nice to him.

Then one day, when she was a senior in high school and he was in the eighth grade, Cass was telling her about some book he was reading about dreams, about the significance of imagery and the ability of the mind to prognosticate or grasp concepts beyond our conscious comprehension, the fallacy of the “nightmare” and the idea that we are at fault for all of our bad dreams, and that a person in control of their own brain who is emotionally stable can reasonably guide any dream to someplace calm if it ever threatens to turn otherwise.

“Does that mean I’m emotionally unstable?” Celia asked. “I have nightmares. But it’s not like I make myself have them. I’m plenty stable.”

Cass made a face, but didn’t say anything.

“You’ve had nightmares too,” she said.

“Not to my recollection,” he said.

“What about that night where you came to my door all freaked out and asked to sleep on my floor? That was a nightmare.” Once she said it she realized she’d brought up the night they never talked about, that he had left alone as much as she did.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said. He was flipping through his dream book. Its cover was slick with obnoxious star sign symbols and floating golden pictures of expressionless women.

“The night Dad left,” she insisted, knowing she shouldn’t. “You were on my
floor. You were whining about having a bad dream.”

“I don’t think so,” he said. “I’m pretty sure I was in my room that night.”

Celia wasn’t sure why this infuriated her so much--what did it matter if he couldn’t remember? especially if it meant he hadn’t heard their father’s request--but suddenly she couldn’t suffer his eerie calmness anymore, his ability to terrify her while he could never be taken off-guard, his invasion of her room as he forbade her access even to the doorframe of his. She had spent three years since that night trying to protect him or at least make him feel accepted, to convince him that, even if their father had rejected Jean and Cass, she would not do the same, she would persist in saying that she was on their side. She had turned their father down because what he’d done was wrong. It wasn’t right to pick one child and abandon the other, and she would punish Elias by always choosing Cass, even when he irritated her so much that she couldn’t stand to be around him. Couldn’t stand either of them really, since mother and son were both space cadets now. Celia often had to cook meals in a daze in fake cheerfulness in order to coax the two of them into eating. And they would do so blindly, as though they were only accepting that the food had arrived in front of them to be eaten and it didn’t occur to them to ask how it had gotten there.

But after all this, it wasn’t her fault Elias had picked her. She just laid there in bed and listened to him asking. She spent years forcing herself to do penance for someone else’s sins. And so what if she opened his letters and hid them from her family; wasn’t this just shielding them further? Was she supposed to throw them away unread?

So, after all this, she made a mistake. Which she would come to be sorry for.

“Don’t you even remember hearing Dad leave? Didn’t you hear him stomping
“Don’t remember that at all,” Cass said. “From the floor above I wouldn’t have heard him. I only remember Mom going crazy in the morning.”

“You were in my room!” she said. She grabbed his dream book from him and threw it against the wall for no reason. “You had a nightmare and you brought your goddamn sleeping bag down and slept on my floor! You must have heard him!”

“You could have dreamed it, Ceel,” he said. It was rare for him to call her by name, but when he did he usually said the whole thing, never the annoying diminutive that Jean had invented. She was convinced he did it on purpose. “That wasn’t a very nice night. Maybe you heard him leave and it scared you.”

“Because everything scares me, right?” she said. “I know what I’m talking about. I fucking remember what happened, don’t tell me I didn’t.”

“You don’t need to yell,” he said. “Or swear. It doesn’t really matter.”

“It does matter! Say you were in there! Admit that you heard everything that night!”

“What night was this?” he said.

“The night that Dad left!” Suddenly all that time he had kept silent on the subject weren’t pitiful but spiteful, full of venom. All this pretending was just to take away any specialness Elias had bestowed on her, to steal it back from her by erasing the night from existence.

“I don’t really remember that night,” he said. “I’m sorry. I probably should. You’re supposed to remember the night your father left, I guess. But I can’t.”

And she just punched him then. Or slapped him. Her hand was numb after so she
couldn’t remember how the collision occurred, but she hurt from the moment her hand retracted. She knew that he did too because his lip started to swell, went purple on one side, though he just looked at her stunned. They had never been rough with one another when they were small, had never wrestled or pushed each other around; they barely touched. And her hand was on fire. Like she had just punched the devil himself.

“Why did you do that?” He was holding his face but he didn’t look angry. He was so irritatively inquisitive, just wanted to understand, of course, instead of being genuinely hurt by her, and it made her that much angrier.

“Because you’re a lying little shit,” she said. “Because you deserved it. Because you can’t even just admit that you had a nightmare that night, and then you heard Dad leave, because then you might be unstable, right? Why do you have to be so damn weird?”

Which in retrospect was unfair in any number of ways. All the Chapmans were weird. He wasn’t different in that respect. And maybe that was it. He was trying too hard to categorize her as the different one, putting up a wall between Celia and the mother-son team. She tried to protect her ineffectual mother and her odd brother from things they didn’t need to know, taking care of them because they obviously needed it, and Cass was repaying Celia by claiming Jean for himself. Cass was the one Jean usually spoke to her about her husband’s crimes, and though neither knew Celia had been singled out for acceptance by Elias, they still behaved like she just didn’t get it. Her ability to cook and look after them just meant she didn’t have it in her to understand their misery.

She left the room after that, when he didn’t say anything. Because someone had to do it, and she would rather win than look like a bully, which she certainly was right then.
Cass went up to his bedroom later (she could hear his prepubescent footsteps on the landing) and didn’t come down for three days, by which time the swelling had gone down enough to be inconspicuous. And from then on, he didn’t so much give her the silent treatment as stay twenty feet away whenever she was in the house. Then she graduated and it wasn’t a problem anymore. Celia would call and talk to Jean, who was too busy being frustrated with Mrs. Talbot to notice her children’s mutual evasion, and Cass was mysteriously always absent whenever Celia came home to visit. This went on for another three years, until she had almost forgotten about it.

And then one Christmas she brought Daniel home against her better judgment, and Cass popped into the kitchen (by now they’d gotten so good at running parallel and never touching that she hadn’t even seen him in over a year) and smiled and said, “Hey Celia, welcome home. Who’s this?”

She wasn’t close enough to Daniel at that point to tell him about the old animosity between them, and so he didn’t notice anything off in Cass’ strange new warmth. He introduced himself and bombarded Cass with questions and ended up taking up a weird percentage of his time while they were visiting. And Celia and Cass still weren’t speaking but they weren’t not speaking either, like they were little kids again and back to orbiting, and whatever anger that used to fester there had finally fizzled. Now neither of them knew exactly what siblings were supposed to do at this age. How emerging adults were supposed to act when there was only one parent and an intrusive boyfriend to share between them.

They never discussed the night Elias left again. Celia found her way back to feeling sorry for him again, but now she feels he somehow brought on their father’s
rejection himself. The weird child is never the one the truant parent chooses to spirit away.

He was just too accommodating to everyone. He accepted relentlessly, to the point of discomfort for those around him. Someone murdered him, and it might have happened because it wasn’t in his nature to stop them. He’d rather sit back and let himself be killed than admit he was inconvenienced by it.

It hurts so much now. It crushes in on her. She is still having his nightmares for him. Even though he’s a half hour away. Underground. Couldn’t have a nightmare now if he wanted to.

Celia has no idea what Cass did with his life after high school. She kept calling, she kept going home for holidays, but Jean forgot her after she went off to college; one in three times she called home, Celia had to identify herself because her mother didn’t immediately recognize her voice. There were always distractions at The Monster which erased any recent important events from Jean’s memory (had they erased the nature of Cass’ death maybe?), so she often forgot to mention things when Celia called.

One Thanksgiving Celia went home for dinner (without her husband, who told her he was busy that day and couldn’t stop doing whatever it was he was doing long enough to share a meal outside the city limits), and Jean scared the shit out of her by answering the door with a huge gash across her forehead.

“What the hell happened, Mom?” she asked, and at first Jean looked disoriented, like she might have been clubbed minutes before if the blood weren’t crusty and stale on her skin, the bruises already fading around the wound.
Then Jean laughed an unnatural and slightly shamed laugh and explained that she’d been in a car accident about a week before, “hit my head on the damn window,” she said. Luckily, she added, she’d hit a mailbox and not another vehicle, and all in all she just felt “really stupid about it, like what kind of an old lady am I becoming that I’m hitting things that aren’t moving?”

Celia didn’t know what to say. She was offended Jean hadn’t told her about it despite the fact that she had definitely called home since the day it happened, but she couldn’t bring herself to yell at a woman with dried blood on her face.

Instead, Celia said, “I can finish dinner for you if you want,” thinking that a person in that condition, even without a concussion, was better off not operating electrical appliances.

Jean brightly said “Okay!” and then disappeared, and Celia was alone in the kitchen cooking until mother and son both appeared in the dining room without being told, about ten minutes before the food was done. She felt sixteen again.

“So much food!” Jean said as she piled turkey onto her plate, as though it wasn’t her who had planned for the dishes and begun cooking a few hours before.

This maternal amnesia also applied to Cass and his life, and anything he might have been doing with it. Jean never mentioned him unless asked (and then placated her with an “Oh, he’s fine” before moving on), and Cass and Celia continued to speak only as required. For a while even Daniel was closer to him than she was, but because he was her brother and not his, she couldn’t ask Daniel how he was doing or what he was up to. He would have laughed at her and said “Don’t you know? He’s your brother,” and might even have found some way to get angry at her about it (Daniel an expert at holding
grudges, his stand-offs always both artfully composed and absurdly rational).

But then those two had their day out together which turned ugly in a way Daniel refused to talk about, and then he had no insight into Cass’ life either. Cass just kept making her nervous, since she had gone to college and gotten married and moved away and had done all manner of grown-up things, while he still lived with his mother and didn’t have a job and was probably still a virgin, and he was clearly stuck. Still the child who had slept on the floor and heard his father invite her and not him. Still the child who was never terribly affectionate but always patient with their mother, always listening, no matter how venomous the accusations Jean made against Elias, how much she let herself divulge, in full grotesque detail, all his sexual dysfunctions, real or imagined. The woman swallowed him whole, asked him to listen endlessly, and Cass just kept letting her, in fact stayed in his old bedroom after graduation, conceivably just to kept her company. Where Jean had forgotten her daughter as soon as she left, she would never have forgiven Cass for leaving the house.

At least, these were the assumptions Celia made. No one ever told her what happened in The Monster (although she wasn’t sure what was going on half the time when she live there either), and Cass only got weirder and more distant with age.

Once, in order to be a part of whatever Cass was doing with his life, Celia suggested to Daniel that he try to find Cass a job at his office.

“What kind of job?” Daniel asked her.

“I don’t know,” she said. “Something that doesn’t require a college degree.”

“What do you think goes on there? What kind of work do you think I could get him that wouldn’t be busywork for menial pay?”
“I don’t know,” Celia said. “I don’t work there. Or anywhere for that matter.”

“What makes you think he’d want a job? He seems pretty happy living with your mother. The family finances are clearly in good shape, so Cass really doesn’t ever have to work. He can just wait around for his inheritance and cook Jean’s meals for her.”

“Mrs. Talbot does that.”

“Well, he should go to college then, if anything,” Daniel said. “Your family can afford it, and why should he commute to Grand Rapids just to make no money being bossed around?”

“So give him a _good_ job,” Celia said.

“This really isn’t your place, dear,” Daniel said, and then left the room to end the conversation. She wasn’t completely sure she hadn’t pissed him off with the whole thing until he came down later for dinner, smiling and eager to compliment her cooking.

What she was hoping would come from this, whether Daniel offered him a job or not (and which, more than likely, Cass would not have accepted, just as Daniel said), was some clue from her husband as to what he already knew about Cass’ daily activities. What she actually gleaned from it was that Daniel knew way more about her mother’s net worth than she did, and she had no idea why.

But now she’s realizing that she must have known a little about Cass’ life, because she was able to produce a print copy of one of his blog entries for the funeral. This fact enables her to logically pull back a few layers: she must have known he had a blog, and she must have known where it was on the internet, and she must have read it, and she must have taken the trouble to print off a particular entry as representative of this last period of his life, having read enough of it at least to select this one specifically. And
in order for her to know it exists, Cass or Jean must have told her about it. Which means one of them breached the wall of privileged information behind which Celia had been living for years now. And somehow, between that point in the past and yesterday, Celia erased the whole thing from her mind. The printout of the entry, when she pulled it out on the way to the podium (and how she knew to reach for it, she’s hazy on too; 24 hours later, she is already losing clarity on those events as well), was a surprise to her.

She goes downstairs from her book room to get her funeral purse. It’s on the floor under the entryway table. Did she leave it there? Daniel is still upstairs, which is where he will probably remain until he smells fried meat fumes coming from the kitchen. The purse looks out of place there (the table and foyer always clear, she recites in her head, except that designated hour of the day) so she brings it up with her, hoping Daniel won’t hear her, come out of his office and interrogate her. She’s fairly certain he would consider the blog entry and her possession of it suspect, and he would probably steal it from her to do some investigating of his own.

She waits to pull the entry out until she is back in her book room. The two pages look worked over, like someone wadded them up to throw them away but thought better of it and returned them, partially reflattened them and stuffed them back in without concerning themselves as to whether their owner would notice the damage.

The web address is at the bottom. The printer dated her retrieval of it five days ago. The day before Cass died. Was killed.

This doesn’t do anything to support her case.

Why the hell did she print this off the day before he died? Clearly she couldn’t have planned a eulogy before her brother was dead. She can tell herself that she did so
merely out of curiosity; maybe she was planning on asking Cass about the entry, or sharing it with Daniel, and she just never got around to it.

But she has to admit this is disconcerting. If Daniel sees this, he will take it as further evidence of her guilt, and seeing that date on the paper, even biased in her own defense, she is struggling to come up with ways to acquit herself. This looks ugly in a way she can’t cope with.

She types the blog address into her web browser and shoves the papers into a desk drawer.

The first entry Cass wrote is dated almost exactly three years ago.

