I USED TO WEAVE CROWNS

A Novel

by

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DEDICATION

I wish to dedicate this thesis to my parents.

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ABSTRACT

This novel-in-progress explores the nature of memory, grief, and the complexities of coming of age. Through the voice of the narrator, Ada Strunsky, who is by turns both prickly and tender, we are drawn into the world of San Francisco at the end of the 19th century, a time of social and economic upheaval, when monopolists made fortunes and oyster thieves roamed the Bay. Through an associative structure, the novel seeks to capture the feeling of memory, which is often non-linear, more impressionistic than logical. As Ada seeks to untangle her complicity in crimes both literal and emotional, she takes the reader through her formative years, exploring questions of identity, internalized misogyny, ambition, and how beholden we are to our own past.

Novel description:

Ada Strunsky is not who you think she is. Middle-aged, solitary, and friendlier to animals than to people, Ada harbors secrets from her past. When a new neighbor who is lonely in her marriage foists herself on Ada, she finds herself drawn back, recalling her troubled formative years.

Ada begins her story in 1894. Unemployment and economic hardship are widespread. The Gilded Age has made fortunes for the few. Social reform movements are on the rise. Young people are rebelling against the strictures and social mores of the Victorian Era, forging hard-earned identities by casting themselves in roles inspired by the newborn mythology of the American West. In San Francisco, Ada is nineteen years old and alone.

The daughter of Polish Jewish immigrants, Ada is adrift. Her father is confined to a sanitarium. Her sister is newly married to a louse. Her mother left when Ada was fifteen, leaving a cryptic legacy of nascent feminism. Determined to forge her own path distinct from her family, Ada sets off for Oakland. There, she falls into the rough-hewn and colorful company of the oyster thieves. There is Allen Wade, huge and prone to violence. There is French Frank, jocular and jealous. There is Mavis, the so-called Queen of the Oyster Thieves, a woman of puzzling contradictions: whimsical and hard-edged, dreamy and sneakily clever. In her newfound life, Ada carouses, steals oysters by moonlight, and falls in love with the ambitious and mercurial Ellis. Ada and Ellis form a close and contentious bond. Both intellectual, both self-taught, and both seeking to "live, not merely to exist," Ada and Ellis find an uncommon connection that is as powerful as it is destabilizing. As their affair intensifies, so too does Ada's sense of having come "unmoored." An act of betrayal leads to dire consequences that forever alter their lives, consequences that ripple across time and haunt Ada still.

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PART 1

TAKING PICTURES

1925

When I woke up, I was thinking about a gray parrot I once knew. People from that time come to me the same way, before I am fully awake, though I almost never remember what the dead say. I heard the parrot's voice, saw him bob his head from the shoulder of the boy we called French Frank.

"*Fais attention! Fais Attention!*"

That was the parrot's favorite phrase. The parrot spoke French and another language no one understood. For this and other reasons, I felt for that bird a great affinity. Delicate, white feathers ringed his eyes, which were tiny and black and attuned, glinting with a wary intelligence. French Frank had won the parrot in a game of casino. Nights when we drank, French Frank wrote himself notes on newspapers, scraps, the backs of letters, notes to remind himself of what he had to do the next day, or to record things we said, or mostly to record things that Ellis said.

This was all thirty years ago. I still have French Frank's notes. Sometimes, I rifle through those papery piles, hear Ellis's voice. "*Alcohol tells the truth, but its truth is not trustworthy."* Some of French Frank's notes are to-dos. Many say only, *Feed the bird*.

"*Fais attention!*"

The bird meant, *Be careful*.

I suppose I can't say if he meant it or not. So long as I am endeavoring to be accurate about things, the literal translation of the French is not, *Be careful*. The direct meaning is different, more practical.

"*Fais attention,*" the parrot says.

Pay attention.

*

I have a false memory of the parrot the night French Frank got shot. The bird spreads his wings and lifts off as French Frank crumples on the shoal.

In moonlight, oyster shells glow, gray and white like rotten teeth. I have the smell first, the tang of gun powder. Then I have the sound—huge, piercing, more crack than bang. Then French Frank sat down—that was what it looked like. His rear hit the shells with the sound of wet crunching. On his face was a startled expression, as if he were mildly offended to be sitting there in an inch of black water. His arms were stretched straight, pointing forward, his wrists limp. He looked like he was readying for an embrace. I had to force myself to go to him. I was the only girl, and I could feel the boys' expectation that I would know what to do instinctually, as if all my life I had been harboring a secret desire to heal wounded men. For me, it's always been the other way around. I was the one who wanted to be tended. Before what happened to French Frank, I had even fantasized about getting shot so Ellis would be forced to take care of me, required to reveal his sentiment, to splay his compassions like a hand of cards.

I should have seen it coming with French Frank. Again and again, the scenes I imagined for myself had the irritating habit of adhering to other people. I don't know what kind of magic power this represented; to tell the truth, it felt like something out of one of my mother's stories: there lived a girl in the shtetl who wanted the wrong things for herself and so they happened to other people, the end.

My boots sank in the mud as I crossed to French Frank. The bullet had caught him in the side, only a graze, though I didn't know that at first. In moonlight, blood looks

even more disastrous, blacker. He held his hands to his side, the blood seeping through his fingers. When I reached him, I didn't know what to say.

"I think something has happened," French Frank said.

"Yes," I said.

I sat down in the cold water—the tide was coming in already. Already. Had Allen Wade already rushed across the shoal to tackle the watchman, who stood frozen with his gun warm in his hands?

"Is it?" French Frank said. "Is it?"

I both did and didn't know what he meant. I put my hands over his, and French Frank sighed as if he were about to fall to sleep. I could have slept; I felt weighted, bleary. Fatigue is my customary response to great stress; in my life's most taxing moments, all I wanted to do was close my eyes. From the shore, the chirping of birds. The sound tripped over the water. Morning already, the sky pink at the rim.

If I could have said, He'll be fine. If I could have told them it was only a graze. Maybe. I don't know. I don't know if the surface nature of French Frank's wound would have mattered for what happened after, what Allen Wade did to the watchman who fired.

*

By then, I had been in the company of the oyster thieves for three months. As a crowd, they seemed to me risky and wondrous and alive. Alive in the sense that anything could happen—not quite unpredictability, that is not the right word. For that crowd, everything sat closer to the surface, there was no padding. When you talk to most people, you get the sense that, for them, the world has become like a painting left to dry. The

time I spent along the Oakland wharf seems to me, still, very fresh, as if I could touch the surface and my finger would come away smeared with crimson, with gray. **

I do not paint anymore, but I do think about painting—I mean I think in terms of painting, what pigments to mix.

I sit at the kitchen table. Outside, the neighbor I call the Waist is taking out her garbage. Next, she will bend her rugs over the laundry line and beat the shit out of them. Generally, the neighbors don't care for me; they think I am stealing their cats. I can't help it that I've always had a knack with animals. I may have been a thief, but I am also other things—a friend to dogs, for instance. It is not hard to be friends with a dog, and yet many men I have known failed at it. Every dog I have ever met became my friend. Even bat-eared Toenail, the angriest stray of the Oakland wharf. Toenail growled at coiled heaps of rope. He growled at the sloops rocking in their moorings, at canvas sails snapping open in a breeze. He growled at the wind when it blew the Bay into whitecaps. He growled at Ellis, but Toenail was my friend.

The Waist is my age, though we look very different. She has the translucent-white skin of people who have spent a lifetime politely avoiding sunlight. Today she wears a housedress the color of a coffee stain. To paint it, I'd mix Naples yellow, lead white, ochre, and a pinprick each of Prussian blue and vermillion to gray the color, settle it down. To paint the rug, I'd need Scheele's green, but they don't make that shade anymore. The paint was arsenic-based, cheap to manufacture and brilliant, a color that seemed like it might grow from the walls in tendrils and take root. Scheele's Green caused the deaths of many children, who wasted away in green-painted rooms, and the deaths of some women in green gowns, though it killed far more of the girls in the

garment manufactories, the ones who stitched dyed silks and dusted the pigment onto paper flowers. The flowers were pinned into the hat brims of wealthy ladies. The garment worker girls died vomiting green, the whites of their eyes stained the color of pea soup.

My mother told me those stories. There was no one like my mother when it came to the facts of death, the everyday, common closeness of it. The way I see it now, she proceeded through my childhood knowing she would leave us, my father, my sister, and me. She must have held the knowledge like a roll of emergency cash, something your fingers check for in your pocket to make sure the lifeline has not slipped away. In the years she stayed, she tried to warn me about all kinds of threats: Scheele's green, rip tides, staircases, teetotalers, Protestants, doctors, enemas, Germans, pogroms, poxes, blizzards, crinolines, and men—specific men and men in general.

My parents had come from Poland to New York, then to San Francisco around the Cape, through the angry handshake of the Atlantic and Pacific Oceans. They spoke Yiddish, though my sister and I were forbidden from speaking anything but English at home. Our father wanted us to be "good American girls," which is how he put it in his thick accent. He was the kind of man who spoke to us almost exclusively in proclamations, never quite looking at us, but staring up and to the side and smiling in a distant way—smiling at his imaginary family, his imaginary daughters, facsimiles of us except more American. When I thought of his "good American girl," what she looked like, I always pictured the girl printed on cans of early June peas. She was blond, round-cheeked, and stared up and to the side in much the same way our father did, with a self-satisfied vacancy. The early June peas girl held something aloft and gazed at it. What she

held, amazingly, was an identical can of early June peas, the girl's own image small but discernable on the tiny can.

One listless afternoon, Mavis and I ate canned peaches on the deck of French Frank's sloop. The day was clear, and we grew warm with our backs against the rail, protected from the wind. My scalp turned hot from the sun and my thoughts felt thick, slow-moving like the peach syrup. I told Mavis how I used to admire the early June peas girl, and Mavis sighed with understanding then turned a fork speared with a slice of peach, quiet with contemplation.

"What I'd really like," she said, "is to be on cigar boxes."

A line of clear peach syrup slipped down her thumb.

"I could paint you," I said. "Put you right on a cigar box."

"No," she said, licking the syrup. "No, you don't understand. I want to be on *all* the cigar boxes."

Mavis was the only other girl in that crowd. The Queen, the boys called her. You could tell it made her sloshy with happiness when they did. ***

*

One morning, early in my time along the wharf, Mavis and I walked into Heinhold's First and Last Chance. We must have been going to see if Erich, the proprietor, would take pity on our sorry states and make us eggs. Erich liked us; he liked that Mavis and I gave him the opportunity to put on the mannerisms of fatherliness, to don it like a cloak when we wandered into his place, red-eyed in the mornings and smelling of alcohol.

We crossed the threshold and I felt beneath my boot something rubbery but firm. Curled in the sawdust was a crooked, blue sausage that terminated, somehow, in a ladies' manicured fingernail. It was a woman's thumb, severed below the joint. Mavis bent down, using her forearm to lift her hair away from her face.

She squinted at the finger in the sawdust, gazing for some time before she rose.

"I don't think I know her," Mavis said.

She said it plainly, without sadness or relief.

Mavis confused me, and so my thoughts about her go on and on and on. She appears at odd times, still images of her materializing in my mind when I sweep, or strike a match, or set down a can of pink tuna for the neighbors' cats: there is Mavis, watching me.

Other times, I place her in the corner, sitting backwards on a kitchen chair—I conjure her intentionally, is what I mean. I remember her well, especially her forehead, which was very round and prominent to the point that it seemed exposed. Afternoons we spent on the deck of one of the sloops, Mavis's forehead would pink more than any other part of her face, as if it were her thoughts that made her skin burn.

I place Mavis nearby when I walk, when I cook. She watches me with a distant kind of amusement, one foot tapping. Other times, it is Ellis who I place nearby, though we only end up arguing in my mind, and I often have to shake my head violently and squeeze my eyes shut to make him go away.

*

In another memory, Mavis and I sit drinking with Ellis and French Frank very late. We were in Heinhold's, with its slanted bar and warped wooden planks. Like so

much else along the Oakland wharf, the place had been built from the hull of a former whaling ship. The wood walls had a porcelain sleekness from years of weather and human touch. Mavis never used my trick of watering down her whiskey, and soon she was asleep, her head resting on French Frank's shoulder, her mouth slightly open. French Frank, at one point, turned to look at her and stuck his finger in her open mouth. He held it there, considering, before he withdrew his hand.

French Frank and Ellis were deep into a soused argument about the telephone when a man walked into the saloon. He was accompanied by a solemn girl, wearing a red belt. They were both very short, and I wondered if this is what had drawn them together as a couple, the way people choose dogs who resemble them.

"Oh, I don't know," the woman said, shaking the dampness from her coat.

"Honesty at last," said the man.

The woman slid her hat pin out slowly, pinching pearl at its end.

"It is a shame about Roberts," the man said.

"Oh, I agree! But I don't know," the woman said. "It takes a lot of courage to live."

They sat at one of the small, round tables and drank whiskeys in a professional way, as if they had to reach a quota by a particular hour. Under the table, Ellis's hand found my knee and squeezed.

The woman asked the man if he wanted to go somewhere else; he said he didn't. They each took a sip of their whiskeys. I had time to notice things about them. The woman petted the black tassels of her skirts, smoothing down the strands. She drank whenever her companion drank, her hands caught in the black lattice of her lace gloves.

The man had blond hair, thin lips, and a faint moustache that appeared and disappeared according to the angle of the light. For a time, he struggled to roll a cigarette. He left the paper open on the table, the tobacco loose, then struck a match and threw it at the woman. The flame snuffed out in the air and the match landed on the table. He struck another, brought the flame close to his eyes, then threw it at the woman.

"Eddy," the woman said.

He lit another, examined it closely, then threw.

"Eddy."

This went on. She said his name as if trying to wake him up.

"Let me make it easier for you," the woman said.

She tipped her glass and poured whiskey down her chest, into her lap. The whiskey caught the lamp light and shone on her skin and I noticed then that freckles crowded her neck, her arms—so many that they seemed, at first, to be her natural skin tone, the color of dried red clay.

Eddy lit another match and threw it. The match landed, still lit, on the table in a puddle of whiskey and bloomed into a faint blue flame. The man and woman watched the flame bend, quiver, go out. Then Eddy lit a match.

I saw Ellis see what was happening. He balanced his glass along the ellipsis of its bottom rim, turning the glass so only the edge touched the table. His hand was no longer on my knee. I don't know when he moved it, but I noticed that the weight was gone.

Ellis said nothing, and neither did French Frank. I also said nothing, didn't move.

When Eddy had no more matches, he and the woman rose from their chairs and left.

*

Matches were another one of my mother's dangers. She told me of a woman she had known in New York, another seamstress, who killed herself by eating the heads off every match in a pack.

"It was the white phosphorous. Most people don't eat them. They dissolve the heads in coffee or alcohol." My mother said all that with practicality, pulling a brush through my hair.

For a long time, I thought the problem with my mother—the problem she had—was that she was too porous. She allowed stories like the one about the seamstress to enter—she let them in to root around, to latch. I had all kinds of explanations about her then; she is much harder, now, for me to figure.

So much that happened seems stranger than it did at the time. You would think that the years would have made it all more legible.

Very strange, for instance, that I was fifteen for one March only. I was fifteen and it was Sunday. My mother knitted me a blue scarf. The scarf really embarrassed me. I mean I was embarrassed for my mother. The scarf was narrow and scalloped, with many dropped stiches and a short fringe. She pushed the scarf towards me across the kitchen table. I held it with a sense of helplessness, poking my fingers through the gaps.

"I don't need a scarf," I said.

"Oh," said my mother. "I thought you did."

The next day she was gone. She took some of her books and her clothes in a small suitcase. She left her brown coat, her wedding band, her shopping basket, and two notes, one for Agnes and one for me.

*

When I asked Mavis about her mother, she said this:

"She was tall and slender and very pretty. She minced as she walked. She had as much vanity as brains."

Later, I learned Mavis had pulled the description from the novel *East Lynne* nearly word for word. I didn't know what to do with that information, or what it said about Mavis, or what it meant about how she thought of me.

*

Outside, the Waist beats and beats the green rug. I call her husband Mr. Countdown because he often tells me how many days remain until the weekend.

"Two more days," Mr. Countdown says as he walks their incontinent Jack Russell in the evening.

That is a difference between me and other people. I despise the weekends. Too much open time, time like a flat plain. I read somewhere that large amounts of insanity struck farmers and their wives who settled the plains. It makes sense to me why those people lost their minds, driven mad by isolation and their smallness against all that wide space, driven mad by the wind.

My mother told me that certain winds in Europe were known to make people insane. In Italy, she said, it was legal for a man to kill his wife when a certain wind blew from the Sahara. I don't know if there were similar laws on the prairie.

Sometimes when I picture where my mother is, I imagine her all alone on a great plain. She stands holding her hat to her head in a sea of bowing grass. She looks one way

and sees no one, looks another way and sees the same. She is very happy when I imagine her this way.

Agnes, my sister, she is harder to picture. We don't talk much these days and I have trouble when I try to place her.

There are the new neighbors, a young couple next door. I can hear the young couple through the wall we share, footfalls and low voices, the mechanical resonance of voices on their radio. I have watched them, too, observed them from my half of the screened-in porch. Young Husband is nothing much. He is a brown suit and, in the evenings, he is the smell of a cigar.

Young Wife wears her hair short in the current style. For an afternoon, I watched her on her knees in the dirt. She drove her trowel into the soil with anger and emitted grunts as she worked.

"There," she said, and drove her trowel in.

She wore dungarees and a man's collared shirt. It was late afternoon, and the light was deep and slanted and caught in Young Wife's shirt, making it glow. She looked like a slice of orange, her body the dark seed. I don't think anyone saw but me.

*

Maybe his name was not Eddy. The man with the matches.

In a fast-moving river, an eddy can save your life. Of course, it was my mother who told me that.

My mother taught me how to swim. Her stroking method could best be described as flailing, as almost drowning. She did show me how to float on my back, weightless, in

controlled surrender. She told me that swimmers drown because they exhaust themselves fighting the water.

"If you're caught far out," she said, "flip onto your back to rest. Don't fight. The ocean is like a man. It doesn't want what it can have."

I floated on my back and gazed up at her, an angle that made her appear unknown to me: the underside of her chin, her nostrils: swooped like commas, black and large and fascinating.

When we visited Aunt Millie, we swam at our beach—a small cove, a violent place littered with jagged rocks and tangles of brown kelp and crab shells pecked clean. The wind blew sea foam across the sand, the froth sudsy and yellow like dirty soap. Sometimes, my mother stayed under the water for as long as she could. From the shore, I watched as she held her arms high and sank, as the gray sea closed over her head. I stared at the spot where she had gone under, counting. Each time, I felt sure she would not surface, and I imagined running into the waves, how heavy her body would be. But then, she would come up gasping, her hair slicked back, her mouth open to the sky. I couldn't look at her as she walked from the waves. How dare she, was my thought. How dare she make me wonder.

*

Yesterday, a knock on the porch door. Young Wife in a plain white dress holding a Bundt cake. She handed it to me.

"If you ever need anything," Young Wife said.

I was not sure what she meant.

"We want to have you for dinner. Or coffee."

"No," I said.

Young Wife shifted. She wore canvas Oxfords, a child's shoes. She had a look of shiny rawness in the way of some youths. A sheen rather than a polish, as if she'd just emerged from a cocoon. Her hair frizzed out of its clip; grass stains streaked her canvas shoes.

"We believe in getting to know the neighbors," Young Wife said. It could be awkward at first, she continued, getting to know people, going into their homes, but I shouldn't be worried at all, *at all,* about what to wear or what to bring, the important thing was just going, letting people get to know me, see that I wasn't so, well—and there Young Wife waved her hand vaguely, smiling, but not in a cruel way, and I had the thought, like a reminder, that I had stabbed a man once. Memories come to me like that sometimes, like tasks I've forgotten to do. *Oh, right.* I had stabbed a man once and now there I was, holding a Bundt cake.

Young Wife put her wrist to her forehead then gazed off to the side, to the strip of earth that separated the front yards of our apartments. Her new plantings lined the strip, the soil as dark as chocolate cake. The new plantings were not thriving. A late blizzard had withered the leaves, turned the stalks black and rubbery.

"Your marigolds are dying," I said.

"Yes," she said. "My husband says I'm hopeless."

Then Young Wife laughed. Her laugh was like a voice snaking upwards from a deep hole. She seemed to realize this, and she looked down, and she pushed the toe of her shoe into a rotten patch of the porch.

"Sorry if it's dry," she said, nodding towards the Bundt cake. She looked away then, back to the strip of earth, and spoke in a sing-song refrain, quietly and to herself.

"Can't garden, can't bake."

She came to with another deep-holed laugh. Then Young Wife walked down the steps, those canvas shoes slapping. Her heels rose out of the shoes. I closed the screen door.

"My name is Sarah," she said, turning on the bottom step.

A black car passed. A Buick, I think.

"Ada," I said.

"Ada."

*

Ellis called me Stendhal, so that's what Mavis and the boys called me, too. The way he said it sounded like *Stand-doll.* There was the Queen, the Prince, Centipede, Mouse, Clam, Bad Weather, Joe Goose, Whiskey Lewis, Soup Kennedy, Scotty, Irish, French Frank, and more that I can't remember. The others called Ellis the Prince, but I refused. He never said openly that my refusal bothered him, but I could tell that it did.

