NIGHT OBJECTS

A NOVEL

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PART 1

I said to my soul, be still, and wait without hope.

—T. S. Eliot, *Four Quartets*

Antediluvian

Before we begin, consider: In 1687, Newton published his law of universal gravitation, which states that where F is the force, m_1 and m_2 are the masses of the objects interacting, r is the distance between the centers of the masses, and G is the gravitational constant. More poetically, gravity is the force that causes two bodies to attract one another. Over two hundred years later, Einstein refined that. He said that gravity isn't a force so much as a curvature of spacetime. It is predictable until it isn't.

I already gave my statement to the police, of course. Detective Thibeaut knows everything—or rather, she thinks she does. I just need to make one thing clear. It's true that I wished him dead dozens of times. Hundreds, even. But I, Lenny Winter, did not kill that boy.

I

Before

I was fifteen the summer I learned to do brightwork. This was the same summer I first tried—and failed—to view the Virgo A galaxy.

My mother and Yip sat me down in April: When school let out in early June, we would leave Miami. My mother felt guilty about the whole thing. She chewed her lip. Her overbite gave her a leporine air, which always made me feel oddly wistful and tender. But I did not wish to feel wistful, nor did I particularly wish to feel tender. I didn't mind that we were moving, but the decision had been made with such quiet and sudden finitude. I wanted to feel sullen. I tried out a brooding glance.

"Don't be like that," my mother said. The pay she brought in as a community college sociology adjunct didn't stretch far in Miami. Yip, who'd been medically discharged from the army after a traumatic brain injury, received a small disability check each month. They wanted to move somewhere quiet, somewhere with affordable housing.

That was the other big news. My mother and my stepfather had decided to pack all our belongings into a U-Haul and drive across the

country to move onto a small houseboat. Yip had grown up sailing on Boston Harbor. He said he'd never forgotten what it was like to fall asleep rocked by the waves.

"Think of how easy it'll be," said my mother, "to stargaze from the boat."

She kept twirling a hank of her hair, tangerine strands long against a freckled hand. Her paternal grandfather had been a Glaswegian, his wife a Muscovite. The other grandchildren had inherited the wife's dark coloring, but my mother had her grandfather's reddish hair, which paired oddly with her sallow skin. She was a copper penny, emitting a humming, quick glow—equal parts alert and nervous, an animal in the wild, coiled and ready to release.

She looped another strand of hair around her finger and tugged.

"Okay, kitten, look. The high school up there has a joint astronomy program with the community college. Or…" She paused, rested a hand on Yip's knee. "There's a boarding school nearby. Near-*ish*-by. Blanchard, I think. They have their own astronomy lab. Tassia Dex went there, actually. Remember? The one who served on the Kepler exoplanets mission?"

She was desperate; my parents could never afford to send me to boarding school. But what was there to cling to in Miami? I had few friends to bid farewell to when we left.

"Doesn't it rain a lot in Seattle?"

"We're not moving to Seattle," said my mother. "But yes, it rains in Washington. Not during the summer, though. There's good visibility then."

Had I been more uncertain, that alone would've convinced me. I'd wanted to be an astronomer for as long as I could remember. I had no good reason for thinking this would be possible. My mother, who'd been a physics major in college before she failed fluid mechanics, approached

stargazing with an exaggerated corniness. We had a cheap tabletop telescope that we brought on camping trips; she'd cheered the first time I located Venus on my own. In the strange alchemy that transmutes a parent's dreams into their child's, her excitement became my own.

And then there was Carl Sagan. I was allowed to watch TV only on Saturdays, and we got only PBS. In elementary school, I'd eat bowl after bowl of cereal on the green velvet couch, poking my toes through the spots in the fabric worn silky thin, watching *Cosmos*. The way Carl Sagan explained the mysteries of the universe made them seem simple, as if anyone could understand them with enough time and hard work.

He also looked almost exactly like Yip, my stepfather. When Carl (as I called him in my head) spoke, it was as if he was talking directly to me. There was an episode where Carl explained that apple pies and stars were made of the same chemicals. I watched it so many times I could say his lines along with him. Thinking about the universe beyond Earth's atmosphere, about a space so huge and different that I could never fully understand it, made my head swim in a warm, woozy way.

And so, on an April morning twelve years ago, when my mother said that I'd make new friends, that I would hike mountains and learn to rock climb and see stars I hadn't known existed, I considered what Carl would do were he to find himself in my position.

I told my parents that I would love to move to the Pacific Northwest.

Our journey from Miami to northwestern Washington state wound through the muggy swampland of the Florida-Georgia border; the flat khaki scrub and curved turquoise sky that make the snow globe of New Mexico; a freak late spring blizzard coming into Montana; and finally—the thick, fresh, gray salt air of the northwest. You make it over

the mountains of Yakima, past the peach fields and red dust, and you can't yet see the ocean. But you can lick the breeze or the back of your hand or your lips, and you can taste the salt. It fills your eyes and your lungs, and you become puffy with the weightlessness of the air, the sky, the clouds, the spicy piney needles that litter mudroom floors and settle into dark flannel crevices in the beds of loggers and beauticians and fishermen.