“The Leviathan was a nondescript beast ship making rounds from Nantes to the eastern seaboard of the United States, primarily New York, Boston, and Charleston. Decommissioned since 1957, it was primarily a cargo ship whose crew were, for the most part, poor Europeans working their way across. This “working” broke those onboard into two categories: men and able-bodied women who were able to contribute at least some small amount to a list of nautically unskilled tasks, and those who could not contribute, children and the infirm, whose place on the ship was bought with cash. No one crossed for free, but anyone who could make themselves useful were offered some leniency in price. The price itself was never fixed. A gentleman in the captain’s employ, Mr. Nathaniel McKenzie, was charged with coordinating payment, and he was notorious for his keen perception of desperation, determining always a price that bordered on extortion, only barely within the means of the individuals and families who came to him. Passengers were forbidden to discuss with each other the deal each had struck with him;
anyone caught doing so faced days of withheld rations from the galley, on McKenzie’s orders.

“This particular voyage, into Boston, more than likely took place in 1947 or ’48. Records were not kept of passengers because the vast majority of them had no authorization to disembark at their destination; crew was listed in logs under false names, all of them American. If asked, the ship’s captain would say that his turnover rate, while high, was not unusually so, and that, though he could not say so with certainty, he assumed all of the men who did not report for duty for the return trips to France must simply have gone back to their families, an act he could not but respect.

“The Chapmans were unaccounted for on that voyage in any respect, under false names or otherwise. They had not paid a cent to be on board, and Mr. McKenzie was completely unaware of their presence. In fact, none of the paying passengers or permanent crew could recall seeing them in the first few days at sea. There was no question of their having stowed away; passenger quarters were open and too small and the cargo bay too frequently inspected for any one person to have gone unnoticed for that long, let alone a married couple.

“The first night anyone could recall seeing them, there was choppy water and forceful waves and thick rain, and most of the passengers were below decks, vomiting on the floor for lack of a more comfortable place to do so. Somehow with all that the place still smelled like salt clouds; everyone’s nostrils were burning with the stuff. After a few hours, once the slosh of liquid on the floor grew more audible than the rain, as the weather receded, a woman in her late twenties in floor-length traditional (possibly Austrian) dress started moving between the cots, cleaning people up and offering the
sickest ones water and a grainy, oatmeal-like substance, which she correctly predicted would ‘soothe their stomachs.’ Most people assumed she was a nurse, hired by McKenzie for her medical skills, though she told them nothing that promoted this misconception. It was only when she retreated to a corner to comfort her ‘queasy’ husband that certain passengers put together that they had not seen her or her husband previously at meals or otherwise. They knew Mr. McKenzie usually put to work anyone who was able to pull themselves upright and they must have but have seen them if they were there to be seen.

“The next morning, someone brought this to Mr. McKenzie’s attention (though no one would take credit for telling, as Dorothy had been kind enough not only to nurse them but to attend to many of the crying children when their horribly sick parents could not, and this excused the couple of any number of sins). The Chapmans were taken elsewhere so that they could explain themselves, once McKenzie confirmed he had no knowledge of their presence onboard, and the majority of their bunkmates assumed the greedy bastard was going to have them thrown into the ocean. The more superstitious passengers believed that this was in fact exactly where they’d come from in the first place, swept from the sea onto the ship by a magical wave during the storm (and the name of the ship seemed only to further support this theory). General consensus was that this was absurd, but the skeptics, when called to task for dismissing the idea, had to admit they could not come up with a better explanation for the Chapmans’ sudden presence onboard, in the middle of the night no less. No matter the controversy below, no one believed that Mr. and Mrs. Francis Chapman would still be on the ship when they reached Massachusetts.

“But then, only an hour later, the pair returned to their quarters, Francis a little
worse for wear from the churning the night before, still a little unsteady on his feet, and Dorothy told the few people bold enough to approach them that the whole thing had been a misunderstanding. She said (Francis wasn’t much of a talker in general, even after he recovered) that their passage terms had been worked out months before and Mr. McKenzie had simply forgotten. No one believed this, since McKenzie was known to be both meticulous and unmerciful, but the fact remained that they had come back unscathed with his approval.

“The Chapmans made appearances in the mess hall from then on and there was no fuss about it. People still speculated that they were creatures rejected from the ocean, whose magical powers had somehow either convinced McKenzie to ignore them or threatened him into complacency. The more likely story was that they had come onboard with a high quantity of money, and McKenzie’s pride had been bought from him. It was easier for people to assume that the Chapmans had simply escaped their notice, that somehow the two had been in their midst all along and no one had thought to take note of them until Dorothy made her rounds that night. But, though few people discussed it, they were all certain that the Chapmans had actually appeared that night from the darkness, and no natural means of explanation could wish this away.

“Confronted with this fact, all the others kept their distance from the Chapmans, which was easy enough because the couple chose to keep to themselves as well. For whatever reason, they were not made to work, and most people only saw them late at night before bed. Passengers replaced their appreciation and awe with resentment (particularly for Francis, who was so rudely silent all the time), though some mothers remained grateful to Dorothy, who continued to offer assistance watching their children
from time to time. For the most part, though, when the group arrived in its new homeland, everyone was glad to get away from the two of them and focus their frustrations now on building a prosperous new life for their families.

“Mysteriously, though no one could have pinpointed the reason, each paid passenger on that voyage suddenly became a faithful churchgoer in their new country, even those families in which religion had been abandoned for decades. It was never discussed, but the consensus belief was that someone ought to be thanked for their safe passage across the Atlantic, for the appearance of some Old World angel on the worst of nights (Dorothy only grew more holy in their minds as time passed), and that positive energy might as well be aimed at God.

“$%^&*#@

“This is how I imagine my grandparents, Francis and Dorothy Chapman, entering this country. My mother was born here, and claims she knows next to nothing about her heritage, other than that her parents came here before she was born; she’s not even entirely sure where they came from. There was already family somewhere else in the U.S., she knows that much. This is where Francis told her my father, Elias, came from, somewhere else, a third cousin (or so) from the Midwest probably. But Francis never elaborated and Elias, after they were married, refused to disclose any more about his background. I read Wuthering Heights in high school for an English assignment, and my father in my memory reminds me of Heathcliff, dark, occasionally angry, appearing from nowhere and eventually disappearing back to it. Mysteriously wealthy.

“Somehow my mother was never curious when she was younger where she came from, or how her parents got here, or how an immigrant married couple so far away from
any other family came to own two businesses on the Michigan lakeshore. She can’t even remember Francis working any steady job before the bait shop, though he must have. She said she is fairly certain that they came here with nothing. For fuck’s sake, she grew up in a barn. The financial transitions are elusive: the Chapman family came from nowhere, purchased and drove into the ground two boating and fishing shops, respectively, then somehow, between the arrival of Elias and the present, found themselves seriously rich. My mother says she doesn’t know much we have, but she’s fairly sure that it’s a lot. Her financial advisor keeps telling her she has nothing to worry about, which could mean any number of things.

“I didn’t, however, start this blog in order to figure out my family history. My mother says she was so ashamed of her parents when she was young, their accents and their weird food (neither of which she can remember clearly enough to give me any cultural clues), that she pretended they’d moved here from Rhode Island. She told everyone that people are practically aliens there, barely Americans, but Americans nonetheless and sufficiently acclimated to Midwestern customs that they should not be made fun of. No one bought it, it sounds like, and she still got treated like shit at school. And then, by the time she was a little curious and honestly a little embarrassed at how little she knew, she had already been married and moved out for a couple of years and her parents were dead. So the family secrets died with them it seems. As well as scurried off with my father when the prick ran away about eight years ago.

“My reason, then, for blogging, is not Mr. and Mrs. Francis Chapman of indeterminate European origin. Actually, the reason is Richard Marx. A name which will probably only mean something to housewives of the late 1980’s and hardcore Top Gun
trivia fanatics. A singer-songwriter-wuss whose fame came and went about fifteen years ago. A recording artist whose music is almost exclusively romantic fluff and movie soundtrack filler.

“With the sole exception of a strange 1992 single called HAZARD. A song which, up until about a week ago, I was pretty sure I’d made up.

“I must have heard it when I was about six years old. I’m not sure where I heard it; the radio doesn’t play in this house. It was a Billboard hit that summer, and then it disappeared. Whereas the Genesis and Vanessa Williams songs from that period still get played on easy listening stations, that one has strangely fallen through the cracks. Richard has other songs that still swim around the playlists of those stations catering to people who stopped absorbing new music ten years ago. Women who recall the early nineties as a time when it was still acceptable to inject romance into lyrics so forcefully it leaked back out, songs in which the singer (often male) would get so overcome with emotion he could only sing the damn thing while rolling around on the floor, covered in his own tears, haloed by his shaggy mullet.

“HAZARD apparently tried to create some controversy around itself when it was released. Did its narrator really murder that girl? Could we as a nation be comfortable sympathizing with a misunderstood singer who may be responsible for the death of his only female friend? There were alternate music videos that suggested other possible culprits, videos that did nothing to the lyrics but superimposed over them images that heavily insinuated the guilt of other people (a town sheriff, Mom’s deadbeat boyfriend). But the question would never actually answered. Because the question, Capitol figured, was going to sell records.
“When I was six, once it started to fall from popularity, I could only remember that someone in the mystery song was murdered under odd circumstances, and that the tune’s name (and the town’s) was shared with the place I grew up (and still live). Turns out it’s named for Hazard, Nebraska, not Hazard, Michigan, which is my hometown. The fact that two small Midwestern towns picked up the same off-putting name is strange enough.

“But I was six years old. I heard the song a few times, then the country forgot about it.

“I waited to hear it again for years. At first because it was a strange song, because it was interesting. And then, the longer I went without hearing it, I wanted to because it had been so long, because I wanted to prove to myself that I hadn’t imagined its existence, that my brain had not invented a song about a girl who gets murdered in a town called Hazard. Eventually, it actually seemed possible it wasn’t real, and this disturbed me all the more. How had I invented this story? What did it mean? It bothered me for a long time. Why, when I asked the few people I dared ask about it, did no one know what I was talking about? I couldn’t look it up or track it down because I had nothing to go on: no title, no artist name, not even a line from the song remained in my memory. I could remember the heavy-toned keyboard in the beginning, which sounded like a group of men singing at the bottom of their voices. But that was it.

“And it occurred to me that I might have projected this onto my imaginary song from something else; there is a song that came out around the same time that gets played fairly frequently still, one I also can’t recall the title of, but whose intro sounds awfully similar. The whole thing, rather than being some key to a mystery I couldn’t decipher as a
child, was beginning to seem like some indication of my own instability.

“Then, a week ago, I heard it. For the first time in thirteen years. Playing on the tinny sound system of a diner downtown. I was eating scrambled eggs. I was wearing my corduroy jacket that’s too tight in the shoulders. My socks were still drying out because it had snowed the day before and the county road commission only has one guy on call in town. He goes by ‘Junior’ (not his real name), is 57 years old, and spends most of his time in that very diner complaining about the half-dozen made-up spinal conditions he’s convinced he’s suffering from, but does not see the irony in his conviction that anyone suggesting he needs to plow when there’s less than six inches of snow on the ground is a whiner, and should just go out and buy a diesel two-ton, four-wheel-drive pick-up already and leave him the hell alone.

“He was not there when it happened. It was just me, my waitress, and an elderly woman who wasn’t eating but had brought a foot-tall stack of women’s magazines to flip through. The pages crackled from water damage when she turned them. It took her five to ten seconds to turn each page, like the act of switching to a new one meant she had to bid some tearful farewell to the one before it.

“I recognized it immediately from the synthesized low voices in its intro. But, I waited, just in case it was something else. And then Richard Marx’s words began, ‘My mother came to Hazard when I was just seven….’ And I knew. I looked around me. No one else was listening. No one else noticed that this song was being played for the first time in over a decade (or maybe it had played many times since then, and somehow the two of us had never crossed paths). No one was paying close enough attention to hear Marx’s enigmatic wording of the story, the child who came to live in this small town in
Nebraska with his mother, who even at seven was rejected by society for an unexplained reason, who would come to have only one friend there and only years later, a woman named Mary who mysteriously turns up dead not long after they make friendly. Naturally, the narrator is blamed. He claims innocence, but his alibi is a little fuzzy. The song ends without clarifying; he says simply that he has to escape, ‘all of my rescues are gone.’

“Hearing HAZARD again, even as elated as I am to have its existence confirmed, is disturbing. Just as much as it was when I was six years old. It puts to rest some things just as it upsets others. HAZARD is a mystery that no one ever bothered to solve.

“I came home. I did some internet research. I watched the music video (the main one; the alternates are now lost in distant archives), which only created more confusion (characters are added to the mix who do not appear in the lyrics--that corrupt sheriff, the mother’s boyfriend who eerily resembles Marx himself, though Richard plays the narrator’s role--and they only bring the viewer further from an explanation). Now that I had found it, my goal was to try to understand it so that I could dismiss it. After all, it is still only an early nineties pop song by a singer whose name is no longer recognizable to most Americans. It shouldn’t logically have any meaning because the whole thing is fiction, and pop musical fiction to boot. Marx claims he hadn’t even heard of Hazard when he wrote the song, actually wrote the song and then plucked the town name out of a Nebraska directory because it sounded cool.

“And yet, Marx was evasive in interviews. Even years later, when his career had shifted to production and writing and the industry evolved away from sap, he would avoid answering any passing questions about the song, its origins or intentions. A couple
of times, his only response was, ‘It’s a song,’ which was already a breech from his tagline during the promotion after the song’s release, ‘It’s whatever you think it is.’ A journalist occasionally followed up with, ‘So it’s not based on anything?’ There is no record of him answering this with anything but the question, ‘What do you think?’

“The history of the Chapman family in Hazard, Michigan is also one of unanswered questions. Francis and Dorothy, wherever they came from, died in Traverse City. On the same night. In a hotel room bed. Jean Chapman, my mother, is not totally sure of the cause of death, but she knows it went uninvestigated by local police. When I was eleven, my father, Eli Chapman, ran off in the middle of the night and has never returned. Not a word in eight years. He took no money, he abandoned his car, and he has been off the grid ever since. My mother can’t make sense of this either.

“And I feel tied to our nameless HAZARD protagonist, in more ways than I’m willing to elaborate on. This song, like our history, is too lost in the limbo space between invention and reality to be easily understood, too unnervingly off-kilter in it facts to draw attention from the masses.

“I am the only person who cares enough to figure it out. Because I am the only person whose continuing existence is dependent on the answer. In a way I don’t fully understand.