Only Allen Wade used his real name. For a long time, I heard it as one word, *Allenwade,* and I thought it was beautiful, full of old European flavors, like a holiday you'd find in Chaucer. Allenwade, the festival following the summer fast. Allenwade, the three days in the fall when the town comes together to feast and dance and burn women alive.

I was named for my grandmother, a woman I never knew. She showed up on the edges of my mother's stories, a figure through windows with a shawl over her head, her

strong legs pushing a shovel into the frosty ground, burying a fish to fertilize her leeks. I come from laughing, studious, luckless people. Jews, in other words. We come home to our village and find it burned to the ground, all of the uncles shot. We spread our hands. *It was bound to happen eventually.* We move, we plant trees. What did my mother love to say?

"There is hope, endless amounts of hope in the universe, just not for us."

Then she would laugh and laugh.

Ellis used my past against me on occasion. We both came from little, but Ellis came from less, as he liked to remind me. He didn't like that I kept my hair short, that I wore men's clothes when we raided the shoals. Ellis and I were the same age, nineteen, both educated outside of the schools. Some of the time, we sat on the floor in the free library, hidden among the stacks, amidst the smells of paper and horse glue and intellectual decay. Other times, we were drunk, brilliant, and awful to each other. In our vagrancy we took great pride. We walked together down Clay Street once and a woman stared.

"Where is your chaperone?" she said.

"Where is yours?" Ellis answered.

Then we strode away, leaving the woman's face open-mouthed and hanging there.

Ellis and I were the middle siblings of our group: a few years older than some of the boys, younger than the men. The men had reddened faces and noses that looked tenderized. They had been discharged from the Navy or else kicked off whaling ships or else kicked out by their wives. They looked like caricatures from warning illustrations in the newspaper, sweaty and hunched, the lines around their eyes and mouths etched in

white. The men were the ones Ellis truly loved. I don't mean how he loved me—which he did in his way, in his limited capacity. He loved them in the way you love someone who you want to be, or who has something you desire. An idealizing, jealous love, the kind that takes something from you.

*

Harvesting oysters is easy; you simply pick them up. It was almost disappointing my first time, the lack of struggle. The way the boys had talked about it—obliquely, winkingly, barely able to contain how proud they were of themselves—I had imagined much hacking and heaving, a prolonged fight. I realized later the boys had been trying to show off for me. It was a wonderful feeling.

We worked fast, without speaking. By the end of the night, I would be shaking with cold, the cuts on my hands stinging from the salt.

Oysters grow in clusters; they cling to each other. Bouquets, Ellis called them. He showed me how to pry the larger oysters free and throw the smaller ones back. He didn't do it out of sentimentality. The small oysters didn't sell at the markets where we passed our stolen catch to hotel chefs, cannery workers, police officers, maids, seamstresses, barkeeps, and housewives. Everyone who bought from us knew we hadn't obtained the oysters legally. But our prices were better than the Morgan Oyster Company, which had acquired a sour image in the public's collective mind as a monopolist of the tidelands, the company that had fenced off its oyster beds, that had stolen the land from the working class who subsisted on seafood foraged from the Bay.

As a rule, we didn't worry about the watchmen. It took little convincing to assure them that it was not worth dying for the Morgan Oyster Company. The guards lived alone

in single-room, stilted houses the company had built near its stakes. Often, it was simply a matter of showing the watchman how many there were of us—twelve to twenty, depending on the night. Usually, Allen Wade did the convincing. He was huge—tall and wide and prone to sudden violence in the way you typically see in much smaller men. He had a fidgety energy and a mind bent towards paranoia, causing him to walk into every room and demand if we were talking about him. When he died, several years after I knew him, the Santa Cruz mortician said Allen Wade was the largest person he had ever laid on his slab. I don't know why Allen Wade was in Santa Cruz and I never learned how he died. All I know is that when I heard the news, I was not sorry.

I don't know what John Morgan paid the watchmen to live full-time in houses over the water, but whatever the amount, it wasn't enough. They all let us pass. I thought sometimes about what happened to them afterwards, when it became clear they had let us take what we wanted. I asked Ellis once, and he said it was a womanly question. Kind-hearted, he said, though now I don't think that's what he meant.

*

Who knows why that watchman, that night.

We had sailed up to the stilted guardhouse as always, silent in our sloops. Allen Wade climbed the ladder. The rest I would have had to imagine from the outside: the watchman startled in his bed, his eyes wide at the size of the man in his house. For some reason, I always placed on the watchman a drooped sleeping cap, at its point a heavy pompom.

Like the rest, that watchman let us pass, at first. We were on the tidal flats far to the south, where shallow-hulled boats heavy with central valley grain glided through

miles of marsh. You'd see Ohlone sometimes, solitary figures at the stern of tule canoes. Buxom, those canoes looked to me, portly and comfortable.

The moon-lit world was black and white. The night was clear, the moon fat but not full, its lower edge blurred as if someone had set their thumb to it and smudged. Low tide had drained the estuary, turning it into a landscape of mud and beached jetsam: rope, fishing net, broken crab cages, barrels, and chairs with their legs pointing to the sky like animals showing their bellies. Down the slope of the exposed bank, a fast-moving channel cut a dark line.

Our shadows were long and pointy across the shoal. We gathered bouquets and dropped them in sacks with a sound that made me think of slate roofing tiles. The oysters were slicked with cold mud, and soon it looked like we were all wearing brown gloves. Ellis was close, humming "The Sailor's Loves."

After Allen Wade did what he did to the watchman, he pulled off one of the watchman's boots and, in a final fit of rage, threw it into the channel. The tide was coming in by then, and the boot drifted back. I felt a strange absorption with the boot, how it floated. The boot looked new, black and uncreased. He had recently bought those boots. I hated that I knew that about the watchman. I still do.

*

If you grow up without much money, you never lose that feeling, I think, the terrified joy when you buy something new, something only for yourself. For nineteen dollars, I recently purchased a camera, a practical 2C Autographic Kodak Junior, slim enough to fit in my pocket. Though it is called Junior, it is not a camera for children, I made sure to confirm that with the salesgirl. Junior only means a low-end version, she

explained. She seemed to regret the phrase “low-end,” and there followed an embarrassed silence. I let the silence tick by so she would feel it. Then I paid an extra seven dollars for the anastigmat lens.

I take many pictures—oh, of nothing. A slab of light across the kitchen linoleum. Birds. A cat regarding himself in a mirror propped against the wall. Two women picnicking—that photograph I had to take quickly, I did not want the women to see.

I asked the salesgirl if I truly needed the anastigmat lens, and she said, *Oh, yes, absolutely you do,* and I asked her why and she said it was the only lens that assured the correction of not one, not two, but all three optical aberrations. Those were the words she used. The optical aberrations—the specific three—those I have forgotten, but I remember the collective term.

One strange effect, I have found, with all this photography: it had altered my memories. They used to be nothing like snapshots. I can’t quite say how my memories used to be, only that now they are changed, and I see so much of my life as still images, the people frozen, contained in elongated frames.

The watchman did not wear a drooped sleeping cap. He wore the tall boots over his long johns, the fabric of the pants scrunched around his knees. The pistol was shiny in his hand.

*

I did not see what Allen Wade did to the watchman, I heard it, which is worse, a sound can be many things. A heavy, wet, rhythmic thud grows in the mind, wild. The sound lodges and lives on in the body, my body. I feel that sound, still.

Certain things I know. I know that, eventually, the watchman ceased to cry out.

Then the boot flies, dark and arching. A silver-edged splash. The tide brings the boot back and the heel taps against the shells.

The memory seems to be on a track, like a mechanical ride, round and round. First, the smell of gun powder. French Frank sits down. The sound comes after. The shot. Sharp, then a low growl as the report echoes against the hills. The parrot squawks, annoyed, and flaps from French Frank's shoulder. But this part of the memory I know is faulty—an optical aberration. The parrot was not with us. And he had clipped wings, so there is no way he could have flown as he did—as he does—in my mind.

*

After my conversation with Young Wife on the stoop, I washed the kitchen floor with Boraxo powder, pushing the scrub brush harshly. I tried to keep my body occupied with cleaning, and I spent another blank hour scrubbing the bathtub, the odors creating a sharp-scented atmosphere, the smell bright but false.

Young Wife's deep-holed laugh followed me around, trailed me like a needy child. At a market in San Francisco once when I was a girl, I had seen a vendor who sold exotic animals in cages: parrots, a butter-yellow snake, a monkey with a gray coat and a solemn face, his tiny shoulders hunched in resignation. In one cage, a bat flung itself with violence against the walls, looking like a deranged black rag. Its wings made the sound of tiny hands clapping. That was how my thoughts seemed after my conversation with Young Wife; my mind flapped and flapped.

I swept the hallways, the stairs. I pulled the sheets from my bed and hung them outside to air while I flipped the mattress and opened all the windows. I stood in the

middle of the living room, feeling the cross breezes, the chill, imagining it displace the old air inch by inch. I had the thought that I ought to call Agnes.

I would simply have to be careful with Young Wife. We could be pleasant. We could exchange how-are-yous and just-fines until our throats grew dry and our brains turned to pudding from chit-chat. We might even become slight friends—yes, I have friends, friends at work and some along the block. But there is always a line and I am always aware of it—how near we are. I have to remain vigilant. There is still too much I can't explain. Or else I can explain it, but I know I will not be understood.

Because of course, I have regrets. But I do not regret what others would want me to regret. All the thieving I do not regret. Nor do I regret the drinking, nor the devilry—a word Ellis liked. All the time I spent with Ellis in the library I do not regret. I do not regret the afternoons with Mavis, the low-angled sunlight on the deck, the heat releasing the smells of oil and pine from the wood.

I do wish I had met different people. I regret stabbing French Frank, but only because he later got shot, and that seemed to me a great unfairness, like I had marked him for violence by driving the fork into his arm. There were others who deserved a fork in the arm more than French Frank, and I wish I had given it to them. But then I have found that to be one of life's reliable, sad features. One is always stabbing the wrong people.

PART 2

SHE USED HER FIST AND BROKE HIS NOSE

November 1893

1.

For a time, I was infatuated with headwaters. Aunt Millie told us stories of 1862, the great flood year when it rained straight through an entire December and the rivers breached their banks, inundating the valleys with so much water that sea-faring ships could sail from San Francisco to Nevada City. I liked the idea of a river turning treacherous, its powers latent until they weren't. During my time along the Oakland wharf, I said that my greatest desire was to see the headwaters of the Sacramento. The boys responded to this. It was an impulse that made sense to them, the inclination to arrange your life around an arbitrary physical conquest. For Ellis, it was Alaska. For me, the Sacramento. I said it so much that it became true, even long after I lost my interest in headwaters.

When I try to trace it back, what happened to me, to locate the headwaters—the best I can figure it, my beginning began three months before I moved to Oakland, when a woman I admired told me I was not happy. To be truthful, I thought it was a remarkably stupid observation at first. I remember the morning, the gray light seeping into the saloon from the paned windows as I used my pinkie to stir the pickle barrel's cold brine. I was a blade of nineteen years, skinny and curveless, someone you would have seen but not noticed—there, in the corner of Lillian Baker's grocery saloon on that pale day in November, when Lillian looked up from the ledger and said, "You're not happy here."

My mouth was full of stale steam beer when she said it. It was my habit in the mornings to lick the brine from my finger then take swigs from beer glasses left over from the night before. I looked forward to it, the taste of salt, the heady tang of the beer—

it relaxed me. I liked the idea of taking something from the customers. Taking something back, that's how it felt.

The beer was warm and flat. I couldn't swallow. I turned away from Lillian to hide my full cheeks. The taste of the beer turned metallic, making my eyes water. It was quiet—just the two of us in the back behind the shelves of dry goods and canned peaches. There was the sense of privacy, of being tucked away from the city. I felt close to Lillian in the mornings.

At last, I swallowed the beer. It went down harshly, all prickly edges. In general, things were bad with me; I worked all the time and had only my younger sister for company. I did not know where our mother was, though I felt she might come back any day. Our mother had left us once before when I was nine, Agnes seven. She was gone one month then returned, frantic those first days with acts of apology. To have her back was wonderful, then exhausting. Her need was so transparent. She gave us presents: new books, tiny shells, ribbons for Agnes, and for me a nosegay of violets. For a time, we could get whatever we wanted from her. She bought us white bread from Goldfarb's, long mint candies from Robert's. I hated the feeling of watching my mother, desperate, digging in her pockets for coins.

Other troubles: I was in debt. My debts—my father's debts, but then mine—were over five hundred dollars, not counting our taxes in arrears. Under our mattress were many notices from the tax inspector along with letters of introduction from men to Agnes that I had successfully hidden from her. Agnes was quite pretty; she had been pretty her entire life. I had asked our mother once, shy with hope, if Agnes's looks would fade. My

mother had lifted one of my braids and held it in her hand as if it were something curious she had found in the street.

"Never wish your time away," my mother said.

She tugged on my braid, as if ringing a bell.

People had always been kind to Agnes.

*

In the cold saloon, I received what Lillian said, took it in. Happiness—I didn't see the point. I knew no adults who were happy. I also rather cherished my misery; it seemed to me a unique mark of my intelligence. During that period, I was accosted with the constant suspicions that I was either a worthless louse or some kind of genius. What variety of genius remained to be revealed. I was being, I thought, very patient about it.

I lifted a glass and began to wipe it with a rag, set it down, lifted it again. In my silence, Lillian went on to say how she wanted to help me, how she had been like me once and someone had helped her. Lillian gave a little nod then returned to scratching numbers into the ledger. I couldn't latch to what she was saying, what she meant—I only felt a free-falling and distant panic. I didn't know why she was trying to drive me away. I took up the broom, my movements jerky and stiff. I weaved between the tables, righting overturned chairs. Under the bristles of the broom, broken glass graveled in the sawdust curls.

I collected glasses from the tables, holding three in each hand with a bowler's grip.

"New locations don't change you," Lillian said sternly, as if rebuking something I had said.

One of the glasses slipped from my fingers and fell with a dull thud into a pile of sawdust. We both stared at the glass. Outside, a carriage passed, horse hooves clopping.

"New locations don't change you," Lillian said. "But they can knock you out of your own bullshit."

For the rest of the day, an uncanny feeling followed us through the saloon. There was a strain when we spoke to each other, which we did only about logistical matters. I moved through my chores, turning over what Lillian had said, and wondering about the particular nature of my bullshit. During a slump in the afternoon, Lillian went out to purchase tobacco for her cigarettes. I was left alone with two tourists, a couple from St. Louis who had come to Lillian's place for the same reasons that all the tourists came, for an "authentic" Western experience.

After the door's bell jangled, I could always tell by the first words if the customer was a regular or a tourist. The tourists felt the need to comment on everything, on the shelves of jams and cured meats, on the saloon's décor, which was a confusion of frontier junk and seafaring paraphernalia. A limp lasso hung near the stove, along with a rusted shovel that Lillian claimed had helped free silver from the Comstock Load, but which in fact she had pulled from a garbage wagon on its way to Dumpville. On the shelf behind the bar, nestled among the whiskey bottles, was the rusted skeleton of a Colt. Above the shelf was a broken harpoon Lillian had secured to the wall with iron bracers. When I was caught in certain, interminable, one-sided conversations with regulars, I calmed myself by imagining sudden violence. I liked to picture ramming the harpoon through a regular's leg, but I didn't like that I liked to imagine it. Most of my thoughts seemed of a variety that I wasn't supposed to have. Outwardly, I tried to take lessons from the décor of

Lillian's place, where the false artifacts were bolted down to discourage their repurposing as weapons. That was what I needed for my thoughts: strong bolts.

Lillian dressed in men's clothes. Her most prized item was her pair of snakeskin suspenders, which she said she'd made herself from the copperhead who'd tried to kill her. *Not the only man who tried*, Lillian said. For a quarter, she'd pull up her trousers to display the snakebite scar, a deep crater netted with ghostly white stripes. On Friday and Saturday nights, the busiest times, Lillian wore a blue silk skirt and red stockings. She refused to sit in men's laps for any amount of money, but five cents bought her lucky kiss for their decks of cards.

Lillian got away with barkeeping because of the grocery, which sat at the front and faced the street. The saloon was a narrow space hidden from view by shelves crowded with jars of preserved green beans, which looked to me like pickled witches' fingers. The bar was a plank of wood balanced on two whiskey barrels. *Just like how it used to be*, Lillian said to the tourists, who often wore looks of disappointment at the distance between their expectations and their experience. But the place did offer the atmosphere of the old, renegade days. We were breaking the law just by being women in the saloon. The tourists eyed us with excitement when we poured their drinks, delighted not with us but with themselves and their own bold senses of adventure.

During my shifts, I watched Lillian carefully. She had a particular talent for making men fall in love with her. She achieved this, from what I saw, mostly through ridicule.

"Let me take you somewhere, Lillian, and make you an honest woman."

"You don't want an honest woman, Tom. Not with a face like yours."

Then Lillian would hook her thumbs behind her suspenders. That image of her stands right before me: Lillian leans her hip against the bar and hooks her thumbs.

I had decided to work for Lillian because she offered me a job when no one else seemed to want to. Also, she shared a first name with Lillian Frances Smith, who I had seen with my own eyes at an exhibition in San Francisco with my mother when I was ten years old.

"You're the same age," my mother had said when Lillian came out in a dress the color of plums.

Lillian Smith held her Ballard rifle, the barrel forming one half of an X across her chest. She raised it, set her sights. At fifty paces, glass balls hung by wires from a suspended wooden deer. *We're the same age*. She fired from her right shoulder. A glass ball exploded, and I jumped. I checked my mother. She smiled at me, squeezed my hand. Lillian fired from her left shoulder. The air smelled of powder—sour and singed. She held the rifle upside down and backward, using a hand mirror to aim. A contraption loosed ten glass balls into the air, and she shattered each one before they hit the ground. At the end, she bowed and blew kisses, and the crowd threw carnations.

In fact, we were not the same age. My mother—either she lied or was mistaken. But the idea stayed. The thought would arrive at odd times—while I was sweeping the sawdust or unloading a crate of canned peaches. *You're the same age*, my mother's voice would say from her perch in my mind. I took aim at her there, imagined myself setting my sights, arranging my legs into a wide stance. The bang, the kickback. And the image and voice of my mother would vanish with a bang, in a sour puff of gun smoke.

The regulars at Lillian's I didn't hate; they were too pitiful to despise. When they banged their glasses or yelled into my ears, my revulsion met an incoming tide of sorrow on their behalf. There are places in the Bay's estuaries where the waters of outgoing rivers meet the advancing sea, and at certain times this creates a constant, white-toothed wavelet, a crest where the two liquid forces meet. That is what I felt with the regulars, a struggle between my anger and my sympathy. It was exhausting, and turned my attitude to vinegar. I grew irritated. I didn't have Lillian's talent for barkeeping, a skill that required a mixture of outgoing performance and careful withholding. If you were too cold, the men grew angry, and if you were too friendly, they took it to mean something and grew angry when you corrected them. After many unsuccessful attempts at performance, I adjusted and turned inward, pulling taps and pouring brown American whiskey without saying anything. My quiet was perceived by some as an invitation to talk. In that way, I acquired a small, sad collection of loyal customers, men with blotchy cheeks and eyes that searched from their sunken brows. They liked to talk, my men, and so long as I gave occasional and curt acknowledgments—nods or grunts or even just a direct glance—the men were appeased and told me things. Oddly, this felt like an accomplishment. I made myself empty, a receptacle for the men's secrets. I imagined with pride how they told me things they had probably never told anyone else—wives, mistresses, sisters, friends. While part of me understood the wrongness of this—that the person I became at the saloon was not a sustainable personality—I also couldn't help but feel special from their attentions, and I sometimes engaged in conversations with my mother in my head, telling her about my achievements with those men, savoring her look of disapproval, her sorrow at how wrong she was about the world.

2.

At the end of my shift, I stepped from the grocery outside into the late afternoon. In the silky depths of my coat pocket, I gripped the handle of my knife, a slender stiletto in a leather sheath. It had belonged to our Aunt Millie. She had called the knife Last Resort.

The street was as it always was. The slow procession of pedestrians, men who watched their feet, ladies who gripped their coat collars closed. The accordion man had taken up his post on the corner, swaying as he played, the sound woozy and clownish. I passed a laundry, its stoop littered with crumpled wrappers of Paris Blue. From its front door seeped a humid atmosphere of soapy vapors and the clamor of ladies' voices, a tangle of Polish and Italian. I joined a throng of bleary-eyed workers from the paint factory, men wandering home after their ten-hour shifts. A dog with a patchy coat trotted nearby, sniffing. He approached with his head lowered, his eyes raised. From my pocket, I excavated a scrap of jerky. *You're not happy here.*

The wind shifted, carrying on its shoulders the smells from the sugar refinery, the odors of burnt caramel and decaying vegetables. I turned from Mission onto 3rd, past General Arthur Cigars and O'Dwyer's & Co with a sign painted on a sheet strung above its door: *OWNERS BANKRUPT: ENTIRE SHOP MUST BE SOLD.* We had liked O'Dwyer's, Agnes and I. When we were children, our mother had brought us—not to buy anything, just to dream. On the street, the scent of pine brought to mind the section of the store that was nothing but drawers full of wooden knobs. We liked to decorate our future there. This knob for my bedposts, those knobs for Agnes's. The house of our imaginings was always the abandoned house on the dunes, the wrecked place we had found in the Outside

Lands near where our Aunt Millie lived. The wind had blown sand through the broken windowpanes and under the cracks of doors, depositing small piles on the floorboards—little mounds, like the residue of an untidy ghost. There was a weathered piano with missing keys, its grin gap-toothed. Our mother sat at the stool and plunked out a wobbly tune, the absent notes giving the melody a loopy, drunken personality. Later in the living room, we sat on the sandy floor and wrote our names.

