

## Sweet Texas Angel

As she crosses the high point of the suspension bridge, the water below brown-green and streaked with sand, Kay feels the wind whistle through the floorboards of her Toyota and drum against the soles of her sandals. It is not yet seven a.m., and the horizon ahead of her is streaked with orange and red. Alone in her car, her car alone on the bridge, everything she sees appears poised to fly: the gulls standing with their necks craned on the bridge railing; the flaming refinery towers licking holes in the low, stretched clouds; a piece of paper trash drifting over the water. Even her steering wheel feels loose, as though the tires have lost contact with the road, and if she were to pull back on the wheel in just the right way she could steer the car upward above the bridge and the refinery and the whole sprawling Houston skyline, dewy and gray and infinite. She yawns, checks her rearview mirror, and watches the amber streetlamps feed like a necklace into the darkness she has left behind. Through the dashboard vents she can smell the Gulf, the salty air.

She's made good time. She'll arrive at her mother's by seven-thirty. She left earlier than usual, having never really gone to sleep, slipping through the back door and through the tunnel of pines to the highway in the pre-dawn black, the dew just descending to the lawns. She has left everything in place. Her bed is made, the spread folded beneath the pillows, the corners tucked in tight. She's set out bowls and plates for breakfast, folded the napkins into triangles and weighted them with spoons, filled the coffee maker, and scrambled eggs in a bowl. All Cory will have to do is pour the mix into the skillet and move the spatula back and forth. Jill will pour the orange juice. Lee will fix the coffee. Rowdy will do the dishes without being asked. Everything will function without her.

Back on her side of the water, the Toyota glides easily, picking up speed as the road curves back to earth. The highway before her is wide and straight and goes all the way to Florida. She could be gone before anyone thinks to miss her.

Crossing this bridge on other Saturday mornings she has dreamed of herself doing exactly that, missing her turn-off, slipping the Texas border, disappearing to some distant city, a different life. It is the consequence, she supposes, of how she spends her Friday nights, her car parked beneath the sea of neon billboards lining Westheimer and Richmond, in the tight jeans and bright make-up she only wears when going out, her back against the bar as she leans close to the ear of a stranger so he can hear her over the music. No man has ever asked her last name and when he asks her first, she calls herself whatever she likes. The result is the same, his desire no less present in his fingers. Speaking a different name into the ear of a man she doesn't know, she feels pulled out of her body, allowed to hover above herself—through the bar and across the parking lot and into her car, the headlights glowing in her rearview mirror illuminating her forehead and nose, following her away from the city to the winding farm-to-market road to the gravel pathway through the trees. The house sits at the end, hunkered in the pines. “This your place?” the man asks, standing shielded by the door of his car, surprised she has led him to a house so far out of the city, so big and so dark. Unsure of whether or not to trust her.

“It's where I live,” she says. “I don't own it.” She and Cory have an understanding. Weekends she can do what she likes, including bringing a man to her bedroom, so long as he is gone before the children wake up. Cory would rather Kay bring a man home than stay out all night. “So we know you're safe,” Cory said. “And so you don't show up with your underwear in your back pocket while we're eating breakfast.” Kay lifts a finger to her lips, points to the windows where Jill and Rowdy sleep, and leads him around the house to the

back door, the stairwell in the garage fummy with gasoline and wet grass, the slow antifreeze drip from the van. Her bedroom is at the top. “There’s a room here?” the man asks. She nods and opens the door. The ceiling slants sharply across her bed; on the other side three tall windows look over the acres of pine that surround the property, the low water in the bayou a silver thread in the moonlight. The clothes are hers, as are the frames on the dresser, the stack of cassettes, the tape player, and the stained glass sun-catcher in the shape of Texas suctioned to the window. The rest—the bed and dresser and nightstand—belongs to the house and will remain after she is gone.

Though in a way, the entire house is hers. She decides when to set out the china and the silver, what to grind in the food processor, when to use the oven. She moves freely through the bedrooms and closets and even into the big bathroom in the master bedroom, soaking in the sunken tub when no one else is home. On sleepless nights she walks the long tiled hallways, touches the doorknobs of the children’s rooms, drinks orange juice from the pitcher with the refrigerator hanging open. No one minds. Lee has told her he sleeps better knowing she is there to watch over them. She’s something like an aunt, but not. A stranger they have long grown used to. They tell her she’s like family, which means she’s not family at all.