“This is my new profession. I will get it out of Richard Marx himself, or I will hunt it down some other way.”
So this is what her brother was doing with his time. Chasing washed-up pop stars around to unlock the meaning of a song which probably had no meaning in the first place. Celia remembers a couple of Richard Marx’s songs, or if they aren’t his specifically than she remembers their genre, too full of emotion to have any grip on reality, repugnant to anyone who was not a middle-aged divorcee. It’s uncomfortable. She is compelled, when it plays over the speaker system at grocery stores, to laugh at it audibly and make faces at the ceiling whenever another customer passes her, so that she isn’t mistaken for voyeuristically enjoying the excess of sentiment.

This song, though, she doesn’t recall. Nor does she remember Cass ever mentioning it. It’s a convention that must have been popular for a while there, pop musical dramtizations, something to feed the public desire for crime stories before the cop shows filled network television. But Cass was convinced it was important somehow, that this song in particular was relevant to the Chapman family.

Though, why did he omit Celia herself from the family history? Why is there no mention of a sister?

She pushes onward. There are dozens of entries on the site spanning the last three years. The one she read at the funeral was the second to last one he ever wrote. There is one short one after, from last Monday. The day before it happened.

“The bastard committed murder. He ran off afterwards, and clearly would suggest he had his reasons for it and then plea for sympathy. But it was still murder and he deserves to be hunted down for it.
“I don’t have to wait for my letters to get their answer. I’ve figured it out for myself. I’m leaving town here soon to take care of it, and I’m not sure I’ll make it back. In the immortal words of Richard ‘Right Here Waiting’ Marx, I’m going down to the fucking river.

“Eleanor, you know I love you, but you’ve seen me through this the last couple of years, and you know what has to happen.

“Am I going to come back on here and publish the result of it if I can? I’m not thinking that far ahead. But you can wait for me if you’d like.”

And that’s where the whole thing ended. Somewhere a woman named Eleanor is waiting for a reply that will never come. Whatever her brother figured out, he didn’t have a chance to execute his plan; the afternoon after he hit the “PUBLISH” button on that last entry, their mother found him dead or almost dead in his own house.

Is this how Hazard Guy from the song died too? Unable to escape?

Did someone with some knowledge about this song investigation come and kill him? Was it Richard Marx himself, caught in some old indiscretion?

There are noises from Daniel’s office. A pile of papers drops to the floor. Then the murmur of dictation into his digital recorder.

This blog seems like the beginning of clearing her name, but Daniel would probably recognize more quickly than she its relevance to the case. And what if he finds the name of a different potential culprit and exonerates her? Does he lose the moral high ground of their marriage? Does he come to her to admit his wrongness?
She will tell him after dinner.

She opens the door of her book room with excessive force, so that he will hear her opening it. Her feet sludge down the stairs. She drains a glass of water from the dispenser on the refrigerator; it’s always colder coming out there instead of from the faucet, which makes some sense. This is what refrigerators do. She can take comfort from the fact that, when a glass is pushed into the curved palm of the lever, the fridge will hum gently and release, in a perfectly cylindrical stream, water so cold it hurts her teeth as she drinks. No matter how much water she takes. There will always be more.

She cranks the oven to something between 350 and 500; she looks away before the LCD screen finishes climbing. There’s a packet of ground beef wrapped in paper on the second shelf down in the freezer. Rock solid, and two days before its expiration. Is it supposed to thaw first? The Pyrex baking trays are in the cupboard by the floor in the corner. She pulls out the medium size. She places it and the meat next to each other on the counter. The gas oven hisses calmly as it works upward toward her requested temperature. Upstairs, the floor creeks under Daniel’s shifting feet.

She looks at the counter. She pictures meatloaf. The red congealed layer of sealant on the top. The wet slips of onion turning clear, the meat chunks engulfing them. She can see meatloaf.

But she just keeps staring at the package and the dish in front of her, and is baffled. Like she’s never cooked a meatloaf in her life. Like she hasn’t done it hundreds of times before.

She makes spaghetti instead. There are jars of store-bought marinara and stacked
boxes of spaghetti noodles (and no other kind of pasta) in the cupboard above the stove.

She is surprised to find garlic bread in the freezer when she goes looking for green beans, and she pulls this out to complete her offering. The simplicity of the meal is shameful; she is ineffectual, leaning against the counter waiting for the water to boil and the oven to preheat. Then the spaghetti spins from her fingers in chaotic strands into the pot, and the slightly freezer-burnt bread goes on a cookie sheet and into the heat. And again she has nothing to do with herself.

The sauce has several minutes before it’ll need to be microwaved. The parmesan is in a canister in the fridge door. Usually, her cooking keeps her occupied in the evenings for at least 45 minutes--Daniel is impressed by her endurance trials with the steam, the precise balance she strikes in timing the side dishes and entrée so that they arrive in the dining room fresh without reheating or damage control--but this would be stretched if she got it up to fifteen minutes. And perhaps already cooling by the time she has to fetch Daniel from his work.

The noodles are still a little wet when they merge with the sauce; they slop when she stirs them. She makes a mess of the counter digging into the bread with an enormous serrated knife (were those cuts in the Formica there before?). She doesn’t want to be this sort of wife, but her rhythm is off. Recipes she’s been making for Daniel for years are hiding from her. He might take this as further reason that the marriage is no longer viable. If he thinks of her as a murderer, does it matter if she serves him sloppy pasta?

He is at the dinner table surrounded by papers when she comes in with the casserole dish. Her hands are hidden inside lime green oven mitts, and she feels strangely guilty.
“I made spaghetti,” she says. “I hope that’s okay.”

He doesn’t answer, but he gathers his work with an over-polite fervency, bends a few papers the wrong way trying to get them out of her path, and then does a one-handed dive into the china hutch to fetch her hot mats. She cradles the dish on to them like she’s handling someone else’s baby. Her hands are clammy, and she peels them out of the mitts and hears Daniel slide back in through the kitchen doorway just as she realizes he has left the room. The garlic bread lands on its serving platter next to the pasta. He has anticipated her.

“Thanks,” she says.

“You’re the one who cooked, after all,” he said.

“Spaghetti,” she says by way of qualification of how little cooking she actually did, in a sour nasally tone that makes her sound like the worst kind of spouse.


He goes back for the plates and silverware once she’s sitting down, having forgotten them, and again she thanks him. Then there’s an open bottle of Chardonnay, coming out of nowhere, which he tips into two glasses and serves, and the bottle is gone before she has a chance to see where it’s run off to.

He joins her at the table and swoops a napkin into his lap. “I’m glad to have you home,” he says.

“Are you?”

He smiles. His mood has clearly turned. “Of course,” he says. “You’re my wife.”

He serves her a big clump of spaghetti. It has a strange milky smell to it that she didn’t catch a few minutes ago. She hopes the sauce hasn’t gone off in the cupboard.
“You didn’t seem too happy about it earlier,” she says.

“I was being unkind,” he says, filling his own plate. “You lost your brother. I’m sure you’re very upset.”

“So you no longer think I did something to him,” she says. She dangles her fork over her food as though her consumption of it depends on his response.

He makes a show of thinking. “I recognize that you’re grieving and I don’t want to be enemies.”

“Does that answer my question?”

“I think it does.” He takes a bite of spaghetti and swallows it down, crunches into his sliver of bread, which she now sees she has cut into stingily small pieces. “Delicious, dear. As always.”

They eat for a while. A car with a faulty muffler drives past so quickly it has to be on the main road, though its volume suggests it’s actually crossing their front lawn. She hears mud slipping. The stop and then the churning of tires in something wet. Like grass that has recently been sprinklered.

“You hear that?” she says.

He’s reading paperwork while eating just as he usually does, and he dutifully looks up to listen for a repetition of car sounds but they don’t come again.

“Just a car passing,” he says.

Then she hears what could be a shifter getting stuck between gears and the crunch of a sapling losing its battle with a vehicle intent on working its way out of a mudhole, no matter which direction it had to exit from or what object could be in that direction to slow it down. The road that their driveway stems from is too far off and too dry and treeless to
be the sight of whatever carnage is going on outside. But a few seconds later the sounds are gone, and the only thing Celia can hear is their refrigerator whirring and pages moving so that Daniel can get to the ones beneath them.

“I think that was in front of the house,” Celia says. “On the lawn.”

Daniel frowns and then smiles. He gets up and walks to the front window to look. His voice echoes back at her off the glass, “It’s nothing. Someone must have got stuck on the road.” Then he comes back and finishes his food with renewed vigor.

“Wonderful,” he says through the last bite.

“It’s just noodles and sauce in a jar,” Celia says. “Not like I cooked or anything.”

She looks down and notices that nothing Daniel served her has moved from her plate. Funny: she thought she was eating.

“Well you made it delicious,” Daniel says. “And you know I would have found a way to screw it up.”

He is probably right. Daniel has not prepared food for himself since they’ve been together, and she’s not entirely sure how he ate before they met. How he even managed to locate food.

He brings his dishes into the kitchen and begins to wash them even though they have a dishwasher and he never washes dishes. The cupboard doors around the sink swing open a few times before he finds the soap. She looks down at her food: it looks awful, clumping as it dries, and the garlic stinks like it’s been sitting there for days. She doesn’t understand why she’s not hungry, though, why even her grotesque culinary failure isn’t calling to her. It’s been hours since she ate last.

She joins him in the kitchen and feeds her dinner into the garbage disposal. It
immediately chomps into it with enthusiasm; Daniel has one hand on the disposal switch as he wiggles his fork under the faucet. He takes her plate from her and washes it too.

She goes in the living room and turns on the television. The local news is on. It’s probable that she will be featured on it since she’s managed to make the murder local now, where a few days ago the story was just a non-Holland death for which the autopsy results had not been released. The anchorwoman is cheerful and blond in the same way the Press reporter this afternoon was cheerful and blond, like there’s a school somewhere that teaches media demeanor exclusively to sorority girls. The water keeps running in the kitchen for much longer than seems necessary for a few dishes, and although the environment is paying for her husband’s attempt at reconciliation, she is still grateful. Waiting for the top stories to play by herself.

He comes in, and she hears that the faucet is now silent in the next room.

“You didn’t drink your wine,” he says. He pushes the glass at her, and she takes it. Against her better judgment, she pours some of it into her empty stomach. Her head starts to swim.

Her husband has gotten himself a second glass, and locates a coaster for it before sliding in next to her on the couch, and this is, while not unusually affectionate (since he still holds a distance of a few inches), certainly unprecedented. He has a recliner he uses in the evening. He likes to tip it back so far he has to look around the shadow of his nose to see the TV, which she assumes is so that eye contact between them is impossible.

He groans at the news when he sees it, then kisses her through a layer of hair that has dipped into her face and says, “Let’s watch a movie.”

“You’re not curious?” she says. “What’s going to be on?”
“How about *When Harry Met Sally*. You like that one.” The DVD appears suddenly (just like the Chardonnay did before; her husband is a strange sort of magician) and he pops it in and finds the spot on the couch he was sitting in the moment before, so adeptly it almost looks like he does so unconsciously, like he’s actually not mentally measuring the appropriate number of inches between them.

His office has probably notified him already that her picture will be on Channel Nine a few minutes into the six o’clock news hour, and that Mrs. Guardian won’t come out looking very good. The photo they use could be taken from the newspaper, but it’s equally likely they got ahold of her mug shot.

For about twenty minutes she watches her husband instead of the movie because she knows he can see her staring in his peripheral vision and might eventually turn and ask her why she’s doing it. He doesn’t. He laughs at the Billy Crystal lines that aren’t jokes. She keeps staring, and he holds his focus on the movie. Eventually she gets bored. Her eyes fall back on the screen around the point when Billy and Meg are standing in a bookstore talking. Celia can’t initially recall the movie’s plot. Were they dating before now? Are they meeting up years after the break-up? Hasn’t she seen this movie a dozen times already?

When it ends, Daniel finds *As Good As It Gets* and starts it before bothering to run the idea by her. The movies run together and become a four-hour blob of sarcastic romance, and interminable cinematic mass that makes her forget there was ever a time she and her husband weren’t sitting on the couch drinking in silence. By the time it’s over she does feel a little bit drunk from the hours of consumption, even though she stretched one wine glass out to last the whole period and a half inch of dregs is still floating at the
bottom. She’s lost all sense of time. It’s clear that it’s getting late and the day has been long, and though she is fairly certain that this time last night she was sitting in the dark in a quiet jail cell, she can’t square this with the passage of the hours in between. It has to have been days at least since they arrested her.

She feels a little sick to her stomach (not all that surprising; she’s consumed nothing but wine since this morning and only a little of that) and she might otherwise assume that her digestive track was responsible if Daniel’s fingers weren’t rubbing the seam of her jeans into her crotch. The movie has maybe ten minutes left. Jack Nicholson and Helen Hunt are out in the street. Daniel’s timing is intentional; he’ll probably open the fly of her pants just as the credits start to roll. If she doesn’t immediately react he will take her hand and try to disguise his nudging it of her hand into his own crotch with harmless dry kisses up her neck. He will breathe into her ear and the wetness will be so shocking and warm that it will be a good fifteen seconds before she notices he is grinding himself into her palm, holding it in place with his other hand. His contortions will strike her as slightly awkward, so many body parts working and trying to escalate in conjunction with one another, but only because she couldn’t pull off the same herself. His rhythm, on the other hand, is always careful and impressive.

He fulfills all her predictions. There are about four minutes of credits after the movie and by the time they’re done he is already standing up. They have never had sex on the couch, nor do they ever make eye contact as they transition to the bedroom. The walk is quiet and unsexy; Celia almost always loses the inclination on the way up. Maybe if he held her hand, or stopped to touch her on the stairs—though right now this would make her suspicious. His touching her might mean something else.
She lets him lead her. He always leads. Is there something too doglike about following, that he can’t stand to look at her backside, knowing what they’re about to do? Not that there’s anything specific about her back that would shame him; they’ve been doing it missionary and only missionary since he graduated college (“Only kids fuck doggie style,” he said to her once).

Celia has already consented in a non-specific way, but on the steps it occurs to her that there ought to be some reticence on her part, that if his confidence of her guilt (his wife is a murderer) is not enough to stop him wanting to sleep with her, then maybe she should be the reluctant one. When you have sex with a person who is ignoring that you’ve killed someone in order to make it to orgasm (or worse, if he’s grabbing on to the idea somehow, and that image of violence is driving him closer instead of holding him back), there’s got to be some loss of dignity on your part. All the humiliation is on one side: the person who has to be forgiven to get fucked.

