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## A Regional Guide to Living

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A Regional Guide to Living

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
of Bard College

by

Megan Brien

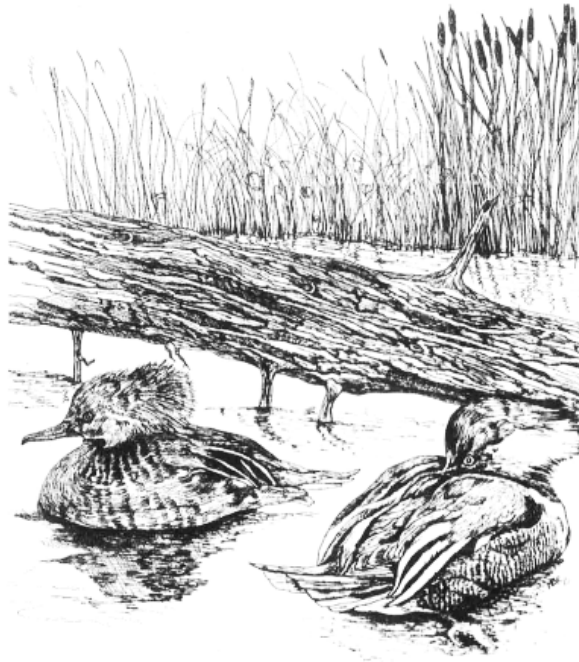
Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

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## Acknowledgments

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*“We look at the world once, in childhood.  
The rest is memory.”*

—Louise Glück, “Nostos”

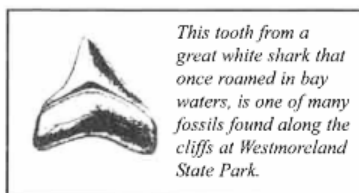
*“The Old Rappahannock is a-rolling along, singing a song to me. It  
flows so deep, it flows so wide, I’d like to stay forever by its side.”*

—James Wharton, Heyday of Wharton Grove, stomping his feet on that  
old piano all night long



You're out on Little Totuskey Creek, gliding silently downstream in your canoe, binoculars in hand, and you get the distinct feeling that you're being watched. Not a house or shed or duck is in sight. Coming around a bend amid a carpet of big cord grass and pickerelweed, a fluttering of wings takes place just off the starboard bow. A young heron soars swiftly, cutting across your line of vision and disappearing into the deep darkness of hardwoods beyond the marsh. Welcome to the backwaters of the Northern Neck.

—*Northern Neck & Chesapeake Bay: A Regional Guide to Rural Living*





Note on Lancaster Wildlife, 1677

"For the encouragement of killing wolves in this county it is ordered by this court that any person or persons that shall or may from and after the date hereof kill a wolf or wolves and shall forthwith repair to some one of the worshipful Justices of the Peace for this county and there present the said wolf or wolves so killed (provided the said wolf or wolves shall not be so young that the said justice shall think the same not of age to do mischief) that thereupon certificate thereof from the said justice of the truth thereof that he or they killing as aforesaid be paid by the county 150 pounds of tobacco for each wolf."

### Note on Lancaster Wildlife, Unspecified

Last night I know I heard them. Outside of my window, whose curtains were drawn tight, the wolves were howling as they do most nights and I could not sleep, as I do not most nights. The moon had its bigness and brightness going for it, and I hid under the blankets and wished they would stop.

It is summer, so the nights are short. That I am thankful for. I am also grateful for the canned food in my cabinets. The corn and the beans and the tomatoes—they have saved me. I dribble salt over my spoon with each bite, and if I close my eyes, sometimes the food tastes as if someone has cooked it. I have three cans a day, something different for each meal. When I am not eating, I like to clean until every surface of the house is hurting. There are books; I read them only when my mind feels utterly blank. This happens more and more often. There is a Bible. I have decided to save it for last, to not touch it until all the other books have been read. I am sure it will have more of an impact this way. I should hate to witness the Bible being upstaged.

I used to pray to God, but this did me no good, so I stopped. That was months ago. The wolves still come at night, and I am usually awake to receive them. It is difficult to fall asleep, knowing they will soon arrive. My eyes tear up with exhaustion as I wait and listen for them to approach from the woods. Their movement is scattered and anxious, fast and powerful. The leaves crunch under their feet. Though I cannot bring myself to look outside, I know they are large and hulking. I can see them in my mind's eye, their mouths drooling red saliva through rotten teeth, yellow eyes flitting, fur matted with mud and other animals too slow to escape. Unhinged! That's what my mother would say. Disgusting!

The house is surrounded by woods on all sides. A mouse turd in a bag of rice. Looking out of the windows, one would not know that Mortar's Creek is so near. A two minute's walk tops. Not that I've been there lately. It's been at least a year. I do not leave the house anymore.

The kitchen mirror is bent and warped and fogs over for no reason. In the mornings I look at my reflection and tug on the pieces of hair behind my ears. They are dry and brittle. Before, I would have taken my hair up in my hands and braided it into intricate plaits; the tresses hung behind my neck, and I knew it looked beautiful because I could not take my eyes off of myself. Now, I leave it alone. I cannot bear to see my face. It is pallid and lifeless.

"Pinch your cheeks and take rapid breaths." That's what my mother would say to me before any outing, even, or especially, at the doors of our Presbyterian Church.

By the time we slid into the family pew, I was faint and dizzy. Desirable. On Sundays, we opened our small black books, and the Pastor opened his. The congregation looked straight ahead. During services, I imagined sucking on the necks of men and women in front of me. We

sang hymns. I counted the freckles on my arms. (Perhaps each imperfection indicated another day I'd spend in purgatory.) The music lifted up the faces around me and I felt sorry for them. Hands grasped onto other hands in ecstasy—a performative gesture I took no part in. Smiles! Laughter! The Glory of Our Saviour! None of it touched me. We sat back down.

“There is no salvation,” the Pastor would say. “Only His plan for you, and the study you must partake in along the way.” His eyes were kind.

I was sixteen when I watched the wolves overtake his frail body and rip it in half, hamburger style.

Winter means firewood. On the days when I cannot steal myself enough to go outside, I burn the legs of tables and chairs. They are lacquered and take longer to catch, but it is worth it in the mornings I feel the wolves' presence. They are always at the back of my mind, but there are times when they leap into the forefront and I stand frozen in the doorway. I see movement in the shadow of the pines and I know my ax would never be enough to protect myself. It was not enough for my father.

On these days I shut the door, slam it, and move the desk back in front of it. The desk is handsome, an heirloom. My brother Carter and I would take turns hiding in it when we were children. The rain outside kept us in the house; we played games and explored dark corners. The writing desk offered a perfect tight space to disappear into. It smelled of oak and tobacco. Our initials are notched on the back left side, scratched on by the rough edges of coins.

I hope I will not have to burn it, but know I will if the time comes.

Today I wander through the halls and touch the paintings hanging between the doorways. The rooms are both empty and cluttered, filled with the objects of former life. I sit and go through the closets, smelling my father's boots, my mother's dresses. They bury me—I let them. Everything around me is tied to them, my family; they rest on top of me, within me. I feel them weigh me down as I lie on the hardwood floor. If I could leave this body, just for a little bit, perhaps it would all float away, up up into the sky. Or is it my mind trapped here, writhing on the pine boards? How long have I been here? The room is darker. The sun, it's gone inside of me. I've eaten it up in a salted spoon and now it is never going to come back to the sky and light up the world and warm my arms as I pinch the wet grass after a storm and laugh as my skin glows redder and redder with plum smiles—

There is a loud thud downstairs. I sit up through the pile of clothes and listen hard, my breath stopped halfway up my throat. Nothing. No sounds. Careful and silent, I stand up and push my parents' things back into the closet. I slip my dress back on. After waiting a few more moments, I creep down the stairs. Everything appears to be the same, the bookcases cover the windows, the chairs sit stacked by the fireplace. My empty food cans remain in their pyramids. Right.

“Hello?” I say. My voice frightens me. It is coarse and alien. This makes me want to cry, which prompts me to be sick instead. Luckily there is a bowl nearby for moments like this. What comes out of me is green like fresh pickles, and when I am done I know that I need to get rid of it immediately. The smell makes my skin crawl, as if my own stomach juices were products of someone else.

The bowl sits in another room as I shove my shoulder and hip into the side of the desk, moving it incrementally away from the front door. When there is just enough room for me to squeeze through, I run and fetch my vomit, frantic to have it done with. The door is five inches thick, heavy with its iron hinges. I heave it open and dump the bowl's contents to the side of the entrance, where there was once a small herb garden. Steam rises from the newly soaked ground. I turn around to go back inside and see that a note has been nailed to the door, just underneath the knocker. It is handwritten, short, no more than a few sentences. My eyes snap from left to right, but nobody is there. Wind rustles the tops of the trees in front of me. I snatch the paper and retreat into the house, moving the desk back with haste and too late realizing that I'd left the bowl on the steps outside. It didn't matter.

My hands shake as I sit down to read the note. For the first year after the wolves arrived, this is how we communicated with our neighbors. The families closest to us. Messengers were sent—those that still had horses and, after that, those that ran fastest. It did not take long for this system to break down. We assumed others were either dead or hiding, holed up in their homes like us. People had stopped gathering in large groups after what happened at Mary Campbell's baptism (Pastor David et al. sliced through hamburger style). But this note, this is new. I cannot remember the last time I had contact with another person. Time is a haze now, it is like the wolves: there in the background, threatening to overtake me at any moment.

The note read:

Candlelit service tomorrow at dusk. Brampton's Grove. Bring  
your own candle and meat.

A service held outside. At night. “Bring your own candle and meat.” Unbelievable—they were serious. Who organized this? Left this note? It may be a trap. “...and meat.” Yes, they were hungry. Hungry people, desperate people. Lonely people, maybe. Brampton’s Grove is a forty-minute walk, thirty minutes if I went fast. There is a pathway along the creek that cuts through the woods. I look down at the paper again. The handwriting has a pleasant slant to it, like the writer had jotted it off before heading into town for a whiskey sour, fan in one hand, pen in the other. Sitting up straight, I mime this action—the writing, the drinking. I smile and laugh like a debutant. Fan myself coquettishly. Invite the barkeep to refill my glass, winking as if it were our little secret, this extra drink. What a night! Isn’t it beautiful, the way the candlelight bounces off those gin bottles? And that music, who is playing that violin? I close my eyes to hear it better. They are wonderful, just perfect. I open my eyes. The entrance hall stares back at me, empty and gray. And alone, so alone it is unbearable and I am furious at it for being so. I crumple up the note and bring it over to the low-burning fire, toss it in, and watch as it smolders into nothing.

Lying awake in my dark room, the room I was born in, I count my breaths. The cicadas scream their scream from the crape myrtle. The note creeps in and out of my mind, or rather, it creeps in and I shove it out. I know hearing the wolves will quell my temptation. Eliminate it. I wait.

Sure enough, their howls begin to whistle through the night air. The sound rattles around in my chest, and my counting increases. Ninety-one, ninety-two, three four five five in out six or

seven eight nine one two no hundred, it's lost and they are closer now, surrounding the house on all sides.

Mother!

