ADRIANNE HARUN

PEARL DIVING

The winter my father disgraced us, my mother told us her version of a children's story—"Henny Penny"—without the relieving idiocy. We had been trapped inside all day while outside a snowstorm consumed every familiar landmark, and when finally we arrived at dinnertime, we ate the meal—thin, sliced beef and buttered new potatoes, a tiny bitter endive salad—in almost utter silence, as if the snow had muffled our conversation as well. Afterward my father disappeared without a word into the den, and my mother rinsed the dishes. Then she poured herself another tumbler of vermouth, lit a cigarette, and otherwise prepared herself to amuse my brother, Henry, and me with games of Scrabble and Blind Man's canasta and, as the evening wore on, her own renditions of well-known fairy tales, tales that centered on the town of Clementsville, where my parents lived.

We were far too old for such evenings. I was fifteen and Henry seventeen, but even if the storm had not held us captive, we had nothing better to do. We never stayed in Clementsville long enough to make a single friend. This was our first trip back from the Holt School in over six months, and the atmosphere was tense, although we didn't yet know why. While my mother straightened the kitchen, we smoked a joint in Henry's room before reappearing, dutifully stoned and greedy for the bowls of butterscotch pudding that in the past accompanied my mother's twisted fairy tales.

In my mother's version of "Henny Penny," the sky really does fall, no joke. First came the clouds, she said, holding out a hand to pantomime catching bits of cloud that transformed quickly from damp, full-bodied orbs into sweet-smelling mist.

"Close your eyes, boys," she told us.

At her command, we offered our palms, which she dusted with a feathery tissue. Once the clouds drifted loose, she went on, the sky rearranged itself, blue washing into blue, before it too began to let go, thin chips of varying hues—azure, sap-

phire, cerulean, robin's egg—coating roofs and streets. Bits of fallen sky caught in the fur of animals, she said, they flickered on eyelashes. Cold beyond cold, those chips were. When one fell upon your bare skin, you jumped as if you had been burned. To illustrate, my mother touched our cheeks with a piece of ice from her glass of vermouth.

The world grew dim as colors faded. Chalk-gray trees, iron grass. Another set of clouds, previously hidden, descended. These were dirty and ragged in comparison to those that came before, like ratty tumbleweeds. You couldn't resist kicking one, she said, and watching it bounce above the huge spread oak and into the town pond beyond, engulfing the nasty-tempered swans. No one seemed to notice the spiraling tunnel forming above, a shadowed hole that swelled in size until, like a giant vacuum, it began sweeping people toward heaven. One by one at first, then batches, whole swarms writhing upward. Soon nearly everyone in town was beating the flat, chill air, holding arms aloft like Superman.

Then what? Henry and I begged. We were stoned enough that our own arms were half-rising in response, our feet twitching involuntarily as if we, too, were beginning the long journey from the bottom of the world.

My father poked in his head, drawn by the irresistible rasping of my mother's whispering voice. We ignored him; he hadn't felt cloud on his palm or sky on his cheek.

"Elaine," he began, frowning as he grasped the elements of her tale.

"Don't start, Jay," my mother responded. "It's my story this time." She looked straight at him, her drink tinkling in her hand. "I think I'm owed a few of my own, don't you?"

Everyone in our family told stories. We relayed them as a matter of course: simple lies, long, complicated misdirections. Throughout the fall, Henry had labored over his college application essays, fabricating autobiographies, each one more fantastic, more heroic, than the last.

"What do you mean, 'aviator'?" I asked, looking over his shoulder. "You don't fly planes."

"I could, Kenny," said Henry.

"But you don't. And you don't do humanitarian runs to . . . *the Maldives?* Henry, no one is going to believe this crap."

In response, my brother had offered a series of dismissive gestures that let me know that any attempts to shame him would go unheeded.

That winter evening when my mother challenged him, my father imitated Henry's quick twist of the mouth, his left eyebrow slightly raised and held, the shoulder shrug. An insult acknowledged but not owned.

Go ahead, he seemed to say, *tell your story, but you have no idea how a tale truly grows smooth and fulsome, how a story becomes a life*.

And the next morning, my mother did relate another tale, this one rife with accusations and dismay.

"If only," she pronounced at the end, "he'd stolen enough so that we could disappear."