She could still stop him. They’re not in the bedroom yet. Both of them are still clothed. She could point out that, on principle, this is a dicey situation. As a lawyer, he could be sympathetic.

But he’s touching her. This has to be something. There’s always the possibility that his own chants of “you’re my wife” have convinced him of something, and the sexual gestures are his way of making peace. His hands on her tonight are different than the hands this afternoon, the ones that were pinning her to her chair in the dining room as he explained her legal options. These feel like husband hands at least.

He keeps the light off in the bedroom. He opens the blinds because he likes to see the room in slits as they make love, the mercury lamp in the yard bleeding through the
windows, softening the walls and fading almost to nothing by the time it reaches the bed on the far wall. Enough remains only to suggest nudity when he looks down at her during the act, signifying shadows where there are curves, static where there is pubic hair. She is light-colored shapes and soft female skin and a trail of heat which culminates in a humid invitation between her legs. As she’s gotten older, she’s become not so much wet as misty in those crucial moments of penetration, a fact that Daniel has met with a greater insistence in recent months. If he’s noticed the increase in friction and the delay of the necessary moisture down there he hasn’t mentioned it. Although he has never been much of a talker in the middle of things. Instead of calling her on it, he fights harder. Tears through resistance.

He takes off his own clothes. His pants vanish so quickly it’s deceptive; if they weren’t in year eight of their sex life, she’d mistake it for haphazard, but she knows he’s put a lot of work into learning how to drop clothing so that it lands on the carpet in a mostly folded position.

The boxers he leaves on. They’re the only article whose removal he’ll let her participate in, since everything else distracts him. If he feels her hands working the buttons on his shirt, he’ll catch himself calculating her speed on them and comparing them to his own, and his erection will momentarily (or permanently) falter. Once she tried to stroke him with one hand while undoing buttons with the other; his teeth started grinding, and he ended up pushing her down to her knees to retrace steps with her mouth (she was a little girl for a few moments, given a task to keep herself occupied so she didn’t get into any more trouble). As her lips cradled the half-dead fish and tried to coax it back, he fastidiously finished the shirt work and made a point of fully folding it twice
(the first time not quite precise enough) as she did so. To teach her a lesson, as always.

But the boxers stay until she is ready to negotiate with them, his one concession. He likes the swipe of the fabric as it travels down. Watching her, already undressed herself, curl downward as she guides them to his feet.

This is the point where the kissing finally begins, not on the couch or on the stairs, not until the process of removal that can’t be made sexy no matter how hard they try. There has to be filler between that first brush on the couch where he comes at her and she reacts, when the clothing barrier is still romantic because they have to fight with it, and then, after the march up the stairs, the few seconds when he touches her wrists to restrain them so they don’t rise in instinctual cover of her breasts; before they’re both horizontal and the sex has to border on madness to still be intoxicating, once the fuel of the intervening fabric is gone. He kisses her as he gets out of his shirt and pants and socks and then folds them (she has to turn her eyes awkwardly to one side and hope his are closed to see the whisk of folding and the careful drop).

Then he kisses her as he pulls her out of hers, and his lips start to slip some as he gets more impatient; in the past, clothes have been torn, buttons have gone flying off into corners and gotten lost forever. It is only as he rips into her clothing that she recalls she’s still got on the funeral get-up from yesterday, the dress whose front smells a little from yesterday morning and whose zipper is now being worked by her husband’s uneasy fingers. The stink of jail must still be in her hair, since she didn’t think to take a shower when they got home. The phone-book sanitary napkin in her underwear that she’s only remembered to change once today. Why didn’t she take care of it then? How can he inhale all that sweat and rust and disinfectant off her and still want to be inside her?
She’s down to her underwear only (the cloth sticks and then slides off her; her skin prickles from the application of open air to the residual moisture) and he guides her onto her back and into the lumpy pile of blankets. She skates backwards over the lumps and edges to the headboard like she’s trying to escape, because he likes the few seconds of chasing her. Most mornings she makes the bed because she appreciates peeling the sheets like a banana at night, the perfect crease of bedclothes just past the pillow where she can comfortably bury her legs without upsetting the tucked-in sheets at the end. But she didn’t sleep here last night or wake up here in this morning, so the bed still has the imprints of Daniel’s tossing last night, the force with which he unearthed all the sheets and turned them almost sideways, stole the share of blankets from the spouse who wasn’t there and then let them leak off onto the floor as he slept. If he slept.

He climbs on her and sucks her nipples so hard she can feel capillaries bursting. He rubs his erection hard against her hipbone and pins her sideways; she’s off-kilter and struggling to stay on her back. When she slips, he pins her shoulder down with his palm and the mercury light is lost behind him, behind the huge darkness he’s making on top of her and all around her, fastening her shoulders back and moving around her pubic bone with his hips, pushing so hard he must be hurting himself just as much.

“Daniel,” she says.

“Celia,” he says. “My love.”

“Hurts,” she says, “a little.”

He doesn’t answer. But he does kiss her. One arm wraps around her neck to hold himself, and his lips purse into her with such desperation she has to remind herself that they’ve had sex at least once in the last couple of months and there would be no reason
for years of angry, backed-up semen to be forcing its way to the surface now.

This is him taking out his frustration. This is him fervently horny, so overwhelmed with his own lust for her after one day’s absence he must not feel the clamminess of his own hands, the clicking of her bones as he contorts her. This isn’t Daniel her husband at all. She is grateful and terrified. He will break her in half. He will dislocate her shoulders. He will bite into her flesh until he draws blood. He will crush her windpipe and kill her.

And off come her underpants, burning her thighs on their way down, and then he’s in her and he’s pumping away. And there’s so much wet she can hear it. She hears the mess she’s making. He feels it too and speeds up in delight. He grunts and grunts from it, at a volume that’s slightly Neanderthal-like and certainly not him. No stopping to get her caught up first. He’s halfway there already. He’s not waiting for her. The friction is still heavy and burning but she knows the wetness is everywhere, migrating down both of their legs. His breathing gets labored but his pace keeps growing, until maybe two minutes in (though it could also be two hours) something tears or feels like tearing, skin separating and catching fire, and he finishes. He says the word “God” and it stretches out for ten seconds or more. Then he leans into his locked arms and dangles above her, panting. And rolls off, sighing dramatically.

And screams. “What the fuck!” He bounces off the bed like something’s bit him, and he throws the cover out of his way and turns on the bedside lamp.

The sheets are a sea of blood in which they’ve both been swimming. It’s spread across the surface and he just flopped down into it, and now where moments ago it only painted his inner thighs and his genitals, his lower back is stained a dark moist red. On
her, it is everywhere. It has washed out from her insides and almost drowned her.

Celia is astonished she has managed to bleed so copiously and still be alive. It seems impossible. All this blood must have come from somewhere, and she can’t be certain there was even this much in her to begin with, let alone how it could flow out of her with so little pain and then be all around her and practically engulfing her, and that she can still be conscious, looking around at it, and nowhere near death. Maybe he is bleeding as well. Maybe they are somehow bleeding in synch with one another, a disgusting side-effect of the unexpected sex.

Though given his reaction, this is probably unlikely.

“You’re bleeding all over the place!” Daniel says. “You couldn’t have told me before I climbed on top of you that you’re on your period?”

“I’m not,” Celia says. She plants her palm in the puddle on the sheets and immediately regrets it.

“You’re not,” Daniel says. “Really. Then what the hell is all this?”


“So you’re just bleeding for no reason?” Daniel tries to wipe some of it off his hands but only makes the mess bigger, spreads it to previously uninfected body parts. They are both red-palmed and unable to touch anything, awkwardly holding their arms out from their bodies in order to stop the spread. Under different circumstances, Celia might have looked for metaphor in this.

“What did the doctor say?” he says.

“I don’t remember actually,” she says. “That whole couple of days there are a bit
fuzzy.”

“Why didn’t you tell me you went to the doctor? Why would you keep that from me?”

“I’m sorry,” she said. The air in the room is starting to turn cold. She’s laying flat on her back still, naked, the blood chilly as it evaporates off her skin, and this nakedness just makes her more sorry. Daniel is tall hovering over her, his penis soft and dark red. “I forgot to.”

“You forgot a lot this week, I guess,” Daniel says. “Is this a medical problem we should be concerned about?”

“I’m not sure about that either. I’ve been distracted.”

Daniel sighs. He surveys the sheets: the bed is now a planet covered by more red bodies of water than pale blue fabric land masses; Celia is still floating and possibly sinking.

Then Daniel seems to recall his own state of disarray, the amount of his body which has been slicked over with her blood, and he growls, “Awwwghhh, dear Gooooood,” this time far less orgasmic, far angrier, and he darts naked into the bathroom to clean himself up. The door slams. The bathtub faucet blasts water and the shower clicks on. There is about fifteen minutes of splashing. She hears the clunk of a bottle of body wash picked up and put down three times. More angry groans. She continues to wait on her back, unable to justify moving, and the blood dries on her. She wonders if the sheets are ruined for good.

He emerges in his bathrobe, hair still dry. “On Monday morning,” he says, “we’re calling your doctor. I want to know what the hell you were there for, even if you don’t
“I care,” she says. “I just don’t remember.”

“Let’s just get some sleep,” he says. He looks over the sheets again. “Jesus. Go clean yourself up. I’ll take care of this.”

Although she thinks she might fall further into the blood if she tries to swim, she tries anyway, rolls off the bed in a totally unattractive way and looks at her husband, clean and pajamaed now, while she is standing there all red and dripping with his seed (as it slides down her leg, she recalls that he did not use a condom and is startled by his carelessness). She waits there naked to allow him time to judge her. By now, she’s aware of how much work she’s been in the last 24 hours.

“I’m sorry, honey,” she says. “I really forgot.”

“Yeah, well,” Daniel says. “It’s not the end of the world. You’ve had a hard couple of days.”

“I have,” Celia says. She starts crying quietly. These words coming from him at last somehow make it sound far worse. She has been to hell and feels all of it now. Tonight she is covered in blood. Last night she slept in jail. A few nights ago, her only brother was murdered. This is a new kind of world she can’t make sense of, one that strikes her as spectacularly cruel. One that doesn’t offer her the luxury of grieving. Because the town of Hazard, and clearly numerous people outside of it, know without benefit of judicial verdict that she is a monster.

“Celia,” he says. “Go get cleaned up. I know you’re upset, but you are a fucking mess. Once you take a shower you can lie down and get some rest.”

“Right.” She goes into the bathroom and he heads off to the linen closet. She’s
afraid to touch anything. The bathroom tiles and bathtub are immaculate; Daniel managed to clean himself and erase any remnants of bodily fluid from the cream-colored plastic. His towel is fluffed and moist on the bar by the sink, the same perfect bright blue that it was every day before this. She can’t understand how he managed to eliminate so entirely signs of the whole experience, how fifteen minutes was enough to make the whole thing go away.

If she spends the next hour scrubbing away her epidermis, will it even come clean? Is she anywhere near that adept?

She turns the shower on and climbs under the scalding hot water. The blood melts off in clumps, where it’s caked on to her. In some places, it holds on in strange creases that she has to dig into with her fingernails to break them free. She goes after them with her body wash and her bare hands (worried the loofah will pick up the fluids and they will permanently settle in its innermost layers). The shower smells like ammonia and lavender and rust. All the smells are leaking into her and remixing. It’s as if she keeps getting stinkier with everything she does, like this whole experience has made her more porous.

Once the stuff is off her skin and it looks like the right color again (though maybe a little pink from scrubbing), the water still runs a little red; her insides are still dripping. Did something happen to the both of them, her and her brother? Is she dying too, but so slowly she has no other symptoms yet?

Edward VI was king at ten and dead by sixteen, taken by an illness no one could explain. His sister Mary followed him to the throne and started to decay as she ruled, as she ripped apart her country and earned the fear and dislike of her people. Her insides
swelled and turned putrid, ballooned outward until they killed her. Her husband was hundreds of miles away when she succumbed.

Their sister Elizabeth was the only one anyone remembers, Elizabeth I. And she intentionally killed the line. Governed her family to death.

But Celia has seen a doctor and if she were dying, he could not have, in good conscience, let her go home. He would have caught it, if there were anything to catch.

When she is confident everything that can be washed has been, she dries off, puts a tampon in (even though the box expressly dictates against it, threatening TSS, a warning she reads and then ignores), and gets into her robe. Daniel is already in bed, reading a hardcover book with no jacket. The sheets are green, new ones he brought in to take over; the old bloody ones have left the room. She is surprised it didn’t soak all the way through the mattress, that the whole bed doesn’t have to be burned. The next time she changes the sheets, will she find outlines of red where he tried to bleach it out? She can’t smell bleach. She can’t smell anything.

She gets her pajamas out of the dresser and climbs into them. There are a couple of minutes as she transitions from robe to pajamas where she is clean and exposed, naked and still slightly wet from the shower, and she spends these couple of minutes looking at her husband. He doesn’t notice her.

She climbs in next to him. The room is profoundly still. She recalls the clicking of Nineteen-Year-Old’s computer game last night, the stabbing of a single key over and over. She compares it with Daniel reading, the pages scraping against the sheet as he rests the spine of his book on his chest, the creaking way he turns them, like he doesn’t want her to forget for a moment that he is occupied.
“Sorry again,” Celia says.

He doesn’t look up. “Stop it,” he says.

She pushes down under the sheets and faces upward, staring at the ceiling ineffectually. Minutes pass. There have only been a few ceilings in her life she can recall sleeping under or even giving her full attention to, but she knows if those few were given to her in a line-up she wouldn’t be able to separate them. Except the one in her jail cell. It opened a new world of oppression directed specifically from ceilings, the whole possibility of feeling pushed downward by drywall and the perpetual threat of melting into the floor.

By contrast, the one in their bedroom is absurdly high. It’s vaulted, and the point of intersection seems 50 feet away.

“I have a question for you,” Daniel says. His book is dropped open on top of him. For a few strange seconds, they look up at the ceiling together.

“Okay.”

“Is there any possibility your doctor’s appointment was on Tuesday?” Daniel says. “That you were there while everything was going on, even for a while? Could you have mixed that up?”

“My appointment was on Wednesday,” Celia says. “I went into town the next day.”