The trees are cackling along with them alright, ha's and howls all over. It's difficult to tell how many there are. A pack. As many as fifteen. Two packs. Thirty mouths. One hundred and twenty claws, dexterous and sharp. How high can they jump? Not high enough for me.

Father!

The door is blocked. So are the windows. I gated the fire. My cans are in pyramids all over the first floor—I would hear them come tumbling down instantly. The ax is next to me, here in the bed, wrapped in its own blanket. A double-barreled shotgun with two slugs leans on the bedside table.

Carter!

I tighten the sheet around me so that it fully encases my body. The music returns and I sing along. It lifts me high and away, even when my voice shakes and cracks. If I close my eyes, sometimes the cries of the wolves seem like a choir of singers, and I am their soloist with my back turned from the altar.

The tomatoes in this can are diced, my favorite. I slurp up every cube of red, pass it over my tongue and down the back of my throat, squeezing my eyes shut all the while. The morning had passed in slow minutes—I counted them through the threads of my sheet draped over my face. There is something in the silence of dawn. Everything is still, stifled. I pretend this is true. Outside of my walls, nature is just as turbulent as ever, violently turning over and twisting itself

inside out. With or without me, this goes on; I am terrifyingly irrelevant. The bugs are devouring one another, the birds are screeching in massive hordes with lustful abandon, the tide is coming and going, indecisive, as the fish swallow and shit in the same water in endless succession. But in the morning, I may stave this world off for hours, fantasizing whatever reality I please. During this time of day, I am anything. I am a goddess, omniscient, controlling every phenomenal outburst of life on this earth. I am a pig, rolling in the mud and squealing because it is so good, this mud, so good on my soft pink skin. I am nothing. I am nothing and it is okay.

The juice at the bottom of the can is soothing on my lips. I down it and reach for the jug of water next to me, down that as well. It is a miracle that the well has not run dry. Every month I carry load after load from the well to the house. I move my feet fast and recite various platitudes under my breath. “Better late than never.” “Forgive and forget.” “What’s done is done.” “Give a man a fish, he’s hungry.” The familiar words calm me, placate my mind. Any time I go outside and return home alive, it is a miracle. “All things are a miracle,” I say in this moment with my empty tomato can.

I am smiling dumbly, looking around the room. The living room once looked out to the woods, in the direction of the water. During the day, the room filled with light. When it rained, or, on occasion, snowed, the windows laid bare a different world. They became portals, directly contrasting the warm dry interior while inviting one to look and see what else was out there. Protected and entranced, I’d sit in front of the glass. Bookshelves now block the view. But I know what is there behind them, and I do not care, I want to see those trees from within the glass, the bubble, the place where I am supposed to be safe. I stand up and go to the first



bookcase, stepping over my can pyramids. One, two, three inches; I peel back the wooden frame, giving myself just enough room to squeeze behind it.

And now I am in front of the glass, everything is in full view. Me, the woods, the cold. I press my nose, my entire face, up to the frame and let out a long foggy breath. The scene of trees is blurred. Now they are just a mess of colors. I wipe the condensation with my cheek. The trunks stand alone amongst one another; there is no vegetation in between them, just a carpet of dried pine needles that is miles deep, layer upon layer deep from hundreds of years of decomposition. Like a corpses' hair, they cover the earth in dry piles, and if you dig your hand deep enough into them, you can sink your fingers into the ground's rotting flesh. I fight the urge to slam my head against the window. Instead, I switch the latch open and push.

The air is icy and I am stepping outside and the hair on my legs is pinching against my starched skirt and I do not care about the wolves at this moment, just the sun and my own heart which is going going gone. The grass is frozen, I think, judging by the way it slices into my bare feet. It hurts but it is better than even the tomatoes because it makes me remember them and I am running now, so fast, in the right direction but without a candle. They will probably have extra. I will sing in the dark if I have to.

It was normal, or, say, not not normal for the entire family to go out all at the same time. "Stick together," that's what we'd say. Us kids, Carter and I, weren't allowed to go out alone. That was okay. It didn't bother me, not like it did Carter.

"I can share a bag of chew but I can't fetch water from the well. Doesn't make any damn sense," he said on more than one occasion. He said it angry but not too angry because deep down

I think he didn't really want to go to the well. Sometimes when the wolves were howling at night, Carter would come rushing into my room, asking if I were okay and saying well, he just thought he'd check. Sometimes he'd sit down next to me and I could see that he was shaking. My brother and his thin arms. I let him sit there and think he was comforting me. The two of us looked like ghosts in the moonlight.

That day, all of us left the house—me, Carter, Mother, Father. Carter had the shotgun, my father had the ax. My mother and I carried a butcher knife and a fire iron, respectively. The deer meat was running low, and my father had the idea that we could use our small boat to plant some trap stakes upstream Mortar's Creek. "We'll make a weir," he said, motioning his hands in what I supposed was a weir shape. "It'll feed us for months." I didn't ask any questions.

He spent weeks preparing the stakes, first chopping down the trees, then cutting them into smaller pieces, finally sanding them down into perfect cylindrical poles. Each end came to a fine point.

We carried them from the house to the bank of the creek, one at a time. Hot, humid, summer. My hands slicked over quick with sweat. I was alright taking my time; I felt safe. They were ahead, already by the boat, loading the stakes on. Here I had the last one. I could hear them talking (not too loud, but the sound travels over the water). My father was bossing us all around, and since it was his project, we let him. His voice carried over the trees, followed by muffled replies from Carter and my mother. I kept walking, one foot in front of the other, pointing the sharp end of the stake away from me. I was nearly at the tree line. That's when I heard them running.

Out from the left, there's where they came from. Upstream. Their shapes flitted through the gaps of the forest. Many paws. I heard that, saw that, and stopped my feet. Looked at the shapes go fast towards my family. They were still talking; Carter had that annoyed sound in his voice. I didn't yell. Or scream or do anything. I just watched as the wolves got closer and then all of a sudden the screaming and a shotgun firing only once and other sounds I didn't like once the screaming stopped.

I set the stake down on the ground and walked back to the house. I took my time.

There is another hour before dusk when I arrive at Brampton's Grove. Two people stand in a small clearing. I do not recognize them. They are very dirty. I look down at myself and decide to hide behind a tree. One is a middle aged man, the other an old woman. She is frail and hunched, with loose skin hanging off her cheek bones. How she has lasted this long is anyone's guess. The two of them know each other, they have come together. I wonder if it is the man who nailed the note to my door. I cannot hear what they say, but by their feet is a burlap sack. The air is not so cold now, or I am not feeling it that way. I wait for others to arrive.

The sun is behind some veil of gray, hanging back as it drifts down to the horizon. Three more people come into the clearing over the next hour. Nobody says anything. It's just people looking at each other like they don't know how to be. No candles from what I can see, either. Or meat. Just as the sun begins hanging its head low, like it's ashamed and tired, I step out from behind my tree and walk to the others.

They all watch me come, not surprised I'd been hiding. Maybe it was obvious. I don't care. Up close, I can see the individuality of each person's ugliness. Their faces are like terrible

mirrors of fright and it takes great control not to claw out each of their sad, distant eyes. The man and woman from the beginning bend down and open the burlap sack. All the bag contains is a heap of shells. They pass them around. I get my own oyster shell, and see that it is filled with a kind of fat, oily and slick. There is a small braid of hair poking out from the center. A wick. We gather in a circle, cradling our shells and looking on as the man and woman fumble with some matches.

There is a spark that catches eventually. My candle gets lit. The flame sits low, doesn't flicker much, doesn't move. Its light is weak, but against the cream whiteness of the oyster husk, its glow radiates out and up, into my hands and arms. I bend my face down until my nose is nearly skimming the thing. It gets dark around me but I don't notice hardly. I think the others have started singing. Their voices are far away in a beautiful kind of whisper that all has to do with my tiny light. I realize exactly what is happening and why, and I am okay with it. It wonderful here in the oyster where I can forget my body, my meat. I think I am singing too. It is great, it is good. The paws, the running, the howling. Here they come! We are in the throes of it together, although I cannot see anyone else and the air is getting thicker around me. The back of my eyelids glow red as I lift my face up and curve my neck. The sound coming out of me calls straight up to the sky where another white shell blushes with fullness, at last.

### *Attracting Wildlife to Your Yard!*

You can provide food and cover for area wildlife in a number of simple ways:

- Plant trees, shrubs and groundcovers. Creating natural corridors of vegetation provides birds and small mammals with places to rest, hide, and raise their young. Hedgerows, wildflower meadows, and brush piles also make good resting and nesting sites.
- Enhance wildlife food sources by planting native trees, shrubs, and flowers that provide berries, nuts, and seeds. Refer to “Bayscaping” chapter for ideas.
- Provide water at different heights in your home landscape for drinking and bathing: plant cup-shaped flowers for insects, and place shallow lids and dishes out for birds and small animals. Remember to add fresh water regularly, especially during dry summer months, and place containers near cover for quick getaways.
- Replace open lawn areas with wildflower meadows to draw butterflies, bees, and other insects needed for pollination.
- Create a small water garden, complete with a water lily tub or water barrel, for birds, small fish, and perhaps a frog or two.

—*Northern Neck & Chesapeake Bay: A Regional Guide to Rural Living*



## Inevitably Snakes

She sat in the passenger seat of the car and watched him unload the trunk. In her hands was a yellow lamp with no shade and no bulb, just a long cord that she had raveled and unraveled several times on the short the car ride there; he hadn't noticed the veritable nest of wires that became of her lap. He kept his eyes on the road because that was how he was. When they pulled up to the curb he had said, "Our first house!" and she had said, "Townhouse." Then he smiled at her like it was all funny in a way, and she couldn't help but do the same but with her eyebrows.

The townhouse was gray, which was fine because she liked gray. It also had concrete steps that led up to a white door with a metal knocker and a silver 5, the latter of which hung right at nose level and swung violently with each open and close, open and close. That day, the day of moving and sweating, they went in and out and in and out with all their things in their hands; she got in the habit of slapping the door frame every time she passed through it. *Slap!* In goes the microwave. *Slap!* In goes the drying rack.

Their new home was situated in a row of twelve, and as the day went on, she saw people come and go from the other numbered doors. She spoke briefly to a man with a small child ("Hello." "Hi there! Setting up camp, I see." "Yes, we've only just—" "HELLO MY NAME IS MILES!!!") and a woman with a dog ("Nice day for that, isn't it?" "We're very lucky." "I remember when I moved in, it was terrible, just freezing." "How's the heating?"). Cars pulled in and out of the shared parking lot. A jogger smiled as she hopped around the pieces of their

deconstructed bookcase; they had puzzled over it for twenty or so minutes before giving up and leaving it, for the time being, splayed out on the sidewalk.

The movers arrived with the rest of it all, and he told her to just wait in the kitchen while they did their thing. She sat in a lone chair and watched them fill up the place with brown boxes. She picked at her nails. The movers were two men and a woman; none of them made eye contact with her, but they moved so swiftly she didn't want to look away. One of the men tapped each box as he set it down. She thought his name might be Mel. Each time Mel came through the door, he turned his head and looked at the floor where she crossed and uncrossed her feet. She bit her nails.