She had a year to go toward her nursing degree when she answered an ad to look after a blind woman and an infant. The pay was low, but it included room and board, a bedroom above the garage that smelled of paint and window tinting, brand new furniture, her own bathroom. She figured she’d stay a year, stockpile her tiny paycheck, and go back to school. Lee was a researcher in the Medical Center, and he said he could get her a break on tuition. But a year passed and then another, and in the third year, Cory was pregnant again,

and Kay boxed up her books and her stethoscope. Fifteen years later she is a kind of nurse, though one who moves between the infirmary of the mad and the penitentiary of the blind. Most of her life feels like that, filled with the things she wanted, but not quite what she wants.

Even when Rowdy and Jill started school and it seemed the right time to go, something always happened that prevented it. There was the time, for example, she steered *around* a car accident. They were on I-10 headed to the Galleria when a pickup bounced off the guardrail, spun across the lane, and t-boned a Buick. Kay pumped the brakes, swerved, and cleared it. The car behind her ran smack into the pileup. Jill said it was a miracle. Even the neighbors walked by the house to marvel at the van. People didn't worry about hepatitis in the suburbs, or tuberculosis, or silicosis; they worried about the dangers of cars and freeways, about cancer, about bankruptcy. When Steven Stevenson, the dentist who lived across the street, got wind of how Kay had avoided the accident, he spent a good hour circling the van, kicking the tires, propping the hood to stare down at the engine, tapping his gold A&M ring against the radiator and the engine block. He declared the van "a fine machine" and told Lee the Chrysler Corporation would be very interested in hearing about how its vehicle performed. "And give your help a raise. Watch out or I'll come steal her away from you." Kay was standing outside and Steven Stevenson had winked at her.

For months Cory claimed to have seen slivers of warped light in her left eye. She followed the light into the woods, into the stockroom of the supermarket, into a taxi outside the Galleria. Rowdy said his mother was disappearing, as though unable to see, she could not herself be seen. Turn around and she's gone. Kay thought she was just being selfish. When the tumor showed up, choroidal melanoma reproducing itself like mosquitoes in a wet ditch,

Kay wanted to slap herself for missing it. She wasn't a doctor, but she should have known something was wrong. It was what she was paid to do and had done for a decade and a half, watching the stove and the scissors, sweeping her bare foot along the tile floor to make sure it was dry so Cory wouldn't slip, standing either in the yard or at the kitchen window while Rowdy and Jill climbed the sycamore to the roof or played too close to the bayou where cottonmouths lay curled in the tall grass. Rowdy and Jill had entered their teens without so much as a stitch, and Cory, too, had avoided every danger of blindness. Now blindness had found a way to threaten in the one way Kay had been unable to anticipate, and she felt certain, watching the ophthalmologist dial his scope into a pinpoint of light and lean into Cory's pupil, the melanoma was just the beginning, all the dangers she had fended off were closing in. The car, strange men lurking in the park outside of Jill's school, the cancer that, once Cory was opened up, would be found everywhere, everywhere.

She wanted to hold Cory's hand in the hospital, to write her name on Cory's palm, to tell her *I'm right here*. Cory sat expressionless in her hospital bed with her hands in her lap. Kay sat for hours in the chair beside her bed, never sleeping, waiting for Cory to turn to her, to reach for her hand. But she didn't. The nurses came in and dropped the rails on Cory's bed and wheeled her down the hall. She came back with a square of gauze taped over the hole where her left eye had been, her lips rigid, her face an empty page. Lee touched Kay's shoulder and said, softly, "I don't know where she is." She turned and saw that his eyes were full.

Medication kept Cory calm, but not better. She went home with a prosthetic eye and parked herself at the kitchen table where she buried herself in her headphones, listening to books on tape that arrived by the bundle from the Lighthouse Ministries. Each book was read by an inmate at the penitentiary in Huntsville. Lee used to joke that the prisoners had

sexy, bad-boy voices and his wife probably had a crush on a few. Now he stood at the doorway and twisted his wedding ring around on his finger.

Last night, after they got Cory home from her mother's party, Lee laid his hand on Kay's shoulder, and she didn't shrug it off. Not even when he let it slide to her back, around her waist. He was starting to cry again, gusts of hot air against her neck. She said goodnight in the kitchen, but left open the door between the house and the garage. She hung her dress on the hook on the back of the bathroom door and was waiting when she heard his footsteps on the stairs.