“And you don’t think you might have gone in accidentally on Tuesday, like you forgot what day it was and drove there by mistake?”

“I don’t remember driving anywhere Tuesday,” Celia says. “Until they arrested me, I was pretty sure I was inside all that day.”
“But then you realized you weren’t?” He looks at her. She can see him looking at her in her periphery, but she doesn’t turn.

“I still don’t really believe them.”

“Hmm,” he says. Then he goes back to his book.

For what feels like hours, Celia listens for the footsteps of a pirate behind the closed bedroom door.

She doesn’t realize she’s fallen asleep (with the light still on, Daniel still braced against the headboard beside her) until she hears the thud of something hitting the side of the house. It’s like the knock at the door again; he stops reading but doesn’t move, and she waits with her eyes open for something else to happen. Another thud, something hitting the siding and bouncing off. Daniel sits up. Two of them hit back-to-back now, one somewhere downstairs and one higher, on the outside of their master bedroom wall, seconds apart.

“What is that?” Celia says.

“Jesus Christ,” Daniel says. He is standing but only slowly, like he’s forgotten how. One foot slowly finds the carpet and then tests its ability to carry weight, then arches itself straight, the other leg still folded onto the bed in anticipation of additional sounds. A minute or two of silence goes by, Daniel still in his awkward position on the far side of the bed from the outer wall. Moments before his body was carefully sliding into response position, but he is still now on his one leg. He sways a little holding himself up, but doesn’t go any farther.

Then a half dozen come, louder and more forceful, so hard they almost echo in
the house frame, and the whole structure sounds like shaking, like it’s buckling away from a battering ram, like the onslaught of collisions to its face are from heavy artillery. They are under attack. Celia is certain she hears gunshots and screaming, the noise of battle being waged against them, and she waits for Daniel to move into some defensive position or give her orders about protecting herself. But he is frozen. He looks afraid.

“What is it?” Celia whispers, afraid the assailants will hear.

Daniel doesn’t answer. He leans back over the bed and toward the far wall, ostensibly to bring himself a few inches closer to the sounds.

A couple more thumps, duller this time, probably striking the wall on the far end of the house, then glass shattering downstairs. Daniel flinches and brings his other leg upright underneath him, is just standing next to the bed now with his fists at his sides, but he still doesn’t advance.

Voices argue outside, muffled by the walls. Multiple voices, at least two but possibly more. They are arguing or agreeing loudly about something. And laughing. Those people outside are attacking their house and breaking their windows and they’re laughing about it.

And then something slams into their bedroom window and flies through it, and glass is piecing off in every direction, and the noise of it is so loud it breaks Celia in half. She can’t understand how it could be so loud; it’s like a bomb has hit them, like the whole house is about to collapse. The window breaking goes on and on and fills the room, fills her brain with glass shards, and when it finally passes, the projectile is still moving, still plopping to rest on the carpet. It must be something hard, a brick or a missile, anything whose trajectory and weight would land it heavily on the floor, even
through the padding of the carpet. But there’s no thud this time. It’s a squishing sound, like something wet being squeezed. An object dense but full of moisture.

Daniel crouched behind the bed when the window broke to shield himself from the damage, but as soon as the motion stops he gets to his feet and comes around the bed, already in his slippers to ascertain the situation. To see what sort of ammunition they’re up against.

“Oh God,” he says. He stares down at it. Celia, still pinned on her back and unable to shift even to identify the object, which from Daniel’s eye-line must have landed near the foot of the bed, watches the revulsion sink into him.

“What is it?” she says.

He doesn’t answer. She forces herself to sit up against the resistance in her stomach, the certainty that this attack is meant for her and that it’s just as likely they want to hurt her as damage their house. Pulled up on her elbows, she leans outward to find it, and there it is: a dark red chunk of something, so wet it’s melting into the carpet fibers, a wad of who knows exactly what, without any particular shape to it, rounded on top and collapsed on the bottom but still sort of blending in as though trying to disappear.

“What is it?” she says again.

“I think it’s a pig’s heart,” he says.

And now that he’s said it she can find the veins, the slices of blue across it, the severed arteries. It looks like a flaccid mound of muscle, with the memory of power wafting from it but still decidedly dead and limp.

“You’re sure it’s a pig’s?” she says.

“It’s not human,” Daniel says.
“Dear God, why is someone throwing hearts at our house?” She forgets for a moment the people outside, can only focus on the organ on her floor, how full of the ghost of some creature it is, even motionless. She thinks she sees it moving, even though she’s conscious it’s just her vision coming out of focus, constantly trying to locate the organ in that shape in the floor and only finding the color red, radiating around itself and going in and out of its own shape. It’s too dead to possibly be beating, but it does look like it’s trying to crawl somewhere.

Through the hole in the window, they hear the voices again, this time clearer. There is conversation back and forth, but Celia only hears: “…got more, what should we do?”

Daniel’s jaw cracks. The attack has momentarily stopped, but she knows (and his face tells her so does he) it isn’t over. His limbs turn to fluid and he walks over the heart without any further consideration, opens a lower drawer in the nightstand on her side of the bed and pulls out a handgun. Switches off the safety, and heads for the door.

“Call the police,” he says, and disappears. As soon as she hears his feet start pounding down the stairs, she jumps up and follows him.

He hears her coming down after him and looks behind him briefly before opening the front door, this time yells, “Goddamnit, Celia, call the police.”

She stops at the bottom of the stairs and watches him looking out the window by the front door, holding the knob in his hand and not turning it. Outside is silent, as far as she can tell. Their living room, lit up by the mercury lamp, is shimmering with glass: on the furniture, in the carpet, the jagged edges of the remaining glass in its frame webbed outward from the impact point, where one of them pushed through. Another pig heart is
still where it landed on the couch, a streak of moisture trailing it from where it slid down the back cushions. On this one, the glass slit through some of the muscle and it has folded open like some disgusting fleshy flower.

Daniel arches his back into the door like he’s preparing to spring, then slams it open and emerges onto the cement front porch and screams, “Hey!” He pans the gun around the yard one-handed looking for them, and runs off to the left to chase them down, yelling, “Hey you!”

Someone says “Shit” and someone else laughs, and the sound of pants swipe across the lawn. Celia runs out onto the porch. By the time she’s there and can adjust to the burn of the light outside, their bodies are already slipping into the woods a hundred feet off, and Daniel is standing and breathing heavy in the middle of the grass, aiming his gun at the receding vandals and then firing it off into the air, one two three cracking, horrible shots. With each, he screams “Hey!” louder and more angrily, and each time it devolves further from language and more into grunting. The word so meaningless. What he hopes to get out of saying it, she cannot understand.

She does not dare move from the porch. The people on the lawn have gone now, but the grass is a sea of dead pig hearts, bounced off the siding or abandoned at various battle posts. The paint on the house glistens with the fresh pinkish splotches imprinted on its face, the stamps of disfigured heart shapes (ovals really) in uneven increments everywhere. There are more organs left behind than they could ever have hoped to fire off before being run off the property; some of them are scattered as though this were the intention, leaving the things behind to dye their lawn.

Are there other parts out there as well? Stomachs? Lungs? Coils of intestine
strung out in shapes, possibly hung from tree limbs like Christmas lights? She can’t see them. They might be out here, but all she can see are the hearts.

How can there be so many of them? How did they manage to bring so many and then scatter them all on foot?

And the muddy divots. Thick, erratic tire tracks cover the yard, paths constantly turning in quick, narrow arcs, an occasional dead end where the car must have abruptly slid to a stop and then jammed the other direction, the wheels spinning frantically beneath it. The perpetrators carefully avoided retracing paths, circled back and cut new perpendicular lines like the stripes of a vacuum cleaner’s wake sliced into carpet. All this is underneath the hearts; a couple of them actually landed in the mud slots, creating brown and red puddles where they dropped. There is no chance both acts were committed by the same people. There was no time for both; she and Daniel would have heard the car slopping around, the engine revving up and turning violently.

But there were sounds during dinner. She recalls the noises that Daniel pointedly ignored, the ones he claimed were nowhere near the house, the ones that were practically on top of them. The need she had to disregard it as her own imagination, the desperation to interpret them as a surplus of stress on her part rather than the real harassment of unknown individuals.

Celia curls up into herself. They have been targeted twice today by assailants intent on destroying their property, attacks that could not be random, since they have not suffered so much as a broken mailbox in their whole time living in Holland. And her release hasn’t even made it to the paper yet, will probably break in the Press tomorrow morning.
Then who knows what kind of hell will break loose.

Celia is still standing terrified on their porch, which has mercilessly been spared any damage; strangely they threw nothing at their front door, though this seems like it would be a greater insult. She finds Daniel again. He hasn’t moved from where he fired his gun in the air, except that he is kneeling now, on his shins and still holding the gun loose in one hand.

“Daniel?” she says.

He doesn’t answer. His breathing sounds labored even from fifty feet away.

“Are you okay?” she says. “Should I call the police?”

“No,” he says. “They won’t do anything to help us. We can’t catch those people.”

“Right.” There is no way for them to know who they were. Celia’s unsure if it’s even possible to find out how word of her release reached the public. The paper’s website was full of angry comments about her, from people who learned about the drop of the charges from, she assumes, Nineteen-Year-Old, her irritable night guard. But it was a Grand Rapids paper, based fifty miles away; how did anyone local enough find out about it and then take the trouble to do them harm, somehow collected the hearts of dozens of farm animals and came on foot to break their windows with them? How can there already be so much hatred for her out in the world?

And how much more is to come?

“Daniel?” she says again. Again he doesn’t answer. “We should go inside.”

He doesn’t move. She can see his shoulders pulsing, and this is the only thing that assures her that he’s still conscious. That is, until she hears sobs coming from his side of the lawn and realizes that his shoulders are shaking from crying, violent, miserable
weeping he is releasing into their yard. How beyond lost he must already be in this early stage of the process. How utterly foreign the sound is to her. It does not seem natural or conceivable, but this is the first time in seven years she’s heard her husband cry. She doesn’t try to stop it. She knows without having to ask that he wants her nowhere near him.
When Celia wakes the following morning, there are strange men in her house.
The bed beside her is empty, the heart from last night vanished from the floor, a bath rug dragged over the blood stain it left behind. The window hole taped over with opaque white construction plastic. It drifts when the wind gushes in, bleeds through with sunlight; it is a beautiful day outside.

When Daniel came in off the lawn last night, he simply passed her by. She held the door open for him, and he dripped on the carpet coming in, soaked in blood for the second time that evening. Any forgiveness he’d managed earlier was gone, no sympathy for her emotional reaction to the attack, since it was exacted upon her and he had been just an accidental (unfortunate) victim of it. His expression as he entered said that she was not the victim here. The vandalism was her fault.

She had slept the night alone in the crime scene. Celia thought when Daniel climbed the stairs wordlessly that his first goal would be to clean the bedroom enough to make it habitable for the night, and she did hear him walking around up there. But then the linen closet door opened and he walked back across the head of the stairs holding a sleeping bag and slammed his office door a moment later. She locked the front door twice: locked it, unlocked it, relocked it. She considering knocking on his door and trying to talk to him again, but the day had been long for him; maybe he just needed a night by himself sleeping on the floor to calm down.

So she went back to their bedroom. Daniel had closed the window curtains. The heart was gone. What could he have done with it? It wasn’t in the bathroom, and he had only been there and his office; had he taken it with him?

She climbed back into bed. She stared at the ceiling. Eventually she must have
slept, since she is just waking up from some measure of sleep, no matter how short. The bath rug wasn’t there when she came in, so he must have entered the room sometime this morning. He must have taped up plastic without waking her. He must have been up since well before dawn.

And now there are feet shuffling downstairs and the voices of men talking, and Celia is not entirely sure the police haven’t returned to bring her back in.

She emerges in her bathrobe and peers around the corner of the stairs. Daniel is in the foyer with a Holland policeman and a man in a leather jacket.

“It’s not your place to say whether my wife did anything wrong,” he says to the policeman, who is holding a notebook and not writing, occupying his hands. The man in the leather jacket pretends not to listen although he’s only three feet away from them.

“She hasn’t been charged with anything, and we both have the right to protection from harassment in our own home, regardless. They’ve broken windows and damaged siding, and they made a serious mess of our front lawn. What kind of sick person pelts someone’s property with animal parts?”

“Were either of you hurt?” the officer says.

“That’s irrelevant,” Daniel says. “They weren’t trying to hurt us, they were trying to scare us. And as far as I know, trespassing and damage of private property are still crimes. You are required to pursue this, I don’t give a shit what you’ve heard about my wife. We deserve a certain level of respect here.”

“I understand your concern, Mr. Guardian, but there isn’t a whole lot we can do about this, and you know it. You don’t know who these people were, and we have nothing to go on except a bunch of pig hearts. There is a very small possibility of us ever
finding these men, and even if we do, there’s almost no way we could prove they’re responsible. Now if they give you any more trouble, you should call us first instead of taking matters into your own hands.”

“And, I suppose, wait for them to cause more damage to my house while your people take your time getting out here?”

“Sir, I talked to your neighbors, and no one saw any of these men last night. But they did hear shots being fired. I’m assuming that was you.”

“I have a right to defend my home as I see fit, and that is a licensed gun.”

“Nevertheless, firing on those guys probably didn’t help the situation any.”

Daniel sighed. “I only fired a couple of shots into the air, I never once aimed at them. Now are you going to do anything about this or not? We have reason to believe this will happen again as long as Mrs. Guardian’s name is in the press, and it’s your job to protect her, both of us, from any additional vandalism, or worse. This could easily escalate to some sort of violence.”

“Now, if you have any more trouble you can give us a call. But until then, I don’t think we can help you. Maybe if you’d called us last night.”

“It’s deeply reassuring that our tax dollars are going to such good use,” Daniel says. He opens the door, and for a moment the two men simply look at each other. The officer seems tempted to respond, but instead walks out to his car without saying another word.

The man in the leather jacket says, “You can file a complaint against him, I suppose. Call the press and tell them that the cops and the public are teaming up to harass you two. Conspiracy sells.”
“Come on, I knew they weren’t going to do a damn thing. I don’t think the man wanted to admit seeing a yard full of hearts scared the shit out of him.” He looks up at her leaned against the wall at the top of the stairs. “Come down here, Celia.”

She shuffles down, uncomfortably aware she’s walking around in her bathrobe in front of a stranger. “That didn’t sound good.”