"We ought to live this way, don't you think?" our mother said.

I loved hearing her say it. I felt I had been waiting my whole life for her to do so. The living room was dim and blue with evening.

"We could live anywhere," Agnes said. "Like Paris."

"We could be just as much the three of us in Paris as here," our mother said. "I'll be a painter. I'll walk around Montparnasse and paint whatever I like. What will you be?"

Agnes answered that she would be an actress. Our mother turned to me. I said a painter, too, and she gazed at me for a moment longer than she had gazed at Agnes. It was her I'm-not-sure-who-you-are look. We made more plans there on the floor and soon it was completely dark and we couldn't see each other, though I had the sensation of seeing my mother and sister's faces—their faces were so familiar to me, a familiarity that often rendered them unseeable, and so in the dark, I saw my memory of their features, and it was frightening how they seemed to change and shift.

"And Papa?" I asked.

I became aware then of the ocean, the distant waves crashing.

"He'll do as he likes," our mother said.

The next day, my mother went with Aunt Millie early in the morning somewhere, and they did not return until late, after Agnes and I had fed ourselves three meals of molasses on bread.

The words of the other signs that filled O'Dwyer's windows came back, prices for armoires and bed frames. I wanted a drink, a soother. I thought of Lillian again, and I imagined other things Lillian could have said, wanted to say—more hurtful words lashed at me, and it felt good to hear Lillian say them, the Lillian in my mind. It felt as though there was, along with the hurt, a sense of relief for both of us.

3.

The rooming house where I lived with Agnes was a white, sour-faced building, the façade stippled with too many windows—too much glass to hold up the structure, I thought. When a carriage passed on the street, every window quivered in its panes, and in certain areas of the rooming house, it sounded as though you were in the center of a tinkling tray of heavy glassware. The architecture was gloomy and so were some of the tenants, though the solemn set tended to be the ones who moved on first. They either disappeared in the night, slipping out to avoid their final week of rent, or else they married each other. In our ten months at the rooming house, there had been three engagements and one wedding in the parlor, a small affair with all of us drinking champagne from Hazel's chipped cups and wishing the stony-faced couple all the happiness—meaning, no more than any of us had. The other kind of tenant—the more permanent set—tended to be older and fiercely dedicated to the most eccentric parts of

their own personality. They cultivated their quirkiness in order to—I don't know what, feel superior to their surroundings, I suppose.

I dashed up the narrow stairs, endeavoring to avoid Hazel Jorgen, the rooming house's proprietor, who had an uncanny ability to seclude herself in the stairwell shadows that seemed unlikely in their capacity to conceal her. Agnes and I were often a few days late on our rent, and I had become skilled at the art of Hazel evasion. She had a head of angry little curls and dressed like a widow going to the opera, all heavy black lace. Now, I can see there was something sad about her outfits, her obvious striving.

In the stuffy closeness of our room, I found Agnes on a cushion near the woodstove dividing her earnings into envelopes. She said hello without looking up. I watched Agnes stack coins—her fingers were long like our mother's and tattooed with blue and mauve dots, places where she had pricked herself with a needle and the fabric dye had seeped in. She worked for Levinson's Cloths and Linens, a textile emporium on Market where she sat for nine hours in the attic sewing custom curtains and napkins and gowns. She was paid per item: five cents for napkins, eight for larger jobs. At Lillian's, I earned seven cents an hour, my low wage on account of Lillian saying that I didn't know how to do anything. I had worked since I was fifteen, but never before had money stitched itself into every gesture, every choice—everything we bought, I thought of in terms of hours and napkins. Dinners at Pacific Empire cost me five hours at Lillian's; for Agnes, they cost eight napkins.

Like the other rooms of Hazel Jorgen's place, ours had been formed by the construction of a thin wall, creating two smaller sleeping quarters from one space. These walls doubled the occupancy of the rooming house but also gave the impression of haste

and inconsideration and thereby presented a constant threat to morale. Agnes had attempted to overcome the dreariness of our quarters with the deployment of familiar décor: stacks of our mother's books lined the walls, along with some of her paintings and a few of my own. Our parents' wedding quilt hung behind the bed, hiding the patched coats and shirts and dresses that hung on nails, limp and waiting. I wished Agnes hadn't filled every free space with our old things. I really hated it, in fact.

I sat on the other cushion and warmed my hands by the stove. To say something, I asked Agnes the news of the other denizens of the rooming house: Edgar had misplaced three pairs of pants and was casting about for who to blame, Mrs. Pinsky had caught five mice. Agnes straightened her back and stretched as I tried to fend off the mood that tended to drop in between us, a kind of mutual embarrassment, the feeling that we ought to have been closer than we were. I felt a sense of desperation, as I always did. The idea that I could fix it all in one conversation.

Agnes finished the news and asked about my day. Typically, I had little to account for my shifts at Lillian's. The regulars spoke but I was a poor listener, and so when Agnes asked for news and I had none, I invented details. My inventions became hard to track, and sometimes Agnes would give me a quizzical look, and she would remark, *I thought you said it was Mr. Waverly who stole the glass eye*, and I would have to amend myself and say, *Well, they both did,* and it went on like that to the point where many of the saloon's regulars had stolen many glass eyes.

But on that evening, I did have something to tell her.

"Lillian said I'm not happy."

Agnes said nothing. She dropped coins, one for each pile—the pile for rent, the pile for food, and the pile for our father's hospital bills. As they fell, the coins clinked.

"Maybe you aren't," she said.

"What do you mean?"

"Just that, it's nothing to be mad about."

"I'm not mad."

"No, of course not. You? Never."

It was all going so wrong already.

"Of course, I should be happy," I said. "Just look at how we get to spend our time, just look at all that we have."

I swept my arms. I felt wild and foolish, and there was a moment of silence that stretched.

"It's not a fault," Agnes said. "It doesn't mean you're … and it's not that I'm so pleased, all the time. It's just that, I think …"

In the woodstove, a log cracked.

"I think I have hope," Agnes said.

She nodded at the woodstove, as if agreeing with a point it had made. I rose and announced I was going to Pacific Empire for dinner—though I had so little *hope* for satiation, as opposed to Agnes, I was sure, and so what even was the point? Agnes rolled her eyes at my little speech and said she did not feel like dinner. I took a long time to get ready, changing my stockings and tidying places in the room that didn't need any tending. Agnes remained on the cushion by the woodstove.

"That's all of mine," Agnes said towards the piles of paper money and coins.

I draped our father's coat around my shoulders—it was far too big, an itchy brown tweed. I retrieved my earnings from my cigar box where I also kept my newspaper clippings. On the inside lid was the familiar woman in her green frock, staring blankly as she carved the initials of the cigar company into a tree. I felt a sudden lurch of affection for the woman and wished I could step into her place. She looked dazed or drugged, blissful in her idiocy.

I sat again on the floor in the itchy folds of my father's coat and divided my bills and coins. I finished quickly.

"That's all?" Agnes asked.

I looked back to the cigar box, to the lady with her empty-eyed cheer.

"It's not enough," Agnes sighed. "We can take the rest from the savings."

She tapped the bills into neat stacks and slid the thin piles into the envelopes.

Agnes did not know how much our savings had dwindled. By my calculations, we had a few months' worth remaining. The original sum had been nothing impressive, a small amount our parents had been able to set aside. The move from our old apartment on Polk Street to the rooming house had helped the money last, but the interest on our debts combined with our father's hospital bills—a sickening fifteen dollars a week—had rapidly depleted the funds, and though I knew I would have to tell Agnes, eventually, part of my mind also believed that the money would appear, somehow, or that our savings would continue to diminish but never reach zero—I had to believe that.

Again, I asked Agnes to come to dinner, and she sighed, rose, brushed her skirt. She handed me the envelope for Hazel Jorgen, who I hated then. Instead of giving her the envelope, I imagined slapping her in the face, her curls jostling. All that rent money—we

might as well as have burned it—a waste of our fleeting lives to buy ourselves another week of labor and meals of overcooked roast, all our best hours already accounted for, and every day opening like a book we knew by heart.

*

Now, of course, I miss the mornings when we stomped down the stairs, Agnes greeting every ghost in the crannies, spirits she insisted on but that I could not see. Down we went to the parlor with its small tables and smell of smoke and coffee, a place that seemed to be constructed entirely from moth-eaten shawls. A white, knitted room, the atmosphere cozy and bookish. The parlor could have belonged to a dusty academic institution for the mildly unhinged. There we found everybody: nosy Gerald with his vest buttons strained in a valiant struggle against his belly, Edgar the failed poet, Ruby the successful mistress, Mrs. Pinsky regarding the world with suspicion through her lorgnette, the disgraced priest who screamed in his sleep, the twin brothers who no one could tell apart, the newlyweds who no one could stand, the balding widow, the Swedish actress, and Hazel Jorgen with her powdered pigeon who she claimed was a dove. Agnes was all motions, all at once. She gulped coffee as she poured her second cup. She chewed a rock-hard scone and made her rounds. She had something to say to everyone, little questions or assurances—*How's the foot, Mrs. Pinsky? Edgar, I read the Rimbaud you recommended and I hated it but I still think you're splendid*—and I watched, jealous, admiring, though what I mostly felt was a sense of proprietary pride. *That is my sister. Mine.* It didn't matter in those moments that Agnes and I had missed our turn-off somewhere. It didn't matter that I was the way I was. I felt better for being the person in the room who knew her best, for watching her know what to do and say. Agnes spooned

sugar into Mrs. Pinsky's cup and laughed at something the Swedish actress said while I tried to become one with the wallpaper —and every morning moving just like that, and stupid me thinking that they always would.

4.

A few mornings after our conversation about hope, my sister and I were running late. We rushed down the stairs to a funereal atmosphere in the parlor. Sobriety always made us laugh uncontrollably; it was the same when we were girls in temple on Saturdays, both of us biting our cheeks to stop our laughter at the bearded Cantor and his wheezy chanting. We pocketed scones for our lunches, averting our eyes from the gray-faced crowd. Then we fled, pouring through the front door in a fit, clutching our bellies and nearly running over white-haired Mr. Tomlinson, who stood on the steps with a suitcase.

We had lived long enough in the rooming house to recognize an eviction when we ran into one on the steps. When Mr. Tomlinson saw us, he made a little show of checking his pocket watch, which was in fact a spoon. He rubbed the spoon's curve with his thumb. He had tied a silver chain around the handle with clumsy knots. I found myself holding my sister's hand.

"My son is late," Mr. Tomlinson said. He shook the spoon as if it had showed him a disagreeable hour. "My son works for the mayor."

"That's wonderful," Agnes said.

Here is the fundamental difference between us, my sister and I: Agnes was the child who played with the ugliest clothespin dolls because she worried that our neglect

would make them feel unwanted. I was the child who told her clothespins don't have feelings as I ate all the cream off the top of the milk.

But I was also the child who snuck away, later, in the lowest hours of the night to whisper to the ugly clothespin dolls, *I'm sorry, I'm sorry,* and I never told anyone, not even Agnes.

To me, Mr. Tomlinson was only the latest lesson in the rooming house's curriculum of not getting attached. People arrived, revealed scraps of themselves in gestures and asides, then slipped away. Sometimes they moved into better places, telling us breathlessly how they would invite us to parties in their new apartments, gatherings that we left-behinds knew would never materialize. We understood. Those who moved on for improved conditions didn't want to look back. The transitory nature of the place made me practical. I kept to myself. I didn't want to know anything about anyone.

I had always been a restless sleeper, but never more so that in that rooming house. I often awoke in the timeless dark, my mind running laps of familiar, depressing calculations. My ribs felt screwed on too tight, my lungs shrunk and crowded around my heart. I lived on a reserve of jangly nerves, on the fear of joining the ranks of the sallow-faced, jobless men who stalked the streets, wandering, lifting wooden pallets and peaking under the corners of wagon tarps to look for where their real lives had gone.

Sleepless, I added my hourly wage to Agnes's then multiplied by eight hours times six days, amazed each time at the smallness of the final figure—so amazed that I would become convinced there was some grave error in the nature of math itself, some long-ago mistake that had rippled through time and edged me and Agnes closer and closer to becoming Mr. Tomlinson on the steps.

5.

That December I remember as a month of misty weather. A damp time, my shirt always stuck to my back. One morning, I drifted upwards from sleep to the sounds of my sister having a whispered conversation with Mr. Tomlinson's replacement through the wall's gap. The wall in our room ran through the fireplace, rendering it defunct and cutting in half the sooty fingers of a smoke stain. Where the wall was built around the sink, there was a small gap through which we could hear and, apparently, converse with our neighbor. When I looked to where Agnes crouched, it appeared as if she were speaking to the pipes. She sat on the floor near the sink in one of our mother's old shirts, a white blouse with paint stains on the cuffs and ruffles at the breast that always to me looked aquatic, like a fish's small fins. I remained very still, keeping my breath slow and even. Though our window was open, no breeze came up from the alley.

"I'd like to at least *see* the fair," Agnes whispered.

"We certainly should," our new neighbor whispered back.

Draped across her lap was a pair of our father's pants, her needle paused, pointing down, as she listened.

I sat up in bed.

"Who are you talking to?"

Agnes startled and dropped her needle.

"Peter Burstein," she said. "You've met him."

I made my look dark. I said nothing.

"The spectacled one. Playing gin rummy." *Handsome,* she mouthed.

I shook my head.

Jewish, Agnes mouthed.

So?

So!

Agnes sighed through her nose like a horse.

I felt very angry with Agnes, very angry with her for wearing our mother's shirt. I thought bitterly how, by wearing it, Agnes was erasing more of our mother's smell, replacing it with her own—though in fact it had been four years since our mother had left, and most of her smell had by then long faded from her things. I felt so mad—I was blind with it, truly—and I could have ripped the shirt off my sister. I know that I could have.

Agnes looked at me pleadingly.

"I miss Mr. Tomlinson," I said loudly, projecting towards the wall's gap. "He was crazy but at least he was quiet."

I fell back and pulled the quilts over my head. After a short silence, Agnes returned to her conversation, which I strained to hear, primarily to see if they were speaking of me. There was much giggling and many inane observations followed by hearty agreements—*Yes, it* is *unseasonably warm!*—all of which made me feel more and more convinced of the eventual doom of the species. Agnes laughed at what Peter said. They made plans to meet after supper.

*

I had asked my mother once if Aunt Millie was beautiful. We were riding in a cart on our way home from her place. I was twelve years old and was actively engaged in a secret love affair with my own face. Love affair isn't quite right—it was more of an

obsession, a need to study myself in mirrors and windows to check for signs of secret allure.

In the cart, I had to wait for my mother's answer. We had just reached the first of the cemeteries along Lobos, and we both sealed our lips so spirits could not silk inside our bodies. After the cart reached Broderick, my mother spoke.

"She is not," my mother said. "Which is for the best."

The cart hit a patch of sand and gave a queasy lurch.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because the world doesn't mind an ugly woman who keeps her life for herself."

The statement launched her into a lecture, and she wound through topics as the cart jostled and jumped. Every woman outlaw was ugly, my mother said, otherwise, they would not have been allowed to wear their pistols or travel with Wild Bill. Jane Eyre was not beautiful, though she had high moral standards, which excused her lack of beauty. Daisy Miller was pretty—so pretty that Mr. Winterbourne could perceive it in the dark—laughable. Lady Audley was beautiful, possessed of the power to stop men's hearts with her smile. Always, heroines had smiles that stilled the hearts of men. Their hair was flaxen and soft. They wore delicate muslin. They moved diaphanously, like curtains or small birds—like waves, or grasses, or light itself. They trembled at the edge of brooks. They quaked at the sight of certain men. It was a wonder they didn't disintegrate into flittering ribbons of flesh with all the trembling and quaking heroines did.

When my mother finished, she seemed to vibrate. Her life force was tangible then, close to the surface. During other stretches, she was inward and silent, the kind of silence that is like a warning. Though I preferred her animated, there was something frightening

about her energy. She seemed almost angry—raw and unreliable. In the cart, I watched her carefully, trying to detect symptoms of her "condition," which was vague to me as a child. When I had asked my father about it, he tucked his chin to his chest and didn't speak for some time.

"You will find as you grow older," he said, "that other people's happiness has very little to do with you.

*

A few words now on Peter Burstein. Peter Burstein was a bespeckled and curly-haired scrap of a man, twenty-four to Agnes's seventeen. He haunted the sitting room with a gloomy arrogance, always carrying an enormous manuscript in the hopes that someone would ask him about it.

"My opus," he said when Gerald finally inquired one morning over coffee.

"A philosophy," he said. "A new philosophy. I'll likely never finish."

And that is all that I care to say about Peter Burstein.

6.

Around that time—in late December—things between me and my sister took a turn, as they say, and I remember two instances that felt consequential, though what happened between us was slow, a gradual distancing. At the time, I blamed Agnes. I blamed Peter Burstein. Now—I don't know. I feel different about it, I suppose.

The first instance of consequence occurred on a walk, but I don't care to talk about it just yet. The second instance concerned the fair.

That winter, the entire city flitted around, collectively losing their minds over the Mid-Winter Exposition. Agnes decided what she most wanted, other than to spend hours talking with Peter Burstein about his "new philosophy," was for both of us to acquire jobs there.

Outside the fairgrounds, we joined a line that included every girl in San Francisco and, by the looks of it, every girl in the state of California. We were a young, chatty collection. We eyed each other, trying to detect who was most hirable and therefore deserving of sabotage. Our stretch of line settled on three German girls, blonde and shiny. For a brief time, our line section was beautifully united in the way only strangers can be around a shared enemy. We glared. We spoke behind our hands. A dark-haired girl made wide gestures with her elbows, catching one of the German girls repeatedly in the back. Even Agnes joined in, asking me loudly if I remembered what our mother had said about German Jews—that the reason they were all plump was because they were so full of themselves—and I felt closer to Agnes. We passed a few happy hours in that line.

In the end, the three German girls skipped away with contracts, waving the papers above their heads for the rest of us to see. Agnes walked away with a contract, too. She was hired to be a Gum Girl, to wander through the fairgrounds in a short skirt selling gum for five cents. It sounded unbearably interesting. To her credit, Agnes contained her excitement on our journey back to the rooming house, telling me that the work would probably grow dull after two days. She said I hadn't been hired only because they could see I was too smart for the fair. She was so good at pretending that I was almost convinced, up until the moment we walked back into the rooming house. Peter Burstein sat by the fire. Agnes strode to him and told him her news, breathless. He set down his

book slowly, closing it over his knee, then looked at Agnes and asked to see her contract. He read the document slowly and I felt a terrible pain for Agnes. *Look at her,* I thought towards Peter. *Look at her and say something.*

"Well," Peter said, folding the contract along its creases, "Would you like to know what I think of fairs?"

"Yes," Agnes said. She said it as if she had been waiting all her days to hear Peter's opinion on fairs.

I stood in the doorway, watching, I don't know for how long.

*

I began, during that time, to conjure a scene in my head. With each imagining, I made small adjustments, though the principal elements were always the same. In place of my sister, it was me. Peter and I walked side by side down Market, Peter and I stopped at the window of the millinery. In the dark window, men's sealskin bowlers and women's velvet post-boys sat on faceless wooden heads, tilting at sinister angles. The hats all seemed on the brink of sliding off to the floor. From the creases of some of the women's bonnets, feathers fanned. Those feathers resolved into outstretched wings attached to whole, stuffed birds. The birds were arranged to appear as if they were about to take flight.

"I would like to see more of you," Peter said. He spoke quietly in the direction of the hats.

I said nothing. I stared at a small bird with high wings nestled at a hat's brim among a bunch of wooden cherries. I had no clear thoughts, just a hard defiance, proud and unmoved.

"I have no interest in that," I said.

In this daydream, I fiddled with my response, sometimes making it more cruel. Sometimes, I laughed in his face. To imagine it was immensely satisfying, and each time I exited the dream feeling like I had just eaten a fat éclair from Borgmann's—gorged and jittery and a little sick. At the same time, there was an underside to the dream, an undercurrent—how good it felt. I wouldn't have admitted it to myself then, but oh, how good it felt to be wanted.

*

I suppose I have to tell now about the walk with Agnes.

So. It is cold. Down Market Street, as always. We dash across the wide street and come to a section of sidewalk where bread loaves lie scattered. Where are we going? Where is Peter Burstein? Indisposed that evening, and Agnes stuck with me. I mean I felt that way. I felt that Agnes felt that way.

Agnes kicks a loaf to me. I kick it back, and we pass it back and forth, growing giddy and warm, then she looks at me, beaming.