Heading south along the shoreline of the Ship Channel she smells diesel and molasses, rotting fish. A rusted pipe with a mouth as wide around as a car tire spews a creamy foam over a pile of concrete slabs. It is October and so the shrimp trucks are out, white, their compressors chugging. A man hauls two bags of ice back from the Circle K. She looks for the wooden pylons, once the legs of fishing piers and boat docks, where her father used to keep his shrimp pots. On Sundays her father and mother and Kay would drive the peninsula to take in the catch of gigantic gray prawns fattened in the warm water. Her father rolled his overalls above his knees and waded out to the anchor lines, which he pulled in fist over fist, careful not to snap the line. Kay followed him out in her bathing suit until the water got too deep for her to touch the bottom, then turned and waved at her mother who stood stroking her belly on the shore, the green water lapping against her ankles, her neck and arms peachy and freckled and not yet scarred by disease. Her father was already showing signs of hepatitis, but he wore long pants and sleeves most of the time, so the jaundice was hard to see.

Two miscarriages and a brother that came stillborn at twenty-three weeks and after that her father was too sick to try again. He did not trust hospitals or doctors and avoided both. Every oil worker got something, he said, and so accepted his disease as part of his predetermined fate, surrendering to it without a fight. For years Kay watched him wander their neighborhood naked, some nights attempting to swim across the Channel, other nights loading and unloading his pistol in the back bedroom of their cinderblock house in a movement so practiced and rhythmic it looked unconscious, as though he could do it in his sleep. When he knew his time was up he drove to a motel. The night the police arrived at her house, Kay checked the metal case on his closet shelf. It was heavy. She would not have agreed to ride in the police car to identify him had the gun been missing.

Her father's mouth was open, exposing his tobacco-yellowed teeth, but his eyes were closed, and in the hazy fog that drifted across the windows from Galveston Bay he looked almost peaceful. She imagined some essence of him escaping through the O of his mouth, his spirit swimming upstream against the air-conditioning and through the grates and into the air. She touched his cold beard, his wooden lips. "That's not him," she said.

"You're sure? We have a driver's license."

"No, I mean, it's his body. Just not *him*. He's gone."

"Right," the officer said. He rubbed the corners of his mouth with his thumb and index finger. "No soul in the shell."

"However you say it."

But it was a good way to say it, one she thinks of still as she crosses through town, the storefronts dilapidated and tired, the same old Chevys and Fords parked diagonally against the curb, a Starbucks grossly out of place on the corner where the hardware store used to be. It is the same town she knew as a girl, only now emptied of the people who

populated her girlhood, full of people she almost recognizes but does not quite. A city of shells, she thinks.

Her mother sits in the living room in the rocking chair, her legs covered with a frayed afghan. She watches *Good Morning Houston* with the sound off. The plastic blinds are sun-bleached and cracked and the room smells of mold. The flowers Kay brought last time sit wilted almost black in a vase of syrup-green water. Her mother's hair is thin as thread and knotted around the crown of her head. "Hey, Momma," Kay says.

"Sheila. You're back." It's been a year since her mother remembered her name.

"It's Saturday."

"Is it?"

"Got any of that coffee left?"

"Heck, no."

"They threw it out? Well maybe you have some tea in the cupboard. I need *something*." The apartment has no teakettle, so Kay sets water to boil in a small pot. The bottom is rusted, but it will do. She dials open the blinds and throws the flowers in the trash, fills the sink with hot water and Joy and throws in the bowls and silverware on the counter. Every flat surface—the kitchen table, the end tables by the couch, the top of the fridge and microwave, even on either side of the door—is covered with *Watchtower* and *Awake!* magazines, the new issues stacked right on top of the old. There is a Bible on the table—not the New International Version Kay keeps in her own nightstand drawer, but the New World Translation, the Jehovah's Witness version. But the magazines are what engulf the room. They look as though they've been arranged as a barricade against some unknown evil, possibly Kay herself. The two women who share her mother's house, Ava and Charlene,

converted her mother when Kay was sixteen, just after her father died. When Kay left for nursing school, they moved in and emptied her mother's cupboards of alcohol, her refrigerator of meat, and got her walking a little each day, all of which has slowed the progression of the disease. For that much Kay is thankful. But the women also keep her mother fearful of hospitals and have convinced her it was sex that made her sick and it is sex that keeps the disease alive inside her. "If you want to get better," Ava told her, "your daughter shouldn't come around. The Bible says to remove the wicked from among you." To avoid any conflict, Kay now comes in secret, on Saturdays, when she knows Ava and Charlene will be out all day knocking on doors and handing out tracts to the boys skateboarding in the park. What do they think when they come home to find the house clean and the cupboards full of food? A miracle? Manna from heaven? They never say.