The town was called Port Angeles. Highway 101 was the only way in. Just as we crossed town limits we were spit out at the top of a hill. There was a brown building with a sign that said PIZZA PIZZA PIZZA! An older woman wearing a mullet and a nametag stood outside, smoking a cigarette. There were four coffee huts in quick succession: Bean Me Up Scotty!, Joe-nsing, Café a Day, and Deja Brew. Beyond Café a Day was miles of ocean. We drove down another hill into downtown: two streets running parallel to the water. Many of the businesses were closed. Still, there were people down here, packs of middle schoolers eating chips and Entenmann's doughnuts, a couple of women with plaid shirts loose and baggy over leggings. A man wearing jeans, steel-toed boots, and a safety vest sat outside the dollar store.

"Oh," I said. "Whoa."

One of the cross streets had revealed a mountain range, comically lovely, with vicious peaks and purple-white snow. My throat tightened. It was like realizing you hadn't breathed in several seconds and then taking in so much air you thought it might kill you.

"Hurricane Ridge," Yip said. "The Olympic Mountains."

We continued. Something pleasantly fetid moved through the car's rolled-down windows, the iodine-rich stink of tangled seaweed and slippery fish. Now we were on a wide street called Marine Drive, which contained a gas station, another coffee hut, and two hangars, each with a large depiction of a boat. A few blocks later, we arrived. The

marina's parking lot was quiet. There was a small diner, closed for the day. A dozen cars, mostly beaters, but one or two newer models. Dotted around the edge of the parking lot, on slings of wood and cinder blocks, were several sailboats. They'd likely seemed tamer in the water, but they loomed over us as we exited the car, land-wrecked storks dozens of feet tall.

My mother was right. The visibility was outstanding. The stars in Miami were a weak, smoggy blanket scattered across a bleached sky. On the Olympic Peninsula, it was the exact opposite. I sat on the top deck the night we arrived. We were far enough north that dusk did not fall until nearly eleven, at which point I was swimming through a thick soup of starlight and indigo. The sky pulsed with a silent urgency that demanded closer examination. I'd known there were billions of stars in our galaxy, but I had not believed it until we arrived in Port Angeles.

I didn't like the moody Northwestern days in the beginning, the sky so bloody orange at dawn, a thick delicate fog looming over the marina. I'd dress for cold and rain, only to be tricked by hard yellow sun pouring onto the rigs by midmorning. Afternoon brought drizzle, or wind or hail, or the uneasy low pressure of a coming storm, blowing in from the yawning black mouth of the Pacific, barely tamed by the scrap of land called Ediz Hook. The Spit, as it was sometimes called, was a curving, man-made finger of rock, sand, and gravel just past the abandoned paper mill, a cloister for the seagulls and the more libertine high school students.

I rarely went out there. I was expected to help with the unpacking and refurbishing of our new home. She was a forty-foot Pearson houseboat, built in 1975, up for auction in an estate sale. The rest of the estate

had sold quickly, but the boat sat rotting in a Seattle marina for two years, her hull accumulating a thick layer of barnacles and green algae. The insistent stench of mildew clung to the air inside the cabins. The estate's executor agreed to sell the boat for an extremely reduced price, and my mother and Yip used their tax return as a down payment.

The saloon had a small kitchen, a galley with a narrow gas stove and a refrigerator. Below the galley, down a short flight of wooden stairs, was my small berth. There was a narrow bunk built into the wall, several cubbyholes, and, most promisingly, two portholes. Beyond the galley on the main level was Mom and Yip's cabin, which led to the aft deck. The name she came with was *Piece of Ship*—fitting in a marina whose boats included an *Elvira's Sandal* and a *Snaggletooth*. Nevertheless, we renamed her: first *Pilot's Boy*, then *Swan Maiden*. "She's a hard one to name," Yip had said, through a wreath of pipe tobacco.

But—finally—we named her *Goodnight Moon*, which has always reminded me not of the illustrated children's book, but of that Pablo Neruda poem about the naked woman whom he saw as brightness itself, his whole world, the moon living in the lining of her skin.

Two weeks after we arrived, a man named John Spaulding came to measure for galley counters. The sun had come out earlier than usual, and the sky was freckled with clouds, a powdery azurite, what Baba, my grandmother, would have called in Russian *goluboi shto ubivayet serdtsi*—the blue that kills the heart. It was the first truly warm day of summer. One of the marina's friendlier stray cats lay in the shade on the aft deck, below the hanging pot of birdfoot nasturtiums and Plains violets. A breeze brought the smell of fresh-cut logs off the strait, where they waited in cargo ships, stacked like the toothpicks they would

become upon their arrival to Japan or Macau or Taiwan, or whatever *Chi-nee city they sail away to*. (John Spaulding was dismissive both of political correctness and the logging company. Yip told me that the sentiment behind this was mutual and involved a broken contract and an incident concerning fifty pounds of smuggled German kielbasa and a pack of wild dogs.)