"You know you will live with us," she says. "When we're married."

She looks so happy.

"Or I won't," I say. "Maybe I find you boring now."

I do not look at her face. I raise my foot and bring it down into the loaf, making a crater. I look at Agnes then. She gazes at my foot sunk in the bread.

"Has he asked you?" I say.

"No."

I shake the loaf free, then kick it to Agnes, but there is no spirit in it—both of us can tell—and the bread slows and stops halfway between us. I feel awful—sick, loathsome. I want to be glad for my sister. I do.

Agnes walks and I follow. I string my arm through hers and she lets me.

"Remember when Mother told us we'd lose our hair if we were too vain?" she says.

I say nothing, though I do remember. A neighbor, Mr. Zilberman, had given us a plate of almond horns dusted with flour. Agnes and I pressed the almond horns to our faces to "powder" ourselves, which is how our mother found us, giggling and maniacal.

"I was so, so worried after she told us," Agnes continues. "Mother found me crying after a bath and asked what was wrong, and I held out my hands and showed her all the hair that had fallen from my head, and she—I could tell she felt really sorry about what she'd said. Which made *me* feel bad for making her feel bad."

"Look at that man," I say, stopping suddenly. Agnes walks on and my arm slides out of hers. Across the street, a man with bushy mutton chops tears up pieces of paper and lets them fall into the gutter. He works steadily, crying.

"Why do you do that?" Agnes says, turning. "You always …"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Tell me."

She shakes her head.

"Tell me or I'll pinch you."

I try to say it with playfulness, but my tone is odd and strained.

"You always change the subject," Agnes says.

"That man is undeniably interesting."

She stomps her foot. She looks young, a child again.

"And you hate Peter. You haven't even tried."

"What do you mean, I always change the subject?"

We face each other. The pedestrians walk around us, some of them brushing us with their shoulders. A man drops his umbrella. It falls with a clatter. Agnes bends to pick it up, and he thanks her, and she says it was nothing, and her voice is so different with the man—gentle and cheery—that I feel that we are past it already, through the dark hallway of our anger.

"I don't *always* change the subject—why, look at that bird!"

I see immediately that my instinct to make a joke is wrong. Agnes stares at me darkly—disgust, is what it is.

"Why do you always carry that notebook if you're never going to use it?" Agnes says. "It's like you want to let everyone know that you're an artist, but you're not."

I receive this with a physical pain, like a needle piercing my chest. How has this become about the yellow notebook?

"I draw in it," I say.

Agnes is no longer looking at me. She gazes at the dark window—it is a millinery, and I have the thought, *Always a milliner's,* and it seems to me that I caused this moment to happen. I brought it into being by imagining myself with Peter in front of a millinery. I had fantasized about an argument, a cleansing anger, and reality—

treacherous, laughing—had said, *So that's what you want?* and had given me what I had imagined, replacing Peter with my sister as punishment, as a joke.

"It's like they never existed," Agnes says. She speaks to the hats in the window.

I can't move, I feel profoundly exhausted. I want to sink down on the sidewalk and sleep. In the back of my jaw, I feel the clench of a yawn forming like a swelling wave.

"I'm sorry about what I said about your notebook," Agnes says.

She has that look she acquires when she is cross with herself—eyebrows scrunched, lips pursed. I love that look.

"I just wish—I wish we could talk," she says.

"We talk."

Agnes flits her hands through the air; I know what she means. Insubstantialities. Nothings. We didn't discuss our parents, our childhoods—I know she is right, that I change the subject. Part of me knows, but it is like—oh, what was it like? It was like the part of me that knew was stuffed away in a cupboard, or outside—locked outside, circling the house.

Agnes looks at me. She turns from the hats on their wooden heads and her expression is still far away, but I can tell her anger has left her—Agnes was never one to be angry for long; even as a child, her rages were like currents of cold water you encounter sometimes while you swim, little cold pockets that arrive and pass almost simultaneously—and she opens her mouth to say something more and in that moment, I yawn. I yawn massively. It is as if by holding back the yawn it had gained strength, and though I try to fight it, to hide it, there is no—I mean, it was no use.

"I cannot *believe,*" Agnes says.

She turns and she walks and I know she does not want me to follow but I feel that I should, being the older sibling, so I walk behind her, leaving a good distance, and I trail her as she winds her way back to the rooming house, and though she disappears a few times, swallowed by a crowd outside a restaurant, I always find her again easily—I know her right away even from the back, even though her coat is the same dark twill as most of the coats on the street. I find her again and again—I know which pair of shoulders belongs my sister, and if one thousand people walked away from me down a street right now, to this day, I would still know.

*

As I followed my sister, I thought about the day Agnes and I had powdered our faces with flour from Mr. Zilberman's almond horns. Agnes asked me if she looked beautiful and I told her yes even though she looked ridiculous—we both did, of course, but Agnes believed me. I could tell she believed me, and that she felt proud—older and proud. It was a game but it was also important to her. I suppose all games are important to children, in some way; there is always a buried desire at the very bottom of play. Maybe it was being the eldest, or maybe it was my age—I was ten or eleven—but I remember the feeling that, for me, a curtain had already been lifted. I had a double understanding that Agnes did not yet possess. It was like the first time you go backstage in a theater, and you see all the pulleys and lay-away sets and scaffolds, all the tricks, and after that you can never really see a play the same way, because part of your mind is thinking about all the people behind the scenery who are flicking switches and pulling ropes and moving about in the dark.

Then our mother found us and said what she said, and she told us to wipe our faces, and in the mirror above the basin, I saw Agnes see herself. I saw her disappointment at how she looked, so different from how she imagined. I felt responsible. I felt like I had been the one to do that to her. She wiped her face without speaking. Then she went to our room. I found her on our bed with a book and she did not speak to me for the rest of that afternoon or evening, and I wonder now if that was the first time, for Agnes—her first moment of peeking backstage.

7.

I could have apologized for the yawn, explained.

January came, and I saw Agnes less and less, and as time took us farther from that argument, to apologize or bring it back felt impossible.

Agnes began to rise early. I would find her downstairs spreading Hazel's purple jam over a scone at a table with Peter Burstein. She would wave to me, and I would sit with them, and we would talk—everything polite but shallow.

The evenings Agnes spent with Peter, they played Ecarte or Snap or Whist if there were others, and several times Agnes invited me, and on each instance, I said no.

One evening in our room, Agnes made her preparations in the mirror, then paused at the doorway. I sat by the fire pretending to read.

"Are you sure you don't want to join us?" Agnes asked.

I shrugged, shook my head.

She stood in the doorway for a time, so long that I wanted her to just leave already, to stop regarding me like I was a sorry case. Then she did go, and I hated her and

I thought about how people were always leaving me. It sounds theatrical, I know, but that is what I thought about. I began to imagine for myself an evening full of little resentments. I poked at the fire.

Then, Agnes—she came back. She sat in her customary place and said that she didn't feel like cards that evening and had told Peter so.

"Oh," I said.

She sighed contentedly, though I perceived something—performance—in how she did it, and I felt responsible to keep the mood going.

"Did I tell you about Violet Eilids?" Agnes asked.

Violet Eilids, she said, was one of her fellow Gum Girls at the fair.

"You know, she makes love to the men to make a sale, Violet, she's a real flirt. Last week, she does her job a little too well, and a man gets it into his head that she wants to take him into the bushes—" Agnes hiccupped— "she didn't, but he grabs her necktie, and you know what? Violet, she used her fist and broke his nose."

Agnes leaned back on her hands.

"She'd learned boxing from her brother," Agnes said. "Now, all the girls are talking about wanting to start a club to take up boxing. For protection."

"Just don't give the men ideas," I said. "Then you won't need protection."

Agnes looked at me for a long moment.

"I thought you'd like that story. It's like your clippings."

Agnes nodded towards my cigar box, where articles about Lillian Frances Smith and Belle Starr and Calamity Jane were folded, the creases so worn they had begun to tear. *Just don't give the men ideas.* I felt my mother then, saw her in the corner looking at

me with great sadness. What I had said wasn't meant to hurt Agnes, I wanted my mother to be wrong.

"You could come to the club meetings," Agnes said. "Learn to box with us."

I felt very warm. I wanted Agnes to stop looking at me.

From downstairs came the sounds of the piano. Agnes tilted her head, listening, until her cheek was nearly resting on her shoulder.

" 'Let the music speak to us of tonight, in a happier language than our own,' " she said. She sat straight and looked at me. "Book?"

I pretended to find it difficult.

"*The Woman in White*."

"You knew it right away," she said.

"I had to think."

"No, you didn't." She gazed at her palm, tracing lines between the tattoo dots from her needles. "Give me one."

" 'It is the grand misfortune of my life that nobody will let me alone.' "

Her head snapped up and she gazed at me, steady, saying nothing.

"You could simply say, 'I don't feel like playing.' You could just tell me that," she said.

"So you give up?"

"Why can't you say what you feel? Just say it."

"It was a trick. The answer was the same, *The Woman in White.* Here's another--"

"Stop."

“ ‘The rod of iron with which he rules her never appears in company—it is a private rod, and is always kept upstairs.’ Book?”

“I said stop.”

Agnes plucked a sock from the back of the chair. The sock was a creamy orange and had a hole in the heel. Agnes put one hand inside the sock. With the other, she pinched at the yarn around the hole’s edge, plucking. She found the end and pulled, and the stitches came loose, leaving empty loops. I watched her. The fire crackled.

“Why are you destroying your own sock?”

Agnes shrugged. Row by row, the sock disappeared, unraveling into crimped yarn that sat in a heap in Agnes’s lap.

“What did you mean by that?” she said. “ ‘The rod with which he rules her.’ What did you mean?”

I suddenly wanted to be elsewhere—to be at our Aunt Millie’s house. The sound of the ocean through the windows, my mother’s hands on my feet. I felt sick with how much I wanted that.

“You can go play cards if you wish,” I said.

Agnes took her time. She did that, at least. Pretended to think about it. She rose, brushed her skirts, the orange yarn falling, soundless, to the floor. At the doorway, she turned, and my heart raved with hope that she had again changed her mind.

“Make sure the fire is out if you leave,” she said.

8.

It all seems so silly now. Or not silly—I don't know—impossible. Impossible that we were who we were.

I should have said earlier that on Sundays we visited our father. We handed over precious coins for a trolley to take us to his hospital, where we sat with him in his northern room and walked the tiled hallways telling him news that he seemed, sometimes, to understand. Every Sunday, Agnes and I went together, but it must have been around the time of our fight at the millinery when we broke our habit, because I have a memory of visiting our father alone.

I did much alone during that time. I wandered the city, armed with small tasks to provide a sense of purpose. I was very lonely. And there is something so embarrassing about loneliness.

*

The hospital was a white, towered building that sat near the Bay's mouth, a spare and clean place that smelled strongly of cabbage. In the halls hung scattered paintings. In every painting, a ship tilted precipitously on a white-crested wave. The skies held bulging, purple clouds, the horizons tipped with a tender shade of pink that was difficult to find hopeful.

For a few hours, I sat with my father in his room, which he shared with a man who was actively diminishing beneath his sheets. On each visit, the man's legs grew stickier, his knees as peaked as roofs. My father remained as large as ever. Tall and meaty. One half of his face sagged as if its invisible strings had been severed. His beard

grew long and tangled. Sometimes, he asked me to cut it, and I obliged, though I did not like to touch him. There was fear in his eyes. A constant and terrible uncertainty.

"Ada," he said to me often, trying to hide that it was a question.

"Yes," I said.

And he smiled, relieved for a span before he startled in his chair and asked again.

*

Many times during my childhood, I had the strong sense that my father didn't like me. When I heard his bootsteps on the stairs, I would dash to sit near the fire, settling on my lap one of his books, whichever I was pretending to understand at the time. With the heavy book, I could hardly wait. I imagined my father opening the door, entering the room and, upon seeing me with the book, I imagined that he would smile and comment on my excellent taste. He never did. Sometimes he would say, *You're reading such-and-such,* and nothing more. Frequently, my mother asked my opinion on what I read, and, on occasion, she even complimented my thinking, though paired with my father's indifference, I began to suspect she was only doing it to hide the grave reality that I was dull. My sister found better success with our father by being relentlessly cheerful, a trait that irritated our mother. This filled me with joy, private and luxurious and sinister, like black velvet wrapped around a razor blade.

When I was seven, our father lost his job at a green grocer's. He found work again selling tickets at a theater, and then in a dry goods store. In the evenings, he would sink into the tattered Davenport and quiz us. *Name the capitals of Persia, Afghanistan, and Baluchistan. Conjugate natare into all six tenses. Who was the mathematician who put forth the Theory of Proportions?* He did this to check on our mother, who taught us at

home. She insisted on it, telling us often that the girls' schools were useful if you wanted to learn how to be a frightened little rabbit for the rest of your life. Our mother taught us French and arithmetic and history. She prepared us well for some world, just not this one.

Our father's quizzes filled me with a queasy nervousness. If I answered a question wrong, he would turn to Agnes. At the time those were the worst moments of my life, when my sister glanced at me with apology and gave the correct response.

Our father was a man of habit. He had the habit of flying into a rage over minor grievances, shouting or sighing in a massive way to signal that one of us had gravely disappointed him. I learned how to tiptoe around his moods, how to clear away possible sources for his affront: bills left out on the table, chalk dustings on the Davenport from our lessons. He hated to be overheated, and when I heard his heavy gait on the stairs, I would scatter the logs in the fire to avoid his castigations about the swelter in the room, about wasting money on wood. At other times, he looked at me with great love, almost longing. A pained look that frightened me more than his temper. Or not frightened—but rather made me feel awkward and itchy. Unnerving, those times when he would glance at me again and again from his chair, looking as if there was something he wanted to say.

He had the tendency to pull Agnes's curls so they sprang back like coils, making her giggle until he pulled too hard. Then she would cry and he would apologize, taking her onto his lap while my mother and I watched from across the room.

My father's anger was forceful and frightening and predictable. When our mother came home with the shopping, he would huff about how she had spent too much on things we didn't need. Anticipating this, I began accompanying my mother to Leyb's Dry Goods, where I questioned her selections. *We have beans already, Mama. We don't need*

flour. One time, my mother turned to me and said harshly, *I don't need two husbands.* After that, I stopped nudging her. On the next trip to the store, I waited until my mother was turned away, then snuck items from our basket and set them in the wrong places on nearby shelves.

*

When I was ten, my father took me to a meeting of the Workingman's Party. Men in baggy suits greeted my father and shook his hand, and I felt proud standing next to him. My father spoke to various people—I remember one man in particular: skinny and bearded and speckled with moles as if someone had blown mud across his face—and I waited for my father to introduce me, trying to exude the affect of a self-contained, well-behaved child, the qualities my father seemed to value most highly. To my father, every man said, *A house full of women, I pity you*, or some version of that, and then they laughed, and I laughed, too, to show that I understood what was funny, though I didn't.

*

I know that my father could not have taken me to the demonstration at Crocker's Spite Fence. It occurred in 1877 and I would have been only three, and yet I have a memory of standing with my father in the dark and the cold listening to Denis Kearney yell about cheap Chinese labor. My only explanation is that my father told me about the demonstration, and I wrote myself into the story, a leap of imaginative memory that my mother would find entertaining if I could tell her.

Crocker's Spite Fence was in fact a wall, forty feet high and terribly ugly. Crocker had built the wall around the house of the man who had refused to sell his property to

him. The wall made the house lightless and became a symbol to certain political groups about the overstep of the capitalists.

The crowd gathered, restless, the men breathing like horses. It was a cold night, and the air was filled with the white puffs of exhalations. Someone lit lime barrels on fire, which cast quivering light up the ornamented walls of Crocker's mansion, the finials and gratings making long, sinister shadows.

Denis Kearney spoke. I craned to glimpse him between the dark bodies of men.

"When the Chinese question is settled," he shouted, "we can discuss whether it would be better to hang, shoot, or cut the capitalists to pieces."

The crowd nodded and stomped. I looked to my father to see which he thought was better, hanging or shooting or cutting.

*

In one of my clearest memories, I am walking with my father down Leavenworth Street. I am thirteen years old and uncomfortable all the time.

We had just attended a talk by a visiting socialist scholar, a spectacled man who spoke in long, thorny phrases that seemed to contain no periods, one flowing into the next. If you had asked me before the talk to draw the figure of death, I would have drawn the face of the socialist scholar, which was gaunt and seemed to emit a white, cold light. After the talk, my father asked my opinion about what I had heard, and I said that the socialist had made many good points, which is what I thought he wanted me to say, but my father shook his head and said that I was too easily swayed by a large vocabulary.

"He is a fool," he said. "I lament that your mother isn't teaching you to think for yourself."

His words stayed with me. I tried hard after to do as he said, to think for myself, and I took to challenging my mother during lessons, asking her why we couldn't go to regular school with other girls, why we had to learn French at all. I persisted even though I could see that this hurt her; I felt helpless; I could not stop myself, and it was frightening, which only made my behavior towards my mother worse. I began to make fun of her, ridiculing her habit of drinking tea in the bath, of losing track of her things.

*

The last good morning my father was dealt, he had snapped the newspaper open and read aloud from Ambrose Bierce's column.

" 'The Italians continue their cheerful national pastime of stabbing one another,' " he read, chuckling.

As he left for work, he bent and picked up a sock from the floor. He dangled it in front of his face, and I braced for him to shout, to berate me for leaving my things strewn around. The sock was maroon. He put the sock in his pocket without a word and left. Shortly after, he collapsed in the street—O'Farrell Street. Later I wondered what happened to the sock. It troubled me. Also troubling were my father's last words as himself. They were so maddeningly stupid. *The Italians continue their cheerful national pastime, the Italians continue their cheerful national pastime*. They ran through my head like an endless, inane parade.

I wondered later if the words held some cryptic meaning. In the rooming house, I thought to ask Hazel about the significance. I had begun to spend more time with her in the Winter of Peter Burstein. Our visits were unsatisfying and boring and sent my mind

clawing like a rat trapped in a crate, but they also took up space, ate those hours that I would have otherwise spent tallying my wages or being cross with Agnes.

Hazel was one of those who believed in signs. She had told me once she knew her brother was dead because she saw a seagull in the street eating a rat. The rat was still alive. Its pink tail made quick and anguished circles while the seagull picked organs from a hole in its belly. I asked Hazel how on earth that led her believe her brother was dead.

"Well, he was in the Navy," she had said.

Regardless.

I turned fifteen. Then March came and the blue scarf and my mother leaving.

Shortly after, our father collapsed, then slowly lost his mind. This surprised me; I hadn't known he had been so attached to our mother. Now, I'm not so sure the two events were connected, but at the time, I was sure that our mother had caused our father's decline. I got this idea not from my own deductions but from the doctor, who came to our Polk Street apartment with his terrifying black bag. Terrible things came out of that bag. Little metal instruments and cod liver and, once and worst of all, a thick rubber balloon. But our father's condition transformed the bag, and I fervently hoped the doctor would reach into its depts, elbow deep, and emerge with just the thing to make it all not true. The doctor examined our father and advised us to feed him less red meat and take him for walks—as if he were a dog, I remember thinking—and before he left the doctor turned to me, his hand on the door.

"Your mother was very selfish doing what she did," he said.

I didn't like to think of my father sick and frail. The same man who self-printed pamphlets on worker's rights and the true nature of private property. He couldn't control

himself, I figured. He felt things strongly, so strongly that he would not speak for a long time then burst out yelling—at us, at our mother—and then go quiet again. But other times, he was very companionable. Around the fire, he loved to tell us things. He believed that a great revolution was coming, an uprising of workers against the capitalists. My father believed he would be an important leader for this revolution, perhaps *the* leader, and as a child, I thought this, too. My father seemed to me to be an extraordinary man, and I believed him when he said his potential was limited by a world not ready for his ideas. My mother laughed at this, at him, and it wasn't for a long time—too late, really—that I understood why she was so angry.

9.

After I sat with my father in the hospital for as long as I could stand it, I gave his hand a squeeze then fled, stepping into a white flash of sunlight reflecting from the building. Leaving that place felt like being born. I walked from him and the hospital's cabbage smell as quickly as I could. Then it was back on the trolley with a new relief, for just after those visits, I did not have to see my father again for another week. Of course, this relief would be double-sided, like a ribbon, and carry guilt on its other side. Then I'd fight the urge to purchase something to make myself feel better, turning my head away from the shop windows along California with their greedy displays of glazed pastries, the egg wash turning my thoughts yellow.

As a treat, I settled for alcohol, which could be found for cheap in the right places. Women were not allowed in many saloons, but there were proprietors who believed more in commerce than in etiquette, and some others who felt the city had been a better place

before decency laws, before telephone wires, before the railroads. Abe Warner was one of the latter kind. His saloon sat on Meiggs' Wharf. It would turn out to be a consequential place for me.

Abe was happy to let me barter for my beer. Or not happy, but grudgingly willing, so long as I tucked my hair under my hat and didn't talk to anyone. Through bartering, he had accrued an impressive collection of nude portraits. Several of my mother's paintings made it to Abe's walls. The thing about Abe's was that everything was covered in cobwebs. Abe couldn't bring himself to evict the creatures, which he described as industrious and who he called by names like friends.