After the movers left, he came and sat on the floor next to her and put his hand around one of her calves, leaning his head against her knee. Hot breath trickled down her leg. "Here we are," he said. The kitchen opened up to the living room; the walls were all white and bare. She got down on the floor and looked at him with her hands on his knees, serious. Then she widened her eyes, maniac-style, and made her face say Wow! so that he laughed while she hitched her legs on either side of him.

The next day, she woke up before him and wandered around their stacks of belongings, all still packed away with scribbles indicating this is what's in here, this is what's in there. They had slept with the mattress on the floor that night, something she had romanticized out of proportion but still enjoyed, nonetheless. They had taken turns rolling to the edge of the bed and flailing around as if the fall would be long and terrifying. The yellow lamp had shone its bare light onto their contorted faces.

She went into the kitchen and made coffee, then went to drink it on the concrete steps outside. The woman from Number 6 was walking her dog on the grass median strip at the center of the parking lot. She bent down to pick up the dog's droppings, then smiled and waved the plastic bag. The dog pulled and pulled until the woman had to turn away.

Later they sorted through books and clothing and dishware while listening to the toddler in Number 4 have several severe tantrums. He banged on the walls like a frightened, captive bird.

"It's sort of nice," he said. "Like there's always someone there. Like a TV is on in the background."

"TV's not always good," she pointed out. "But I guess it's sort of comforting." She picked up the silver frame her mother had given her and tossed it onto a pile of sweaters.

"I can't wait until we've got everything put away, then it'll finally feel like ours," he said.

She nodded and stuck her hand into a box of scarves, pulling them out one by one and placing them on top of her legs and feet so that she could be buried in the thick, colorful wool.

As they lay in bed that night, she heard singing coming from Number 4. It was low and weak; she imagined the little boy with his eyes closed and his father's hand stroking his head. Sleep now, sleep now. The singing continued long after the boy must have fallen asleep.

She got up and saw the woman and the dog again. The dog was in constant urgency, straining against its collar and leash and letting out dramatic gasps of breath. It reared its front



paws like an enraged steed. The woman seemed used to her dog's desperate attempts at freedom; she took pains to walk at a leisurely pace. Another wave of the bag of crap.

They figured out the bookshelf and pushed it against the wall. She stood back to look at its emptiness. "I like it like this," she said. He laughed and began picking up books from the stack they had organized earlier. The shelves filled with spines.

Clothes were folded, put into drawers and closets. Plates went into cabinets. The floor cleared in increments as they flattened box after box and shoved them in a corner of the living room.

"Do we need to hang these?" she asked, gesturing to the framed pictures and paintings leaning along the hallway.

"Don't worry, I can deal with the hammering," he said, grinning.

They were eating takeout because neither of them remembered to go grocery shopping. All they had was milk and instant coffee and five blue eggs from a roadside farm stand.

"It's not that," she said. "I just think it looks better without them."

He picked at his noodles. "We can wait a bit," he said.

At work, she drank coffee at her desk and told her coworkers about the furniture the two of them were acquiring.

"We bought a couch," she said. "It's green."

Jan and Mark nodded approvingly. Green is good for couches.

Three days later: “We bought a television. We don’t watch it, though.” Nodding, approval. Watching is bad for televisions.

Food was bought so that the refrigerator no longer hummed with hollow coldness. She began to store grocery bags in a kitchen drawer; they accumulated, grew into a mass of gummy plastic that tugged at her wrist each time she forced another one into the fray.

When they ate meals, she liked to use her thumb to wipe away crumbs from the corner of his mouth. The small bits of food fell silently to the kitchen floor and stayed there.

She also liked to watch the woman and the dog in the mornings. As he slept, she would roll off the mattress, creep out of the bedroom, and go downstairs. She’d stand in front of the bookcase in the living room and take each book out until the shelves were empty. Then she’d get her coffee and stand in front of the bookcase a little more. When she heard the neighbor’s door open and close, she’d take her mug out to the concrete steps and wait for the pulling, the wave, the pulling. Once her coffee was gone, she’d go back inside and replace the books. He’d make his way down soon after, scratching his stomach with his mouth open.

“Why do you get up so early?” He asked her this after the third week. He had pillow creases on his cheek that she tried, and failed, to smooth out.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I like the quiet, I guess.”

The night before had been scored by yet another heartrending Number 4 meltdown.

He shook his head. “I don’t know how you do it.”

He would go and lay back down, then get up later to look at his books and write things down on his notepads.

She tried to convince him to leave the mattress floorbound. “Who needs frames!” She said.

“I do,” he said. He talked about his back, how it wouldn’t be good. How backs can wreak all sorts of havoc.

The frame arrived later that week in the mail.

“We bought a real bed,” she said to Jan and Mark. She drank more coffee and didn’t say how little she slept in it, though. Sleep is bad for beds.

The day came when all of the insides of the boxes were turned out and the corner of the living room was cleared. The pictures were hung by then, as were the paintings and the small, tasteful mirrors. All the walls were filled, just like the closets and the refrigerator and the receipt basket by the phone.

“Well,” he said as he took a turn with his arms stretched out wide. “Pretty luxurious.”

Another bookshelf had been added next to the first one; it now took her double the amount of time in the mornings to empty their bloated shelves.

“Very,” she said. She joined him in the center of the room and put her arms parallel to his so that they stood there like tandem crucifixes. Then he grabbed hold of her and they tumbled down onto the floor and she laughed while he put his legs on either side of her. It was raining and his hair was still damp from earlier, when he carried all the flattened boxes out to the trash. “I can help,” she had said. “No need,” he had replied, his arms full and wet as he went in and out, in

and out. Now she listened to the drops hit the windows like thrown dice as he moved his lips down her blouse. Now she thought she heard a dog bark as he traced his fingers around the back of her knees, and gently pushed them up and apart so that he could fill her up too.

That evening she made tea. When she opened the cabinet to get the sugar, she noticed several small, brown pellets scattered amongst the bags of rice and flour. The corner of an oatmeal packet was chewed through. She picked up the sugar and brushed away the droppings with her sleeve.

They tried watching the television once, only to discover that the wires had been hooked up wrong the entire time. It had been funny at first; she had made jokes about the decorative value of plasma screens.

“It’s not that important,” she said. He had been become increasingly touchy as he sat on floor sticking various cords into random sockets. “We never use it.”

“Yes it is,” he said. He threw down the wire he was holding with a childish jerk. “What was the point of even buying it? Why did we get it?”

“You wanted it,” she said.

He went back to his fiddling without looking at her.

It started to rain nearly every day. The woman from Number 6 began to wear a long green parka with a hood, which made it harder to turn and wave her little bag in the mornings. And yet, she still did it, even when the ground was slimy and wet and the bag flung out droplets with each

wave. The dog seemed to like the rain very much. It pounced in puddles and bit into the air, testing the woman's hold on the leash all the while.

She added wiping down the kitchen cabinets to her morning routine. Droppings accumulated at night, when he was asleep and she was listening to the scurrying sounds in the walls. They seemed to move in packs. One set of paws would scamper by, followed soon after by a multiplied horde that stopped and started at irregular intervals. She imagined a group of lost tourists all piled up onto each other after one at the front abruptly came to a halt. These noises would come late, long after Number 4's singing had stopped and the row of townhouses hummed with quiet snores.

"How do people get mice?" she asked one day at work.

"Oh, I don't know, general messiness, I suppose," said Mark.

"Leftovers," said Jan.

He read to her in the evenings, sometimes from books and other times from the notepads he spent his days filling up. She may not have cared for all of the things he read from, but his voice carried her up into the ceiling in a way that made the words irrelevant.

She had her feet up on a pillow with her eyes closed while he flipped through pages.

"I should say, I mean, I haven't said..."

"What?" he said.

She opened her eyes and stared at the whiteness above her.

"Nothing," she said.

He found his place and continued with his reading. She closed her eyes and felt herself go up and up.

Later that night she would leave out pieces of bread on the table and counters of the kitchen. She would crumple up the crust and stick it in nooks and crannies. She would dribble juice onto the floor and let it dry into sticky splotches.

The three trees on the grass median strip turned brown as it continued to rain in great strokes each morning and afternoon. She got onto her stomach and squirmed under the bed in order to retrieve a box of moth eaten sweaters. The heating bill began to make a monthly appearance—they'd open it together and wince comically at the numbers. He'd rub her shoulder as she wrote out the check. She'd pull on his sleeve and later remove his shirt and put it onto herself, winking and saying something about taxes.

When she walked down the hallway, sometimes she'd glimpse a brown tail disappearing around the corner.

The toddler from Number 4 ran up to her once after she'd arrived home from work. She was walking through the parking lot when a door slammed and out he came, a pantless screaming bat.

“Help! Help!” He ran headlong into her legs and rubbed his eyes onto her kneecap.

“What's happened? Where's your dad?” she asked, looking wildly around and hovering a hand over his head.

“Won’t let me! Won’t let me!” He was sobbing into her pant leg when the father came out of Number 4 holding a stuffed dinosaur and looking near tears himself.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. He jogged over and peeled the boy off of her.

“It’s alright,” she said. The damp fabric rubbed against her skin.

“He’s never done something like that before, I guess it’s like puppies, right?”

She stared at him blankly. “Sorry?”

He chuckled and shook his head. “Don’t worry about it, I think my conversation may be suffering a little.”

She thought about complimenting his singing voice. The boy had quieted down and was now hugging the dinosaur and swinging his legs around his father’s hips.

“Well,” she said.

“Right, thanks. See you around.” He smiled and turned away. She watched the silver 4 swing from side to side after the door closed behind him.

The two of them knelt at the coffee table and ate a dinner of pasta with eggs. He had made it. She chewed and looked at his ears.

“I think we might have mice,” he said casually.

“Oh,” she said, matching his tone and glancing now at her own hands to make sure they held the fork steady and didn’t say anything she didn’t want them to.

“I thought I’d go and buy some traps,” he said.

“Is that really necessary? Can’t we just, can’t we let them be?”

“Why would we do that?”

The pasta flopped around on her plate as she made useless stabs at it.

“I don’t know,” she said. “I just don’t like it. Okay? I just don’t like it.”

“Okay,” he said, sounding like he did when he was talking to his sister that collected small vodka bottles from planes and gas stations.

She found a hole in a corner of the living room, behind the couch. She stared deeply into it after emptying the bookshelves and perching on the front steps with her coffee to receive the deft wave of dog excrement.

According to her boss, the river was rising at a rapid level and would soon spill over its banks and roll into the yards of waterfront property owners. That night, she told him this and he said well aren’t we lucky with our concrete steps and median strip and she said yes, sure, of course you’re right. He shuffled some papers and reached over to touch her. She tried her best not to think of anything at all, even when she heard something like singing or scratching coming through the walls.

A leak sprung in the bathroom ceiling; he placed a pot underneath to catch the slow, syrupy drops that slipped down one by one.

“What if we got a cat?” he said to her one day when she walked through the door. He was sitting on the floor with a pen in either hand. His hair pressed flat on one side of his head.

“A cat,” she said.



“Yes. They’re wonderful companions. My mother and father had one,” he said, looking down at his endless papers.

“What are we, then?” she said. It came out as she felt all of the things vibrate around her, the books and the frames and the chairs, until it was like they were whispering and laughing and snapping their fingers.