Kay scoops the pamphlets into a trash bag, ties it shut, and sets it by the door. "You think those two could pick up after themselves every once in a while."

"They're busy."

"I thought cleanliness was next to godliness."

"Let me help you." Her mother pulls the afghan from her lap and stands. She looks tired, but lucid, better than last week. Her green eyes hold their focus. Kay watches her mother's swollen ankles and the bottoms of her blistered edemic legs as she shuffles across the dark carpet to the kitchen, her faded nightgown in a bunch around her middle, the hem against the floor. Her feet slide; even this short distance is too far to walk. She holds her hand against her side. "You feeling okay, Momma?" Kay points to her abdomen. "Does it hurt here?"

Her mother's eyes widen. "I know what you are trying to do and it won't work. Your father says I am doing the right thing. God told him so. He talks to God all the time."

“They have new procedures now, Momma. They can do it without blood transfusions. If you got a new liver you’d feel better.”

“Ha! Kenny says that’s all hogwash.”

“I’m not sure Dad’s talking to the right people.”

“Shows what you know.”

“Momma,” Kay says. She lifts her mother’s hand from the counter, rubs the bones between her fingers. She can almost touch her index finger to her thumb with her mother’s hand in between. She cannot not try. “Don’t you want to get better?”

“God’s plan is God’s plan.”

“But you could get better.”

“Oh, Sheila. Let’s find you something to drink.”

Her mother rights herself and her nightgown shakes loose. The cloth beneath the armpits is yellow and the folds of her lap are sour. Kay wonders when her mother wet herself, how many days she’s worn the dirty gown. “Look at you!” Kay says. “Didn’t they see your nightgown?”

“They don’t see my body, just my soul.”

“Well, I’m sure they smell more than your soul. How about we take a bath today?”

“We did that last time.”

“It’s a whole new week, Momma.”

She guides her mother into the bathroom, sits her down on the toilet lid. A layer of hard-water grime rings the sides of the tub and clumps of gray hair are tangled in the crosshairs of the drain. Kay picks them out and scrubs the tub with Ajax and bleach, rinses, turns the water to warm, and plugs the drain. While the tub fills, Kay brushes out the knots from her mother’s hair. “Maybe after your bath we can go get something to eat. My treat.”

Her mother gets monthly disability checks, same as Cory, but Kay doesn't know what happens to the money.

Kay takes her mother's hands and lifts them above her head. "Hold here a sec," she says and lifts the nightgown over her head. Her mother's body no longer alarms her—the dark bruises on her thighs and sides and the mass in her stomach where her liver swells—Kay's used to these things by now. Even to the hair between her mother's legs, still dark and abundant, the last place on her body she looks alive. Kay lifts her mother from the toilet and helps her to drop slowly into the water. The water folds around the wrinkles in her neck as she slides her hair below the bubbles. She lifts her belly and lets her feet rise to the surface. She almost smiles. "Feels good, doesn't it?" Kay says. "Nothing like a hot bath."

With a washcloth and a bar of soap, Kay lifts one leg, washes it, lowers it back. Then the next leg, then an arm, then the other arm. She presses her hand to her mother's back and helps her to slide up to sitting. She washes the arch of her hunched spine from the back of her hairline to the base of her coccyx. The water turns gray and filmy. Her mother has hardly left the apartment, if at all, and Kay wonders how she collected so much grime by just sitting around.

Kay looks away while she washes between her mother's legs, ashamed to touch her mother there, but knowing if she does not, she won't be clean. She cleans close to her mother's ear. She looks at the back of her mother's head and whispers in her ear, so softly she can hardly hear the words leave her own mouth. "Momma, can I tell you something?" She lingers there, pulls her head back a little and waits. Her mother makes no movement, no noise. She's listening. Kay leans in again. "I slept with Lee." But it is not enough to simply say his name; he was not just a man. "Cory's husband," she whispers, even softer than the first time. "The children's father. I let him touch me. In my bed."