“The cops aren’t going to do much to help you, Celia, you’re going to have to deal with that. Everyone assumes you’ve brought this on yourself and you deserve a lot worse.”

“Great.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Daniel says. “We’re not going to make any friends this early in the game.” He pulls the other man toward them gently, and the man gives her a look of reverence that seems better suited for viewing carnivorous zoo animals. “This is Jake. He works with our firm sometimes, protective services for clients. He’s going to be here during the day to watch the house for us, patrol outside to keep reporters out and make sure we don’t have anymore trouble. He’ll be here whenever I’m not.”

“Ma’am,” Jake says.

“What about when I go out?” Celia says. “He’s not going to follow me around, is he?”

“Why don’t you head out for now,” Daniel says to Jake. “I’ll have cleaning people in here half the day taking care of this mess.”

Jake tries to smile at her and fails, then lets himself out, paying a strange amount of attention to closing the door behind him quietly.

“He looked like he thinks he’s protecting a killer,” she says.
“I’ll make you some breakfast.” He goes to the kitchen without waiting for her to answer. When she follows him he is already prepping to make eggs, the skillet on the stove turned all the way up.

“Do you want me to do it?” Celia says. Daniel shrugs.

“You didn’t answer my question,” she says. “Is that guy going to be trailing me everywhere?”

Daniel stares at the carton of eggs, like he is still, at his age, trying to piece together how they get into the skillet and turn into something scrambled and fluffy.

“It’s obvious that all this hasn’t sunk in for you yet,” he says. “You don’t get to just go on with your life. While my colleagues put together your defense, you have to stay out of harm’s way, and definitely away from the fucking press. And I think you’ve shown you’re in no place to make decisions right now, especially since you’re experiencing a pretty serious mental breakdown. As it is you’re a danger to both of us, and I’m putting you under house arrest until further notice.”

“Jesus, Daniel, I’m not your daughter. You can’t just hold me prisoner.” She walks over and brings the heat up to half, noses her way between him and the eggs.

“Yes I can,” Daniel says, leaning back into the refrigerator. “Jake is here to keep you indoors as much as he is to protect you. He will stop you leaving if he has to. This is for your own good, Celia. This is only going to get worse.”

As she cracks the egg into the pan, Daniel goes to the dining room and brings back the Sunday Press, spewing ad glossies to the floor as he does so. Normally meticulous about cleaning up after himself (claiming always that he only wants to lower her load of housework), he doesn’t notice them or ignores them. If she mentions them,
though, or grabs them herself to put them in the trash, she’d be pissing him off unnecessarily, and so she stirs her eggs and watches the ominous paper coming toward her.

“They know you’ve been let go,” he says. “There’s an article about it in the front section, and it’s not trying too hard to be impartial. They’ve got some of your mother’s neighbors in here crying miscarriage of justice and police incompetence and ‘I guess anyone can just get away with murder these days if their husband’s a lawyer,’ that sort of thing. And if you think last night was ugly, just wait until the next load of crazies sees it in print. And the police aren’t going to intervene unless someone tries to blow up our house.”

Celia looks down at the face of the paper as she waits for the eggs to catch. Neither of them makes a move to open it. Yesterday was enough. She’s not sure she can read another one.

“Those people that were here last night knew about this before the press even got ahold of it,” Daniel says. “I don’t know how the hell they did it. My office is looking into it for the time being, but I think it’s someone who knew Cass. My assistant hacked into his email and found some things that could be relevant. The name Eleanor Rigby mean anything to you?”

Celia stabs into the mixture with her spatula, scrapes away at it viciously. Some of it has already burnt, although she’s been watching it this whole time. It hurts that her husband was accusing her of murdering her brother yesterday and is now nonchalantly talking about digging through his emails, unaware of his own disrespect. It hurts her that the eggs aren’t cooking properly.
“The Beatles song?” she says.

“It’s a screenname that comes from the song, yeah. We’re still figuring out her real name. I think it’s his internet girlfriend. They’ve been talking back and forth online about some singer from the 80’s. And she wrote him a bunch of frantic emails around the time he died, including the last couple of days; she must not have found out he was dead right away. But if she read the article yesterday about you getting arrested, there’s a pretty good chance she had something to do with that shit last night.”

It hasn’t previously occurred to her that Cass could have been with someone, that he no longer hid in his room like he did when they were children. He was twenty-two, but his possible sex life seems ugly and inappropriate. She has no right to be angry, but learning about this girlfriend only now is infuriating, bordering on betrayal. She knew almost nothing about Cass until just hours ago, and some woman was so deeply involved with him she is frantic with his disappearance. Their only meeting thus far could be through drywall, Eleanor exacting revenge by bombarding them with viscera. Claiming Cass as her own loss, when Celia is the one who had to grow up with him.

“But even if we catch up with her, that doesn’t mean this is the end of it. There are just going to be new nut jobs after this, people with too much time on their hands who are going to make you suffer until the police pick you up again. Trust me, you won’t want to go out anywhere. Jake might not even be enough as it is.”

The eggs take forever to clot fully, and she just can’t understand it. She stirs and stirs and they stay liquid, splashing every which way, the cooked parts little floatation devices in the surf. She looks across the counter and notices that she has absentmindedly emptied every egg in the carton into the pan. Twelve eggs swimming around, refusing to
solidify.

“They’re cooking a little slow,” she says.

He looks into the pan for the first time. “Why the hell did you make so many eggs?” Daniel says. “Who do you think is going to eat those?”

“Sorry,” Celia says. “Wasn’t thinking.” The eggs finally begin to fluff, and she flips the clumps over with her spatula. “Should I be worried about getting hurt?”

“Well, I still don’t think they actually want to do anything to you, besides make you miserable,” Daniel says. “I’m guessing they want to make sure you’re paying for it in some way until they gather enough media attention to get your case picked back up. They probably figure the police just dropped the matter altogether when they let you go. I’m sure they’ll try to get some press attention going about you, make sure everyone knows you’re some horrible sadistic murder who’s been unfairly released back into the wild.”

Celia is stupidly unprepared for this. She’s eleven years old standing in a hallway crying and watching Cass bleed, crying because she knows she didn’t really do anything to him and really he’s not even that badly hurt, but a part of her knows she wanted him to be and is sick over it. She knows she didn’t hurt Cass. She knows she was nowhere near Hazard when he died that afternoon. But today, half the state is reading their newspapers and searching between the lines of an article that suggests the police weren’t doing their jobs. They are picturing her getting sent home to Holland with her lawyer husband and viciously refusing to mourn, happily gloating like a cartoon villain that she’s gotten away with it one more time. And last night at least three individuals were here (tracked her down, hunted her) ripping up her yard and pelting the house with bloody organs (acquired from where, how the hell do you get your hands on that many hearts?) just to
torture her, to punish her for whatever they think she is guilty of, and Daniel is certain there will be more. And two days ago she was arrested in front of her childhood home, a couple dozen feet only from where Cass succumbed, by individuals so fully convinced of her guilt that they needed to share their disgust with her, who were definitely furious when some superior forbade them to charge her, definitely convinced that they’d been robbed of their opportunity to bring her to justice.

And why are so many people so convinced of her guilt? So certain that, although she loves her brother and has always wanted to protect him, has felt duty-bound to do so since their father walked out on all of them, there was something in her which made her suddenly, without any particular motivation to do so, brutally murder him? Hasn’t anyone wondered how it translates that a woman with no violent tendencies for no reason is unanimously believed to have driven two hours and chopped up her brother one afternoon?

“We need to set this straight,” Celia says. She’s tearing up and can’t see right, but she can smell her finished eggs starting to overbrown on the bottom, so she turns off the burner, takes plates out of the cupboard and divvies up the big disgusting pile of them for the two of them to pick through. “We have to figure out why everyone thinks I did this, and what the misunderstanding is. Can we ask the police in Hazard why they think I did it?”

“They’re not going to help you put a defense together, Celia. If they think you did it, their job is to put as much as evidence possible together before you have a chance to cover your tracks. That’s why they arrested you right after the service. To catch you off-guard.”
“How am I supposed to fix this then? I can’t prove they’re wrong without knowing why they’re accusing me.” She gives him his plate, and he takes it, and then holds it like he’s not sure what it is.

“You can’t do anything here,” he says. The “here” is emphasized with the eggs, which scatter in small clumps onto the floor. His voice is reaching its point of carefully elevated volume without actual yelling, where it goes when he’s angry at her and wants to keep the rational upper hand. “Like I said, they do have something substantial on you, whatever it is, whether you like it or not, and anything you do is just going to dig you in deeper on this. I’m going in to the office soon, and my colleagues and I will start working on piecing this together ourselves. You—just stay out of trouble. Don’t leave the house and don’t try to figure anything out. If you want, we’ll keep you updated.”

Daniel drops his plate on the counter and walks upstairs. Like he knows he’s won at something.

By the time he comes back down a half hour later, she is sitting in the dining room trying to avoid staring at the blood stains on the living room couch. The mountain of eggs are long since cold, still plated, on the kitchen counter.

“Hey,” he says, poking his head in, dressed inexplicably in a suit even though it’s a Sunday. “There’ll be people coming in soon to take care of the lawn and the furniture in here. Just let them in and go hide in your book room and please don’t talk to them. I doubt they’ll bother you, but it doesn’t hurt to be cautious. And Jake will be around by then watching the place, but just in case, don’t answer the door for anyone else.”

“I’m an adult,” Celia says. “I’m twenty-six years old. I do not need to be told not to open the door for strangers.”
Daniel frowns at her but doesn’t answer. The door slams on his way out to the garage.

After his car pulls out, Celia goes to the front door and unlocks it so the cleaning people can let themselves in, so they won’t have the chance to look at her and puzzle. She goes up to the computer in her book room and turns it on.

Maybe, she thinks, she should call Jean, now that she’s alone for the first time since the start of all this. She misses her mother now like she never has before. But how much anger does Jean have pent up inside her now, between a runaway husband and a dead son and a screwed-up, possibly homicidal daughter? How many pushy cops and news articles will it take before Celia gets cut off completely, before Jean gets an Order of Protection and renounces the last member of her family to the press?

She’ll call later then. When she knows that her name is cleared and Jean will let her in the door.

Fuck Daniel. She opens the browser and steers back to Cass’ blog, to read for clues. This is what she’s got for now. Not much.

But how much has changed since a week ago today? On a normal weekend morning alone, knowing that her front yard is unguarded and her safety going outside isn’t yet an issue, would she talk to her mother, would she take the car into town, would she spend more than an hour out of this room?

How small a person was she before this began?

Where in that first blog entry Celia was the only notably absent family member, for the rest of its three-year run, all of the others are sparse as well, receded into the
background behind his exhaustive research and speculation about Richard Marx and his mysterious song. Spliced into these are various topics which seem unrelated: other songs from around the same time which he picks apart and then tosses aside; snippets of history local and distant, ranging from the heavily quoted and cited from other sources to the blatantly invented, items about their own town of Hazard that are foreign to her and sound fictional; the rehashing of arguments had between himself and internet strangers on message boards whose topics he readily admits he knows nothing about, though not as he’s actually arguing with those strangers; the occasional one-sentence note to Eleanor after the first few months, most of them vaguely affectionate. The rest is Hazard the Song and Richard Marx the Man and how one became a part of the other, how Marx managed to write the song and where it might have derived from and what it might have done to him, how Cass traced his fade from the public eye, without any clear evidence, to the moment the American people heard that song and eventually put together that something was not quite right.

But it wasn’t just that Cass thought Marx was hiding something, that the musical murder could have been real, Mary the victim an actual person who was actually victimized, Marx either partly responsible for her death or privy to information about it, the song an arrogant reveal to the listeners of Adult Contemporary music who would never bother to investigate. Cass was finding himself in the lyrics, wondering if the song had some strange significance for him, suggesting that filling the holes the song left blissfully behind as Marx enjoyed his popularity was now his responsibility, the only thing that was going to give him any meaning. It was never said explicitly. But Charles Chapman, in the years leading up to his death, was obviously miserable.
“I can make sense of a town whose residents don’t particularly care for one sketchy teenager (or guy in his twenties I guess; Richard never mentions an age in this song, and the music video doesn’t answer much; he’s just a big ambiguous mullet for most of it) without knowing the exact reason. The sketchy teenager is telling the story, so you know he’s not going to admit to doing anything that might put them off. If he’s a delinquent, or has a nasty violent streak, or everyone thinks he sexually assaulted a bunch of girls from school (or he actually did), he’s not going to admit to it. A man accused of murder after a lifetime of suspicious looks from his neighbors won’t confess to the possibility that yes, he’s done some things that make him look good for this crime, regardless of whether he did it or not. He goes on the defensive, he plays the victim, he paints you a picture of years of persecution that will end in tragedy, so even if he goes down swinging you still feel sorry for him.

“All that makes sense. But the first lines of HAZARD go as follows:

“*My mother came to Hazard when I was just seven...*

“*Even then the folks in town said with prejudiced eyes,*

“*‘That boy’s not right.’*

“Never mind the awkward wording of the first line (which makes it sound like maybe Mom was arriving on her own and Richie’s already been here by himself for a while, probably not intentional). The first thing he tells us is those people hated him since the moment he got here, *at the age of seven.* He was just a little kid, and for some reason, they immediately decided something was off about him. They reject a seven-year-old boy right from the get-go.
“How do you come to the conclusion that a seven-year-old is messed up in the head? What can be so wrong with him that they turn against him that soon, assume so early that he’s ‘not right’? That’s not just delinquency, that’s insanity they’re accusing him of. The devil got his hands on that boy, and the best medicine for him is a healthy dose of well-intentioned shunning.

“Who do we side with here? He tells us it’s just prejudice, that all the hatred has somehow been bestowed unfairly on a kid too young to fend for himself. So, of course, the townspeople are the monsters here. In the video, they sure look like monsters, and he just an innocent child. It’s hard not to feel bad for him.

“But how does an entire town turn on a little boy without any good reason? If he’s illegitimate, the people turn on the mother maybe, and take pity on the child. If this were a few hundred years ago, maybe some sort of deformity or weird behavior could have convinced them of witchcraft, could have made them worry that their children would come home cross-eyed or broken if they looked at him the wrong way. But with that kind of mullet, this is a child of the early eighties. And even in Nebraska, that many people are not going to pass judgment on a child unless he’s done something truly awful already, or is so mentally malformed that he poses a danger to others.