She said this not to us, but to her long-estranged sister, Ginny. Henry and I did not know Ginny, who until recently had lived in Europe. My aunt had married a far richer man than my father, although one with a more humble pedigree. He, too, had recently tumbled from grace. Only my Uncle Jack's lapse involved a woman, and my aunt, I understood from eavesdropping, stood to gain rather than lose from his indiscretion, especially as long as she retained custody of her daughter, my cousin, Laura.

Of Laura I knew very little. She was almost exactly my age, our birthdays two days apart and, like Henry and me, she'd been sent off to school at an early age. Laura had her own troubled history. I knew she had attended no fewer than seven schools in nine years. Even as my mother and Ginny considered their own options, the subject of Laura and her latest debacle hovered close to the forefront of their discussion. As they talked, my mother nipped at a set of needlepoint cushion covers with a pair of manicure scissors. The needlepoint design incorporated my father's initials, and the scissors made tiny kissing noises as she snipped, leaving shreds of blue thread on the rug around her feet.

Toward what should have been the end of our extended weekend at home, my mother finally told us what we already knew: our father had been caught in one of his stories. And yet, remarkably, he had not been fired. His position had been altered, responsibilities lightened, and so forth, and he was required to undergo a course of therapy with a Dr. Alice Chase.

More to the point, he was bound to make complete restitution for certain missing items, which he swore he had merely misplaced. This final stipulation would require, we learned, severe family sacrifices.

"We can keep the house," my mother said, "but we'll have to let other things go—at least until we get on our feet again."

It took us a minute to understand the portent of her statement. Hearing our mother's edict, Henry, normally placid and easy-going, began to rage, and when that failed, he wheedled and schemed. Our mother remained adamant.

"We have no choices here," she said, flexing her tiny scissors.

We had no way of knowing whether she was lying.

That day the weather warmed dramatically, and rain arrived, beating the snow into swift, slushy streams that roared through the dirty gutters of Clementsville. All the pure beauty disappeared and the town emerged, mud-streaked and tattered. Our mother drove us to the Holt campus, two hours away, where, high on white crosses, Henry and I cleaned out our dorm rooms in a haphazard frenzy, hurling half-sealed boxes into the back of her Audi wagon. Our mother said little to us, but on the way home she swerved into the parking lot of Clementsville High School. Twenty minutes later, just as our hearts were pattering down to normal speed, we were enrolled in the yellow-bricked public school of our hometown.

"This isn't real," Henry said once we were back in the car, our new schedules in hand. "This isn't happening."

"Pretend, then," my mother said, without a trace of meanness. "Just pretend that it is."

Instead of calming Henry down, my mother's advice inspired Henry to release a string of curses aimed at my father's shortsightedness, including a lengthy riff labeling him a "blind bastard," a designation that caused my mother to laugh aloud, an unfamiliar rasping sound that shocked Henry into silence.

For the first eight years of his life, you see, my father had been completely blind, the result of an embryonic virus that had prevented a crucial optical synapse from developing. His affliction did not seem to slow him down. By all accounts, he was a remarkably outgoing child, if something of a wiseass, and both adults and other children tended to indulge him and consider him more clever than he probably was. Then, inexpli-

cably, around his eighth birthday, he discerned floating shapes drifting across the field of his right eye. Within a few days, little starbursts of light erupted, cracking the black expanse, and in their wake, a peculiarly angular world rapidly came into focus. Soon his left eye offered the same cloudy frame that had preceded vision in the other eye, and in an even more expedient fashion, that eye's vision, too, raced from the vague to the precise. Remarkably, the missing connectors had tremored their own way into being.

I can hardly imagine what that must have been like, discovering an entirely new dimension of life. It must have been almost as if he had realized he could fly, really and truly, outside his dreams. Miraculous, yes, but disconcerting, too. Extroverted as a blind child, my father became increasingly reticent as his vision lightened and splintered abruptly into the twin unimaginables of color and illumination. He'd been interpreting both all his life, twisting the visual descriptions he'd been given into his own sightless spectrum:

Red, the feel of silk between his fingers.

Green, the loamy scent of a spring day on a baseball field.

Yellow, a bit of runny egg gelling on his tongue.

His mother's hand smoothing the heat of his always-wild hair from his forehead—well, this was as good a definition of light as he had known.