I tried to talk to Abe, but he looked at me crossly, like I had interrupted him, so I settled into my stool and passed those stalled middle hours of Sundays drinking steam beer and listening to Abe gently admonish his spiders.

Ferries deposited crowds on the pier, their boots shaking the pilings. Some came into Abe's place, men in frock coats and women with their hair frizzed from the salty wind. I watched the door carefully, checking every feminine face, looking for my mother. It was a terrible game. I would devise little bargains with some looming, faceless power—not quite God, but more like Meaning itself, the invisible stitching that staved off pointlessness. *If this man in the sealskin hat sits next to me, then the next person who enters will be my mother*. The man in the sealskin hat did heave himself onto the neighboring stool, but the next person who entered was not my mother—laughably not, for he was a large man, corpulent and shuffling, his belly round and hard-looking. *If the man in the sealskin hat orders a steam beer, then I will see my mother on my walk home.* But this was a cheat; everyone ordered steam beer.

After my drinks and unsteady on my feet, I trudged back to the rooming house. I huddled in our room and wandered from place to place, from the bed to the sink to the swampy green fireplace, rearranging my mother's paintings, thinking that I should mend the quilt as I had been meaning to do for weeks, or possibly for my entire life. I would take stock of any items I could possibly sell—I had already parted with our father's pocket watch and our mother's meagre jewelry—and I would try to find one of the more intact volumes from my mother's library that could possibly be worth something, but then I would end up turning one page, then another, until I was rehitched to the words, and the thought of selling any of my mother's books felt like a betrayal, and I would grow angry with her for continuing to shape my decisions.

As Agnes began to spend every free moment with Peter, I began to secretly indulge in minor luxuries we could not technically afford, such as an éclair or a bowl of steamed clams at The Oakdale Bar. While I pried open the shells and dipped crusty bread in the good, rich broth, I felt tremendous, like I had outwitted Agnes and discovered a great secret of life, which was clams. But as the meal progressed, and as the broth dwindled in the bowl, I felt increasingly uneasy at the imminence of the bill, and the stone of worry at the bottom of my heart grew heavier and heavier.

To make myself feel better, I passed the time imagining myself riding a horse across a great and empty plain. I imagined my mother. I put her there, at a table at The Oakdale Bar. I placed her with people—new and faceless friends whose expressions were permanently fixed in a state between shock and respect as I showed my mother my fine rings and shiny boots and told her, as it turned out, I was much better off without her. Oh, my mother, how she begged in my fantasies. Sometimes she knelt on the floor,

beseeching me, rending her hair, while I stood above her, stony and impervious and superior.

As I left The Oakdale Bar, walking along the waterfront with my hand gripping the bone handle of Last Resort, I vowed each time to be different, to become a frugal, selfless person. It was like Mr. Micawber said to David Copperfield: a man who earns twenty pounds a year and spends nineteen pounds, nineteen shillings, and six pence will be happy, but if he spends twenty pounds and six pence, he'll be miserable. I was miserable.

After indulging in clams, for the remainder of the week, I would manage to be good. I would take my meals at the lesser, cheaper eateries, the places Agnes and I had gone. I would drink my supper in steam beer at Lillian's. I would pay the interest on our debts. But I would also walk down the street and pass ladies in furs, or men in boots as shiny as oil, or children—children were the most maddening. Sucking on bright green candy sticks, stuffing rolls into their mouths with pudgy fingers, lapping at hot chocolate like cats in the windows of cafes. I would be good, so good, and then I would see a woman in a bakeshop spreading thick butter over a slice of bread the length of my arm, and inside me, a surge of such bitterness and envy would rise that I would gasp. The woman ate her bread. She looked settled, easy, part of the bakeshop display. I checked the woman's rosy face for any signs that she was secretly like me, that she had lain awake, as I had, her mind wrung out with worry. But the woman in the bakeshop had no darkness beneath her eyes, no sag to her posture, no gauntness to her frame. I imagined snatching the bread from the woman's hand, ripping her fine coat from her shoulders.

When I did manage to sleep, my dreams were full of numbers and socks. I dreamt I was lying awake in a room that looked and felt and smelled exactly like our true quarters. I dreamt of a goat, the boot-shiny rectangular pupils. I dreamt of pencils and spoons and all my teeth turning to sawdust in my mouth.

*

We used to play "Picture This," my mother and I.

"Picture this …you're walking to the trolley and you pass what you think is a man sleeping but in fact he is dead. What do you do?"

"Picture this … you're at a dinner party. Fine people, duck roast. Across the table, you catch the dowager tipping powdered poison from her ring into her husband's soup. What do you do?"

Picture this: You are poor and alone and angry.

What do you do? I confined myself to our room, knowing that if I let myself out onto the streets with the timing wrong, then I would find myself behind the steamed window of a café eating éclairs I couldn't afford, and though the chocolate would coat my lips and the cream would fill my mouth, the feeling wouldn't last, and I would hate myself for spending the money.

So I would be harshly frugal, for at least three days out of the week. But, as I have said, my economical intentions never lasted. Payday would come again, and the harsh economy I had inflicted on myself all week would send my mind spinning on a loopy axis of possibility. *I've been so good,* my thinking went, *don't I deserve something nice?* Our debt deepened. I took out another loan. I was two weeks behind on paying our

father's hospital bills, a fact I hid from Agnes. I took her half of the money to pay my tab at Abe's.

My mother and I sometimes used to speak to each other in made-up chapter titles from *David Copperfield*. I Boil an Egg and Make an Upsetting Discovery in the Wash Basin. On a Walk, We Make a Resolution.

"'The New Wound, and the Old,'" my mother had said when I had cut my finger with a paring knife in nearly the same spot as where I had cut it the week before.

I Waste Money and Stay the Same.

I Sit in Another Saloon.

My Mind Goes in Circles Like an Addled Donkey.

Regardless, my efforts at frugality, such as they were, made little difference. By mid-January, our savings was gone.

10.

Here is my mother's favorite story, which I think explains quite a lot, though it is difficult to tell with one's own family. She tells me this story again and again in the brittle heat of a dying fire. Everything in this world, she says, contains a double. A replica indistinguishable from the real, a demonic copy. Women, men, cats, trees, eagles, ships, sharks, clouds, and rain. Books? I ask. Books, my mother says. And I have a demonic double? I ask. You do, my mother says, everything does. Even the tea kettle? I ask. Especially the tea kettle, my mother says. It's why the kettle screams and screams.

My mother says: Forty days before a person is born, the voice of God bellows the name of who that person will marry. This name is heard by the angels, but

also by eavesdropping demons, who carry the name back to their doubled realm in their toothed throats. And what happens then? I ask. Sometimes, nothing. But other times—other times, the demons arrange for the person to marry not their intended, but the infernal replica, the impish version of their life's true love. And what then? I am, by this time, barely able to speak my question. My mother fans her hands, shrugs. Then you are married to a demon, she says.

"That's a terrible story," I say. "That's a terrible story, and I hate it."

"Do you?" My mother's voice is soft, curious. "I find it rather helpful."

"But aren't the doubles cruel?"

"Sometimes."

In the hearth, a log cracks, spitting sparks. *Please be happy*, I think at the dark, warm shape of my mother. *Just be happy. How hard can it be?*

*

My mother's doctor had prescribed four things to treat her condition: swimming, herbs, enemas, and walking. She agreed to three out of the four. I walked often with her. My favorite walks were in the evenings when candlelight made little jewel boxes of the windows. Along the streets, men smoked their castigating pipes next to women in purple skirts and frilled tops, the large flaps of lace making them look like lizards. We walked into the teeth of ocean winds. Little by little, our shoes filled with pebbles. Our skirt hems brushed the street and turned black.

On our walks, my mother pointed out the homes of the German Jews with Christmas trees in their Bay windows.

"That is not a person," my mother said. In a window, a man stood in yellow light. "That is not a man. That is a ghost."

We walked on. My mother stopped.

"I think now it is not a good idea to live so far from where your people are buried," she said.

I couldn't understand what she meant at the time.

*

The years turned me ten and I tried to run away. My destination was Aunt Millie, who would be dead a year later—though of course that's not why I was making for her house. I walked several blocks through the dark before I realized I'd forgotten my collection of coins. When I tiptoed back into our apartment, my mother's bedroom door opened, and there she stood, fully dressed, wearing even her coat. Her eyes caught on my suitcase.

"Come on, then," she said.

In the kitchen, she heated milk in a pan. She watched me while I drank it. The hot milk and my mother's unexpected tenderness gave me the courage to ask her what I wanted to know. Why was she dressed in the middle of the night? She couldn't have discovered my absence and dressed so soon.

My mother sat with her hands flat on the table.

"It's a terrible thing to have your mind made up about yourself," she said.

More years passed. I painted portraits and sold them and then February came and some coward shot Belle Starr, the famous horse thief, while she was walking down the street. I read about it in the paper and cried. Then it was somehow February for half the

year. All the vegetables withered, but then it was September for the entire second half, and there were so many wild strawberries you couldn't pay people to take them out of your hands. Then Aunt Millie died. Time was quilts over the mirrors and my mother locking herself in the washroom for hours. Then I was fifteen and my mother knitted me a blue scarf.

That morning, I arose first—I must have, because in my memory I stand alone in gray light in the kitchen, and somehow I know already what has happened. I know because on the kitchen table is my mother's wedding band. Her wedding band and two notes.

I don't need a scarf.

Of all the things I could have said, I chose to say that.

I stared at her wedding band. I had never held it before, never seen it off her finger. I lifted it from the table and put it my mouth.

The taste of metal. The clink against my teeth. I read my mother's note. *I'm sorry*, she had written, then crossed it out. Her handwriting was not overly ornate or flowery. Her lettering was confident, like wrought-iron fencing. *You are old enough now to look after yourself.* That line aged me in both directions—I felt decades older and unbearably small. I thought of my mother's feet. I thought of her voice in the dark. I pushed my tongue into the hole of her ring.

Where was my mother going to sleep? That was my first and clearest question. I couldn't begin to picture her bed. My inability to imagine my mother's whereabouts made me feel frantic. I suddenly understood that we had spent the entire year bickering. We had bickered about the weather, about Poland, about candles, about the nature of Sir

Michael, the older man who falls in love with Lady Audley in *Lady Audley's Secret*. I felt sorry for Sir Michael. When Sir Michael proposes, he asks Lady Audley to forget his fortune and think only of her feelings for him. Of Sir Michael, my mother's thought was that he was an idiot. Any man who asks a woman to forget the practical concerns of a marriage proposal is a man who is fooling himself into believing that women are swooned by dusty peckers and personalities as powdered as their grandfathers' wigs.

We had even bickered on our last walk. We had taken a circuitous route, not our usual course. My mother walked fast, always slightly ahead, and I grew hot beneath my clothes, trying to keep up with her.

We ended up on a street near Chinatown, the avenue narrow and steep and lined with shops with scalloped awnings. My mother stopped at the fringes of a crowd of men who had gathered in front of a window. In the window, bathed in blue light, was a woman dressed as a mermaid. She sat in a chair and danced. Danced is too strong a word. She swayed, a cigarette stuck to her bottom lip. Her tail was made from a gossamer fabric beaded with fake scales that caught the blue light that seeped from paper lanterns. On the street, the scene was quiet, the crowd intoxicated, reverent.

"Show us your clam," one man mumbled.

As if in answer, the mermaid lifted her legs and gave her tail a half-hearted flap. She seemed bored, which interested me.

A few men pressed their faces to the glass, their breath making foggy blooms. One man pounded his fist. The glass shuddered. I jumped, but the mermaid only continued to draw small circles with her upper body. She did not look at the man who had pounded on the glass.

"Let's go, please," I said.

My mother made no motion, no sign that she had heard me.

"Please, let's go," I said.

The man pounded his fist again on the glass. The crowd shifted on its feet. I could smell my mother's coat: wooly, waterlogged, strung with smoke. She rolled a cigarette. The tobacco was dry, and flakes dribbled from the ends, riding an imperceptible breeze down to the cobblestones. My mother smoked. She smoked in tandem with the mermaid, mirroring her movements, like she had forgotten that particular choreography and needed the mermaid to remind her.

The man pounded the glass again, harder, and the pane went wobbly, reflecting light in jack-knife flashes. The mermaid regarded the window with that same distant stare.

"She's bored," I said.

"She's not bored," said my mother. "She's used to it. There is a difference."

I watched the mermaid, her eyes fixed on some distant elsewhere. There was determination in it. Effort. A will to tuck herself away from what was happening. I thought, *I might like to be used to it.* I shoved my hands in my coat pockets. Both pockets held sand in their creases. In her window, the mermaid danced. The scene seemed all at once to be purposefully obtuse, the world holding its meaning back. I didn't know what I was supposed to do or say. I didn't know how to draw my mother away from wherever it was she spent most of her time—a presence that marks an absence, like a seat on a coach still warm from the previous rider.

Some men left the crowd and others replaced them, as if there were some ordinance about the number of spectators. I rubbed the sand between my thumb and index until it hurt. My mother smoked, wordless. What if the mermaid woman were my mother? And next I experienced a thought that felt like the beginning of adulthood, the first plunge into an understanding I didn't want. I thought, *My mother is a person.*

It was a strange feeling, edged with panic. It seemed to me like one of our fake chapter titles from *David Copperfield*.

The mermaid smoked her cigarette, filling her small room with haze.

My Mother Turns out to Be a Person, I thought.

But I could not tell her that.

11.

Agnes and Peter were married on February 18, 1894 in a judge's chambers, with a small reception after in the parlor of the rooming house. An auspicious number for Jews, the number eighteen. I told myself it augured well for them, the two eighteens in their wedding date.

Agnes wore one of our mother's old dresses, the waist taken in and the hem raised by an inch. Someone played the piano and there was dancing.

Agnes found me by the fire and sat on the arm of my chair. Her body seeped heat. I put my hand on her back, felt the ribs of her corset. She seemed like a different kind of creature, bound and rigid and warm.

I tried to think of something to say. I knew Agnes would want me to say that I wished our parents were there. The thought of saying it made me afraid.

I left the party early. I needed to walk, to be out. At first, I did not mark my course or my destination. I wrapped my father's coat around myself, cinched with one of his leather belts. I made my way to Market, the street wide and full of passing, busy life, everything smelling of mud and oil and cigars. The storefronts spilled their wares: buckets and brooms outside R.F. Osborn & Co. Hardware, racks of suits outside Nicoll the Tailor's; outside of the Lippi Brothers, everyone's feet reflected back from the display of gilded mirrors.

I crossed Market and followed Octavia. I passed a brown house with a capped turret, and I heard my mother say how it was just as possible to be miserable with money as without. We walked in silence, my mother and I—me and my imaginary mother, far apart.

Along Van Ness, she liked to point out the swollen houses of every successful Jew in the city.

"And I married the one with the business sense of an owl pellet," she said.

On the street, I laughed. As I continued on, I slipped between that evening and others, and I could not have said, in certain moments, which felt more real.

I walked west, following Sutter and the humming trolley tracks, then north along Laguna to Lafayette Park, where the houses towered and the streets were paved with brick. I descended, not understanding my destination until I was climbing again, up to Buena Vista, where I stopped and gazed down at the pooling white glow. The Mid-Winter Fair's electric lights glittered through the dark branches. From the top of the faux Eiffel Tower, a searchlight's beam swooped clockwise over the dark trees. The surrounding parkland was dark and unlit, leaving the fairgrounds to shine, all of it white

and searing—a building's glass dome radiant, the Ferris wheel an electric bull's eye. The fair looked warm, it looked like heaven—like the glittering, clanking afterlife where everything is alight, and the hours are one endless dinner with everyone who loves you best.

The cold rang through my teeth. In the park, wind deposited at my feet a collection of dead leaves. Picture this … you stay all night in a cold park until you fall asleep and freeze to death. What do you do?

Die—there was a relief in the idea, small and sad. If I died, then all my problems would be solved. No more anger at Agnes. No more sleepless nights. No more father to care for, no more queasy worry over bills. *You're not happy here.*

Somewhere down in that crystal pool of electric blaze were people. Real ones. Buying their tickets, selling their gum, eating peanuts. My mother could have been down there—and the moment I thought it, the idea became true. My mother *was* there. She ate roasted chestnuts from a paper bag in one of the Ferris wheel's caged carts, staring out into the surrounding blackness, maybe even imagining me.

The white arm of light made another sweep.

12.

Agnes and Peter moved into more spacious rooms on the fourth floor. They would continue living at Hazel's, Agnes told me as she packed, to save for an apartment. She would continue to contribute to her part of our father's bills; she hoped that our savings might cover some of it in the meantime (I had still not told her about the state of our account). Peter had his philosophy to complete, so Agnes would continue to work, though

after what happened with Violet Eilids, Peter didn't want her selling gum at the fair anymore. Agnes spoke in a steady, factual way, but I could tell the development made her sad.

"If you had to get married, you could have at least found someone with money," I said.

I had meant it to sound teasing, joking. But during that time, my words were treasonous—they seemed one way in my head, and another when I said them out loud. Agnes finished her packing and stood—too soon, much too soon—ready at the door with her suitcase.

"I suppose I'll see you," Agnes said.

The quiet seemed to settle, like sediment in a shaken glass. Alone in our room, I did not feel present; I felt that the room was haunted by me, that I was its hapless phantom, one of those women in novels who go attic-mad and spend their nights accosting the living.

Much from that room, I have lost track of—the paintings, the wobbly stack of teacups, the books. One book I do have still, *Looking Backward* by Edward Bellamy, a green-bound copy with silver lettering. The book's hero, Julian West, falls into a deep, hypnosis-induced sleep in the year 1857 and wakes up 113 years later to a society much improved. People of the future visit a central store that displayed every item of necessity: books, lamps, teakettles, spoons, hats, glue, chairs, salt. The people of the future choose what they want, and the following day, their selections are delivered straight to their homes, transported through a network of tubes that twist beneath the streets, like the city's guts. There is no crime in the future because everyone has what they need. For

three years, everyone works a difficult job—mining, laying tracks for railroads, street paving—then they choose whatever career they want. They work only four hours a day until, at the age of forty-five, they retire and devote their remaining days to their own pursuits and pleasures. I say "everyone," but who I mean is men. In Bellamy's mind, men of the future do these things. Music, though, is truly for everyone in the future. It comes right into your home—flick a switch, and there would be music, stringing along telephone wires and seeping through the walls.

As far as I can tell from my vantage, society is not on its way to remaking itself the way Bellamy envisioned. I wonder what has become of him. I wonder if he knows he was wrong.

*

The wind was fierce the day I changed my life. I remember it that way—the street crowd hunched, holding their hats. When you stepped past the shelter of the buildings into the open street, the wind was strong enough to knock you sideways. People staggered, side-swept, like drunks.

I did not walk in with the intention of leaving. Lillian stood in her usual spot by the ledger, a cigar secured horizontally under one of her suspenders, close to her heart. It had been a week since Agnes was married, and I had not slept for more than two hours in the past seven nights, and the thought of sweeping the saloon and serving the customers filled me with such sorrow, I thought I actually might die.

"I'm not happy," I said.

Lillian looked up and said nothing for so long that I wondered if I had said something else—those treasonous words, betraying me again.

"Good," she said.

The hurt surprised me. I realized I had wanted her to protest.

"I'm relieved, to tell the truth. I was readying to have to fire you. I felt badly, I know your situation is difficult."

She spoke quickly, as if she had been waiting a long time to say those words. I gripped Last Resort in my pocket. Outside, the wind must have been blowing clouds across the sun because the light kept dimming then flooding in again. I wanted to take it back. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to do as the protagonist had done in *Looking Backwards*—to fall into a deep sleep and wake up a century later. I wanted to be through every difficult moment and out on the other side, gazing at my former trials in fond recollection.

The light dimmed, brightened, dimmed again, as if some addled Hand were flipping a switch. Lillian said she did have good news. She wrote on a scrap of paper. For a groundless moment, I believed she was writing my mother's location. When she finally handed it to me, I stared at the paper for a time without understanding why it held a man's name, Robert Baker, along with an address in Oakland.

"My brother," Lillian said. "Younger brother. There's good work along the Oakland wharf for those who want it."

Lillian gazed at a spot just ahead of the ledger. The cigar stuck beneath her suspender had a red ring at one end.

"Well," she said.

"Yes," I said.

Inside my chest, the tiny voice of hurt cried. I decided it didn't matter. On the plank that formed the bar, I traced the dry scar of a water ring. I pushed the scene away, pushed Lillian away—she said more, and I heard it but at a distance, as though she were speaking from the other side of a pane of glass.

I don't know when I thought of the mermaid directly—if I thought of her back at Hazel's while I threw my things into a bag, or when I lay awake that night, or in the moment itself, my finger circling the water stain. The glint of her gossamer tail in blue light. The way she swayed, smoked, and didn't seem to mind anything. *I would like to be used to it.* Of course, it is possible to live like that, to tuck yourself away, pretend what is happing to you isn't happening, just as it is also possible to take the wrong lesson from experience.

PART 3

I COULD BE TROUBLE

March 1894

1.

Crossing the Bay now isn't such an endeavor, but back when I did it, ferries sank all the time. They collided in the fog. The engines caught fire. The hull hit a sandbar and everyone lost their lives.