He didn’t answer her but seemed to instead be staring sadly into her kneecaps. She thought of his voice lifting her up and away.

“What if we went somewhere? Someplace else?” she said.

“Someplace else,” he repeated.

“Yes,” she said. “Just us. Just us.”

She knelt in front of him and opened herself up like a map so that he may see where best to go.

That next morning the both of them woke early. They had put their clothes in bags and had then put those bags into the car. While they finished loading, the woman emerged from Number 6 to walk her dog. Her green parka hood sat flat against her back.

“I’m going to fix us some food for the road,” he said to her, turning and walking back inside.

She watched as the woman made her way closer. The dog stretched its neck against the collar, its breath chaotic as ever.

“Hello,” said the woman.

“Hello.”

They stood in silence.

“I see you’re going somewhere,” said the woman, nodding at their car.

“Yes,” she said. “We’re going somewhere quiet.”

“Quiet.” The dog strained harder but the woman stood still, grounded.

“Yes. Just the two of us.”

“That’s nice,” the woman said with a smile.

They stood in more silence.

“I’ve been feeding the mice,” she said without a thought. “I don’t know,” she said. “I don’t know.”

“Oh dear, we’ll have to get those taken care of,” said the woman as she began to remove an empty plastic bag from her pocket.

“Why?” She kept her eyes on the dog. It wouldn’t look at her.

“Well, if we don’t, it wouldn’t be too good. My nan always said that where there’s mice, inevitably snakes will come along to eat the mice. Nothing to do but get rid of them before the whole row is infested.”

She stared at the woman, at her brown eyes.

“But not yet,” she said.

He came out of the house with a paper bag and both of their coats.

“All ready,” he said to her. He looked at the woman. “No rain today.”

“No,” the woman had said, “doesn’t seem to be any today.” She gave into her dog’s pull and walked over to the grass. Turning around just slightly, she waved over her shoulder.

They got into the car. He maneuvered it backward, then forward, slow and careful. She watched his hands tap and caress the wheel. The bottom of the paper bag had small holes in all of its corners.

“Our first vacation,” he said to her. He kept his eyes on the road.

“Yes,” she said. “Nice to get away.”

*One of Your Neighbors is Calling for Help!*

Did you know that a beautiful little beetle that sports an unusual white shell lives in your neighborhood? Found in several locations along the beaches of Northumberland and Lancaster counties, the Northeastern Beach Tiger Beetle is asking for a little consideration. You see, it survives most of the year under the sand, in the intertidal zone, breathing and eating according to the whims of the tides. But during July and August, it moves upland just a bit, near the dune line, to raise a family.

Whether living above or below the sand, the beetles are especially vulnerable to trampling—from dogs, toddlers, and other innocent pedestrians. You can help the beetle just by walking a few feet above the water line at high tide or a few feet below the water line at low tide when you're out on a stroll.

This stretch of the Northern Neck is one of the last known concentrations of these gorgeous insects, which used to frequent the entire north Atlantic coast. Your redirected footsteps along the beach will make a big difference to its ultimate survival.

—*Northern Neck & Chesapeake Bay: A Regional Guide to Rural Living*



## Teeth, and Other Ways to Fill Jars

The dental visits began the summer after I turned twelve. My mother had decided that this was the best course of action in dealing with Todd, my second primary molar, left side, who refused to come out long after the rest of my baby teeth had ceded their places in my jaw. He was a stubborn tooth. “Dr. Gil will know what to do.” That’s what my mother said once I’d shown her Todd; I had my head thrown back and was trying my best to settle my tongue in a position that wouldn’t obstruct her view. She said, “I’ll call him right now,” and picked up the phone. That was that. We went once, then we went again, and again and again.

On the first visit, Dr. Gil said to wait and see what happened, he said maybe things would pan out naturally, you never know. We waited and nothing happened, so we went back again. He said maybe wait longer and we did and then we came back because, again, Todd stayed put. That’s when Dr. Gil began to broach the topic of removal, something my mother ardently resisted.

“Don’t you see the risks? The discomfort? The pain?” he’d ask.

“Jonathan doesn’t want it out,” she’d say. “Please don’t push it.”

They had this way of haggling, he waving around his metal enamel scraper, she crossing her arms and setting her mouth. I’d be there in the middle of them, seated at angle, watching the ceiling. There was one panel that had been painted sky blue—it hovered above me like a window that promised blankets of safe cloud that you could wrap all around yourself. You just had to be brave enough to jump up into it. Eventually, Dr. Gil let up on the idea of pulling out Todd; he’d simply perform a cleaning and send us on our way. By then, a routine had developed.

The two of us would drive across town and park in front of the dilapidated strip mall; the office of Brian Gil, DDS shared a building with a used bookstore and an abandoned taekwondo academy. I'd sit and wait in the passenger seat as my mother fixed her hair. Once she'd finished and put away her car comb, we would get out and walk to the glass doors. They were heavy and led to a small waiting room. Carol the receptionist was always there to greet us.

"Jonathan, Marge, back again I see!" She had a perky, unaware face that was impossible to tire of. We'd approach her desk, my mother already holding her hand out to take the clipboard of papers. Carol would look down at me and inquire about my social life: "Oh Jonathan, how is *school*?" I didn't have much to tell; I made up things about girlfriends and music lessons and sports. Carol smiled at everything I said and I loved her for it. Every now and then I'd glance up at my mother, see if she noticed my lies. She'd be intently writing, scribbling furiously at the pages on the clipboard. Sometimes she'd drag the pen across the paper, underlining a word or phrase with contained force. Then she'd flip to the form at the top of the pile and hand them over to Carol.

"I'll take these *straight* to Dr. Gil," Carol would say.

We'd sit down then. The muted television played a show about pretty houses and their average looking buyers. My mother loved it. She watched the screen, her eyes moving rapidly to keep pace with the flashing subtitles. I read magazines like *National Geographic* and *Rolling Stone*. Twenty or so minutes later, a dental hygienist in scrubs would call my name and usher us through the brightly lit hallway. My eyes traced the clean, white tiles of the floor. A bib was fastened to my chest. I leaned back, looked up, and let the small piece of sky pull me in.

“Marge, Jonathan, how are we today?” Dr. Gil said this while looking down at his notes, reading. Then he’d look at my mother. They communicated something I didn’t pay much attention to. He scrubbed my teeth, though I believe the duty was beneath his qualifications. The vibrating brush moved in concentric circles, gentle and repetitive. It seemed to say, You’re alright, Jonathan. You’re brave. You’re special.

On the way out, I was handed a bag of gifts. Toothbrushes, floss, mouthwash—they lined the plastic like unsullied diamonds. I waved goodbye to Carol as we passed her desk. She’d wave back and whisper, “Bye Jonathan!” through her perfect white teeth.

I stopped having to ask to go. My mother began to take me every month, so that by the time I turned thirteen, I had gone to the dentist over ten times in one year.

My father, however, was not aware of these visits.

“Where are you going?” he would ask. He’d pull at his tie and sit down on his chair in the living room, having just gotten home from work.

“To the park,” my mother might say. Or maybe, “to the library”; “to go on a drive,” “to drop Jonathan at a friend’s,” and so on and so forth. The lies were simple. He didn’t question them. Neither did I. We all knew the real answer: to someplace else.

It’s not so strange that we didn’t tell my father about Dr. Gil and the Todd Problem. We didn’t tell him a lot of things. Like when we bought candy at CVS and ate it in the back of movie theaters, feet up, coats on. Or when we went to cafés and my mother sat and talked for hours with her friends. They’d laugh and taste each other’s drinks and lean toward each other so I couldn’t hear what they said. Maybe they’d touch hands and look serious, so serious, at each

other and go quiet. I brought along books to pass the time. Sometimes her friends would turn to me and say something like, “Jonathan, you’re getting too tall! Please, stop it now!” Their breath would be sweet and fermented and much too warm. I’d shrink down in my seat and nod something good. Then I’d go to the bathroom, stand in front of the mirror, and open my mouth wide so that I could see Todd reflected back at me.

“Where have you been?” my father would ask, sitting at the kitchen table holding an apple.

“The library,” my mother might say. Or maybe “the park.” Or just “nowhere.”

He would take bite from the apple and stare at the gash his teeth made. “Sounds like fun,” he’d say.

Later that night I might hear yelling. *Please don’t push it.*

Later that night I might run up the stairs on my hands and feet like a dog. *Where are you going?*

Later that night I might hide under the bed. *Please, stop it now!*

That fall, I befriended my school’s German teacher—a Mr. R. He was from Poland and must have assumed the proper pronunciation of his name would be too large of a feat for most middle schoolers; I never knew his full name. Every day we ate lunch in his classroom, where he told me about Poland and his dog, Plama.

“Today she ate through my carpet and vomited on my bed,” he’d say, shaking his head.



“Maybe you should start feeding her dry food,” I’d say. He’d nod and we’d both take bites out of our sandwiches.

Mr. R had eyes that made me think of acetaminophen. His voice came out heavy and measured, and when he spoke of his home, nostalgia further weighed it down with a familiar longing. He wore the same three ties the entire time I knew him, rotating through them in a cyclical pattern: red, blue, paisley, red, blue, paisley. They hung from his neck like small gestures of patience, like a finger held up to say, One minute please, just one minute. The classroom he taught in had only one row of working lights, which gave it the dim feeling of a monastery. We talked for hours in that place. He listened to me.

“Did you know I have a tooth that won’t come out?” I told him.

“Stubborn teeth mean strong bones,” he said. “You’re very lucky.”

“Today Jonathan and I are going to the park,” said my mother. She stood by the sink and looked only at her hands as she washed her dish. It was early on a Saturday; my father insisted we eat breakfast together on the weekends. There was something he liked about us all staring into the depths of our cereal bowls at nine in the morning.

“The park?” said my father. “Why would you want to go out there when it’s like this?”

The leaves were dead and gone, brown on the ground, frozen. He was seated across from me and looked out the window to emphasize his point; the glass had fogged over from the cold. I pressed my hands in between my legs and squeezed them tight.

“We want to go for a walk,” she said. Airy, careless.

“Uh huh,” he said. He stood up and walked over to her. He put his hands on her waist and said something into her ear and then continued to stand there behind her with his hands on her, on either side of her. She didn’t say anything, just stood there too without moving even a little bit. I squeezed harder, tried to impress my hands into the inside of my thighs so that they would always be nice and warm. There wasn’t anything to see outside the window but I thought maybe there were shapes moving on the other side, maybe there was something right out there that might try to come in. I touched Todd with my tongue and strained to make out what it was.

“Come on Jonathan, we’re going,” said my mother. She had pushed away from the sink and was coming toward me. She grabbed my hand and led me over to the door to get my coat. I looked back at my father as we left—he stood by the sink, unmoved, his hands rolled up into balls. When we got into the car and pulled out of the driveway, my father ran out of the house. He yelled as he ran and his hands were little fists swinging in the air. My mother accelerated and we shot out into the street. We drove away fast with my father behind us, stomping his feet in the front yard.