She sighs against her mother's cheek. In that moment she feels better, as though she has released the bad Kay from the good. The good Kay kneels on the bathroom floor soaping her mother's deflated breast while the bad rises with the steam and evaporates against the light bulb. She leans her mother back in the water. Her mother's eyes are open and wild; they scan the ceiling and the top of Kay's head. Made greener by her pale skin and ashen hair, her mother's eyes look deep as globes. But they do not recognize her. Her mother pulls her arms tight against her chest, flattening her breasts. "Who are you?" she says. Water splashes down the front of Kay's blouse and jeans.

"It's just me, Momma. Calm down."

"Get away. Get away." Her mother tries to stand up from the tub too quickly. She teeters and Kay reaches for her. Her mother shakes her elbow. "Don't touch me. Oh God, *please.*"

"Momma, it's okay. It's me. It's Kay Lynn."

"Help me, Kenny!"

"Okay, okay." Kay drags the towel from the rack and opens it to catch her mother. "Let's dry you off." Her mother snatches the towel from her, suddenly strong, presses it against her chest, and then lets it fall into the water. She teeters forward and then backward and flails with both hands out, grasping at the air. Kay wraps her arms around her and lifts her from the bathtub. Her mother screams, "Oh God! Oh Kenny!"

"It's okay, Momma." Kay steadies her with one hand and reaches for another towel beneath the sink, spreads the towel and wraps it around her mother's shoulders. She holds it tightly so her mother cannot flail and drops an arm to her knees, lifts her mother up. She is light, more wind than body, less body than ever.

The bedroom is stuffy and hot and smells of cigarettes, an odor that lingers in the carpets and the walls like the ghost of her father. She sets her mother down on the edge of the unmade bed. Her mother lays her head against the pillow, pulls her legs into her stomach, and shivers. She kicks her feet beneath the blankets and Kay helps her pull them up to her neck. The sheets smell of rotting fruit, the nightly shroud of a decaying body. She had plans to take her mother to the laundromat, but that can wait. She leaves the lights off and backs out of the room.

She'd promised herself she wouldn't to talk to Lee today, but in the kitchen she dials the number to his laboratory. Even on a Saturday he's there. She can hear voices in the background, the whirr and beep of the sequencer, the techs chatting while they pour the slides. It takes him a second to recognize her voice. "I was just thinking about you," he says.

"I hope I didn't interrupt."

"It's not very busy. Are you okay?"

"My mother doesn't know who I am. She forgot my name months ago, but now it's more. My face. She talks to my father all the time."

"I thought he was dead."

"He is."

"Oh. . . . Where is she now?"

"Asleep."

"Meet me."

"I need to go to the store and she needs her clothes washed. This place is a sty."

"Give yourself a break. You'll be back before she wakes up. It's early still."

"Where?"

“Warwick Hotel. In the restaurant.”

“You can get away?”

“I’ll make something up. I’m the boss. Leave a note for your mother. She’ll never know where you’ve been.”

“Even if I leave a note she’ll never know.”

It scares her to think that soon her mother will be dead. Maybe she’ll make it to the summer, maybe only Christmas, but either way, it won’t be long. It’s not the same as when her father died. Even if her mother does not recognize her, Kay recognizes herself by going to see her; her mother and her old house remind her of a past that does not belong to Cory, or the children, or Lee.

She knows she’s on a fool’s errand. Lee really isn’t her type. She’s never gone for the businessmen in expensive suits who hide their wedding rings in their breast pockets and set the keys to their BMWs on the bar. Her heart has always been for the wrecked and the injured. Beat up roughnecks with chemical burns and discolored tattoos, longshoremen with slipped discs and broken thumbs—these were the men she took home or followed back to small trailers with wood-paneled bedrooms, tiny houses beneath the freeways. She knows injury, where to lay her hands and mouth, where to look and where not to look. The father of her child lost his left hand and wrist in the rigging chain of a shipyard crane. In the bar where they met, he tried to hide the absent hand in his pocket. Only when Kay pressed her hand against his thigh did he let it appear. She closed her palm around it like a doorknob, twisted, leaned close to his ear and told him she had a car. She spent three days in his motel room in Galena Park. His stomach was compact and tight, strong from the job he could no longer do. A scar from an earlier accident ran from his chin to the base of his throat. She wondered how he was alive. She let her head rest against his forearm, his truncated arm

hidden beneath the pillow. She could feel his absent fingers on her cheek, still warm as the real hand cupped over her hip. He told her the crane lifted him over a hundred feet in the air and left him dangling over the Channel for nearly thirty minutes before he could be brought down. “It only hurt at first,” he said. “Then I couldn’t feel my arm no more and it felt like I was flying. I thought I was dead. Took nearly a month before I was convinced I wasn’t. My hospital room was all white. I thought it was Heaven.” She watched his chest swell as he talked, how he breathed all the way out.