On the ferry's slippery deck, I couldn't remember if I had read about those accidents, if my mother had told them to me, or if I had made them up. They all seemed reasonable possibilities as the swell grew and the ship tilted, my trunk sliding heavily between my legs.

I wore my father's clothes. His pants I had mended, taking in the waist to fit my frame, but his coat was far too big. The whole thing consumed me, hiding my body the way a theater curtain hides the stage. But the coat was warm—black wool strung with gray flecks in the weave. I checked my pocket often, feeling for the envelope that I was sure had fallen out or been plucked by the wind. The envelope held two weeks' of my wages along with Lillian's scrap, the name Robert Baker.

She had told me little about him, only that he seemed to make a good living at whatever work he did and that he was two years older than I was, though still in many ways a boy. I had donned my father's clothes because I didn't want to meet Robert Baker as myself. I even thought to use a different name for luck. Sylvie. Anne. Sylvie Anne. Would Robert Baker like a Sylvie Anne? Robert Baker had grown in my mind, become mythical—he would be kind, he would take me seriously, he would want me around.

The ferry was white and two-storied, with a chugging water wheel and twin stacks that breathed black smoke. Along the rail at the prow were huge, white knobs that looked like mushrooms. What were they for? I found those knobs fascinating. Everything on the

ferry was fascinating—I felt raw, receptive. Whatever the world had to show me, I was ready.

I stood on the upper deck at the prow, looking ahead, though there wasn't much to see. Thick fog had descended. The world was one dirty, blank page. Leaning over the wet rail, I stared down to the sleet-gray water, to the white designs of wake, trying to find patterns in the froth. Through the fog came the patchy warble of singing—male voices singing in Italian. The wind carried their voices unevenly, and the sound had a phantom quality, a spectral echo. Because everything was new, it all felt important, and I had a hard time latching onto one thing. My attention lurched from the gray water to the gulls threading through the fog to the other passengers inside the ferry, smudgy figures behind the fogged glass. The passengers wore dark clothes and held newspapers and seemed to not know that I was on my way to a brand-new life.

Outside, the day wasn't friendly. I was wind-chilled and my nose ran. The cold seemed like something that was happening to me personally, and when I looked at the people inside, I felt superior in that I was being tested and they were not. I imagined them watching me with envy. I imagined them discussing my oddity, my courage. The smudge of a man snapped his newspaper open. A woman with a handbasket bent forward to shake the weather out of her skirts.

I wanted someone to tell my bravery to. I pictured Lillian at that early hour, my favorite time of day. The pale light. The jars' delicate tinkle on their shelves when a heavy carriage passed on the street. Lillian in her suspenders, scratching the previous day's numbers into tidy columns. I tried not to think of Agnes.

Seagulls trailed the ferry, gray against the white fog, their beaks tipped in murderous red. The wind found the thin places in my father's clothes. They felt so light on my body—so much lighter than skirts. I had walked from Hazel's rooming house that morning with the feeling that I had forgotten something, and it took me the entire walk to Meiggs' Pier to realize that I felt strange with the absence of the weight of my normal clothes. At Abe Warner's saloon, I ordered a beer as I waited for the ferry.

"I'm going to Oakland," I said.

Abe ceased his stream of chatter—he had been speaking gently to a cat, who wove high on its paws in figure eights across the bar. Abe squinted at me, clearly trying to recall who I was. He shook his head.

"You know what life on a pier bar is, young man?" he asked. "Too many goddamn farewells."

Abe returned his attentions to the cat.

"How am I to remember every goodbye?" Abe asked the cat, who cast her yellow eyes to me like she knew.

"I will return," I said to Abe's yellow-eyed cat.

I would not only return; I would be better. Undeniably improved by the noble hardships of my uncertain future circumstances. *I Face New Challenges and am Improved by Them.* I would return to the city twice a week, somehow, to visit my father. I would not be impatient with him. I would ask him questions and walk him slowly through the hospital hallways, past all those painted ships in various states of peril. In one painting near my father's room, white water clutched a frigate against an ochre sky. Close inspection revealed exposed rocks in the dark foreground and human figures who crawled

or splayed or beseeched the clouds. Near the rocks in the wine-dark sea, one pale arm reached as if trying to pluck an apple from a branch. I hated that painting. It disturbed me in a way I couldn't articulate, and so I studied it more closely than any other. My hatred for the painting was energizing, a dark animation. In Abe Warner's bar, I resolved on my next visit to take the painting down. Having a concrete plan felt like a great victory. I finished my beer.

*

The Long Wharf of Oakland stretched out into the Bay for two miles. In the fog, the wharf announced itself by the long, plaintive whistle of a train.

"Coming up on The Mole now," said a man to woman. They had stepped outside, the woman's chin deep in a fox stole.

The Mole. The first new word of my new life. I tucked it away for safekeeping.

I searched through the fog to spot The Mole. When the dark thorns of masts finally emerged, they were frighteningly close. We had arrived already, too soon—I had been wagering on a longer passage to transform me, make me—I don't know what—into Sylvie Anne. But now the passage was concluded. And I felt the same.

The ferry pulled alongside the pier, where men caught the thrown ropes with a disappointing lack of urgency. One of the men cupped his hand around a match. Two others talked as they wound ropes around the cleats. The ferry nudged the edge of the pier and it acted like a signal—the doors opened, emitting fronts of warm air, and passengers streamed out, dry and sleepy-eyed with rolled newspapers tucked under their arms. No one looked at me. None acknowledged my unique position. My clothes were damp. My hair stuck in wisps around my face. When I licked my lips, I tasted salt.

I walked into the open-aired depot, a gaping structure with an iron and glass roof that sent every sound clanging back on top of our heads. The place was crowded, jostling, everyone moving as if they knew exactly what they were doing and why. Against one wall, a façade of a building stood, set with paneled windows and an enormous clock. Along the tracks, trains waited, steaming, letting out sighing puffs the way horses do. The place had the feel of movement, of transition, and the slight unreality of all structures dedicated to transit. There was a mechanical quality to the crowd. Commuters strode with great purpose. A boy in a floppy yellow bowtie called, “Hot peanuts! Hot peanuts!”

I decided to make my first purchase. I handed over three warm pennies. The peanut smell was rich and festive; it brought to mind a wood-lined place. I gazed at the nutmeats without understanding. I didn’t feel hungry. I didn’t even much care for peanuts.

Dispirited, I carried my paper cone to a hulking train. I stood face to face with the machine, its red grill fanned out like an iron skirt. The train belonged to the Transcontinental Line, words that drew a winding mark across my internal map, cleaving a new and terrible possibility: I could, in fact, go anywhere.

The crowd moved around me. A woman passed, green ribbons wagging from her hat. Two men balanced on their shoulders opposite ends of trunk so stuffed its lid couldn’t close. The trunk was kept from spilling open by two belts with thick buckles. As the men carried the trunk, something white spilled from the crack: a limp, gauzy sleeve. The sleeve hung over the trunk’s lip, waving goodbye.

Outside in the weak daylight, I could see straight down the spine of The Mole, the train tracks squeezing themselves into Vs. My father had told me that Chinese had built

the railroads, an idea that seemed outlandish when faced with the reality of iron track, with the wide wooden sleepers. The tracks seemed beyond the possibilities of the hands of men, and it disturbed me to think of how the rails—the very same that I prodded with the toe of my boot—stretched and continued across the parched, golden interior, a place I imagined as one enormous field, the heads of wheat perpetually bent like the necks of carriage horses.

I dragged my trunk over the planks of the pier, passing stacked wooden crates netted with ropes. I stopped to rest my arms, which burned from the effort of dragging my trunk. A train rumbled by, shaking the pilings and sending delicate vibrations through my skeleton. If I held my teeth at a certain distance, the train set them to a rapid thrum. This discovery felt significant. I almost turned to tell it to someone, to Agnes, almost.

I stopped to rest, to catch my breath. I peered over the edge of wharf to the water. A shadow glided, and I leapt back, afraid. I looked again and the shadow glided by, the shovel-shaped form of a ray.

As I walked, the people became scarce, then disappeared. I felt the hot beginnings of blisters on my hands. When I stopped again, I found myself halfway between the depot and the mainland and very much alone. Gulls cried. If solitude were an instrument, its sound would be the cry of a gull. The Bay looked like liquid slate. My thoughts drifted. Agnes's face emerged. I yanked my mind away.

At last, I reached the end of The Mole, which I regarded hatefully, how it had stretched itself to an unnatural length and made my journey very difficult.

Back on solid land, a straight, sandy road led away from the water, past solitary houses and fields. My trunk scraped the sand and collected a pile like a broom.

"You son of a bitch," I said, addressing my trunk.

The trunk hulked, heavy and curved and stupid. It contained more of my father's clothes, my mother's paintings and some of her books, her letter, my cigar box. Two men passed. If they thought it a curious sight—a woman dressed in men's clothes addressing a trunk as, *You bastard son-of-a-bitch*—they did a good job of hiding it.

The street curved back to the water again and a wharf materialized. It passed by in patchy impressions, images I caught between my gasps for breath. Piles of netting and the smell of fish and brine. Clang of buoy bells. Sticky quality to the air, swell of urgency. The men busy moving things from one place to another. And the detritus! Stacks of wooden crates. Piles of used canvas. Ropes as thick as a dog's waist. And amidst all that brown: the sudden, silver faces of fish. Arranged in lines on tables. Mouths agape, flashing ribbed, pink cavities.

Italian fishermen called out the names of fish in a singing English: *troo-ut, sa-almon*. At the end of the row, four Chinese fishermen played a game with tiles near barrels full of something brown and shiny and shattered looking, like moving broken glass. As I neared, the glass in the barrels revealed itself to be live shrimp, whiskered and ancient-looking. The shrimp crawled over and under each other, a seething confusion of spindly legs.

How had my mother done this, gone off on her own into the frightening world? Her nights, I could imagine—walking the evening streets of some seaside town, her boots squelching in mud, her face lit by the yellow windows of other people's houses—but her days I could not picture at all. There were so many noon-bright, blank hours. So much to decide. Where to go, what to do, what kind of person to be or to become.

I stopped and sat on my trunk again. Whatever had happened to me on the ferry continued to happen. The ground swayed up and down—slow, like the tilt of a rocking chair. A wave of dizziness sent my head between my knees. I realized I had not eaten, and I could not remember my last meal. My arms and legs ached, and my skin itched from sweat and the salt air. Something crunched in my pocket—the peanuts. The thought of the peanuts sent a hot, queasy sickness up from my belly into my throat. I breathed through my nose. The ground between my feet sparkled with fish scales.

I Arrive and Fall into Illness.

An Upsetting Journey.

I Begin my Search for Robert and am Beset with Difficulty.

The Copperfieldian titles settled me, as they always did. Between my fingers, the feeling of thin pages. Had I brought the novel with me? The question was all at once urgent. But I couldn't stand the idea of searching through my trunk only to find that I had left it with Peter and Agnes. Agnes had eyed me dubiously when I told her my plans. She stroked the sutured mending across one of our mother's quilts.

"Do you not think you'll be lonely over there?" Agnes had said.

I shook my head violently, which made me dizzy all over again. A sea breeze cooled the wet strands of hair against my neck. It felt tender, that breeze. Nearby, a crow waddled, wagging its pointed rear. The wind turned the crow's feathers in the wrong direction, making him look bristled. I knew I would not be able to drag my trunk farther that day.

On the side of the street opposite the wharf were a string of businesses, low wooden buildings with narrow porches. They had a lopsided, haphazard quality, as if they

had been built in some impatient frenzy. There was a hotel, a restaurant, a saloon, another restaurant, a cargo and freight service, another hotel, a saloon, a saloon, and a saloon. One saloon called the Here for Now, a name I liked. Here for Now, a quality the saloon and I had in common.

The Here for Now occupied the ground floor of a narrow building. The building leaned forward on account, I found out later, of the shifting sand foundation. It gave the impression of a person leaning close to hear a whispered confidence. A friendly slouch. There was a small porch decorated with glass buoys and a boy in a caned chair. The boy's chin rested against his chest. I judged the boy to be around my age. He was lanky and unkempt, like a frayed piece of rope that had been dressed in pants. The boy's clothes were fine: a long, wool coat that looked tailored to his frame, and on his feet, expensive Balmoral boots, mud-caked and tightly laced.

The boy lifted his head and stood, unsteady, possibly drunk. He looked like he hadn't slept in a year, yet amusement animated his features, which were large and substantial and appeared too big for his face, as if he had not yet grown into his own handsomeness. Even in the awkwardness of his proportions, he was handsome. I understood that right away.

"Are you Robert?" I asked the boy.

I hoped sincerely that he was not. He had leaned himself against one of the porch's struts.

"Don't I wish I could be," the boy said.

His mouth moved around the words as if they were sticky.

"I'm looking for a Robert Baker. I have a letter."

"She has a letter." The boy raised his eyebrows. The movement somehow unbalanced him, and he wobbled against the strut. "What's your name?"

I hesitated, wondering if I ought to lie.

"What's yours?"

The boy's smile was unequal, watery.

"I just woke up," the boy said. A worried question tugged behind his eyes. He seemed to see me then, to assess. "That is a ridiculous coat."

"It's a good coat."

"For a longshoreman, perhaps. Or a wrestler—no, they're rather short, aren't they? For a weightlifter, or John Henry. What are you?"

The boy pulled a handkerchief from his pocket then and coughed into its folds. One corner draped loose and displayed red stitching, a large letter A. My letter. A for Ada. There could have been any letter on his handkerchief, but there was that one.

"What's your name?" I asked again.

The boy smiled.

"They call me Sunday."

He let that hang between us. Behind me, the ships creaked in their moorings. A fisherman called the word "cod" so many times I felt sure he must have been taunting us.

"Why Sunday?"

"Because I'm so fucking pious."

He slapped his thighs—actually slapped them—and laughed for a long time. His hands were large and long fingered, like they had been carved from a material different from the rest of his body. I found myself staring. With force, I pulled my fixation from

his hands and focused on how I regretted speaking to him. My first real conversation in Oakland, and I would forever associate my arrival with this demented, gloomy boy.

"I have a letter for Robert," I repeated.

The boy had stopped laughing.

"I might have a Robert," he said.

He lurched forward, catching himself with a foot, his boot thudding on the planks.

"Slippery," he said, eyeing the porch with amused suspicion.

He reached out his hand—that hand—for the letter, I thought, and I told him I'd give it only to Robert.

"Your arm," he said as if I was daft. "Slippery," he repeated, tapping one foot against the boards.

"I'm not in the habit of taking the hand of strange boys."

His hand hovered. He kept his gaze on me and I met it. Perhaps Lillian was wrong, was my thought. Perhaps this place had transformed me already. The boy flicked his fingers. I remained where I was. *Cod! Cod! Cod!*

"Ellis," the boy said at last. "That is my name."

His hand was warm and dry.

2.

There is a saying from my childhood—who can say the source? My grandparents, perhaps: shadowy, solemn figures who, in my parents' stories, were constantly boiling potatoes or burying relatives or telling jokes. The saying: You may know a man by three things—by his wine-cup, by his anger, and by his purse. I first knew Ellis by none of

those things. I knew him by his hands. That was how I thought of him even after I knew his name, as the boy with the beautiful hands.

Ellis helped me up the large step of the porch and led me into the Here for Now. My feeling was like what the first brushstroke of a painting must feel.

"I'll go see about Robert," Ellis said, then he bowed and slipped away.

The saloon was small, the floorboards dark with creosote and distant weather. I was tired and sore, my lips dry and cracked. In the fireplace, logs smoldered and smoked and seemed to make the room colder. The bar was slanted, dipping downwards towards the door. The only decoration was the mounted head of a stuffed bear. The place had none of the backroom drabness of Lillian's, none of her false Old West artifacts, which seemed to me pathetic then: her rusted Colt, her bolted harpoon. It felt good to feel angry with her, and so I stoked the feeling, drawing up memories of sweeping her floors while she laughed at her regulars' tired jokes.

"You're new," said the barman.

"Not to saloons," I replied.

"That boy …" the barkeep began. Then he shook his head and poured me a whiskey without my asking, and though it was early, I drank. The alcohol seemed to wash through me, from my brain to my lower cavity, through my fingertips. I felt I had swallowed it with my nose and eyes, too. The whiskey burned my throat and sloshed in my empty stomach.

"I don't countenance—" he waved his hand in my general direction. "Why are you wearing those clothes? Aren't you a lady?"

He spoke with an accent that was both faint and mannered—the British inflection seemed to arise and recede, and I suspected that he was putting it on. Behind the bar were many framed portraits, all of Queen Victoria. Queen Victoria staring censoriously in a blue sash. Queen Victoria, fat and ponderous, her head at the angle of resolve. Young Queen Victoria, her chin tucked in piety, her sleeves cold-weather breaths of white lace. She had the shadow of a chin dimple, same as me, like a finger pressed into raw dough.

"I'm looking for work," I said.

"Bloody hell."

I sipped the whiskey. I waited. I read a nearby newspaper front to back. An hour turned itself over into another. I don't like to think about that first day of waiting, with gray light pouring in from the paned windows. I don't like to think about how Ellis stole that from me, diminished the sense of possibility.

I sat at the bar even when it became clear he was not coming back. After three hours had elapsed, I pushed my stool and said out loud that there must have been a misunderstanding, that Ellis had meant to return.

The barman tucked his chin and gave me a paternal look of disappointed exasperation.

After that, I didn't speak to Ellis again for two weeks.

*

As far as I know, there is no Yiddish saying about knowing a place. *You may know a place by three things*, the saying might go, *by its food, by its roads, and by its smell.* But as for remembering? I remember every place by its beds. My first bed in Oakland was a double in the attic room above the Here for Now, where the sounds of the

saloon thrummed up to me through the tilted floorboards. Set a wine bottle in the room at the eastern window, and it would roll towards the Bay. There was a window there, too, facing West. The window frames were crooked, put in by a carpenter who I imagined hadn't regained his land-legs. Days that I spent in the attic left me feeling loopy, unstable, and a little ill. I'd stagger down the ladder stairs to the saloon and spend an hour reacquainting myself with right angles. Ellis told me later it wasn't only sea-sick carpentry that made me feel the way I did. The whole place was strung with spirits, he said. The saloon had been built from the salvaged remains of a whaling ship, which gave the space a sense of tired experience, every stain with a story to tell.

"All those men who met their ends chasing whales in the watery parts of the world," Ellis said. He spoke with longing, as if he, too, desired to lose his life that way. "They're here now—" he patted the stained wall "—wondering what the hell they did wrong to end up stuck with us."

The saloon's proprietor was Solomon Vilner, a a jowly man who overlooked my sex and the way I dressed on account of us both being Polish Jews. We had discovered this commonality on my first day when Sol asked me my name—and I thanked luck and good fortune that I hadn't lied and told him Sylvie Anne Whatever, poor gentile Sylvie Ann. Sol loved that I was also a Polish Jew. It was on account of that that he offered me the attic and a job. He tried to engage me in the topic of Poland frequently. Sol would sidle up to me when I was elbow-deep in sudsy water, asking if I remembered so-and-so from Vilna, or if I ever frequented such-and-such place along the Vistula River. He persisted in this even after I reminded him repeatedly that I had been born in San

Francisco. It was my parents who would have remembered Vilna, though I didn't mention them.

Sol asked and asked—always with a hopeful cast in his cloudy eyes—and eventually, I simply pretended to know what he was talking about. Yes, of course I remembered so-and-so. How could I forget the blintzes at such-and-such? Though he harbored for Poland a longing that seemed to cause him pain, with the customers he used his fake British inflection, a performance I understood from watching Lillian; Sol's was simply a different take on the role.

In the mornings, I descended the ladder staircase and marveled at the previous night's destruction: broken glasses, overturned chairs, knives stuck in the walls. A boy would often be slumped amongst the wreckage—sometimes the boy was Ellis. I would prod him until he stirred. Stubble prickled his cheeks, as if it has sprouted there overnight, compelled to grow by alcohol and sleeplessness. I asked Ellis about Robert, and he looked at me with distant, dreamy eyes before he retched and threw up his night's intake on my shoes.

During the nights that followed, I hunkered in the attic, listening to the inebriated merry making of the saloon, not daring to venture down to join the crowds or to look for Robert. I felt afraid of burning my one chance—what if Robert turned out to be terrible, or didn't have work for me as Lillian had promised?

My room shared a chimney with the saloon's fireplace, and during quieter spans, I could hear clear conversations if I sat far enough inside my own hearth. Many times, my pen hovered over an unfinished letter to Agnes, which I started and stopped for several evenings in a row, able to jot only observations of my new surroundings. *Overheard*

through the fireplace, I wrote. *First boy: "That fish, he smiled at me." Second boy: "Can't kill a fish that smiles." First boy (glumly): "Don't I know it."*

The west-facing window of my room framed a view of San Francisco on clear days. I hated clear days. The sunlight overbearing and diffuse, drained of any opinion. I preferred the gray mornings before the sun burned away the cloud cover, the pinkish evenings when the Bay turned the color of a peach. My mother used to say San Francisco was so ugly, but near perfect in its ugliness and therefore worthy of close study. She said the city looked best when smudged away by night, or by fog, or preferably by both.