We didn’t say anything during the car ride. When we got to the strip mall, my mother pulled out her comb and began to brush her hair with small jerks. Her eyes bore into the rearview mirror as if there was something frightening and wonderful contained in the glass, something she needed to watch to make sure it didn’t get away. That was the first time I saw that look on her. I didn’t see it again until years later, when I found an old picture of her in a photo album. She was young, thirteen maybe, and holding someone’s baby. I don’t know whose. The only recognizable thing was that same scared hunger reflected in the wide socket of her eyes.

Trips to the dentist began to coincide with stays at the local Holiday Inn. My mother and I would spend a few nights there every now and then after telling my father we were going to my grandmother's house. He may have known better, but when we left he never raised any objections. On those days, the ones when we would go to the Holiday Inn, he sat quietly in his chair and refused to look at us. When we got to the hotel room, my mother would sit down on the bed and stare at the wall. She could be very quiet. There is one image I remember well—we had put our bags down and taken off our jackets. She bent over to take off her shoes, and her shirt pulled up to reveal a bruise on her lower back. It was a perfect circle. Later that afternoon we made our way to the strip mall.

After leaving Dr. Gil's office and returning to the hotel, I would settle into the double bed shared by my mother and me, pull out my plastic goodie bag, and turn on the TV. I'd place each item from the dentist on the blanket around me so that I was laying in a halo of small dental artifacts. My mother would lean against the wall and watched me, smiling in the sad way she did when I was enjoying something she could not fathom. After a while, she would go for a walk. "I won't be long," she'd say. "I promise I'll be back. Will you promise not to go outside of the room? Will you promise Mommy?" I promised. She would return an hour or two later in a much better mood.

My father taught me how to fold his shirt sleeves when I was seven. He sat me down on the bed and stuck out one arm. "See this?" he said. "Watch me." He took the sleeve, unbuttoned it, and folded it to a place between his hand and elbow. "You try," he said.

I took up his other sleeve and copied what he had done.

“Good job,” he said. “It’s hard to do it yourself sometimes.”

I started folding his sleeves every day before he went to work. He’d stand there by the bed and wait until I was finished with one, then he’d turn around so I could do the other. Afterwards, he’d kiss me on the head and leave.

One day, he bought an armchair and put it in the living room. He’d sit in it to put on his shoes in the morning. To put on his tie. To read the paper. To watch television. Sometimes I’d come down the stairs and see him sleeping in it, a blanket stretched thin over his arms. He stopped coming to get his shirt sleeves folded. He’d do it himself while sitting in between the chair’s two rigid arms.

My father didn’t have a pot belly like some of the dads on the shows we’d watch together. Those dads sat in armchairs as well, but the reclining kind. La-Z-Boys. My father wouldn’t have been caught dead in a piece of furniture that had a lever attached to it. He “had standards.” He exercised regularly, at home (“people who pay for gym memberships are imbeciles”). He had a white collar job as a tax consultant, to which he wore starched white shirts and nonthreatening blue ties. The man hated poppyseed muffins, bird feeders, and missing socks. Couldn’t stand the smell of sunscreen. What else is there to know? He wasn’t so bad. Once, he built a house for my stuffed animals and let me paint it. That was back when Todd was a non issue, just another baby tooth. We spent an entire week working on that house; he’d check on my progress, give me tips when he felt I needed some guidance. At the time, I thought it turned out pretty well. Years later, when I found it in a storage unit rented out by my mother, I saw it for the piece of crap it was. You should never try to find those things when you’re older. Just let them remain as triumphs in your memory.

Just before my thirteenth birthday, on the last day of school before summer break, Mr. R gave me a mug that had sat unused on his desk for the entire year. When he handed it to me, I looked down and saw that it was filled with marbles—all different kinds. Some were blue, others were yellow. Many simply had tiny specs of color within their glassy sphere. I ran a finger over their smooth surfaces.

“What’s this, Mr. R?”

He smiled down at me with his watery eyes and papery face. Mr. R must have really been quite old. “It is my marble collection,” he said. “I thought you might like it. Start collecting your own. Soon, you’ll need a bigger mug!” He laughed at this, wheezing out a few chortles before lapsing into powerful, wet coughs.

“Oh, well thanks,” I said. “I’m sorry I didn’t get you anything.”

“No need for that Jonathan,” he said. “Think of it as a parting gift.”

“Summer break isn’t too long—we’ll be back in September!” I tried to make my voice cheerful like my mother did when she turned around in the car to tell me where we were going.

Mr. R smiled at me. Sad smiles: nobody knows how truly terrifying they can be to children. “I’m afraid we won’t be seeing each other again, Jonathan. You see, I am finally going to retire! Return to Poland! See my family.” His gaze flickered somewhere else for a moment. “I am so very sorry. I will miss you. Jonathan, you are a good boy. Please take good care of my marbles.” He patted my head and walked away, down the hallway, into his classroom. I suppressed the urge to scream out after him, to throw his marbles down the stairwell. To throw

myself down the stairwell. Instead, I slowly made my way to the buses outside. The entire ride home, not a single thought passed through my head.

I took Mr. R's mug and shoved it deep into the back of my closet.

My father's one indulgence laid in a tin box above the refrigerator. Nondescript and filled halfway, always halfway, with individually wrapped peppermint sticks, the tin is present in my earliest memories of our kitchen. My father sucked on one after dinner every night, without fail. I never saw him reach up to retrieve the box, yet, there it was, that red and white striped candy, poking out of his mouth as he settled into his large armchair by the television.

"Want one?" he said one afternoon in July, holding a peppermint over his head as he sat in his chair with his eyes closed tight.

I was sitting at the dining table, flipping through pages of a library book. I knew he was talking to me; my mother had disappeared upstairs after finishing eating.

"Oh, sure," I said. "Thank you." I walked over to retrieve the candy. It's surface was chalky and cool. I looked at the back of my father's head. He didn't say anything else. I stuck it my mouth and fingered through the geode encyclopedia in front of me, sucking on the peppermint. I took a bite. I remember it well—I thought Todd had split open right then and there. The page facing up to me had a large picture of amethyst on it. The crystals were blood red. I yelped quietly.

"What's that?" asked my father, not turning around. I didn't respond. He didn't press.

Holding my jaw, I ran upstairs to find my mother. She sat in the hallway, her back to me, folding towels and placing them in front of the linen closet door.

“Mom,” I said, quiet, in a whisper. We whispered to each other daily.

“Yes, honey?” She turned around, saw my hand cupping my face. “What’s wrong? Are you hurt?”

I nodded, opened my mouth, and pointed inside. She took my head in her hands and peered in.

“It looks okay, Jonathan. What hurts?”

“Todd,” I said. Tears were streaming down my face. I couldn’t control it. Todd continued throbbing. It was all I could do not to faint at my mother’s feet.

She nodded grimly. “Dentist.” Her eyes then wandered to my other hand, which still clutched the peppermint stick. Wordlessly, she took it from my grasp, held it up, and snapped it in half. The pieces went into her bathrobe pocket. She then held my shoulders in her two hands. Her fingers dug in just a little too tight.

An appointment was made for later that week. In the meantime, I kept to soft foods and tepid beverages. My father didn’t seem to notice the sudden, immense care I took in eating. Todd ached continuously—a dull pain burrowed into my lower left jaw.

During the daytime I tried to do what I had been doing all summer: foraging in the woods behind the house. There were enough trees for me to disappear from view; I wanted to be gone. I liked to imagine my mother or father wanting me for something, maybe a chore, and not being able to find me upon coming to the backyard. They might call my name, look around a few minutes, before becoming worried. By then it would be too late. I would be off, dust flying up in my wake. No cop in the world would be fast enough to catch up. Of course, I never seriously

considered running away. In reality, I'd wander through the thin underbrush, poking at the soft ground. Some days I would find curiosities, such as mutated acorns or discolored leaves, and bring them back to my room. I had a small pile going on one of my dressers. Every now and then I'd attempt to climb some of the low hanging tree branches, but I never had much success. I wasn't exactly the "athletic type," as my father said. When I wasn't exploring outside, I was lying in my bed waiting for the day to end so I could go to sleep.

After biting the peppermint, I spent a couple of days meekly walking around the backyard before resigning myself to the house. One more day of dealing with Todd before Dr. Gil did his thing. I went to the bathroom and opened my mouth as wide as I could, trying to get a good look at Todd.

A light knock on the bathroom door startled me out of my rigid position in front of the mirror. "Honey?" My mother. "You in there, sweetie? It's nearly time for dinner and I need your help with some things."

For a moment, I did not answer. I stared at my reflection. My eyes were large and fish-like. Disgusting. My mother knocked again. "Jonathan?" she said.

"Coming." I opened the door. She stood there in her cotton shirt, holding a wooden spoon.

"What's wrong now, honey? Your tooth hurting you?"

I shrugged. Then I cried. My mother pulled me to her breast and held me, stroking my hair, waiting for the tears to pass.

"He's going to take Todd away," I said. "Dr. Gil, he's going to do it."

I waited, hoping she might disagree.



“Come now, I have something to show you,” she said, grabbing my hand and leading me down the stairwell. We went all the way down to the basement, where thick slabs of stapled insulation hung low in a ‘fast-and-loose-carcinogen-hazard’ sort of way. She stopped short in front of the back wall. I watched her shoulders rise and fall.

“Mom?” I whispered. My father wasn’t home, but I still whispered.

She didn’t answer me, but rather bent down and peeled away a section of insulation. The pink fiberglass fell in shreds next to her. Once the wall was bare, a loose board could be seen, detachable from the wall. She lifted this and beckoned me forward.

Behind the board was a small, dark space. It was filled with jars. And the jars themselves—they were filled too. I couldn’t tell you all of their contents. I only saw them once. What I did see, what I know was there, were bits of people. Hair, nail clippings, and, of course, teeth. There were other things; ticket stubs and receipts and candy wrappers. My mother retrieved one of the jars and handed it to me. Nearly twenty small teeth rested inside of it. I shook it. They rattled like tic tacs.

“Mom?” I whispered again. Her face now lit up with something I had indeed never seen. Something like wonder.

“Yours, sweetie,” she said. Mine. I slid my eyes back to the others jars. They glowed, not unlike the cosmic marbles of Mr. R.

While holding the glass in my hands, seeing those tiny bones of mine, Todd gave one more pleading throb. I looked into my mother’s eyes and felt a nakedness. That woman, she knew secrets. Her own, others, all of it.

The door sounded upstairs. “Marge?” my father called. She snatched my teeth away and put them back behind the board. The insulation went back up.

With a finger on her lips, my mother stood and made her way to the stairs. “Coming Dave, just organizing some things.”

“Down there?” he said. I heard the creak of the floor as he settled into his chair. A rhetorical question.

She paused on the first step, turned back to me. You really could never tell what she was thinking. Up she went, ascending to the kitchen to finish dinner. I fingered Todd and thought about those all those jars in the wall.

The insulation stripped back easily. I went upstairs with my teeth hidden under my shirt.

Dr. Gil did not remove Todd that day. The appointment carried on as usual—the waiting room, the papers, the home improvement channel. Carol was delightful as ever. When I opened my mouth, Dr. Gil barely even looked. “You’re fine,” he said. He gave me rugged sort of shoulder grab. It seemed to say, You’re a big boy, you can handle this Jonathan. “Nothing but a toothache. You have nothing to worry about.” He looked at my mother while saying this.

“What a relief,” she said. “Isn’t it, Jonathan?” She looked at me. I shrugged.