I sat cross-legged next to Watchee, John Spaulding's dog, who lay panting and whimpering in the heat. John Spaulding hadn't worked on a Pearson in some time—since the summer of '98, he said over his shoulder, tape measure dwarfed in his hands, which were crusted, creased, deeply gnarled. Later, after I began to woodwork more seriously, I understood why. The burns, the glues, the sharp tools and harsh chemicals are all part of the trade. Despite the heat, he wore thick Carhartt jeans. The black hem of his cotton T-shirt drifted over a waistband, made lacy with holes and snags, frayed bits worn transparent with age. His hair was tied at the back of his neck, the ossified tail emerging sheepishly from the bottom of his baseball cap like a small, flea-bitten rodent.

His eyebrows squiggled up and he said, "You want to learn how to brightwork? Pay you five dollars a rail."

"What's that?"

"All the rails and wooden odds and ends on this boat need sanding and varnishing."

"Alright. Sure." Then, wondering if I was being rude, I added, "Sir. I mean, yes, sir."

"Just John Spaulding, kid." He pocketed his tape measure, grunting deeply as he hoisted himself up, then nudged Watchee with his foot. "Fat bastard." He hopped into his little rowboat skiff with surprising agility, then called out, "Be right back."

Yip came down the finger pier toward me. "Pushkin. Hey."

I don't know when Yip started calling me that. He had nicknames for everyone. Our old cat, Wallace, dead for three years by then, had been Walnut. My mother, Lucretia, was Tish or Tita or Lucy Loo. Sometimes I was Lentil. Never my full name, Alena. "Pushkin" was Yip's little joke about my mixed background: my mother a Russian Jew, father an African Christian.

The difference between me and the real Pushkin was that his father stuck around. Last we heard, mine was homesteading up in the Yukon with a twenty-year-old Haida woman and their newborn. It didn't make any difference to us. Yip married my mother when I was two years old. To me, his face existed outside of time. Slanted green eyes; big, long nose; eyebrows almost meeting in the middle. Yip was scratchy knitted wool sweaters, infrequent but fierce hugs that smelled like cherry pipe tobacco, long bicycle rides that led nowhere—stopping to examine the birds circling above with the binoculars he carried around his neck: *Look, Pushkin, wo-o-o-ow, a snail kite.* Worn comfortability.

"Isn't that funny?" said Yip. "The guys in the boatyard said he's always gone by John Spaulding. Not John. Not Mr. Spaulding. You can't separate the two."

Watchee whined low in his throat. I knelt to stroke his wet nose. John Spaulding's skiff returned. Behind him, in a seated hunch, was a girl. She wore black jeans, a black hoodie, and thick eyeliner. I'd seen her hanging around the telephone booth at the top of the dock, writing in a small notebook. She was miserably out of place on the skiff. John Spaulding hauled himself onto the pier. He offered a hand to the girl, who gave him a withering glare, adjusted her Coke-bottle glasses, then clambered out, all graceless limbs and feet.

"My niece," said John Spaulding. "Sara. We should get you two together before school starts." He gestured between us. "That way you each have a new friend."

"Fuck off," Sara muttered. Clearly she'd been forced to come meet me.

"Bit prickly," John Spaulding said in a stage whisper. "No, you'll get along great. Sara'll help you get settled in at the high school."

Her frown indicated that she'd rather not.

"Alright," said Yip. "Lenny looks about ready to learn to brightwork. Sara, you're welcome to come to dinner tonight." He walked up the dock toward the boatyard to pick up sandpaper and turpentine.

Sara tugged her phone out of her pocket and plopped herself on the finger pier, her back to me and her uncle. Fine. I'd survived in Miami with few friends. I could do the same in Port Angeles.

Of course, none of us knew then what would happen. How the summer would take an irrevocable turn. What awaited me come fall.

Goodnight Moon was in bad shape. Still, she had beautiful wood railings running three-quarters around the boat. Not teak, but a rich reddish tint, speckled with paint, gummy layers of badly aged varnish, long black scars notching the surface like dimples, and faded patches on the leeward side. John Spaulding gave me a heat gun and a flat sharp metal spatula to strip the old varnish. He moved down the companionway, flipped on a little transistor radio, extracted a ragged sheet of sandpaper from his back pocket, and attacked the railing. Kansas wailed around us—*Carry on, my wayward son*—I had to yell to be heard. The first day, I didn't bother. I worked up the courage on the second afternoon.

"Yip says you lived out in Neah Bay."

"That's right." He picked at a tooth with his fingernail then sanded the outside curve of the railing.

"Why?" We'd been out to there once. It took nearly two hours to reach the tiny town. Moving to Washington had seemed like an

adventure when we were still in Miami. Now that we were here, even the busyness of Port Angeles and its twenty thousand residents seemed strangely futile, positioned as they were between the jaws of the Pacific Ocean and hundreds of miles of forest. The farther west you traveled, the greater that wildness grew, pressing on and on, a hungry void.