“But the song doesn’t want you to contemplate this. The song wants you to hear this poor kid’s plight, and feel pity. And want to rescue him from the harm you know is going to come his way, and then really feel guilty when these evil people refuse to give him the fighting chance that every human being deserves.

“And Mary found dead by the river is just one more moment of bad luck. It’s insult piled on top of injury. The only person who was ever nice to him mysteriously
comes up dead, and the town of Hazard has the nerve to pin it on him? What kind of
monster do they think he is?

“I just can’t figure it out.

“The disturbing and obvious truth here is that I’m superimposing myself on top of
our narrator. I am a lifelong resident of Hazard, Michigan. My family has never been
popular here; we’ve made some enemies without even trying. My father has been gone
for a very long time. Now I am that boy who lives alone with his mother, although
actually I’m that twenty-year-old who lives alone with his mother and doesn’t feel
especially welcomed by the people inhabiting the ten-mile radius around him but who
still has no better place to go.

“I don’t really remember being seven. But I have never been a person who gets
positive attention from adults or peers. Or who has friends. I’ve generally been
complacent about it, if not particularly happy.

“But re-encountering this song has thrown me off balance. After years of doing
not much with my time, finding it again in a local diner put me on a kind of mission. A
self-acquittal of sorts. A quest to clear myself of anything the local people have unfairly
accused me of. It gave me something to occupy myself with, something that might give
me some positive direction, a new lens I could see myself through and then, like its
narrator, ‘leave this old Nebraska town’ (although not actually Nebraska, obviously, since
my town is in Michigan).

“But I’m starting to see I’m no longer looking for clues that get the narrator of
HAZARD off the hook, anything that proves for sure that he’s been set up for this (even
the video points us in the direction of the voyeuristic sheriff but also makes the narrator
look kind of bad, sitting by the river chopping off his hair in order to purge himself of something unpleasant). There’s a little too much making him look guilty. Misunderstood perhaps, treated unjustly possibly, but definitely not beyond suspicion. The song is trying to create pathos for our narrator, but this sympathy only makes it that much more uncomfortable when we realize he might have really killed her, he might have murdered the one person who had ever given him the benefit of the doubt.

“I’m not sure I’m ready for the kind of ugliness that idea stirs up.

“And I’m not sure that interpretation offers me any sort of future. If I’m condemning him then I’m condemning myself. If he truly is evil, then I have no idea what that makes me.

“In the past I’ve mostly looked forward and seen nothing. But now I’m looking, and only finding a handful of threatening dead-ends.”

Celia skips to the beginning of the next entry to see if he continues this thought. Instead, he pushes on to a few brief sentences about a Vonnegut novel he’s just finished and then abruptly cuts off, doesn’t return to write anything else for about a month.

The blog goes on for another two years after this. She imagines him holding on to that worry, repeating a question in his head that no one should ever have to answer about themselves: what if there’s nothing in me worth saving?

She skims through the couple dozen entries that follow that and finally falls on an extremely short one three months later titled “Doug Adams.”
“Just finished reading *The Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy*. Ever heard of this guy? Who knew this book was so damn good?”

Celia finds she’s having trouble breathing, and has to lie flat on the floor looking up at the ceiling for over an hour before her head comes back to her.

Celia hates Wikipedia and can’t nail down exactly why. The information, maybe, seems too easily attainable. So much so that it’s untrustworthy to her, although after years of existing the website has gained in credibility, is meticulous enough in its expectations that full-out lies are rare in it, partial misjudgments a little more likely. It strikes her as a place to go to in order to acquire information that fills gaps in memory, expands upon topics that already have a certain amount of urgency to them. You know enough about something to come to Wikipedia grasping for more. Although there are functions in place that allow you to skip through at random and pick up things you didn’t know to look for, its strivings for comprehensive coverage make it as dry as a traditional encyclopedia, learning without a purpose.

In the past, she’s avoided it. But today it contains the story of a woman that a couple of crazy message board respondents have compared her to, and Celia needs to know what she’s up against: another falsely accused sufferer of slander or a genuine cold-blooded killer.
She opens the link for the “Frying Pan Killer” that she bookmarked yesterday.
The photo is a woman in handcuffs, the picture grainy, obviously scanned from a
seventies newspaper article, her face creased over and yellowed with age. Her hair is
feathered and stuck in wet clumps along the sides of her face. She is maybe in her
mid-thirties. She is strangely calm.

**Elaine Kessler**

“Frying Pan Killer” redirects here.

**Elaine Kessler** nee Marks (born March 17, 1948), also known as the **Frying Pan Killer**, was suspected but never convicted of killing her husband **Gene Kessler** in their home in Hazard, Michigan. She was given the nickname the Frying Pan Killer when the Hazard Police Department reported that the murder weapon was a large blunt object, likely a frying pan, but the pan was not recovered from the scene. A cast iron skillet was found to be missing from the set in the Kesslers’ kitchen, but police were unable to confirm that it was the murder weapon, and it did not turn up in the course of the investigation.

Elaine was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, and met Gene at Hazard High School in 1964. The two dated for three years and were married in 1967. They moved into the house where the murder took place in 1969. Neighbors who were questioned claim they heard frequent fighting from the Kessler home during the years they lived there, but this was
contradicted by other locals, who said Elaine seemed friendly and that the couple, though not often social with other townspeople, acted generally happy together up until the murder.

Documents were released later revealing that Elaine had been admitted to a local hospital with severe cuts and broken ribs and arms on multiple occasions, and that these were investigated after the fact as domestic abuse injuries. The legitimacy of these documents were never confirmed. Elaine admitted that her marriage had been difficult but refused to discuss any specifics, and did not confirm or deny the abuse allegations.

On the afternoon of June 3, 1978, next-door neighbors to the Kessler house placed a 911 call when they heard what sounded like an altercation coming from inside. When the police arrived, Elaine’s car was not in the driveway, nor was she home. Upon entering, officers found Gene dead on their living room floor with rigor mortis already setting in, thus indicating that he had been dead for at least two hours. This conflicted with the time the report was made by their neighbor, who later admitted she had waited a while to make the emergency call. She said she had heard similar noises from their house on previous occasions, and did not want to intervene “unless it was absolutely necessary,” since she assumed the Kesslers would prefer to be left to themselves.

Gene bled out from cranial trauma sustained from repeated blows to the head with a broad, blunt object. Elaine returned home after the body had been removed from the home, claiming she’d been running errands for hours. Police reported that she became
hysterical when told of her husband’s death, crying that she’d had no idea her husband was even home, since he was supposed to be visiting his brother in Grand Haven, Michigan. Brother James confirmed that Gene was visiting him the day before the murder, but said that he had driven back a few hours earlier than he originally planned because he had housework to finish before returning to work the next day.

Police arrested Elaine when a search of the kitchen for a potential weapon found that one of a set of four cast-iron skillets was missing. An autopsy reported flecks of metal lodged in the head wound. A few neighbors of the Kesslers came forward in the following days, alleging that Elaine had been openly unhappy in her marriage and speculating that she had planned to murder Gene in retaliation for years of physical abuse (though others contradicted this claim, saying she had never shown any such signs publicly). The Grand Rapids Press printed an article on her alleged hospital reports, but local police responded by saying that these reports were forgeries created to support Elaine’s guilt. The name of the hospital did not appear anywhere on the documents, and their veracity was never determined.

Elaine was tried for the murder but was found not guilty. The defense cited testimony from two individuals who saw her at stores in Hazard on the day of the murder, and the weapon itself was never recovered. During the trial, Elaine testified that the skillet set was a family heirloom which had been passed to her after she got married and was already short one pan; thus the “missing” one could not have been the murder weapon. Media coverage of the murder prior to the verdict was largely sympathetic toward Elaine,
supporting the suggestion that she was suffering from battered wife syndrome. But her
dismissive and uncooperative attitude during the trial received widespread negative
attention. Public outcry after she was acquitted claimed that police were biased in her
favor and had possibly tampered with evidence. There were allegations that the weapon
was recovered and then lost, possibly intentionally, though these were generally
dismissed.

Although it was not commonly believed that any police corruption was present in the
case, the general feeling locally after the trial was that Elaine was guilty of the murder
and had manipulated police and jury into pitying her. In the months following the
acquittal, she made numerous calls to local police about threatening phone calls and
damage to her home. At one point, her garage burned down. Investigators found
accelerant present and confirmed it was arson, but various newspapers speculated that
Elaine had done it herself in order to draw sympathy. No one was ever arrested for the
crime.

In 1981, Elaine left Hazard and moved to an unknown location. The Kessler house was
never sold and was repeatedly damaged by vandals for years until the case eventually left
the public eye. Elaine continues to be known locally as the Frying Pan Killer, although
she never returned to Michigan. Stories about her in local legend as well as print
consistently demonize her as a vicious, vindictive wife and characterize Gene as a gentle
man who was taken in by her charms. Brother James Kessler funded a memorial on the
Gene and Elaine Kessler property and has on several occasions called for a renewal of the
investigation to clear his brother’s name of any suspicion of domestic abuse and to prove Elaine’s guilt conclusively. The case remains unsolved.

Elaine reportedly changed her name and moved out of the United States in 1981. A Muskegon newspaper reported in 1993 that she had died of a heart attack in Phoenix, Arizona under the name Esther Marks, but this was later disproved. Elaine’s whereabouts are currently unknown.

Jake knocks on the door of Celia’s book room as she’s reading.

“Mrs. Guardian?” he says. “Are you in there?”

She doesn’t answer.

“The cleaning people said you weren’t answering the door, and I noticed you left it unlocked,” he says. “I just wanted to say that’s probably not a good idea, under the circumstances.”

She looks at the door, almost as though she expects to see his image through it.

“Why?” she says.

“It’s just not safe,” he says. “It’s better to be cautious. They’re going to come inside now and clean up. If you just wanted to stay in there.”

He waits. She doesn’t speak. She turns back to the computer screen and stares at the words “rigor mortis.”

“You need anything?” Jake says. “You doing okay?”

“I’m napping. I’m fine.”

“Okay,” Jake says. “I’ll be outside.”
“Hey,” she says, and gets up and opens the door a crack, and there he is on the other side, just where she knew he’d be. “I have a question for you.”

Jake looks back at her, but doesn’t say anything. His face is red and sweaty from standing outside.

“Did Daniel tell you anything about me?” she says. “Or anything about what he’s doing? Did he talk about all this with you?”

“I know the people are cleaning up the mess from last night,” he says. “He said he’d be back in the evening. This should all only be a temporary thing, so that’s good.”

“Did he tell you what I did?” she says. She does not know why she phrased it like that. Except possibly to scare him. To remind him he’s alone in a house with a murderer, even if she is smaller than him.

“This should all get cleared up quickly, I’m guessing,” Jake says. He doesn’t smile, holds her eye line like he’s testing her. “They usually do. I wouldn’t worry about it too much.”

He pulls the doorknob on his side toward him and out of her hand, which she notices now is a little bit clammy, and repeats “I’ll be outside” through the closed door.

His footsteps recede, and sure enough a couple minutes later she sees him from the window, emerging back on to the lawn and walking around to the back of the house. Two women in plastic aprons and rubber gloves are collecting the hearts in industrial-size garbage bags and hosing down the puddles of blood in the grass. The lawn is half-flooded with it; the women are slopping through the mess in boots that aren’t doing much, diluted blood soaked up to their knees from over-watering the lawn. Another pair of footsteps is shuffling around downstairs, and voices exchange words that sound like Spanish but
could just be muffled through the walls.

She sits back to continue reading, slowly, struggling with the syntax occasionally and rereading things that make less sense the second time around. Someone brought a wet vac in to work on the inside mess and it explodes on in the living room; the carpet sounds like it’s drowning, the fierce choppy strokes across it and then the upholstery like an animal gasping for air and instead pulling more water into its lungs. She hears another person pass her door on the way to the bedroom. She tries to ignore it.

She keeps reading.

She can’t make sense of it. It feels a little like Cass trying to decipher Richard Marx, but this isn’t a song. It’s a Wikipedia article whose contents are probably not totally reliable and are definitely a little biased (is it really proper research technique to say “many people felt” something?), but still--she expects to find concrete clues leading to a solution on one side or the other, since this is her only source on the topic. Thirty years ago, Elaine Kessler was a woman who may or may not have been abused by her husband; may or may not have been home when her husband arrived back early from his brother’s house; may or may not have owned a heavy frying pan whose weight on normal days was too much for her, who usually couldn’t even get it back to its upper shelf storage spot (and maybe Gene had to do it for her and teased her about it), but on that day, may or may not have swung it so deftly it surprised both of them even as neither was surprised how hard it hit him, as dense it was, how only one blow brought him down to the floor and made the subsequent swings a whole lot easier. The pan may have been lost or corroded and thrown out years ago (Mrs. Marks, Elaine’s mother, presumably no
longer alive to confirm or deny whether that fourth skillet had ever lived in the Kessler home), or may have been one of the mysterious unnamed errands Elaine was running that day: stopping at the grocery store and picking up dry-cleaning and murdering her husband and stashing the murder weapon someplace entirely out of reach and then driving back across town to buy Gene the kind of bourbon he liked from the only liquor store in 20 miles that carried it.

She could have done it or not. She could have been justified in doing it, after years of being tossed down stairs, punched in the face, cut with glass, struck across the mid-section with one of Gene’s own vague blunt objects, and done it only to make him stop, or she could have been happily married until the day she got sick of him. The trick isn’t in the truth at this point, what really hides behind the Wikipedia retelling and whatever stories still float around in the community (that somehow Celia has never heard), but in the stories themselves, the fact that, whatever happened the day, everyone else has their version of it and that’s why Elaine Kessler was finally forced out of her home. Bombed out, smoked out of it. They hated her so much they blamed the burned-down garage on her, could find no sympathy and offered no help.

In 1977, she was a woman whose husband may have treated her badly, even gotten her hospitalized. In 1979, she was the woman who charmed her way out of a life sentence. In 1981, she was a woman who was made to suffer repeatedly but could never suffer enough, and now that she managed to run off undetected, had found one more way to get away with it. Could still be getting away with it today.