I got another cleaning, and as I looked up at the sky-painted ceiling tile, the blue appeared less opulent, the clouds dimmer. As we left, I noticed Dr. Gil’s hand hovering at my mother’s lower back. We drove home in silence. He was waiting for us when we walked through the door.

“Out?” my father asked. He had his arms folded, his sleeves unbuttoned. A handsome man, my father has been referred to as a “looker” on more than one occasion. It’s true, he had looks. I did not inherit that ruggedness, that magnetism. A blessing.

“Yes,” my mother said. She had her hands on my shoulders. “We were at the park.”

“Sure. And I’ve been licking stamps. Aren’t we sweet.” He turned, he was walking away. Done, over. Grocery bags covered the kitchen table and counters.

“I’ll just get this out of the way,” my mother said, walking over to the plastic bags.

“Don’t fuck with me,” he said. I imagined a cat on a railing.

“Dave, I’m not— ”

“Shut up.”

She shut up.

“What I don’t understand is, how a trip to the park could cost me nearly a thousand dollars.” He held a piece of mail in his hand. I suppose my mother had been good about keeping the dental bills from my father’s notice. That is, up until this point.

“Dave, honey, I just need you to listen.”

“What?” He jerked a chair out, sat in it. “Tell me, please.”

This is when I made my run. They always started this way, and I could feel the danger in my father’s voice. I got to my room, went for the bed. Pulled up the blankets and wrapped them around me, swaddling myself like a baby. This method worked well in hiding any sounds. They might scream, she might scream, but I could barely hear it. *Please don’t push it.* In the bundle, I’d hum, or sing, or imagine imagine imagine myself away. Not here, somewhere else. Not me, someone else. I heard his heavy foot falls, down the hall, closer and closer. *Where are you going?*

God help me, help me. The door opens, my mothers yells, screams. The blankets are ripped from me. He is standing there, pliers in hand. And his hands, they tremble like they used to when we went to theme parks and waited in long lines to ride roller coasters and he came too, even though he didn't have to. "Just get yourself a snack!" my mother said once. "Don't come if you don't want to!" He stared at her and shook his head. *Please, stop it now!* We got in line and he kept his hands in his pockets. Now they tremble but he does not keep them out of sight, he moves them and uses them and they shake worse than any roller coaster track. At the dentist, Dr. Gil used gloves. *No!* His hands said, You're special. You can handle this. You're a big boy. "So tall!"

Where are my hands? *Jonathan!*

Let me tell you something: I did not feel a thing.

Later, I woke to find myself in a different bed. My mouth and throat tasted of salt. On the bedside table was a note, written on the complimentary Holiday Inn stationary. It read:

*Jonathan,*

*I will be back soon. Do not leave the room. Mommy loves you. It's*

*alright, everything is fine. Do not leave the room.*

*Mom.*

Next to the note was a jar. In it laid one tooth. A small, yellow, second primary molar.

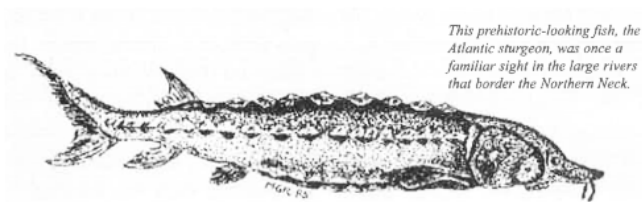
Sitting up, I grabbed the jar, opened it, let Todd roll out onto my palm. I filled a glass of water in the bathroom. I sat back down. The duvet was soft and cool.

I opened my mouth and swallowed Todd whole.

The Northern Neck of Virginia claims a remarkable 1,109 miles of tidal shoreline, edges that are influenced by incoming and outgoing tides twice daily. These lines in the sand were drawn about 15,000 years ago when the glaciers last headed north and the Atlantic rushed in to fill up the great estuary, the Chesapeake Bay. The edges—where land meets tidal rivers and the bay—are dynamic environments in a constant state of flux because of their exposure to a number of natural forces: winds, tides, wave action, and periodic storm events. The result is a place where nature redraws the boundaries on occasion.

Along the Rappahannock, look for evidence of early wharves, whose decaying pilings are still visible at low tide. As you travel along country roads today, look for remains of old grist mills once powered by the many ponds that still dot the landscape.

—*Northern Neck & Chesapeake Bay: A Regional Guide to Rural Living*



## Moe's Head Island

Moe's Head Island was the kind of place my uncle called "corkscrew." He said it spiraled downward and pulled up things you were expecting but still weren't too excited about. Like evangelism or kids with strange freckles. He'd go and drink there sometimes when the morning shone pink and his friends had gone home to their wives, navigating his cruddy motorboat through the snaking currents and narrow inlets. People on the island didn't care much for drunkards, but he knew many of the watermen by name and that seemed enough to earn their disinterest. I went there with him sometimes, though my mother always made him breathe into her face before we took off.

"Jimmy, you better get my daughter back before it rains later."

"Yes, ma'am." He liked to tease her like that, with the "ma'am" and the little bow that made his back crack.

His boat smelled like urine and raw chicken. I sat in the back and wore a life vest until we turned the creek's bend and my mother's crossed arms faded into the saturated breeze. From there, I stripped down to my one-piece and flip-flops. The waves got choppy where the Chesapeake Bay met the Wicomico, where the finger of the river was at its thickest and the vague brackish water of inland turned to full, bold saline. This is where my uncle really liked it. Whitecaps and spray over the bow. Amazing what salt water can do for your hair. "Maria!" He yelled this with his hands on the steering wheel, eyes closed, head thrown back.

"MAAAARIA!"

Never knew who Maria was, but the name fit the moment. Sometimes I'd scream along with him. The gulls overhead called out with their own weak voices.

I liked the island. It was floaty on the water with lots of cats to throw rocks at. The light there always seemed a little dark and murky, like you were looking at it through a dirty fish tank. Seven hundred or so locals. People there milled around and watched boats dock through tired eye slits. No cars; the roads could only fit golf carts, which my uncle loved because that meant I could drive while he leaned out the side with a beer bottle and some oyster crackers trying to touch the tall electric-green marsh grass.

"Look!" Uncle Jimmy would say, pointing at a white ibis, or a blue heron, or a birdhouse, or a crack in the pavement, or a sunburnt toddler. He'd turn back and face me with palm-sized lighter fluid eyes.

"Wow!" I'd say back. I meant it.

The last time we went to Moe's Head had been a Tuesday in August. The morning conversation passed between Uncle Jimmy and my mother like this:

"Jimmy."

"Donna."

"I don't know if you know this, but your shirt is wrinkled."

"Well I couldn't wear my other one, it has barbecue sauce on the sleeve."

"Fine."

"Yeah?"

"Breathe on me."

She was always mad about something. Before I could sidle my way through the front door, she grabbed my hand and squeezed it tight. “Don’t you let him do anything crazy,” she said to me. “Don’t you let him go round saying things.” She handed me a ten dollar bill. Something smelled like burning rubber. Seated at the stern, I watched her disappear with one hand tucked under my thigh.

The dome of the sky had a sort of film overlay, steely, silvery as the inside of a mussel. Looking at my uncle, I made an effort to see him as my mother did. As the people at supermarkets and restaurants and the Purple Palace Laundromat did. His hair was long and greasy and tied back in a ponytail, which I suppose was off-putting if you cared about that sort of thing. He also always seemed to wear the same three shirts. All of them were the kind with advertisements on the back for regional auto dealerships. When he opened his wallet, the sound of velcro tore out loud and clear like a high-velocity fart. He put his sunglasses on the back of his head when he wasn’t wearing them—I liked that and copied it on occasion. Most of all, he was fun. He was fun in the scary way adults are when they seem like they’re having even more fun than you, and they see you while they’re in the thick of the fun but it’s like you’re not really there but more like you’re another part of the fun that is all they can care about, and if you aren’t laughing then why are you even there to begin with? He contained an edge that came out when someone didn’t play into a joke or tried telling him something he already knew (“that’s nice but I went to grade school, so”).

So yeah, I looked at my uncle. There he was: the line of his farmer’s tan peeked out as he turned the wheel of the boat this way and that.



“Aren’t you gonna take that stupid thing off?” he said, throwing me a grin over his shoulder.

“Oh, yeah.” I unclicked the life jacket and let it slither to the boat’s floor.

“Alright, so here’s what I got: last night I was talkin to Stanley, and he was tellin me about this old story, you know a sort of legend, right, about Moe’s Head. Stanley, he says to me that his daddy told him about some underwater bunker they built there in the sixties, you know when the military was there testin the bombs out. And Stanley’s daddy, he’s a vet himself, so he’d have intell and the like. Knows what he’s talkin about, even if he is older than salt. Anyway, it’s supposed to be right there, in the Big Gut. So Stanley’s there sayin this to me last night and I thought, man, you gotta see that. And what else? Bradley, your right-hand girl, she’s gotta see it too. Whaddya say, huh? We gotta see that, right Brad? Dammit, nobody there even *knows* about it. *Untouched.*” When he talked, Uncle Jimmy moved his hands a lot, like he was painting something to good to be seen. His hands were wild that day, already digging through the underwater secrets only he could reach.

I couldn’t help myself. “Sounds too good to be true.”

Head shake, half smile. “Honey, you gotta have faith.”

The hull met up with the water’s divide. We had reached the mouth of the river. I turned and watched the legs of land part on either side of us, their straight pines waving goodbye. The Bay stretched out in hard, gray peaks. The breeze picked itself up in pushy gusts, carrying along the distant blare of a foghorn and the cry of something, an osprey, mounting its hill before dropping down with limp accuracy and reemerging with its squirming prey whose silent cries get lost on my ears.

“MAAAAAARIA!”

Thud, thud, thud. He beat the wheel.

“Okay,” I said.

“Okay,” I said, louder.

“Knew you wouldn’t chicken, *knew* you wouldn’t. Maria, baby. MAAARIA!”

He went on talking about the gear we might need—goggles, waterproof flashlights, Coors Lite, etc. The ten dollar bill stayed crumpled in my fist. Up above, the sun rose, swathed in cloud and pregnant and ready to burst with light at any moment. We bobbed forth.

“How deep is it?” I asked. “Can we swim that far and hold our breath?”

“Eh, not too far down, I don’t think.” He lifted one side of his mouth in a way that I knew meant the questions should stop.

“Maybe there are bodies down there,” I said.

“Ha! Dark today, aren’t you Brad? Man, I don’t know. Could be. Bet there’s some old equipment, you know, radios and that sort of thing.”

Sailboats perched in the distance like fingernail clippings.

“Or old diaries with locks of hair,” I said.

Head cock. He liked this game.

“Dog-sized rats,” he said.

Classified logbooks with government secrets. Air dried food. Army paraphernalia. A big trunk with a lock on it. Maps. Coded maps. One lone finger. Nuclear waste. Dance cards.

Things got darker as Moe’s Head got closer. Slow and quiet the jaw of the island rose up from the water. Rows of muted white buildings sat like jagged teeth along the coast, their paint

worn down from decades of cyclic tides and storms. The smell of fish, raw fish, came up sharp from the shallows as we approached the harbor. Crab shacks floated along the channel, islands in themselves with their untethered walls and piers. Boats motored around the island; others remained anchored, empty and waiting. Something about the people of Moe's Head: they move as if air were a soup. Uncle Jimmy knew how to blend; we docked with deliberate sluggishness.