John Spaulding made a face. "Well," he said. He pronounced it *wull*. "I was young and drunk and a jackass, and I wanted to live somewhere more rural." He elided the vowels when saying *rural* so that only the growling *r*'s and *l* remained. "That's about it." He slid me a good-natured grimace. "You and Sara. Always asking me questions."

Sara had said a total of fifty words during dinner the previous evening. She'd asked me to pass the salad and answered my mother's questions about school with dry statements: *Yes, we have extracurriculars* and *Sure, the teachers are okay* and *No, I don't play any sports* (there had been an implicit *the fuck do I look like?* at the end of that sentence, which I'd intercepted but my mother had either missed or ignored). My mother had spent the evening orchestrating the conversation, which she seemed to enjoy; if pressed, Yip could perform geniality, but my mother had always carried him socially.

Sara was a true-crime fanatic—she'd briefly grown animated enough to tell the abbreviated version of the Port Angeles Lady of the Lake. Cheating wife caught by violent husband. Bludgeoned to death. Dumped in the lake. The water so cold that the fat in her flesh saponified. Before she'd left, Sara told my mother that her biryani was the best fried rice she'd ever had. Then, without saying goodbye, she'd stepped off the boat onto the finger pier, up to the ketch she shared with John Spaulding. If I craned my neck, I could see its rusting mizzen mast from our galley window.

"Well?" said John Spaulding. "The rails aren't going to sand themselves." He fanned a stack of sandpaper in my direction.

Later, over lunch, my mother and I discussed the first couple weeks in Port Angeles.

"Last night was fun," Mom said. "With Sara?"

"She has resting bitch face."

"She was nervous, kitten."

Nervous—Sara? Sara with her belly button piercing and her you-seem-like-an-idiot scowl and her endless chain smoking of clove cigarettes in the women's showers near the dock office? My mother dragged a spoon along the rim of her mug. A tell. She worried about me fitting in. Her new job as an assistant professor at Peninsula Community College began in a few weeks. I suppose she wanted to meddle, push me to make new friends while she still had the time.

"I guess," I said. "Sure." And then, because she still hadn't put down her spoon, I said, "I was thinking about walking into town. There's a movie at six. Maybe Sara wants to join."

Our only family rule was that we ate dinner together every evening, no exceptions. But things were changing. My mother was trying to construct an alternate future for us here. The newness of it lurked in the violently colored vegetables she bought from the farm stand down the street; it was in the way the cashiers asked *Did you find everything okay?* and seemed to mean it.

She crunched on a potato chip, delaying her answer for a long moment. Then she smiled her soft, rabbit smile. "If I didn't know any better, I'd think you were using Sara as an excuse to get out of dinner."

July went. I scraped and sanded and applied coat after coat of varnish to *Goodnight Moon*'s brightwork. The wood became familiar to me, the smell most of all, the way it flew up my nose on clouds of sawdust, then down my throat. Sara and I developed a loosely conceived companionship, watching TV on the top deck a couple nights a week in awkward silence. Sometimes she'd steal a few beers from John Spaulding's fridge

and we'd get a little tipsy up in the women's restrooms at the top of the dock. Life probably would have continued in much the same way—brightworking, unpacking, settling into our new life in Port Angeles, starting the school year at the high school—had I not decided, one day in August, to attempt to view the Virgo A galaxy.

It's been over a decade since I graduated from Blanchard. I lie in bed most nights cataloging all the bad decisions I made that year, the ones that led to destruction. When the catalog grows too large, I try to convince myself that I still might've been sent away to boarding school, still might have met Henry and Sloan and Vikram. Still would have fallen into the same trap. That things might have turned out the same, regardless. And maybe they would have.

But probably not.

2

On August 18—two months after our arrival in Port Angeles—I asked my mother over breakfast if she wanted to go stargazing that evening to view Virgo A. It was a galaxy, one of the largest in the local universe, a deep-sky object with a supermassive black hole in the center. My mother had finished her semester prep. Yip pulled our telescope from the storage locker. It lay before me, our new life. I only had to reach out and take it.

We skimmed away from the marina in Yip's red kayak, my mother steering. As I paddled, my headlamp cut through the pixelated darkness. We'd planned to leave earlier, before the sun set, but she'd laid down after dinner to stave off a headache. The evening felt powdery and half-real, the kind where it seemed possible to dissolve into the atmosphere.

We were headed to a cove called End of the World Beach, named for its positioning on the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Despite Port Angeles

facing the Canadian city of Victoria, Reddit had informed me that it would be impossible to see any of their lights from the beach at End of the World. Perfect viewing conditions. I'd spent the previous few years wanting to be older, but in that moment, I remember feeling happy to be fifteen.

As if sensing my thoughts, my mother said, "I was only a few years older than you the first time I tried to view Virgo A. It's one of the Messier objects." Our paddles dipped into the water, rustling like silk against skin. "M87. I think it was discovered in Seventeen-hundred and—" She trailed off.

"Mom?" I pivoted, looking behind me. She'd stopped paddling and was watching the water, befuddled.