She realized she was pregnant in the Jarretts’ bathroom. She had been there a month. Cory’s stomach and breasts had shrunk back down to size, but her eye sockets were ringed with purple from the surgery to reattach her retinas. Bedsores the shape of footballs covered her stomach and thighs from the weeks she spent immobilized, sandbags packed around her head. Each day Cory could do more, but it was becoming clear she’d never see again, at least not very much. A kaleidoscopic fragment of color, a soda can label, the shadow in the sun, but no more than that.

For weeks Kay slept with a pillow beneath her shirt, envisioning a crib in the corner, the pines wafting through the open windows, her child learning to crawl up the staircase. She almost told Cory about it, but then she didn’t. She called the motel, but no one there had ever heard of him. “Uneven beard,” she said, “missing a hand. Ring a bell?” But no.

One afternoon when the pines were dropping needles onto the porch, Kay watched Cory undress Rowdy and carry him to the kitchen sink. Rowdy was big enough for the bathtub, but the sink was deep and Cory could manage it better. She filled the sink with water and a tablespoon of baby shampoo. Cory slid Rowdy from her shoulder, loosened the towel, dipped him in the water. Rowdy splashed, soaked the front of her shirt, then settled his head into his mother’s palm. Cory squeezed the excess water from the washcloth with

one hand and rubbed it over his chest and stomach. She dipped it again, wrung it out, and lifted his bottom to wash between his legs and the backs of his thighs and knees. She set him down in the basin and water splashed across the top of his face and he began to cry. Kay moved to help, but stopped herself. These little tasks were the vehicle of Cory's recovery, her adaptation to blindness. Cory picked Rowdy up, cradled him against her shirt, then lifted him close to her face. Her eyes scanned as if trying to see. Then with a strange, almost ceremonial movement, she lowered him back into the water, submerging his chest and shoulders and finally his head. The room went silent.

"Cory!" Kay lunged from the doorway. Rowdy was above the water before she even reached the sink, coughing, his eyes wide, his mouth open in silent gasps. It took him nearly a minute to scream. Cory breathed in shallow huffs.

"I almost had him," Cory said. "I almost saw him. He was almost there."

Kay spread the towel and wrapped it around them both. "It's all right. He's all right."

Cory cradled Rowdy in both hands and handed him to Kay. "You should take him."

"No," Kay said. "You're his mother. You're going to put him down."

"I don't think I can. I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize," Kay said. "Just do it." Cory lifted him back against her chest. She looped an arm through Kay's elbow and allowed herself to be guided to the nursery.

"I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't been there."

"You would have pulled him up. You lapsed. You didn't mean it."

"Your voice pulled me back. You saved him."

"I didn't," Kay said.

"You did. You're my guardian."

“No, I’m not,” Kay said. “I’m your friend.”

Still she could imagine it: the strange pietà of a woman drowning her own son in the kitchen sink, Lee arriving home to find Cory curled in a ball on the floor, Rowdy’s body floating. She had seen babies in the hospital who had been hurt by mothers whose horrors were less real than Cory’s. She knew what could happen. And the house, when she looked around it, was suddenly dangerous, the light sockets and the drawer of knives, the hot water in the faucet and the gas hissing up from the stove. She was afraid for Rowdy, but she was even more afraid for Cory. For weeks she dreamed of Cory opening her wrists in the bathtub while Lee slept unaware in the next room, or tumbling down into the bayou behind the house, or swallowing her entire bottle of pills at once. She knew if she looked away for even a second, Cory would do it. She knew it with the same sinking certainty with which she had first touched her stomach and cupped her breasts and known she was pregnant. How could she choose one over the other? Nonetheless there was a choice to make, for it was selfish to have thought of bringing another child into the house, to impede herself with pregnancy and then distract herself with a baby. She went to Rowdy’s room and watched him sleep, his lips puckered, thoughtless as a fish. What would happen to him? It is almost impossible to measure what would-be against what already is.