“First thing, we've got some supplies to buy,” Uncle Jimmy said. He thumbed through his cash while I slipped on a pair of shorts.

I followed him through the network of docks, to the paved sidewalks and along the main street of Moe's Head. Seafood restaurants promised ceiling fans and oysters; bikes and golf carts sat parked on the grass. The yards of residential houses were marked with chain link fences and gravestones. Men with red faces lined the benches outside of the local food market. They talked amongst themselves in short bursts, conversation slipping out the side of their mouths with tangled lilt. Jimmy nodded at them as we passed. I looked at the ground.

The store offered no baskets to carry food, forcing shoppers to hold their items loose in their arms as they wandered the shelves. Three aisles, one checkout counter. The fridge in the back had the beer. The two choices were bottled or canned. As Jimmy contemplated his decision, I ran my hand over bags of dried beans, jars of pickles. Near the door was a freezer of ice-packed bait that made the whole place smell like fish guts. I folded the ten dollar bill once, twice, then tucked it safe away in my pocket.

“Lookin for something, sweetie?” said the woman behind the counter. She licked a stamp and placed it on an envelope in front of her. A trail of saliva hung suspended from her mouth, fleeting and delicate.

“I don’t think so,” I said.

“Don’t listen to her, we’re always on the lookout for somethin,” said Uncle Jimmy. He dropped a twelve pack on the counter, along with a canister of oil and two bags of sunflower seeds. “All gloom out there today.”

“Been like that all week,” she said, typing into a calculator. A party of wasps bunched together in the ceiling corner above our heads. Their collective buzz tickled the air. “Don’t like it. All week.” She touched her chin. “Twelve even,” she said.

Jimmy tossed some bills onto the counter and gave her a commiserative grunt. We exited through the screen door, back onto Main Street and into the fuggy midday air. Sitting on the porch of the house opposite to us was an old man. He had on pants too large for him, so that his legs looked swallowed by two withering denim snakes. We made eye contact, the man and I, and he called out across the way, “Dragging you all around, in’t he?” He laughed then, in the breathy way of someone hollow on the inside. “Got you runnin all over the island!” he said. His eyes rolled and his knee jerked up with each breath he took. Two cats laid at his feet. One had a missing ear.

“Don’t pay him any attention,” Jimmy said. He looked down at me. “Had an aneurysm about a year back, and now all he does is feed the island cats and watch the sun.”

I nodded my head. “Okay,” I said.

He waved at the old man, who still sat shaking in his empty way. We made our way back to the boat, Jimmy with his beer and oil and sunflower seeds.

Moe’s Head was divided by a network of tidal streams that ran through the island like salted veins. The largest channel, the Big Gut, sat fat in the middle of them all. Bridges

connected the neighborhoods on either side so that golf carts and pedestrians could make their way, unimpeded, from the Main Ridge up to the northernmost area of Moe's Head, the Uppards. Jimmy steered us through it all, passing by stretches of small beaches and marshes. Birds of all kinds gathered in the tall reeds, barely visible as they walked and pecked and ducked their heads beneath the water's surface.

"Look under that seat there for some goggles," said Uncle Jimmy. "See if I've got the kind that cover your nose, you know, like the Caribbean tourists do it." He tossed aside another can. There was already a small pile forming by his feet.

"There's some here, but I think they're cracked," I said, holding up the mask so he could see the smallest of breakages trace its way across the right eye frame.

"That's fine, looks fine," he said.

There wasn't much boat traffic that time of day; people were busy eating lunch and taking naps or perhaps doing both at once. We were able to toss an anchor down without blocking anyone's way.

"Okay, so Stanley was sayin the bunker'd be just about right smack in the middle of the Gut. This is a good spot to start, yeah Bradley?" he said, peering over the side of the boat with his elbows stuck out backwards.

"I guess so," I said. "What are you gonna do Jimmy?"

"I'm goin in," he said. Obviously.

I joined him in looking down into the mucky water. It's vague greens and browns gave away little. Just visible, minnows gathered in schools, moving with exact synchronization.

Somewhere a baby began to wail.

“Maybe we should get more supplies,” I said. “And then we could find it faster. That way nobody will see us and ask what we’re doing.”

Uncle Jimmy stayed quiet for a while. He picked up the scuba mask and considered its florid outline. He ate a few sunflower seeds, spitting the shells overboard one by one. Another sip of beer.

“Thought you were excited about it, Brad. Thought you wanted to see what was inside.”

“I do,” I said.

“So let’s go then. Don’t be like your momma. She’d stay all day in her house wondering what’s out in the yard. You don’t do that. You go and see for yourself, isn’t that right Bradley? You like to go go go! You’re a wild child! You, ah, you’re ah . . .” Jimmy licked his lips and scratched his jaw. His eyes moved like some desperate goldfish, bumping its head on the glass side of its fishbowl after having been placed, carelessly, next to a mirror. He tried to snap his fingers.

“Okay, you’re right. Let’s do it. I want to see the bunker,” I said.

Jimmy clapped his hands together. “Good, good.”

He moved around the boat, getting things ready for his dive. He uncoiled a rope and tied one end to a handle on the boat’s side, the other around his waist. “You pull me up if I tug on it,” he said. His words had begun to sway this way and that on their way out of his mouth; his sentences moved around one another like unsteady dancers. I helped him find a flashlight that worked well enough. He stood clicking it on and off.

“It can’t be that deep, right? It’s got the floor of the island under there still, right?” I asked.

“Oh sure,” he said. “What’s the use of a bunker if nobody can get to it?” He put one leg over the side of the boat, then the other. “Remember what I said about the tugging. Also—don’t you get wise and try to jump in too.” He laughed one laugh, then pushed himself into the water. “Maria, here we go!” He dove down.

I watched his body get blurry and small until I couldn’t see his shape any longer. I waited. The minnows glided by. My neck grew damp under my hair, which I tied up with the rubber band I kept on my wrist. The baby picked up its screaming again, this time sounding farther away, as if someone had moved it with hopes of placation. The rope became somewhat taut, and I grasped onto it, ready to begin hauling Jimmy back to the surface. Finally, the tug came.

Jimmy’s outline appeared, growing in size as he approached. He burst from the water and immediately let out a whoop of glee. “We got it, Brad! Found that door, I swear it’s gotta be it. Round and sorta stuck in the muck. Got some barnacle too, nearly cut up my hands tryin to get a grip on it.” He took some deep breaths and removed the goggles, shaking out his long hair.

“What do we do now?” I said. “Can I go down? Can I see it too?”

“Not yet, hold on now. I think I should see if I can dig it out a little, try to find a handle, you see what I mean? Here, hand me the grease rag.” I tossed him the grimy cloth. “I can use this to scrape off some of them barnacles,” he said. He let himself float for a moment, smiling up at the sky with the small waves breaking all around him.

“This is it, Bradley. You glad you came?” he asked, still gazing upwards.

“Yes,” I said.

Jimmy put the mask back on and nodded at me. He went back under, and this time I could hear his gasp of air. Again I waited. The baby had not let up. I imagined a woman with her head in her hands. I put a few of the sunflower seeds into my mouth, and attempted to remove the kernels from their hulls with only my teeth. The clouds above let through intermittent light as they skated from east to west. The rope tightened and I closed my fingers around it. More minutes passed. A sudden shift in the breeze brought bumps to my arms, and I decided to pull once, just once, to see if Jimmy might need a hand.

No response. I pulled again. No boats had passed since we'd gotten there. Neither of the bridges had been crossed. I pulled again. The breeze was no longer a breeze but a steady flow of air, cool and sharp. The boat began to rock as the wind stirred up waves of heavy undulation. I pulled again. This time, the rope slackened and I drew up the rest of it.

Jimmy rose up, and when he broke the surface, he remained silent.

"Jimmy!" I said. "What happened?"

He made his way to the boat with slow kicks. I noticed something in his hand, which he kept under the water. "What's that?"

"I don't think, ah, I don't know," he said.

"Can I see it?"

"Listen, Brad, I'm thinkin we should get you back home. You know how you're momma can get—"

"Pull it out of the water Jimmy."

He gave me a look then, like he couldn't see me quite right even if he squinted. Overhead the clouds grew thick and dark; they seethed with rain. The Gut turned a deep brown. Nothing,



not even the minnows or Jimmy's feet, could be seen in its depths. A soft hiss rippled through the hairs of the marsh.

"Come on," I said. I pointed my finger and did not bend my knees.

Uncle Jimmy nodded at the boat's stern, then lifted his arm up high. In his hand was a chain, large and rusted over with coagulated brine. Each loop had a hole wide enough to fit my arm through; linked together, they formed a line that descended down into the water from either end.

"Found it down there," Jimmy said. "It was attached to the door, I thought if I yanked on it, just kept yankin, I might get the thing open. But it, I don't know, it wasn't the bunker I guess. Somethin else. Sorta like a drain stopper. When it finally gave way . . ."

"What?" I said.

"Well, it all came rushin out. Just water. Dark, cold water."

Droplets of rain began to fall on us. The hiss continued. Louder, closer. It filled my ears.

"Let's go," I said. I felt the money folded in my pocket. "Let's get some food."

"Yeah," he said, nodding at the stern.

I reached out and took the chain from him. It hummed as if, somewhere far far down its line, someone were tapping it with bare knuckles. I felt it in my elbow. My armpit. My neck. I dropped the chain and watched as it sank down out of sight. Jimmy clambered back onto the boat. He towled himself off and took up his place at the helm.

"Where'd ya like to go Bradley?" he asked.

I stared dumb at him, at his naked, pruned face. "Anywhere is fine," I said.

As we motored up the Big Gut, I let my hand hang over the side of the boat and skim the waves. They slapped up my arm, cold, then hot, then cold again. My skin tingled where the water touched it. Uncle Jimmy kept his back straight. Thunder rolled through the island.

“Storm time, Jimmy,” I said. I knew he couldn’t hear me.

A white wall of rain ate away at the horizon. I watched it come closer as Jimmy secured the boat to a dock near Al’s Saloon. It hadn’t occurred to him to bring an extra set of clothing, so he wrung out his shirt and trunks as best he could before we went inside.

Hot breaths of mist hit our backs as we walked through the restaurant doors. Two women were playing gin rummy in a booth at the back. The cards they used were stiff and warped and clattered as they hit the table.

“Get us a seat by the window,” said Jimmy. He still had lines on his face from the scuba mask and his left hand hovered over his navel. The man behind the bar nodded when Jimmy walked over and started his talk.

Outside, the storm made itself known. It whipped and screamed and beat its way to Moe’s Head. I couldn’t say the way it moved was fast or slow; it came the way the moon comes, the way a baby comes. And when it got to the island, nothing outside looked the way it should. Inside the storm, things flipped upside down. The water became the sky, the sky became the Bay. Moored boats looked to be sailing on their own, riding the waves with nobody at the wheel to steer them different. The glass of the window next to me became blurred over. The restaurant walls and roof trembled.