"What?"

"You were saying something about Virgo A."

"Um," she said. "Yes. The Messier objects."

Charles Messier. He'd been a comet hunter, my mother explained, so he'd spent a lot of time examining the sky. *The French, you know?* But he realized that there were dozens of objects among the stars that seemed to be comets but weren't. He made a list of the astronomical objects, all 110 of them, which, it turned out, were nebulae, clusters, and galaxies.

"The list is very accessible for modern amateur astronomers," my mother said. "Our telescopes are much more powerful than Messier's. You could observe all the objects in one night if you wanted to. In fact, when I was an undergrad, we treated it like a date. There was this huge hill behind the Astronomy lab, so you'd stake out a quiet spot near a bush, observe the first couple dozen objects, make out for a bit—"

"Please, I beg of you."

"And then you'd fall asleep, and the next thing you knew it was dawn. Actually," she said, "I don't think I ever successfully completed a Messier marathon. Maybe we should try to stage one."

"You want to do a French stargazing marathon for nostalgia's sake?"

"Humor me. We'd map out all the objects on a chart, using their right ascension and declination, along with a window of time for each equatorial coordinate. We'd start in the west, right as the sun sets, so that we could view the first few objects before they dip below the horizon. Then we work our way east and hope we can view all the objects before the sun rises. We'd have to remain awake all night, obviously. Both of us. Some objects come into view at the same time, which can be challenging."

She'd taken the same tone she used to unpack the specifics of the structural-functional approach to human behavior: highly technical, with a hint of the supplicant.

"The Messier marathon doesn't happen until spring anyway. That would be our best chance at viewing everything. Think about it," she said. "After tonight you'll have a little practice. You know, Virgo A was one of the first objects Messier identified."

We reached the cove after an hour and pulled the kayak to shore. I spread out a blanket, and Mom unpacked the telescope, a thermos of coffee, peanut butter sandwiches.

I pointed to the sky. "Pleiades are out already."

My mother squinted. "God, I'm getting old. I can't see anything." She rubbed her eyes, then her temples.

Time moved strangely around us. My vision adjusted to the lack of light, and I began to see the ripples in the sky that Van Gogh had been so obsessed with. This always happened when I observed the stars. A hush came over me, a tunnel vision blocking out all extraneous stimuli. It was an hour or two before I asked my mother if she wanted a turn at the telescope.

She must've been asleep, because she half-opened her eyes and said, "What?" Then she blinked. "We should go." She struggled to her feet, tripping over my own in the process. "We should go back home."

"What? Wait." Virgo A would soon be visible. "Just another half hour. Please?"

"I don't feel well, kitten." She screwed the top back on the thermos, placing it in the backpack with exaggerated care, as if she'd forgotten how bags worked and was reading from a manual: Unzip bag. Separate the sides. Place thermos inside.

"Leave me here and come back in the morning," I said, desperately.

She stumbled on the edge of the blanket, then held her head. "You're being ridic—rid—" Her words sounded wet, like they were trying to force themselves around a swollen tongue. She breathed deeply, through her nose.

"And you're being so unfair."

"Come on." She came toward me, clumsy hands shooing me from the blanket so she could fold it.

I crossed my arms.

"Lenny. Really?"

"No." I was whining, but it didn't matter anymore. She bent over me, half of her face pulled into an almost-smile, the other half lax. I was so upset that the strangeness of her behavior was a distant thought, one I wouldn't return to for hours. She tugged on my elbows, strands of my hair catching against my arms as she pulled. "Mom!" I flared out my arms against her. She lost her balance, fell hip-first on the telescope, and yelped.

I recrossed my arms, in too deep.

She rose to her knees, groaning, drawing quivering breaths through her nose. "Coooome—come on now. I don't feel well. Let's go."

"This is bullshit," I said, and the last word caught in my throat. There were other words—about how long it had been since we'd gone stargazing together. How long I'd have to wait now that school was starting. The Messier marathon she'd suggested wouldn't be until the spring.

My mother didn't say anything, and I don't think she noticed the tears sliding down my face. I closed the telescope's lens and shoved it in the backpack, where it clanked against the thermos, then stalked down the beach, my mother stumbling behind me. We carried the kayak to the water.

Because I was sitting in front of her, it was several minutes before I realized we were drifting. I saw, through the midnight shade, that she was slumped over her paddle. I scrabbled for the flashlight, the kayak rocking, almost upending us. I forced myself to slow my movements then shined the flashlight on my mother's face. Her eyes were closed. Her mouth hung slightly open, the eerie half-smile still on her lips.

"Mom? Mom!" No response. I pulled my phone from the backpack, but it was useless—no reception. The emergency radio was next to the sandwiches, but as I clicked it on, I realized I had no idea how to use it.

A coldness descended over my brain. We were forty-five minutes from the marina, and every one of those minutes felt like a million years. I paddled and paddled, every stroke becoming a mantra, *please please please please*, although I couldn't say what exactly I was asking for, or of whom I was asking it. This had happened once before. She'd fainted—low blood sugar. A nameless, irrational fear rose in me, the same one that stalked me every evening after I clicked off the light, before I jumped into bed.