The next week when Cory’s mother came to take her shopping, Kay said she had errands to run and drove north through the pines, staying off the highway, passing through Tomball and Navasota and Bryan and Hammond, all the way to Waco. She stole a phone book from a booth, spread it open on her lap and circled the block until she found the clinic, not far from the Baylor campus. She parked across the street at the doughnut shop. People stood beneath a cluster of scrub trees that shaded the parking lot. They held posters and walked back and forth in a line. Others held candles close to their faces and were quiet,

heads bowed in prayer. She went unnoticed until she stepped into the near-empty parking lot and headed toward the front door. “Hey, mom!” someone shouted. “Let us talk to you for a minute! We’re praying for you!” She looked back and saw a young woman in a Baylor sweatshirt, blond hair, an almost beatific face. The girl’s bottom lip quivered, on the verge of tears. Behind her a man waved a Bible and shouted, “Don’t kill your baby!” She turned and went inside.

The doctor wore green scrubs and smelled like soap. He sat down on a stool at her feet, examined the sonogram, nodded, said she was eight weeks along. Through the back of the picture Kay saw a white oval, smaller than the tiniest shrimp her father trapped in Galveston Bay. It sat at the bottom of a dark sea that undulated beneath the fluorescent lights. “Where are you from?” he asked her.

“I live in Houston.”

“Long way from home.”

“That’s the idea.”

“You made it through that mess outside?”

“Yes.”

“They don’t know anything,” the nurse said. “They don’t know what you’ve been through to get here. We’ll walk you to your car later on.”

“In Houston what do you do?” the doctor asked. “You in school?”

“I was. Now I take care of a family. The woman is blind and she has a new baby.”

“That’s a good thing,” he said. “What did you study?”

“Nursing.” The nurse smiled and touched her shoulder. “I’m sorry,” Kay said.

“There’s no need to apologize,” the nurse said. “No one here is accusing you of anything.”

The doctor gave her a shot of lidocaine and when her cervix was numb, he slid a succession of small, tapered dilators into her cervix, each one larger than the one before it. Kay flinched only once, but hard, rustling the paper sheet. The nurse squeezed her hand and the doctor threaded a small plastic tube into her uterus, the tube connected to a pump in the palm of his hand. “It won’t be long now,” he said, and squeezed.

The hotel is red and U-shaped, a circular garden with a gazebo out front, the upper floors shaded by the eaves. The entrance is obscured by a row of azalea hedges and a line of live oaks along the curb. It has an air of mystery and secrecy, a place where oil executives meet with politicians. Lee waits for her in the lobby. He’s wearing khaki pants and a yellow Izod, a kind of camouflage among the other aimless hotel guests. His arms are brown, his mustache neatly trimmed. He pretends to read the *Houston Chronicle* while holding the plastic rectangle of the room key like a tongue between his thumb and the knuckle of his index finger. He’s new at this. She does not stand too close. “I have until noon,” he says as he looks around the lobby. She follows him into the elevator where she studies the comb rows in his hair, the flecks of gray in his temples and above his lip. He presses the button and they rise, slowly first and then more quickly, accelerating as they climb.

The curtains in the room are open to the skyline, the roofs of Rice University rising above the oaks. It is a nicer room than she is used to, twice the size of her bedroom, the chair beside the window upholstered with leather and accompanied by an ottoman large enough to be a bed itself. Unlike the motel rooms around the Channel, built for uncomfortable sleeps and hurried fucks, this room feels almost like the bedroom of a home, extra pillows and blankets stacked on the shelf, the windows turned southward to face the

main thoroughfare of downtown and the museums and the park. “Can you afford this?” she asks.

“There’s a university rate,” he says. “And I have a travel budget; I can slide it in and no one will know.” He untucks his shirt from his slacks, unlaces his shoes, a repetition of the motions he went through less than twelve hours ago. He hangs everything in the closet. Even his undershirt he folds up and sets on the shelf. Kay can feel a ritual forming—what their meetings will look like, how this slow act of undressing will count as foreplay. She hopes he will bring her back to this hotel, though to a different room. There are more angles to see, more streets to look down upon.