I watched the comings and goings along the wharf, the boats bobbing with the wind. I listened to the boys sing from their sloops in the afternoons, when the day hung in the air and everyone waited for nighttime to give them permission to do what they wanted.

On one afternoon, the light as cold and bright as clear whiskey, I saw a laughing girl balanced on the rail of a junk, her arms flung wide. It was not the first time I had seen her, but it was the time that mattered. She seemed to be about my age, strong-jawed and tall. A boy's head poked from below deck, and he seemed to be speaking to her in low tones, for she turned her ear towards the boy without looking at him.

The girl crouched, bunching her skirts above her knees. She leapt, one leg shot out straight. That is how I see her now: frozen mid-air above the water, flashing her candy-striped stockings.

My mother hated many things, in particular the concept of falling in love upon a first meeting, though I found much hope in it, security—the idea that there was a kind of powerful pre-knowing available to us during certain rare moments. I believe it can

happen, both with regards to romantic love and other varieties. Though I was fond of the idea, and though I spent a good part of my best years waiting for it to happen to me, I have only experienced it twice, one of them the first time when I saw that girl leap from the deck of one boat to another and land, laughing, in a heap of skirts. She rolled on the deck, cackling. And I thought, *That.*

3.

The sight of the leaping girl cast a critical gaze over how I was spending my time. Oakland to me seemed clanging and waterlogged and lonely. I walked the length of the waterfront, stepping over grayed ropes, my boots splashing into puddles the color of rust. Dogs wandered the strip, nosing the ground. At long, thin tables, women worked with hooked knives, unzipping the bellies of fish and tossing the innards over their shoulders, the bloody refuse snatched mid-air by gulls.

I tried to chat with a silver-haired fishmonger, a woman with thin lips and cracked hands. She had a weathered handsomeness and wore a bloodied apron, her face like a worn trunk or a burnished copper pot—a practical kind of beauty, the variety that has been tested. I made overtures in the form of regular commerce, buying fish only from her when Sol sent me out. Though I demonstrated by feasibility for friendship through customer loyalty and chitchat about the weather, the woman treated me with steely indifference, her eyes flicking from my clothes to my face, her message clear. Who knows why I chose her? For the challenge, perhaps. Ellis would tell me later that I seemed to like stronger personalities, to attach myself to a greater force.

At the hotel, I sat with my yellow notebook on the slim porch with a coffee—that was another curious effect of my new surroundings: I felt delusionally affluent, at least for those first days. It was as if money meant something different in that new place. I was eager to make my mark, to put traces of myself into circulation. A new place doesn't feel quite real until you buy something there. In Oakland, I felt sure opportunity would turn up—Lillian had set me on its path, after all—a confidence that was as intoxicating as it was short-lived. I was lulled by the deal at Sol's—free room and meals—and for a time in my addled mind, I thought those circumstances meant that I would somehow be *saving* money, though I had no other source of income. I was living for free, yes, but I wasn't making anything, and my father's hospital bills would come due all the same. Soon enough, the reality of my situation set it, and familiar Panic returned, a sickly worry that made it hard to breathe.

So I smiled and tried to show that I was ready for whatever Oakland had to show me, which turned out to be a lot of short-lived bustle during certain hours when ferries dumped their passengers at The Mole, or when the fishing boats slipped back, heavy with their catch. The only creature interested in my presence was a scraggly stray dog who trotted beside me and sniffed my pockets, which still held a handful of peanuts from the train station. I was, for some reason, unable to part with the peanuts. I had kept them too long and so they had gained a weighty significance. The dog had white and yellow fur, a pointy beard, and a bulbous growth just beneath his shoulder, like a hemisphere of grapefruit under his skin. I called him Mr. Rochester and passed him blackened chunks of chicken sausage left over from my breakfasts. He ate the sausage as if it were hot, his jaws smacking with his lips curled away from his pink and black gums.

The waterfront held more young people than I had ever seen in one place. Boys, mostly, who walked the streets in twos or else in clamoring, jostling groups, trading insults and jumping onto each other's backs. With my chopped hair and in my father's clothes, none of them recognized me for what I really was unless I spoke. But no one asked me anything or said hello. The boys were filthy but looked well-fed. They reminded me of the urchins of *Oliver Twist,* and once I had that image of them in my mind, it became impossible to shake.

Those boys, I noticed, seemed to always to have money to spend and nowhere to be. If they weren't drinking at Sol's then they were drinking at Heinhold's, and if they weren't drinking there then they were eating at the hotel or Bertram's. If they weren't in any of those places, they were walking idly in their good clothes or fishing without urgency from their sloops, their loose hands on their poles the very picture of those who do not feel the punishing crush of dwindling time. I asked Sol about the boys, and he gave vague answers. I began to resent him—he only wanted to discuss what was gone. Poland. His parents. I was too preoccupied with my own station—my nose always pressed to the glass of Necessity—and I couldn't find space within the occupation of my worries to listen to his losses. Trouble, he called the boys, and I thought, *I could be trouble, too.*

I spotted Ellis occasionally, in the company of crowds with slight differences in their casting. Often, I saw him in a pair with the largest man I had ever seen—to this day, I have never met anyone his equal. He was large in all directions except for his girth. His hips were narrow, and he was always in the motion of yanking his waistline back into

position. I heard the other boys call his name one afternoon when they loped in threes down the street. Allen Wade.

I passed Allen Wade one evening as the fishmongers were packing up their stalls. He carried a fisherman's pole. At the stall operated by the Chinese, Allen Wade stopped. For a time, he watched them secure the lids on barrels and pour buckets of Bay water over the table. Without a change of expression, Allen Wade whipped the fisherman's pole, striking one of the Chinese on his back. The man yelped, and his companions retreated, drawing into a tight group as Allen Wade set the pole back over his shoulder and walked on.

Cleaning Sol's tables one day, a group of the boys ambled by, Allen Wade among them with his pole, a red weight tugging at the end of the line.

"What is it they do all day?" I asked.

"Not much more than that," Sol answered.

It occurred to me that I had crossed the Bay only to end up in another saloon, and the thought depressed me so much I felt like crying. I wanted badly to be part of something. I had the sense that life ought to feel bigger, a vague notion, childish and precious. As I swept and polished glasses and listened through the fireplace to sounds of the saloon, the boys sang loudly and poorly and slept on their sloops. During the afternoons, their revelry skipped over the water. One day, I bought myself a coffee at the hotel and drank it on the narrow porch watching the harbor. Five boys splayed on the deck of the *Rigamarole*, bottles in their hands. The weather was unsteady, with a strong wind that pushed thick clouds at a pace I found alarming. I spotted Ellis sitting with the girl I had seen, the leaper. He talked while she gazed up at the passing clouds. The look

on her face was difficult to discern—a kind of blank serenity that could have meant either love or extreme boredom. Her hair was dark like mine and she wore it tucked haphazardly under a high-crowned chartreuse hat. The color looked ripe—from a distance, it filled my nose with the scent of apples. The hat had a long, trailing veil that caught the breeze and writhed like a living thing.

A cloud passed over the sun and the world turned to cold grays. When the light returned, the girl seemed to be staring at me, one hand shielding her eyes. She spoke and Ellis looked to me and laughed. Or maybe he only looked towards the shore, not at me directly. To this day, I can't be sure.

*

It was upsetting that, in my new life, the only acquaintance I had formed was with a fishmonger who seemed to hate me. I had been in Oakland for two weeks before I overcame my nerves and ventured down the ladder stairs one evening to sit at Solomon's bar. Behind clouded glass, the gas flames bowed in the drafts let in by the opened door. Sol did not serve wine, not once in the time that I knew him, but wine is what I remember drinking the night I spoke to Ellis again.

I sat at the end of Sol's bar, the lowest point of the slope, and I tried to emanate the poise of someone who had many actual, human friends. A boy with knotted kerchief around his neck leaned against the bar, his knee high, his foot resting on a stool.

Whenever the door opened, I looked there as if expecting someone, hoping another patron might ask me to join them while I waited. The crowd was less lively than I had expected from my eavesdropping. Ellis sat at a small table with Allen Wade and another boy who I had seen but whose name I did not know. If Ellis marked my presence,

he did not show it, and eventually I gave up trying to catch his gaze. The boys at the table argued in a friendly and impenetrable way, while a fourth stood nearby, having spent the better part of ten minutes aiming a pistol at the stuffed bear.

"Leave Sweet Carmen alone, I beg of you," said Sol. Sol wore his good, silk sleeve straps, one black, one red.

"Shut up, Sol," said the boy with the pistol. "I'm drawing on my faculties."

"A sorry collection, that." Sol said. "Your faculties."

The boy with the pistol squinted down the barrel, drawing the gun close to his face. Slowly, he extended his arm straight. One of his companions mimicked the boy behind his back, crossing his eyes and frowning with self-seriousness. The boy with the pistol stood still, aiming at a shot glass that sat on the stuffed bear's head. The group at the table snorted, shook their heads, and went on chattering.

"Ay, I don't feel like it anymore," said the boy with gun, letting his arm fall to the side.

He cast a bitter glance at the table. Allen Wade had his beer lifted, staring at it as if it had affronted him. Most tall people endeavor to make themselves appear smaller, hunching their shoulders and developing spines like fishhooks. But Allen Wade sat tall and straight, and he occasionally looked at each person in the room in turn, as if checking their status against his. Ellis's hair was unkept. It looked as though he had slept in a nest of angry cats. His locks were the color of dust and his face seemed to always be laughing; even when he made no sound.

The group's argument evolved into a discussion on what single weapon each of them would choose if a polar bear suddenly appeared.

"Give me a Colt .45, no more accurate pistol than that," Allen Wade said.

"But if the bear appeared just there," said Ellis, pointing to the slanted bar, "you'd be lucky to get off one shot, which had better be to the heart or the head. If not …"

"It would be a killing shot," said Allen Wade. As he spoke, he stared at a spot on the table. "It's always a killing shot."

"And you?" Ellis said cheerfully to the third boy, who was young and raw-looking, his face blooming red patches. Blotchy, I called him in my head, feeling good and mean.

Blotchy rocked in his seat. His thinking was apparent and painful to behold. At the bar, the kerchiefed boy raised his finger for another. Sol set the drink on the bar top and let the glass slide to Kerchief.

"A cutlass, maybe," said Blotchy. "Do you think that's good?" He directed his question to Allen Wade, who did not look at him.

"A cutlass. Very brave," said Ellis. He held his glass, smiling under the lip. "That's awfully close you'll have to be to the beast to deliver a fatal blow. I have no doubt that, under the right circumstances, you could summon the vitality to face a blood-toothed, seven-hundred-pound beast."

"Seven hundred? Try one thousand," Allen Wade said.

"One thousand pound," Ellis corrected. "A beast who has a single-pointed, wild mind, and only murder in his heart. Facing that with a cutlass—" Ellis raised his glass "—I commend you. You're a braver man than I."

Blotchy, unaware that he was being teased, clinked his glass with Ellis, who downed his beer and stood, cracking his spine. He made his way to Kerchief at the bar.

The table watched him go. As Ellis approached, my awareness alighted under my clothes, which felt disastrously thin, flimsy. I surprised myself by wishing for the safety of skirts—layers and layers of distance between my flesh and the world. Ellis smacked Kerchief's back and the two entered into a conversation easily, as if it were on object they could pick up or set down. The boy with the pistol took Ellis's empty seat at the table. Sol pulled a tap, saying something over his shoulder to Kerchief. Everyone engaged in their little behaviors, their social choreography. I thought of Lillian then, what she would have done: saunter behind the bar, tease the boys, hook her thumbs under her suspenders, turn her back to water down her shot of whiskey, match her regulars shot for shot without them catching on that she was drinking a fraction of what they were taking in.

Sol's gaze lingered after he poured my whiskey. He did not send the glass sliding down the bar as he had with Kerchief's but set it in front of me and watched as I sipped.

"The drinks aren't free," Sol said.

I took from my pocket a crumpled bill covered with a dusting of peanut shells. Sol pinched the corner of the bill and shook it clean of shell pieces. From down the bar, I felt Ellis's gaze as I took another sip.

"Oy, you're a sipper, then," Sol said.

"It's still early."

"Not for most."

"I'd prefer an egg-hot."

In truth, I had never had an egg-hot; David Copperfield drinks them with Mrs. Micawber. Out came the words, and Ellis regarded me. Something flickered between us,

unwieldy and inscrutable. His eyes swam with activity beneath the surface, and I thought of the manta ray I had seen from The Mole. A passing, arrow-shaped shadow.

"Might as well make two if you're making one, Sol," Ellis said, breaking the moment. The noise and activity of the saloon returned. On the edges of my vision, the gas flames blurred.

Sol started on about how the eggs in the ice box had most likely turned, though he loved an egg-hot same as anyone—quite fond of them, he assured Ellis, something he had drunk often, made for him by his Mum.

"Of course. Your Mum." Ellis let the final word linger. His eyes met mine, and we shared a private moment of shared amusement, private, right in front of everyone. Two such moments, one just on the heels of the other, and I felt suddenly unsteady, precarious, like I might do anything.

"One for me also," said Kerchief. His speech sounded wet.

Sol wandered off, grumbling about weevils in the sugar. I waited for Ellis to say something more to me, to walk through the door opened by the egg-hot. He turned back to Kerchief, whose head lolled. Kerchief tugged at the fabric around his neck, pulling at the knot. Inside the creases, where the fabric had not seen the sun or the salt air, the color was a vibrant red. Ellis nodded to what Kerchief said and matched his movements, as if trying to understand him through the positioning of their bodies. I waited, trying to listen over the renewed argument at the table and the sudden singing of a man I had not noticed before, who had detached himself from the shadows.

The maiden, oh, the maiden oh.

The sailor loves the maiden, oh!

So early in the morning,

The sailor loves the maiden, oh!

I heard Lillian's voice in my head, yelling at the man to shut the hell up.

"You didn't answer the question," I said to Ellis.

His eyes flicked to me and stayed. Kerchief lifted a glass to the end of his nose and attempted to force his eyes to focus.

"It isn't polite to eavesdrop," Ellis said. "Didn't your *mum* teach you that?"

"Can't say. I didn't have a mum. I had a mother, though."

"Did you hear that?" Ellis said in mock amazement, nudging Kerchief. "This girl claims she had a *mother*."

"She was a bastard."

There followed a terrible silence. An image arose inside me. My mother stood in a corner of my mind. She looked at her hands. Something inside me lurched for her—a desperate, clawing need to speak to her again. I pressed the feeling down.

The man who was singing let out a final, bellowing verse, then ceased and resumed his place in the shadows, rejoining the dark furniture. He slumped at a table, facedown.

"So, she cusses."

Ellis was beside me then. He had crossed the distance down the bar from Kerchief to stand beside me, close enough for me to make out the fine woolen hairs sticking up across the weave of his coat. He set his large hands on the bar. There was a mole on his left at the middle knuckle.

"I don't care for a woman who cusses," he said. "Typically."

He considered his words. *You must have me confused with someone who cares for your tastes.* Lillian's insults, word-phantoms in my head.

"What would you choose?" Ellis asked. "Against the polar bear."

He seemed to have decided to be amused by me—pleased, even. He gave me a look of reassessment. A wonderful feeling, knowing you have surprised someone, wonderful and potent and addictive.

"A Ballard rifle," I said.

My thoughts were full of Lillian Frances Smith, that short, stout girl under a shower of carnations.

"And you?" I asked.

"A mirror," he said.

A moment passed between us. The man had started his singing again. *Tobacco, oh, tobacco, oh, the sailor loves tobacco, oh, so early in the morning …*

"Clever."

Ellis shrugged.

"I'm rather tired of being clever," he said.

He twisted one of his coat's buttons on its thread and gazed around the room. Sol returned from the back with a pot, his coat pocket rounded with eggs. The man who sang slumped at the table jerked up, as if a mercurial puppeteer were operating his strings.

"That's the fifteenth lay!" he said, then set his head down on the table again.

"I wonder who's winning the argument," Ellis said, looking to the slumped man. "Bad Weather or Bad Weather."

Ellis had turned so he faced the rest of the saloon, his back resting against the bar, his elbows propped.

“Do you know that this place makes me uneasy?” he asked.

He spoke outwards, towards the larger space, but it was clear he meant his words for me.

“You don’t seem uneasy.”

He shifted on his feet, crossing his legs at the ankles. His Balmorals were loose and untied, the tongues crisscrossed with pale scars from the laces.

“I imagine I don’t seem to be many things,” he said.

“That’s just a clever way of saying nothing.”

He looked at me then. What I mean is that he looked at me directly. A bare gaze, plain and unguarded. He ran a hand through his dust-colored hair.

“I don’t trust this place in the least,” he said.

“The company?”

He snorted.

“You might think. But no—I don’t trust places where the tables and walls have seen more of the world than I have.”

He stomped on the gnarled floorboards with his heel.

“Typical,” Kerchief called. He had been listening to us. He sidled over and leaned his back against the bar as Ellis did. “Typical for you to be made to feel insecure by the goddamned furniture.”

It took Kerchief some time to get the words out.

“I am indeed indebted to my own nature,” Ellis said, looking at me.

"Check your accounts," said Kerchief. "They're surely full enough for you to pay down your debt to your nature. I've paid mine off completely."

Kerchief raised his empty glass, and Ellis clinked with him in the air from down the bar.

"I know you," Ellis said to me, ignoring Kerchief, who was walking sideways, crablike, towards us from us.

"Yes."

"Tell me again."

"Robert," I said.

"That can't by your name."

I reminded him how I had met him on the porch, how I had been looking for Robert that first day. Ellis's mouth made the shape of "Ah" without sound. He looked to the ceiling and scratched at his neck's stubble. His hands were long-fingered and wide, and they tugged at something in me—that is what it felt like, a tugging ache somewhere in the region of my lower belly. He wore his same coat, which I saw then was not tailored, though it was still fine: the wool's tight weave, the color dark blue with faint black lines that were almost undetectable unless the fabric caught certain light. The tenuous nature of the pattern, how it appeared and disappeared, was distracting. Just when I was certain that there were, in fact, no black lines in the weave, they would ripple on his sleeve when Ellis gestured expansively and said, "Closest thing in the fruit world to alcohol is peaches."

I had lost the thread of the conversation.

"Canned peaches," Ellis said. "Closest thing to alcohol when it comes to fruit."

"Oh please, God, just have a real drink, put us out of our misery," Kerchief said.

"If you insist."

The drink seemed to untangle something between Ellis and Kerchief, and they turned to each other and resumed their talk as if they had never stopped. I tried to track what they said, to find purchase, but they spoke enigmatically about someone called The Greek and others called Big Edward and Little Edward, who I gathered were in some kind of dispute—The Greek against the Edwards—and then of Asparagus Island and more ridiculous nicknames: The Porpoise, French Frank, The Crab. They spoke of the clear weather, the moon. It became exhausting to follow, to perform listening as a way to stay in their sights. Bad Weather's puppeteer jerked him straight and he yelled that he wouldn't be the one to lay the lashes, no he wouldn't. My mind drifted. I gazed at the portraits of Queen Victoria and wondered if she'd ever found herself adrift in conversations, set aside like a cut glass paperweight. In one photograph, she wore a white veil and a tiny crown capped with the shapes of diamonds and clubs. The weight of her face seemed to tug her features down, and her expression was that of someone who was trying and failing to forget terrible news. What did she do just after the picture was taken? Did she rise and stretch and walk from the room so she could, in private, burst into tears? Her veil trailed across one shoulder, which looked soft and comfortable. What would it be like to burrow my head there, to relax into the fleshy embrace of the royal clavicle? I squeezed a peanut in my pocket until it cracked. I pressed the broken shell to threads.

"Let me guess, you're here to find your betrothed, one luckless Robert, who has run off on you?"

It took a moment to realize that Ellis was addressing me.

"No."

"Robert, Robert," Ellis said. "Who could he be?" He looked around the room, one elbow propped again on the bar. Kerchief had disappeared.

"You're looking for your brother, then. He left your family to pull his fortune from the sea, but to his great calamity, he suffers terribly from seasickness. And so he's been forced to take a job at the cannery." Ellis shuddered. He pulled from his inside coat pocket a cigarette. I asked if he had another, and he smiled with the cigarette stuck to his bottom lip.

"Am I right?" he asked after he had lit both of us.

"No."

"Are you only saying that because you're angry at what a skilled guesser I am?"

"Yes."

He lifted his eyebrows and I showed him nothing more. We smoked in silence. I stole glances at Ellis, who stared at a spot just beyond his cigarette. It was a stare I had seen in much older men, the kind who haunted the halls of the Marine Hospital, men in long, white gowns like skeletal Grecian Senators. The Marine Hospital did have that, the sense of a great civilization gone to age. One of the men who I liked had white tufts of hair that grew haphazardly in a low ring around his pink scalp. His name was Mr. Orrester. Once Mr. Orrester had grasped my arm as I was leaving my father's room. The sunlight poured in through the tall windows, buttery and very hot. Mr. Orrester led me to a table where two men played cards.

"Allow me to introduce you to my youngest," Mr. Orrester said, gesturing to a man whose eyes were clear and blue.

"Pleased to meet you," I said.