By the time I made it back to the marina, a strange tranquility had taken hold of me. I steered the kayak to the dock beside *Goodnight Moon*, hopping out, calling for Yip, tying off the boat, trying to figure out how we'd get Mom onto the pier. Yip popped his head out of a porthole, saw us, and was outside in a matter of seconds. He yanked my mother out of the kayak with no regard for the concrete and wood, which skinned her legs.

"What happened?"

"She was fine and then she just—" I paused. Yip didn't need to know that I'd pushed Mom on the beach, just minutes before she passed out. Maybe she'd hit her head? No, I decided, I would tell him later. After she woke up. I unclenched my hands. They were wet. Blood was already drying in the creases of my palms. I must have ripped them open while I was paddling.

My brain was still suspended. I felt euphoric. Everything seemed silly. Yip said, "Call 911," and when I didn't move, he screamed, "Now!"

I hustled back to the kayak to get my phone. While there was a part of my mind that was taken aback at the frank emotion in his face, his voice, there was another, deeper, more ancient part that reached out and gently touched the visceral panic radiating from him, recognized it like the old friend it was.

Yip called John Spaulding around six a.m. and asked him to pick me up from the hospital and drive me to the marina so I could sleep. I buzzed with the residual clamor of the ambulance, the emergency room, the paramedics' methodical competence. I hadn't understood most of the words the doctors and nurses used. The ones that stuck out were simple: *Blood clot. Coma. Critical but stable.*

Yip hadn't wanted to leave Mom alone. John Spaulding dropped me off at the marina, then returned to the hospital to relieve Yip. I walked down to *Goodnight Moon* to grab a change of clothing for my mother. She would need something to wear when she was discharged. They'd cut her clothes off in the ER. She'd been wearing the T-shirt we'd picked out at the county fair the week prior. She'd be sad it was ruined. I had already decided I'd give her mine.

The diner in the marina parking lot was open. I showered in the

women's bathroom, then waited for Yip at the diner's counter. The waitress set a cup of coffee in front of me, but I didn't touch it. The bell above the door jingled, and a green wave of disquiet swam over me as Yip crossed the threshold.

My chest swelled unpleasantly around the hollow center where my heart should've been. Yip's shoulders were tense, his hands clenched. His face was blank, though, which likely meant he was furious.

I was contrite. "Yip?"

It'd been stupid of me to leave the hospital. Stupid to lose my temper and push my mother on the beach. Stupid to go to the stupid fucking beach in the first place.

"Yip? What's going on?"

His lip trembled.

I knew. I did. Maybe if I pretended like I didn't, it wouldn't be true. The light shifted over my stepfather's face. I thought he might burst into tears. It was terrifying and embarrassing to see him so affected by what he was feeling. As if he was somehow naked. My face felt hot. Yip covered his own with a shaking hand. The waitress stared at us from behind the register. I tugged on Yip's arm, but he just stood there, weeping.

Yip's phone rang. He pulled it out of his pocket but made no move to answer it. After five long seconds, I snatched it from him and answered the call.

"Who is this?"

The voice was gentle, cool. "This is Dr. Yoder. With whom am I speaking?" She was a woman, but she had a dad voice for sure.

"It's Lenny Winter."

A pause. "Hey, kiddo." Gross. "Can you put your dad on the phone?"

"Is this about my mom? Did she wake up? Where is she? I need to talk to her."

Short silence.

"I'm sorry, but I need to speak with your father."

I held the phone between Yip's ear and my own.

"Isidore Leighy?"

How did she know Yip's full name?

"It's Dr. Yoder. I'm so very sorry, but we are going to need you to come back at some point today to fill out the paperwork so the morgue can make arrangements with the funeral home. My shift ends at noon, but Dr. Andrews will be on call if you run into any issues. I'm—so sorry."

Yip had stopped crying. He was nodding at the phone like Dr. Yoder could see him, but it was wrong—why was he nodding? He should be yelling at Dr. Yoder's affected voice. It was ridiculous. I wished for the hundredth time I hadn't left the hospital. Yip hung up. I realized curiously that he was growing old. There were fine lines webbing their way across his forehead, purple smudges under his eyes, hairs growing out of his ears. The skin on his neck was translucent. It seemed so fragile that I could have punctured it with my thumb, ripped it open.

"Yip?" I sort of laughed as I said his name.

Yip reached for my shoulder, but I pulled away.

I felt lightheaded, as though I could float away from my body. "She was stable when I left."

"C'mere kid," Yip said.

Arms around me. Cherry-scented smoke. Wool sweater catching at the curling strands of my hair. When was the last time he'd hugged me? My body rigid, disbelieving. It didn't make any sense. Stuff like this happened, but not to me. All the tragedy and bad things in the world, whirling around, the ball bouncing on the table till it came to rest on my slot, choosing my existence to upend. Two plus two equals five. *Jackpot.* Gooseflesh crawled up the backs of my thighs.