Celia is uncomfortable guessing whether Elaine did it or not, knows she’s too eager to place herself in the story. Just because she’s being falsely accused of killing her
brother doesn’t mean Elaine was innocent thirty years ago, doesn’t mean she didn’t
deserve all the ugliness that came down on her, doesn’t mean that, even if Gene had
every bit of it coming, Elaine wasn’t overstepping the law to get rid of him. It’s
dangerous to sympathize with a Wikipedia entry. And it won’t do her any good, since this
is probably what Celia is in for too, years of being demonized regardless of the outcome,
no matter how well she proves herself innocent of it.

What she does know, without anyone telling her, is that Elaine Kessler, Frying
Pan Killer or not, is still alive and is not in Phoenix, Arizona, and certainly hasn’t left the
country. Or if she did, she’s been back for a long time, and no one noticed because by the
time she came back most people had forgotten who she was or where she lived. Her
neighbors have all moved away, like half the Hazard population from 30 years ago. She
is probably re-installed in that house, still cooking simple meals in the kitchen with those
pans, watching television in the room where her husband died, maybe buying groceries a
couple of towns over, working a quiet office job to make ends meet under that assumed
name just to be careful, even though she could fill out two dozen job applications with
“Elaine Kessler” and disperse them to businesses around Hazard and no one would likely
say a word. She was gone for a while, but she still has a house in Michigan and the
seventies were a long time ago; there just aren’t enough people around to remember
anymore. Hazard back then was three times as big. Though just as venomous.

She is also fairly certain that Elaine was at the jail Friday night (for the first time,
presumably, since that afternoon thirty years ago when she was arrested). And Elaine was
the one who left her that book about grief, about holding on to yourself as you start to
feel like everything you were before is someone you lost, and now you’re nothing, now
you are only your grief. How long did Elaine exist defined only by Gene’s death, like she
ceased to be a person to everyone around her and turned into walking death, just the
vessel through which her husband was murdered? Elaine must have heard about Celia’s
arrest, must have understood that a woman who attends her brother’s funeral cannot be
his killer and predicted the turmoil Celia was about to go through. She wanted to offer
any consolation she could. Maybe the book was some help to her years ago, after she
escaped.

But she would have revealed her name when they asked at the desk Friday night.
Because the pseudonym would have meant nothing to Celia, might have concerned her
with its anonymity, and her real name would have marked her, announced to everyone
that the Frying Pan Killer had come back to town to bring sympathy to a fellow
woman-murderer. Would have ripped Elaine’s life wide open again and further biased the
community against Celia, made her look guilty from all sides.

So, Celia figures, when the opportunity appears and Jake is no longer stalking
around the house trying to protect her, she’ll have to seek Elaine out herself.

When Daniel gets home in the evening, the cleaning people are already gone and
have done a lousy job. This, anyway, is what he’s griping about as he comes into the
house.

“The fucking lawn is flooded!” he yells, probably to himself, but his voice bleeds
through the ceiling and into her closed room. “And what a surprise! There’s still a big red
stain in the middle of the living room floor! So glad I paid professionals to come into my
home and take care of that!”
Celia comes out and stands at the top of the stairs. The rest of the house is cooling off rapidly from the broken windows, still covered in construction plastic. It smells like the outdoors, and the wind is everywhere, sneaking through crevices in the poorly sealed plastic. It billows; the whole house sounds like it’s on a cliff, like the wind is coming to blow everything away. She might be exaggerating. She’s been locked in a room all day with the blinds closed.

“Is someone coming to fix those?” Celia asks.

Daniel looks up at her like he assumes she’s been waiting there the whole damn day for him. “No,” he says. “I thought I’d just leave it like that. The plastic looks better anyway.” He rubs his scalp and when he pulls his hand away his hair is a catastrophe. “They’re coming tomorrow. Repair guys never work on weekends.”

“What do you want for dinner?” She walks down to him and foolishly hopes for some kind of affection. But he’s too grumpy to touch her. It could be any other day. His work face is no more congested with built-up anger than it was any day before she was arrested.

“I brought pizza,” he says, and so he did; it’s sitting on the entryway table in the spot normally reserved for the mail.

“I could have cooked,” Celia says. “It’s not like I have anything else to do.”

“You’re distraught,” he says.

“I’m going to go crazy with nothing to do,” she says. “Figure anything out today?”

“This isn’t a mystery novel, Celia,” Daniel says, peeling off his jacket, clawing out of his tie. “We’re not going to solve this. We put together as many details as we can
so we’re prepared for your defense. Criminal lawyers would rather not solve cases. No one wants to prove their client is guilty and then have to defend him in court. We’re only interested in the things that prove your innocence. Or at least set up reasonable doubt.”

Celia thinks of Elaine. She thinks of that frying pan that nobody found. The reasonable doubt declared by the jury but not by her neighbors, who would roast her for years because they could find no doubt in their minds, no reason to go easy on her.

“But if I am innocent, doesn’t it make more sense to prove that?”

Daniel scowls. “You ready to eat?” Then he heads to the dining room with the box, and Celia has the weird momentary feeling that he’s running away from her with it, that he is going to make her chase him for the food.

They eat mostly in silence; she brings in the plates and he brings her a glass of water and pours himself some wine, doesn’t bother to ask if she wants some, which is just as well because she doesn’t. When they’re done they watch TV for hours, for an eternity.

“As Jake still here?” she asks during a commercial break. She is on the couch and he is back in his chair but not reading, gazing religiously at the television even during the most infuriating advertisements.

“For the next few nights I asked him to make a couple of late sweeps,” he says. “He’s going to drive by to get a good look at the woods and then walk around for a few minutes, just to make sure no one’s loitering out there. If he finds anyone, he’ll call the cops. Won’t even bother us.”

“Do you think they’re coming back?” Celia says.

“Not tonight anyway. That’d be asking to get arrested. Someone else maybe though. But Jake’s armed. My hope is that no one dangerous will try to bother us after
three in the morning, and hopefully not before then. I’m pretty sure of it, actually.”

He looks like he’s about to explode. She knows one part of him wants to be the condescending husband he’s so good at playing, the one so certain of things she can’t stop worrying about that he can’t resist comforting her and ridiculing her at the same time. The other part knows someone could try to burn their house down or send bullets through their windows instead of harmless projectiles, and is furious about taking so many precautions for it, will likely not sleep properly for the next few weeks, terrified for his own life even as he’s so pissed he almost wants to end hers, almost wishes she’d drive into a brick wall and end this nonsense right now. She knows he loves her more than that, is certainly not so heartless as to really want her to die. But his temper is ugly and gets worse when he can’t control it, when he feels powerless to stop himself.

It will comfort him to fix things for her. He will plan her defense and she will plan one of her own, prove she’s innocent just as he’s proving she might not be guilty. Essentially the same thing.

They go to bed late. The rug is back in the bathroom, all fluffed up like someone put it through the washing machine, but as in the living room there’s still a pink stain on the floor.

*Hello, pink stain, Celia thinks. I’m guessing you’re going to be here for quite some time, so we might as well be friends.* Daniel groans when he sees it.

“Fucking cleaning bitches,” he mutters.

Celia sleeps with the assurance of someone who knows there’s a new kind of normal now, and at least she can take comfort that things will be like this for a while. Until, hopefully, they aren’t anymore. Until something gets better.
Until Daniel figures out she’s been through hell for no good reason, and knocks her over with his rush of compassion, remembers that his wife is in a really harsh kind of mourning and emotionally insulates her in a way she’s not entirely sure he’s capable of.

He wakes her up at nine the following morning and hands her the cordless phone from his office and the Grand Rapids Yellow Pages.

“Call your doctor,” he says. “Tell them you lost the paperwork from your appointment on Wednesday and you need the documentation for your insurance records. Give them my fax number. Here.” He hands her a piece of paper with numbers on it. “This is my fax number.”

She sits up and looks at the phone. She slept through the night but his wake-up call jolts at least a few hours out of her, and now she just feels half-dead again.

“Give me a second,” she says.

“You better hope their receptionist doesn’t read the newspaper,” Daniel says. “I’d really rather not drag you into that office in person and deal with all those people staring at the both of us.” He sits on the bed by her feet and looks out their non-transparent, plastic-covered window to give her privacy.

She finds Dr. Kelly’s number and dials, does exactly as he asks. To her relief, the receptionist says “Sure, absolutely!” in a voice so cheerful Celia can’t make sense of it at this early hour.

“Can I help you with anything else?” she asks. “Did you need to follow-up with the doctor?”

What, Celia wonders, would there be to follow up on?
She tells her no and gets off so quickly she knows the woman is trash-talking her rudeness to the other secretaries now. She wants to call back and say, “Look, I just lost a brother, lady,” but she thinks better of it.

“She’s sending it,” Celia says. Daniel takes the phone and book back and says, “Good, thanks. You can go back to bed now.” And returns to wait for the fax in his office.

She has about five minutes of drifting back toward sleep before Daniel comes back and screams, “What the fuck is this?!”

“What?” Celia says, bolting back up, sending shooting pains up her spine. “What is what?”

“So you forgot, huh?” he says. “You forgot why you were there? It just happened to slip your mind?”

Celia sighs. “I know the last few days haven’t made much sense,” she says, her eyes still partially closed, “and I understand you’re frustrated. But I honestly don’t remember anything. I know I went to the doctor. I know I’m bleeding. I assumed I went because of it. What does it says?”

“You’re bleeding because of the fucking doctor!” he says. He throws the pair of fax pages at her and glares down, waits for her to pick them up. “Were you ever going to tell me about this? Feels like something your husband should know, maybe? And don’t use the fucking grief for this, Celia, this is just inexcusable.”

Celia wills her eyes to focus on the words. Most of it is numbers, and the descriptions only come to her slowly, lost in medical language. They charged her for a
large quantity of ibuprofen. A “pre-counseling” session. And some “procedure” that cost 400 dollars.

“What’s a D&C?” she asks.

“Fuck you, Celia,” he says. “Do you think I’m stupid? Think I wouldn’t ask? A *dilation* and *curettage*. As in the technical term for a fucking *abortion*.”

Celia looks down at the paper, and those mysterious letters, which refuse to reconfigure into “abortion,” no matter how hard she tries.

“That can’t be right,” she says. “I’m not pregnant.”

“Not fucking anymore, you’re not!” There are more words in him, clearly, but he forces himself into slow heavy breathing and paces in a way that is too cliché to be really happening.

“Celia,” he says. He tries to sit but somehow fails, flinches and ends up still standing and looking down at her. When have they done this before? she wonders. Oh, yes. The night before last. When he stumbled on the blood in the first place. “Why wouldn’t you tell me about this? Why did you have to hide this from me?”

“Dilation and curettage,” Celia reads. “You’re sure that means abortion?”

“I’m sure,” he says. “I looked it up to be absolutely certain. I was kind of hoping I was mistaken, because that is not the sort of thing a *decent* wife doesn’t tell her husband, and *pretends* to have forgotten about.”

“I did forget about it,” Celia says. She keeps looking down at the paper. She wants the words to resolve themselves into different words and part of her thinks if she looks enough they will, that both of them simply read it wrong. “Was I pregnant?”

“They charged you for a blood test,” Daniel says. “They clearly confirmed before
they went in there. It says you were probably about seven weeks. It says you gave them a likely conception date.”

Celia searches. There it is: *Patient suggested a conception date around June 1st, which indicates progress of seven weeks.*

On Tuesday, her brother was murdered. On Wednesday, she killed her baby (she must have known it was inside her before that day; why wouldn’t she have told Daniel?). On Friday, she was arrested. On Saturday, she was set free.

Why?

They cannot be unconnected. On Tuesday, her brother was murdered. That afternoon, her mother called her and told her, told her to stay away from home. She cannot recall being surprised by it, or even reacting to it. Or feeling anything. What was she feeling on Tuesday?

On Wednesday, she killed her baby. Was the appointment made before or after Cass died? The same day maybe? Did Jean call early enough that Celia could have called the doctor immediately after and offered to throw some money around if she could come in the next day to terminate? Did the grief hit her so hard that the baby she’d been ready to tolerate the day before was suddenly a tumor inside her, one that needed to be removed before the funeral even? Had Jean known about the pregnancy?

Can doctors make appointments on such short notice?

Or were both deaths part of the same impetus? Were killing Cass and the child both an effort to drop the future of the Chapman family off the edge of the Earth?

On Wednesday, she killed her baby.

On Tuesday, she killed her brother.
The first makes the second impossible to deny. She would kill her baby out of guilt. She would kill her baby to cauterize the wound that the Chapman family had created, one that had existed since Francis and Dorothy landed about fifty years ago.

Celia starts to cry. She cries all over the stupid fax, the copy of a copy stored in a Grand Rapids gynecologist’s patient files which proves that Celia Guardian, married four years, no kids, just went on a killing spree through her own family.

She cries with her own guilt. She cries because she feels weighed down with it. She can’t even recall her own acts, can’t fully take in the extent of the damage she caused, the level of malice that was in her the day she ripped her brother to pieces, left his face a mass of destroyed tissue.

She cries because she has lost her right to grieve. The speech Jean gave on Friday about taking score on people’s entitlement, deciding who gets to grieve for him and who must suffer quietly, was meant for her the whole time. And Jean knew it. Jean knew that her daughter had murdered her son, and she pretended not to, told their entire hometown to just leave her alone.

Murderers don’t deserve to mourn their victims. Murderers don’t get pity. Even if the victim is their own flesh and blood. Victims. Twice over.

Daniel groans. “Why are you crying?” he says.

“I did it,” she says. “I know I did it.”

“You needed paperwork to tell you that?”

Daniel doesn’t get it. He still thinks they’re talking about the baby.

“I’m sorry, honey,” Celia says. “I know I should have told you.”

Well,” Daniel says. “If you were grief-stricken. It’s not the right time anyway. I
can understand you wouldn’t want to be pregnant the same time you’re ripped apart over your brother.”

Celia nods.

Does the why of it make any difference? Is it important why she did it, or why she forgot?

“We can play the grief angle with your defense,” Daniel says. “You’ll sound sympathetic.”

“You,” she says. “Like I was punishing myself.”

“I’m sorry,” he says.

Daniel isn’t really upset with her about the abortion. He is relieved. He doesn’t want a baby with her. If she were still pregnant right now, he would have subtly pushed her until she terminated anyway. He is only upset because it looks ugly.

He is relieved.

And maybe she is too.
Bibliography