Last night they touched each other slowly, carefully, crawling over each other as if they were made of glass. Now she watches his thin chest and stomach and she longs for the heavy longshoremen with blackened fingernails and sunburned tattoos. Men with weight to push against her, to pin her to the earth. She’d do it on the floor if he’d go for that. She sees him testing the mattress with his knee, and when he crawls onto the bed, Kay pulls him over and forces him to crawl over her. She presses her palms against the square of his back, pulls him down. “Whoa,” he says. “Slow down. We have longer than ten minutes here.”

“I wish you were heavier.”

“I’m sorry to disappoint you.”

“It’s fine. Just don’t stop.”

He looks down at her eyes, his face yellowed by the morning light through the curtains. “What are you thinking?”

“I’m not.”

“Your mother?”

“Do you want this or not?” She has spoken too harshly and when she looks up, she sees his remorse. She feels selfish with guilt; she wants it all to herself. “It’s been a hard morning,” she says. “I want to feel something different. That’s all.”

“Okay.”

But she *is* thinking about her mother, calling out to her father to swoop down and rescue her from the living. She is that far gone. Anyplace seems better than that damp bedroom, that phantom smell. All those hours alone there in conversation with her father have perhaps allowed her mother to believe it is not death that’s coming for her—at least not the deaths of refinery explosions and hepatitis—but something less horrible, less bleak, more like leaving. Crossing a channel, like her father stepping out of his overalls and wading into the water with his maddened eye fixed on the other side. It’s not so crazy that her mother talks to him. Perhaps his spirit is still trapped on the peninsula between the Channel and the Bay, between this world and the next, urging her mother to come toward him. She never heard her own child’s heart beat and still she talks to it sometimes, not in the way her mother talks to her father, but comforted by the idea that it can see her and all the people she touches.

Lee locks his eyes on hers and she can see him hating this moment as much as he feeds on it. He is the kind of man who would never figure himself an adulterer. His wedding ring is still on his finger. All the same here, he is, afraid of himself. Kay lifts her head and kisses his bottom lip, says “Oh” for him. He smiles, closes his eyes. She lets her head sink back into the pillow. It is possible to become someone else, she thinks, or something, if it is required of us. It is possible to move across.

It is the thought she carries with her through the remainder of that stretched, gauzy day. Filling a shopping cart with cans and bags of vegetables, transferring her mother's wet clothes to the dryer, the long drive across the city. Later, cooking dinner she watches Jill sit cross-legged before the television. Rowdy emerges from the bathroom with a towel around his waist. They ignore their mother, perched on her elbows at the table. Kay thinks, these are the things my child would be doing now. Her mother would live with them, too, bathed daily and medicated, eccentric rather than demented—all the things she gave up to keep safe these children who are too big to protect, to guide a woman who stares blankly at the wall.

After dinner Kay takes a beer from the refrigerator and ascends her staircase. Her open bedroom windows pull the heat up from the garage. She feels her resignation in her stomach and legs, her body too heavy to hold up. She sits on the top step, her car keys looped through her pinky finger. She rubs her foot on the carpet, looks into her slanted bedroom, the dresser and bed, the bathrobe over the door. It looks like a hotel she never checked out of. The wall glows silver in the moonlight, and through the windows she hears the distant zap and sizzle of mosquitoes frying on the bug-lights. She speaks into the humid dark, the void. "I never should have given you up. If you were here I could go."

It does not always answer her, but tonight it does, its voice soft and faint and reassuring. Her sweet angel. "You did what you had to do. Stop second-guessing yourself. For all you know, we might have ended up living in your car."

"I'm going to end up there anyway. Only this time I'll be alone."

"Not yet. Not tonight. Put your keys away."

"They'll get along fine without me."

"They only think so. They don't know what would happen."

“I’ve thought about having another child,” she says. “I could handle it now. I’m older.”

“There’ll be time for that later. You’re getting ahead of yourself. You’re young still. Trust me.”

“Should I have left when I had the chance?”

“You already know that answer.”

“What I’m doing now is worse. I should go.”

“And leave them? You’ve got more here than you think. The children are your children, this life is your life. You can’t pack as fast as you think you can. They need you too much. It was Cory at first and then it was the children. Now it’s Lee.” Below her the garage door opens and the headlights flash against the wall. The engine of Lee’s car revs and she feels it fill the air below. “He doesn’t know what he’s doing. You cannot just run out on him, on any of them. Not now.”

She hears the car shut off, the door open, Lee’s heels against the garage floor. She waits for him to pass by the stairs and look up. She wants him to find her there. “No,” she says. “I cannot run out.”