"We're going to make it through this," Yip said. "You and me."

The room seemed to be hovering underwater, sinking fast through dead bullwhip kelp, muddy sand, the corpses of whiteleg shrimp. The waitress, grown bored with our little drama, marrying ketchup bottles, whistling along to a Justin Bieber song on the radio. Light coming through the diner's polyester yellow curtains, eerily pale lemony-brown.

The only woman in my life, swept away.

3

Yip returned to the hospital. Sara and I sat in the cockpit of John Spaulding's sailboat, in the shadow of the masts pressing against the bruised iris dawn sky, a sleeping mass of tangled furs—Boogey the cat and Watchee—at our feet. Sara offered me one of John Spaulding's beers, which I declined. Then she began to speak. It was something I noticed in those days following my mother's death. The magnitude of my loss seemed to confuse people, make them uncomfortable. They talked to fill the space where my mother used to live. It didn't bother me—in fact, it touched me in a foolish kind of way. Didn't they know that words wouldn't change anything? And yet they kept trying, eyeing me anxiously every couple of words—*Am I doing this right?*—waiting for me to weigh in. I just let them talk.

"Your mom was chill." Then, "What were you doing out there?"

I wanted to return to my bunk, to lie down. To never awaken.

"Trying to view Virgo A," I said.

"Who's that?"

"An elliptical galaxy," I said, knowing that she wouldn't understand

what that meant. "It's one of Messier's objects." I tried to pronounce it like my mother had, *Mess-yay*, but it sounded stupid coming out of my mouth. "He was an astronomer." I offered this weakly.

"Why were you all the way out at the End of the World?"

"Better viewing conditions. There's no light pollution from town."

"Riiiiight," she said, drawing out the word so long that it became a hymn. Even in my fugue state her point was clear. My mother had died so that I could have a better shot at looking at the stars.

Sara changed tack. "You gonna stay here in Port Angeles? Yip is your stepdad, right? You have any blood relatives that'll want to take you in? That's what happened when my deadbeat dad finally got arrested for dealing."

She flashed a humorless thumbs-up. Her voice was nonchalant, acid. *Maybe she was nervous*, my mother had said.

"Mom's been in and out of prison since I was six. Anyway, my dad and stepmom never actually married, so when he went away CPS was like, oh, hello, you can't be living here." She spit. "John Spaulding drew the short straw. No one else would take me. CPS fucking loves him. He's been in AA for, like, twenty-five years. My caseworker says that means he's 'committed and reliable.'" Sara slouched further into the cockpit, ire fermenting across her round, sullen face.

"He seems okay," I said.

"Boogey has a larger brain than John Spaulding," Sara said. The cat stretched and blinked back at her suspiciously. "And Boogey's brain is the size of a pinto bean."

"That's unfortunate."

"Uncooked," she added. "An uncooked pinto bean. First of all, my uncle loves living on this depressing-ass boat in this depressing-ass town. He's always trying to get me to go with him to AA family meetings. All he thinks about is work and what toppings he's going to put

on his baked potato when we go to the Downrigger's buffet on Friday nights. You know he calls the prison every week to talk to my dad? They talk about the weather and the Seahawks." She gestured wildly. "Frigging pathological. This is who the state of Washington has entrusted me to."

The unpleasant implication of Sara's question grew apparent. I could be taken somewhere else. Where would I go? My grandfather had died before I was born, and Baba died two summers ago. They couldn't send me to live with my father. Could they? It was inconceivable that I would live up in the Yukon with a man I'd met twice. I had only a couple memories of my father, though the first might've been conceived from a Polaroid of us: me gummy and drooling over the stacks of rings cutting into his fingers, him clutching my soft baby flesh. The second was a scrap of a moment. If I approached it directly, it disappeared. But if I closed my eyes when I was about to sleep or when I first stepped into a hot shower on a winter morning, the icy-burning chill of gooseflesh shivering over my whole body, then—

Fuzzy, blotchy sunlight. My father's brown hands were beneath mine, wenge dark. I rubbed my cheek against one. No matter how hard I pressed, my fingers made no dent in the etched skin.

That's it. His hands. Nothing else.

"You don't think they'd make me leave?" I asked.

Sara shrugged, then burped. "Would it be so bad if they did? Free ticket out of this shithole for you. But I guess it depends on what CPS decides, doesn't it?"

There was an article in the *Daily News* the next day, above the fold. LOCAL MOM DIES ON STRAIT. *Sheriff reminds citizens to use caution when*

visiting remote areas; emergency radios strongly suggested. An inset near the end, pulled from the Mayo Clinic's website: *Stroke symptoms in women are often less detectable. Headaches. Blurry vision. Confusion. Loss of coordination. Causes include high blood pressure, stress.*

Yip said it wasn't my fault. But of course it was. He still didn't know that Mom and I had fought, that she'd fallen on the beach because of me. And if I hadn't made such a last-minute plan to go out on the water, maybe I could've been more prepared, radioed the Coast Guard, gotten her to the hospital sooner. If I'd paid more attention to her confusion, her slurred words, we could have left the beach earlier. She wouldn't have been at the exact wrong place at the exact wrong time, having a hemorrhagic stroke in the middle of the Strait of Juan de Fuca. Even now, as an adult, I understand my guilt. And so, it's impossible not to wonder if the events following her death were a punishment, one that fit my crime.