Mr. Orrester yanked—his strength surprised me—and led me down the hallway, over the black and white tiles that made if feel as though we were walking across an oversized game board. He stopped at a man sitting with his hands folded in a rocking chair, a book on birds open across his lap.

"Allow me to introduce you to my youngest," Mr. Orrester said.

The man with the bird book bent his head in a half-bow, one short finger holding his place on the page for sandpipers.

All afternoon, Mr. Orrester led me through those warm, echoey halls. The close air had made me sleepy—also the strangeness, the subterranean dread. Such discomfort always made me drowsy, and I felt the same next to Ellis, a sudden and irresistible exhaustion. Even as the tobacco swam happy laps through my head, I felt I could have sunk to the floor and curled myself under the bar to sleep.

The door opened, and a cold draft engulfed us. The stray I called Mr. Rochester trotted in, his head low, his eyes wary. I bent my hand and called to him. The dog paused, one front paw lifted and curled, and regarded me. The strands of his beard were wet and blackened, as if he had been lapping at a pool of burned oil.

"I am in negotiations to purchase a ship," Ellis said.

"What will you call her?" I asked.

Mr. Rochester had turned away and continued on his rounds.

"It must be considered," Ellis said.

He spun around and downed the last of his drink. Behind the bar, Sol pulled a wooden tap.

"Sol, why do you wear one black, one red?" Ellis called, gesturing to Sol's sleeve straps. "Why does he?"

Ellis was not asking me, but I lurched for the opening, the invitation.

"For Stendhal, maybe? *The Red and the Black*."

Still, Ellis did not look my way.

"I know why," Ellis said, slapping the bar top. "It's so you can tell your right from your left, isn't it, Sol? Boys—" Ellis called over his shoulder "—I have solved one of our world's great mysteries."

"Shall I enlighten you?" Sol said with a tone of threat. "Are you in need of further instruction?"

The two gazed into each other's faces, tensed and still. Ellis looked younger than he had when we were talking. On the bar top, his hands lay flat.

"I have no desire to teach you a lesson, but I shall," Sol said. He drew something from his thick belt. A small and tarnished knife.

"Let's have it, then," Ellis said, mimicking Sol's put-on British inflection.

I felt unaccountably responsible for the sudden turn to hostility, like I had missed a vital piece of information and, if I could only recall what it was, I might stave off a stabbing. Sol turned the knife. It was stubby and mean looking, flecked with what looked like cake crumbs.

"I would," Sol said, "but for the lady present."

Don't change on my account. I think that is what Lillian would have said.

"It's quite aggravating, truly," Sol said.

"Mm," said Ellis.

"She's a bit of a tease, this one."

"I'm afraid you might be right, old man."

"Show me one who isn't."

Ellis pounded the bar with his fist in agreement. So quickly did they turn from the promise of aggression to teasing that I thought I must have misjudged the previous moment profoundly. But there had been something simmering between them—I am sure of it—a slouch towards violence. A ritual, I guessed, some kind of habitual masculine relation that I had interrupted, ruined.

"Should we teach *her* a lesson?" Ellis asked.

"I would," Sol said. "But I've got to make you lot bloody egg-hots."

Ellis gave a salute, and the two withdrew from each other like dance partners. Ellis looked at me. His face was blank, but the aquatic life in his eyes shimmered.

To have done anything but smile back would have been fatal—I do not mean literally, but more in the sense of an irrevocable finality. Lillian had taught me well. Always safer to go along with their joke, even if the joke was you.

He opened his mouth to say something, but what it was, I would never know. At that moment the door opened with a gasp of cold air, flickering the gas flames. The leaping girl from the sloop walked in. She wore a long, man's coat over a green taffeta dress, the color so light it was almost silver. Around her shoulders were scraps of a beaded, feathered shawl. The overall effect was confusing, both stern and delicate. It was like she had pulled items from a trunk at random and put them on without thought, and

the idea of that—of imagining the girl tossing clothes around, a swirl of dresses and coats—made me like her even more.

She crossed to the table by the woodstove, where the fire's heat raised her shawl's feathers on invisible currents of air. Each of the boys rose to his feet and kissed her on both cheeks, and the girl went around the room like that, interrupting conversations, the boys pushing back their chairs with a low scrape to greet her. Even enormous Allen Wade kissed her, and I smelled the stink of his breath in my own nose. The girl strode to Ellis, who was standing straight now. She opened a cigarette case and pulled one from its ranks, leaning forward to meet the end to Ellis's match.

"Pretty girls don't have to light their own cigarettes," she said.

"Mavis's Law," said Ellis.

"And what has the Prince been doing with his day?" Mavis asked. "Princely things?"

Ellis sniffed, slouching, though he was clearly pleased.

"The last person who made me account for my time was the boss at the cannery," Ellis said. "And he paid me."

"I've had a lovely day," Mavis said, blowing smoke towards the ceiling, showing her throat. "No thanks to you."

"All thanks to me. I made myself absent. Therefore, you had a lovely day. Therefore, you're quite welcome. Therefore, I should make myself more absent in the future—from everyone, all of this—and civilization, it would flourish. Without me, dogs would befriend cats. Children would pick bunches of wildflowers. Women would sit

happily at the hearth. How glorious everyone's lives could be if I only had the graciousness to excuse myself."

"Isn't he always so glum?" Mavis spoke to me. I understood she was not inviting me into the conversation so much as employing me as a prop. Still, it was an entry.

"Always. Tonight, it's been the furniture that has made him feel unworthy."

Mavis looked at me for a still moment then gave a smokey laugh. Ellis clenched his jaw. I saw the muscle move beneath his cheek, a dark rippling.

More people had entered the saloon by then, and the room was loud with shouted conversations. Over the din, Bad Weather sang-screamed.

A long time ago, way back in history,
When all there was to drink was nothin but cups of tea.
Along came a man by the name of Charlie Mops,
And he invented a wonderful drink and he made it out of hops.

"We do want you around," Mavis was saying to Ellis.

I brought my mind back to our little group. Her hand rested on his arm. He reached inside his coat and brought from the interior pocket a small book with black covers. At first I took it for a miniature Bible, but when Ellis opened the book, I saw faint lines, scrawled words. A notebook. With a nubby pencil, Ellis wrote. He took his time, clearly aware of us watching him, waiting.

"Is it about me?" Mavis asked, leaning towards him.

Ellis hunched himself over the notebook, blocking it from view.

Mavis pursed her lips into a frown, stomped her foot. Pouting. A performance of it. When that elicited nothing, she gazed around the room: groups of boys shouting, and some girls, too, ones I recognized as maids at the hotel. Sol at the woodstove, grumbling as he stirred the pot of egg-hots. The room had started to take on the atmosphere of inebriated, aggressive festivity. The smell of sugar laced through the permanent odors of men and alcohol. *Look what he has done for us he's filled us up with cheer! Lord bless Charlie Mops, the man who invented beer!* The door swung open and a group shuffled in, on one of their shoulder a beautiful, gray-feathered bird.

Mavis's cigarette had gone out. I took Ellis's matches from where he'd set them on the bar and struck. Mavis leaned towards the lit match as if we had done that action thousands of times. She squinted at me through her smoke, and I worried she would recognize me from that day on the deck of the sloop, the afternoon she had said something to Ellis to make him laugh.

"You're new," she said.

She spoke differently when Ellis wasn't paying attention. Her voice was steady and low—grounded, it felt, compared to her former weightless sing-song. *So this is who you are,* was my thought—so different from who I thought, that spacey person on the sloop, laughing at me in her ripe, veiled hat.

I told her I had come from the city, hoping to impress her, or to elicit questions. Her eyes flicked to Ellis, who still wrote in his deliberate way, his handwriting looped and unreadable. I wondered what I would say to Mavis if she asked me why I had come, feeling a sharp and tangy panic that I had at my immediate disposal only the truth.

"How long have you …" I began, unsure what verb to assign Mavis. How long have you been what you are? How long have you passed afternoons on sloops with these boys?

"Oh, a time," she said vaguely, waving her cigarette through the air. Then she leaned in close for a confidence. Her smell was contrary to her looks and fine clothes—she smelled musty, of wool that had never fully dried. She also wore a scent I couldn't place, something like alcohol without the astringency.

"He got his name Prince because of me," she said. "Because they call me the Queen." She withdrew, blowing a self-satisfied puff of smoke. Then, as if to prove her story, she sucked her cheeks just as Ellis had and from her mouth emerged two excellent smoke rings.

"Which do you prefer?" Mavis asked. "Operas or plays?"

"Plays," I said, though I had never seen an opera.

"Wild Bill of Buffalo Bill?"

"Wild."

"Yes, well, that one was easy. How about … do you prefer *The Hidden Hand* or *The Gates Ajar*? Let me guess." Her eyes traveled slowly, up and down the length of me. "From your clothes, *The Hidden Hand.*"

"I prefer it for the story. But *The Gates Ajar* for the words."

"Good," Mavis said, blowing out a puff of smoke. "Then we can be friends."

She reached out her hand and we shook and that was that, it seemed, and I marveled that it could be so simple as I wondered what would have happened if I had not passed her strange quiz. Sol came by then with our egg-hots, plunking them down, then

departed immediately to dissuade Allen Wade from carving something into the wooden beam of the ceiling with a knife.

The egg hot was too warm to drink, but I took a sip, and the scalding sugar adhered to my tongue. The burn was extraordinary. A pain that made me see the color white. I swallowed with great difficulty, my eyes filling with tears, my tongue coated in a fuzzy-feeling scald. Ellis's egg-hot sat near his elbow, untouched.

The man with the gray parrot came to us. He snaked his arm around Mavis's waist—under her coat—and drew her close. The parrot dipped his head low, swaying it back and forth in concerned arcs. He opened his beak and spoke loudly in French. *Je ne sais pas! Je ne sais pas!*

The man spoke back to the parrot in French, chastising him for shouting in his ear. The parrot spoke again, this time in a language I didn't recognize.

"What did he say?" I asked.

"I don't know," the man said. "He speaks French and that. None of us know what it is."

I scooped a broken peanut from my pocket and offered it in my flat palm to the bird. His beak had a frightening hook, but he took the peanut carefully, flicking a black tongue.

"Ah, he likes you," the man said. He spoke with traces of a French accent—distant and faint, like weather on the far horizon.

The bird squawked something in the language no one could understand.

"Poor bird, needs a teacher to learn English," the man said. "English!" he shouted in the bird's face.

"Give him to her."

Ellis turned, tucking his notebook back inside his coat. He tilted his head towards me.

"She's *learned.* Aren't you, Ms. Stendhal?"

Ellis and I shared a look, intimate and fleeting. His tone was joking but also edged—there was a challenge in it, and I sensed that he was waiting to see how I would respond. I felt suddenly very light, like I might hover above my stool and blow away. My skin prickled with the idea that Ellis had noticed something about me, though I also sensed—I must have, I must have—his sarcasm, his private pleasure at his own joke.

Mavis tilted her head and regarded me. She began touching me all over, quick pets of my hair, my clothes, my hands—a sudden burst of performative affection that made me feel embarrassed for her. The man with the parrot reached his hand and shook with Ellis, who greeted him as French Frank.

"Good, clear weather tonight," French Frank said. "Big moon."

Ellis rolled a new cigarette, licking the edge of the paper with delicacy. French Frank was short and compact—thick-looking, as if he were waterlogged. His eyes flicked between Ellis and me, and he shook his head with his eyebrows raised, the gesture of familiar, weary disbelief.

"You know each other?" he asked me.

"Only a little."

"Let me tell you—" French Frank leaned in close, then seemed to think better of whatever it was he had wanted to say. He retreated and giving a knowing half-smile. Mavis had taken the moment to begin a side conversation with Ellis, a soliloquy on how

she had spent her day. French Frank stood in between, cutting me off from Ellis and Mavis. He stood with his back to the bar. The parrot lowered his gray head and bobbed.

"A good crowd tonight," he said without conviction.

"I don't know anyone."

"Let us see," French Frank said slowly. He pointed to a tall, wiry man with a drooping auburn moustache. The man's red hair was a shade brighter than his moustache, and his fiery hair emerged from beneath his cap in aggravated curls. That was Nelson, French Frank said, who was always talking about how he was about to go to Mexico, but who never seemed to leave. And next to him was Peter, who they said cried in his sleep. And the gray-haired fellow warming his bones by the stove—well, no one knew his real name. They called him Union Jack because he had fought in the war. I asked if he was British, and French Frank said of course not. what would give me such an idea? He went on with his introductions, his information amusing and useless. The boy who could beat anyone at arm wrestling. The one in the wheeled chair who had lost both his legs from the knee down in some kind of accident. The man who believed his dead wife had returned to him in the form of a cat.

"What about him?" I said, drawing my head back to indicate Ellis.

French Frank shifted his weight on his thick legs.

"We think he might be a spy. What with how he's always scribbling."

French Frank said the final word louder than the rest, intended for Ellis to hear. Ellis had his back turned, leaning on the bar, so it was impossible to tell if he had marked what French Frank had said. Over Ellis's shoulder, Mavis spoke about a new opera and her criticisms, which sounded interesting, the scraps that I overheard, but there was a

bang then, the sudden crash of a chair. Several men stepped back, giving space to two figures who held each other in a tight, vying squeeze. One of the figures was Nelson, recognizable by his red hair; he drew his fist high and brought it down on the head of his opponent, as if trying to strike a nail into place. The boy held fast, cried out, clawing the back of Nelson's jacket. Nelson struck his head again with the heel of his fist.

There was a lag in reality, a curious cleave between what I perceived and the reactions. No one else seemed to mark the fight. Ellis asked Mavis a question, what sounded like, *What is the essence of aria?* Nelson and the boy embraced, their arms each around the other's neck. Nelson pushed the boy back, forcing him to take quick steps and unfooting him, forcing him down onto a table, toppling its glasses and spilling it beer.

It was then that the crowd woke up to what was happening. Half of the room seemed to stand up, attentive and suddenly, wildly enthusiastic, while the other half separated themselves from the brawling side and encircled the table of the hotel maids, leaning against their chairs and offering to buy them drinks. Sol shouted for the boys to take it outside and no one paid him any mind, though the fighters made their way to the door, still locked to each other, taking tight steps.

The crowd poured out, Ellis with them, leading Mavis and French Frank. I stood for a moment in the quieter saloon, surrounded by abandoned glassware and

I followed, trailing behind. Night had fallen fully, the ships' masts dark against the lighter sky. The crowd gathered just outside the square panes of yellow light that spilled onto the street from the Here for Now. Nelson and the boy stood apart in the middle of the messy circle of onlookers—hunched, arms cocked, panting white clouds of breath. Out in the open, the crowd looked thinner, less substantial than in the small

saloon. I had lost Ellis and the others, everyone reduced by the darkness to the same silhouette, to the shape of their hats and clothes.

"Kick him in the shin!" someone shouted from the sidelines.

Nelson's leg shot out. The boy dodged, his body twisting. He caught Nelson's foot and held it for a moment as if he wasn't sure what to make of it. He yanked and sent Nelson to his back and then he was on top of him, scrambling to pin Nelson's arms with his knees.

"Bite him!" called someone else, which was immediately answered with several voices who shouted, *No biting*! Nelson managed to unseat the other boy, and they tumbled together, rolling over the sand. The crowd shouted more suggestions. *Punch him in the jewels! Slap him! Spit! Spit!* Nelson rolled on top of his opponent and, scrambling, set one knee on his shoulder. His opponent writhed and struggled but couldn't dislodge Nelson, who squatted and swatted away the boy's hands. A moment of stillness, and then the boy let out a wild, high-pitched yawp—a startling, inhuman sound, almost comical. And effective. Nelson, taken aback, eased his stance, and the boy shoved him off, delivering a vicious slap with his freed hand. The two separated then, lying on their backs, chests heaving. The crowd, disappointed, ceased to offer suggestions with the exception of one man—older than the rest, his back hunched and his hands trembling—who continued to growl, *Bite 'im! Bite 'im!* It was private encouragement, like an incantation. Other fights broke out in the sidelines, sharp little skirmishes punctuated by laughter.

"Throw sand in his face," Mavis called.

I found her in the crowd across from where I stood, her arm threaded with French Frank's. She was a head taller than him, but after she spoke, he seemed to stand higher than before, his chest thrust out like a bird's.

"Throw sand in his face," I shouted.

Nelson gripped a handful of sand and threw it into the other's face, though his arm must have been fatigued, because his toss was feeble and a good part of the sand fell onto his face as well.

"I wish you wouldn't," Ellis said.

He stood close, the sleeve of his coat brushing my own. An unlit cigarette hung from his upper lip, bobbing when he spoke. His hands were crammed into his pockets, and his posture suggested that he was trying to encourage the rest of his body to follow, to disappear into his own clothing.

"Why shouldn't I do it?" I said.

The night, the cold, the stars—they had brought my personality back. In the noise and clamor and closeness of the saloon, I had felt estranged from myself, too aware of what I said and how it settled with the others. In the street, Ellis's expression was dusky and hard to see. His deep-set eyes were hidden by angled shadows, and that, I think, emboldened me, too.

"Because that is my partner," Ellis said. "The ginger."

"Partner?" I asked, but then the opponent became possessed by renewed vigor, and he rolled on top of Nelson and lay a slow punch into his face. The sound, like a wet rending. The boy lay another and another, and I became aware of Ellis watching me, and

I understood the moment to be one of those that are hinged. Step in or step out. In my pockets, my fingers crushed peanut shells.

Finally, the boy's strength gave out. He rolled from his perch and stood, shaky, throwing up one arm in a victorious thrust. Nelson lay still. The crowd had splintered, with some still standing in their spectator's places, conducting loud, drunken conversations, while others wrestled and kicked and chased each other down the street into the dark.

Nelson had brought himself to all fours to cough and spit and shake his head like a swimmer trying to dislodge water from his ear. He let out a series of sounds that could have been either hacking or throat-sore laughter and he rocked on his hands and knees, front to back. I waited for Ellis to go to him, to help him. He only watched.

"Doesn't he need help?" I asked.

"He'd only refuse it," Ellis said. "Proud." He kicked at a pebble. The motion was unmistakably boyish, and I remembered again that Ellis and I were of the same age. It was a slippery fact, easy to forget.

Allez-vous en! Allez-vous en! the parrot screeched.

French Frank came to stand beside Ellis.

"Too bad about your partner," he said.

"Indeed."

"Why not take the new girl? You've sailed with a woman before."

Ellis's mouth thinned. Neither man looked at me. French Frank pivoted, facing Ellis. The parrot shook himself, filling his down with air.

"Or is it only interesting to you if the woman isn't yours?" French Frank said.

He walked away. I thought of Mavis, saw her again on the deck of the sloop, her veil whipping behind her, a writhing line of green organza. I sensed the enormity of everything I did not know about those people. Their shared, unknowable history seemed then like a great barrier. I wanted to ask and at the same time I wanted to distinguish myself by not asking—to show that whatever complicated lines of friendship ran between them, it mattered little to me, though of course I felt the opposite. It mattered quite a lot.

Around us, people wandered, unsure what to do with themselves—pale forms casting long shadows. Everything seemed brighter, covered in a weak white light. The moon had risen, fat and huge above the eastern horizon. At the same time, Ellis and I turned to look. We regarded the moon, wordless, while around us the others stumbled and strode, boots crunching sand.

I forced myself to be still as I tried to think of something original to say about the moon. I wanted a statement that would finalize what was happening between us—for I sensed that something was happening, something distinctive and rare. I perceived it as a better quality of attention. That is to say, I was aware of it as a change in Ellis first rather than a change in myself, that feeling of someone noticing you, a combination of surprise and interest. And so it felt urgent to make his impression last, to confirm what he suspected about me.

I reached over and plucked the cigarette from Ellis's lips. Placing it between my teeth, I lit it with my own match. I smoked and watched the moon and resisted the temptation to look at Ellis, though I felt sure he was watching me. A tingle against my skin. A warmth on my cheek that might have been his breath.

"You are highly unusual," Ellis said.

I answered by smoking, though I wasn't able to hide my pleasure.

"You laugh at me?"

"No."

"Good."

Another pause. Ellis pinched the cigarette from my fingers and sucked, long and deep and somehow introspective. But that is perhaps the trick of some quiet people, to present silence as depth. At the burning end the orange brightened, crackled. We passed the cigarette back and forth without talking, while behind us the sounds of the crowd diminished. I cast about for something to say.

"Do you like Stendhal?" I asked.

I felt young and foolish. Ellis rocked on his boots.

"I do."

We were quiet again.

"What is it?" I said. "You seem always to be about to say something."

Ellis looked to his boots, ground out the cigarette with the toe. The stars seemed to project a cold, prickling, alive kind of silence. In the wharf, water lapped at the sloops.

"We ought to return," he said.

He walked away briskly, stepping back into the yellow light of the Here for Now, the noise from the saloon increasing when the door swung open, then quieting again as the door shut. I stood in the dark and the cold, unsure of my own impressions, trying to locate a track to follow. I didn't want to go back into the Here for Now. There was the sense of going backwards; we had been close to something outside.

Someone had taken up a fiddle, another the piano. Dancing had started. The hotel maids danced with a rotating cast of boys, spinning around the small room, bumping into tables, toppling chairs, and laughing—always, I remember, so much laughter. Ellis found me and took my hands and we danced.