“Damn, you here that? Maria, baby, it’s a big one!” said Uncle Jimmy as he sat down across from me. He slid over a cup of lemonade and kept an amber pint glass for himself. He had his mouth wide open and his head leaning back to touch the wall.

“I know it,” I said.

The patrons of Al’s didn’t once look up, not after the lightning, not after the thunder. The women in the booth kept themselves hunched over their game. The bartender cracked open peanuts. I slurped my lemonade in silence.

Then the hissing started again, this time louder and meaner. Underneath it was another sound, a great slow sucking that seemed to come from somewhere deep below us. It creeped in under the door, through the floorboards. I looked at Jimmy, tried to see if he heard it too. He kept his eyes closed, but his jaw clenched up and that’s how I knew.

“Jimmy,” I whispered, “what’s that?”

“Don’t know what you mean, Brad,” he said without opening his eyes.

“Come on, Jimmy. Please.”

He sighed and leaned forward, turning his head toward the door as if the sound had just walked in and was waiting for a table.

“It’s from before, when we were in the Gut and you pulled that—”

“Hey now,” said Jimmy. He had snapped a face at me that I’d never seen before. “Stop that. Don’t you go pointing your finger when you don’t know what you’re talkin about.”

“I just meant, I mean it just sounded the same. I wasn’t saying that you—”

“Alright, let’s be done with it then.” He took up his drink and downed the rest of it, then went back over to the bar. He was just getting his second beer when a woman banged her way

into Al's. She was sopping wet from the rain, carrying a plastic bag in one hand and a jacket in the other. I recognized her from the market.

"It's no good out there," she said to the entire place. "You folks gotta keep an eye on your things. It's all starting to go under."

"What's goin under Marlene," said the bartender. He had thick, sympathetic eyebrows.

"The roads, the docks, you name it," she said. She was still standing by the entrance; a small puddle formed itself around her feet. "I was walkin home and had to come back. The bridges are all underwater cuz the Gut's full up."

"Happens every month in the summer, you know that honey," said one of the women playing cards. She held out her hand and studied her lot with her tongue in between her teeth. Jimmy had his back to it all like he couldn't care less about the whole thing.

"Not like this. It's all bubblin like a fountain over there," said Marlene. She sat down then, finished with what she had to tell. I felt the urge to cover my ears, to protect them from all that was humming their way. A leak sprung from the ceiling and let down a steady drip of water into the center of the room.

"Sounds like quite a sight," said Jimmy with his back still turned. "I'd like to see that." He stood up and started toward the door, stopping only when his hand grasped onto the handle.

"You comin, Bradley?" He stood there, bent over slightly, with his head at an unsure angle.

I followed him wordlessly out into the rain. The tide had risen several inches since we'd been inside, flooding most of the roads and walkways. In order to get anywhere we'd have to step into a swift stream of tidewater, whose current switched back and forth in rapid succession

—the water came from all sides. The hiss and suck reached an apex out in the roiling wind and thunder; I could only see three feet in front of me.

“Maybe we should go back in,” I said. I tried to grab the back of Jimmy’s shirt.

“What, a little afternoon storm is too scary for my Brad? Come on child, you see this all the time.” He lifted his hands upward, proclamation style.

“I don’t want to,” I said. His hands dropped.

“Guess I was wrong.”

Jimmy backed away from me and waved one hand. His long hair got caught up in all the twisting gusts; the tendrils surrounded his face, engulfed it, as if in an attempt to cocoon him fully inside their writhing locks. Then he was gone, swallowed up by the thick sheets of rain. “Jimmy!” I yelled. “Jimmy!” I thought I heard an engine rev, a boat propeller sputter.

I went back into Al’s. Everything remained the same. The women in the back shuffled their decks and Marlene sat drying at her table. Someone had placed a punch bowl under the ceiling leak. Now the drops landed in a pool of their own making, each ripple deepening the small, fresh pond. I seated myself and watched it form its own burgeoning microcosm, complete with a small fly and a fine sediment that clouded the steadily rising water. The fly, at first perched on the bowl’s rim, had tumbled down the side and was desperately trying to paw its way back up. I drank from my lemonade and pulled the ten dollar bill my mother had given me out of my pocket. The paper was damp and smelled of dirty metal. I walked over to the bar.

“Can I buy another lemonade?” I asked the bartender.

“Sure thing,” he said. He took out a cup made of thick, opaque plastic and filled it with a pitcher kept on the counter behind him. “Here. One fifty.”

I handed him the ten. As he counted out my change, I took a long pull from the lemonade. Then another. And another. Once my cup became empty, I asked for more. Pulp caught in my teeth and I sucked it through and swallowed the bits of lemon hide with tart saliva. The inside of my mouth grew a coat of sugar and my tongue turned bumpy. I drank the lemonade until I could feel it sitting in the back of my throat, so that my body was filled to the brim with sticky sweetness.

“Thank you,” I said to the man. If he gave me a funny look I couldn’t tell much; it’s not likely he cared. The leak had slowed. The light outside the window brightened to a half twilight as the clouds above thinned. I left the last few dollars on the bar and stood to leave.

“Where ya goin sweetie?” said Marlene. She had progressed from soaked through to merely damp in the time spent sitting and waiting out the storm.

“To find my uncle,” I said.

“Well you be careful out there, we’ve been waitin for the big one to come for a long time now.” The plastic bag hanging from her wrist was cutting off her circulation; I watched her hand turn blue.

“Maybe *you* should be careful then,” I said. “Maybe you should be worried.”

She laughed then, and the smile on her face broke something up in the air so that I couldn’t see what was so bad about anything at all. “You go on then,” she said.

I walked out of Al’s and left Marlene and the man behind the bar and the women playing cards. The rain was barely at a drizzle now; a mist clung to the edges of buildings and skirted over the guzzling water. The sun laid hidden somewhere deep in the stratosphere so that a yellow light cast itself over the island, reflective and feral, as though it had all been passed through the

eye of a cat. And there, above it all, was the hiss and suck. It pulled at everything and seemed to only get louder. When I stepped down to where the sidewalk had been, the water surged up past me knee.

“Jimmy!” I called. Useless.

I tried walking. The current pushed strong and fast—I nearly lost my footing and had to grab onto the railing behind me. There were other people trying their luck in the steadily rising water. I watched a man take one ginger step after another in the tide in front of his porch. Some children were splashing about, each with one hand mobilized in play as the other clung onto the wires of a chain link fence. Many were on boats, gliding by with motors off, faces set. Every person seemed to carry a kind of unphased determination. Nobody, from what I could see, had even acknowledged the strange sound emitting itself from somewhere below the chops of waves. A distant clap of thunder flapped like an old rug having the dust beaten from it.

To my right was a small, traffic-cone orange dinghy—it banged up against the side of the restaurant, apparently untethered. I made my way over to it, took the line in my arms, and dragged it back to the steps. From there I was able to climb on and seat myself. There were two oars attached to either side of the boat; I took one and pushed off from the bottom step.

“Jimmy!” I called again, paddling my way up Main Street. People were all around now, standing on their porches, touching the wood of their door frames and leaning back to see all they could. Some had docked their boats right up against their houses and were loading things on—bags, toys, books, microwaves. A young boy watched as his mother threw chairs from a second story window. I kept yelling Jimmy’s name. Birds gathered in the top branches of trees and sang out with their singular voices.

“You lookin for somebody?” asked an old man. The laughing man. He sat in a wicker chair and ran his hand over a calico cat.

“My uncle, the man I was with before. Have you seen him?” I said.

“Tall with that long hair? Mhm, I’da seen him before, tuttin round the island,” he said. The hem of his pants dipped into the lapping water by his feet. The cat kept its eyes closed tight.

“Where was he? What direction did he go in?” I asked. I tried not to sound too worried, like I was just curious, that’s all. My fingernails chipped at the oar’s paint.

“Back by the Gut. Looks like a fire, dunnit? Like a big family fire all over the place.” He gazed around him, at his neighbors, at his cat. I thought about offering to take him somewhere, though I didn’t know any places to go and he didn’t have any places to be.

“Go ahead, go get em! Chase em down!” He flung his arm out and waved with wild, disjointed movements. The cat lowered its ears while the man swung his arm from side to side. I drifted away with the thought of that arm rattling around like a loose marble.

The marshes had flooded over so that the grasses poked through the water like stubble. The Big Gut gurgled and gushed, its outline no longer discernible from the land around it. I spotted Jimmy’s boat anchored at the center of the Gut, where the noise seemed loudest. Once I bumped up next to it, I tied the dinghy onto Jimmy’s boat. He wasn’t there. I peered down into the water and screamed his name. “*Jimmy! Jimmy! Jimmy!*” My voice got lost in the snore of rushing water and air.

That’s when he came up, rose up from the darkness and splashed my face.

“Jimmy,” I said.



He shook himself out, doglike. “There you are. Took you long enough, Bradley. I’ve been out here all alone with the storm, and now this! You see this, Brad? Place is *going*,” he said. His words sounded like him, but there was something in his voice that gave it all a strain. It cowered like a child hiding behind the legs of their mother.

“You left,” I said.

“Well, you didn’t want to come.”

“Yeah, but—”

“What?”

“Why did you come back here?” I asked.

“What do you want from me, huh? What’d you want me to say?” He leaned his head back and smiled. “I came back to see if I could find it again.”

“The chain?”

“Yeah,” he said. “Couldn’t though.” He laughed, but his smile had gone. “Guess it got up and walked away.” He climbed back onto his boat and flung his goggles to the side. “I should get you back,” he said.

“This is all your fault,” I said.

He clenched his jaw tight. “What is.” It wasn’t a question.

“You know,” I said. “You know what.” I felt sick to my stomach. The lemonade twisted into sugary knots and hiked back up my throat.

“Don’t you say things like that to me. Come on, Bradley. Don’t say that.” He looked down at his hands, pruned and red. The shirt he wore clung to curve of his back, the dips and the hills.

“I mean it,” I said. I didn’t think much about it. I felt it, though. So did he.

“Alright then,” he said. He reached over and untied the boats from one another, then grabbed me under the arms and lifted me onto his boat. I kicked and squirmed, but the dinghy had already floated too far away by the time he let me go. I threw up into the water. Jimmy started up the motor and turned us around.

“Where are we going?” I said. I began to cry and hated myself for it. “What are you going to do?”

“We’re goin home,” he said. He didn’t look at me. We drove up the Gut, into the main channel where the harbor had been a few hours earlier. Now the boats were either taken by their owners or half dragged underwater by their own moorings.

“Stop!” I said. “Stop!” There were a few people who had climbed on top of their houses. They sat on their roofs and waved at us from a distance.

“Please,” I said, quieter. “Jimmy.”

I heard something near us, something in the water. It was a cat. It swam with its head sticking out, proud, its paws moving in tiny, circular strokes. We slowed down. I looked at Jimmy—still nothing. I leaned over the edge and fished the thing out of the water. It was shrunken and shivering and calico. As I wrapped it in a towel, we picked up speed again and I turned to face the stern. The island’s skyline sank slowly below the horizon. The cat meowed from my arms. As we sped further and further away, I squinted my eyes to better see Moe’s Head as it descended into the Bay. There, through the dark fringes of my lashes, I watched the silent flocks of birds as they soared up to the sky.