"What's that?"

I jumped. Yip stood behind me. He took the paper from my hands. "You should get dressed. People are going to start arriving soon."

The next week passed in a strange, staticky trance. Some days seemed eternal, low August sunlight shining on and on and on over the people who came to sit shiva. I knew none of them. Someone had called the B'nai Shalom Congregation of the Olympic Peninsula, and a dozen of them came to the shiva. The youngest person, who introduced herself as an English teacher at the high school in town, was in her fifties. I shook her hand and tried not to think about school beginning in two weeks, about trying to find my locker, trying to function normally, like a person whose mother was still alive.

Round foods everywhere: eggs, grapes, boiled potatoes. Terrible cooking, combinations that would have horrified my mother. Miracle Whip mixed with pineapple and strawberries; soft meat cooked in canned soup. John Spaulding and Sara appeared on day three. John Spaulding was misty-eyed as he presented Yip with a cheaply ornate condolence card from the drugstore sympathy section. Sara popped cheese cubes in her mouth and clung to the perimeter of the room, but she gave me a solemn salute before they left. At least she would be there when school began.

Some days were a blurry gray blink, wrapped in silence, and it seemed I had barely woken up before I found myself collapsing once again into the mix of feather duvets and dirty clothing that tumbled across my bunk. I could not shield myself from the exposed emptiness of it all. I sat on the floor of the aft deck, barefoot, with all the other mourners, ate what was put in front of me, and then immediately got up to run to the bathroom. All seven days we sat shiva, my stomach twisted and cramped, rejecting the food I tried to force into it.

And the nightmares returned. It had been five years since I'd had one: A demon would sit in the corner of my room, taunting me. I couldn't move or speak. I'd lie, rigid with silent horror, until my body released me into wakefulness. The newer nightmares followed a more disturbing pattern. They always began the same way. As I waited for the numbness of sleep, I'd replay the conversation Sara and I had about CPS. I'd plot and replot the probability that a caseworker would arrive to ask where my biological father was, why I hadn't yet been sent to him. Eventually, exhausted by the calculations, I would fall into a deep sleep. Trapped in the crushing stillness of a void, I'd lurch around a dark corner and collide with the demon. I'd yell, waking Yip, who would shake me into sweaty and panicked alertness, stay with me until I dozed off. It was embarrassing. Not so embarrassing, though, that I'd send him away.

The only thing anchoring me was Yip. Each time we passed one another in the galley or the companionway, he gripped my shoulder or my arm, quirked his mouth at me. It was clear how overwhelmed he was, blinking around like a shocked owl, speaking in his low, calm voice. He'd cried a couple of times since that first morning in the diner, but they were controlled tears. I did not begrudge him this; I had not cried since my mother's death. I hadn't been able to. But it bothered me that Yip was performing for our guests, for me. It was something my mother had often reminded me: *He's introverted, kitty cat. He has a hard time being himself around other people. It's not you.*

Several times during the shiva, I caught Yip watching me with a strange expression. When he saw me glance over, he'd grimace reassuringly and give me a thumbs-up. I still hadn't brought up the CPS thing, but I liked to think of those gestures as confirmation of Yip's commitment: *You and me, kid.* I still felt guilt about my mother's death. There was also the omnipresent fear that Sara was right, that I'd be sent away. Still, it was a nice thought. Me and Yip, against the world.

It's difficult to remember, even after a decade, that wounded feeling. How wrong I was.

4

After

Yes, it is shameful to say that I considered dying. But this is a story about the truth. So, I will tell you that, seven months after my mother died and I was sent to Blanchard, I found myself back in the ocean before dawn, next to another corpse, terrified, gagging on frigid saltwater, kicking against the bottomless darkness.

And then I thought, why bother? Easier, no doubt, to put my head under the water and stay put. I was delirious. It was like Clue, or one of those PSAT word problems: Lenny, Sara, Vikram, Nico, Sloan, and Henry board a boat before the sun sets.

How many are alive when the sun rises?

I swam to shore. The truth was this: Even after the events of the previous forty-eight hours, I did not want to die.

My feet hit the sand and I waded through the shallows. I'd lost a shoe; perhaps it had flown off my foot when I'd been thrown into the water. I sat down on the beach, waterlogged, hair in my face, spasming with cold, lungs attempting to turn themselves inside out. A siren screamed in the distance. My left arm ached. I tried to move it and

the hurt sharpened to an eye-watering peak. Fifteen feet out, the ocean churned lacy white surf. The corpse bobbed merrily atop the water, the ocean appearing and disappearing mangled body parts: a hand, a thigh, a groin. A crushed-melon head, leaking gray matter like cantaloupe seeds into the ocean.