While he attempted to reconcile his former world with that transformed by sight, my father could barely talk, he was so agitated by nameless desire. He wondered what else he'd missed, what else he was still missing. How so much of what he had perceived could have been so wrong. He begged for twilight car rides just so he could stare into homes in those dusky hours when lamps had been lit, the curtains not yet drawn, and family life presented as a tableau for public viewing. Occasionally, too, his nagging fascination drove him to steal an article from another house or a stranger's pocket.

Did he need those things? Those Hummel figurines in their lederhosen. Those dented sailing trophies or knitted infant caps nestled in tissue? Did he even want them? The slot cars or carved ivory cigarette cases or toy German pistols? He couldn't say. Still he stole steadily from the time he was ten, and although he'd had a few close calls, until now he had never been discovered.

He relayed his criminal history—embellished, of course, with unfettered daring—to Dr. Alice Chase, his company-appointed psychologist, who was required to keep a record of their conversations. Weekly, he asked for his own copy, which he kept in his underwear drawer, right where anyone could find it, slip it under his shirt, and take it to the bathroom to read. Dr. Alice had her own thoughts, of course, on my father's thievery. How, *perhaps*—Dr. Alice always couched her slightest opinions in conjectures, as if she were afraid of being sued for having a real opinion—how *possibly* my father's greatest wish was to be caught, to force people to see him differently, just as he'd been forced once to re-vision them.

Maybe, my father agreed.

He seemed to make every effort to be amicable during his therapy sessions, but anyone reading these accounts could tell my father had been hoping for something else from Alice Chase, a reprisal of his boyhood miracle, the world rearranging itself and carrying him along. I imagined he asked her for something—a glass of water, a fresh tissue—using that moment of inattention to swipe the fountain pen that he'd taped to his transcript. Then he might have risen to his feet, refusing her prescription for Xanax, since, he would have said with a sigh, life in bucolic Clementsville offered him not the slightest amount of stress, a statement I would have liked to argue with him.

Although our parents had owned their house since our first year at Holt, Henry and I were in no way part of Clementsville, a town that I decided, from my reading of the local paper, was overrun by a single family. Loreckis manned the fire department, the garbage trucks, and the local post office. Joe Lorecki was the chief of police; his younger brother and nephew were patrolmen. Goldiane Lorecki, an ancient black-clad widow, styled hair at the Lorecki Salon with her son, Albert. Marco Lorecki tended bar at the High Spot Tavern, a place rumored to sell alcohol to anyone who could peer over the counter. Janice Lorecki taught first grade at St. Cecilia's, and Father Lorecki always took the early mass. All the Loreckis lived within the six blocks that composed the core of Clementsville.

Our parents' house, on the other hand, lay on five acres up a long, hidden, graveled drive and faced away from town toward the open fields that signaled estate country. Part stone,

part clapboard, the house was a Revolutionary War relic with narrow doorways so low that Henry and I were forever ducking or slamming our foreheads against the lintels. A pervasive smell of mold and wood smoke hung about our usually unused rooms and made my nostrils itch continually. Our doors didn't even have doorknobs. They closed with black iron latches that made a loud, disturbing click. And because the original renovators had been stingy with electrical outlets, the rooms were also poorly lit. I had grown used to fluorescent dorm rooms and the routine rumble of shared lives. It was difficult to adjust, to stave off an expectant feeling in Clementsville as if we were waiting for a forgotten door to burst open and illuminate our new dim lives.

And yet, I was awed at my unexpected good fortune. At Holt, where I'd been halfway through my sophomore year, the push for success was palpable and judgment permeated every waking moment. In contrast, competition at Clementsville High was pallid. I was far ahead in both math and English. And, although I was late for the season, the Clementsville basketball team had suffered an alarming number of season-busting injuries, and I was allowed to substitute, playing an ordinary but enthusiastic forward. The combination of good grades and sports acumen was enough to make me into something of a boy wonder, a role so new to me that I floated through my schooldays, half-afraid I would wake up soon and discover I was a colossal dupe, strung out on mushrooms, which in the past had suffused me with unwarranted and overwhelming feelings of well-being and caused me to perform certain feats that I afterward regretted and always denied.

As for Henry—he revamped his senior schedule altogether, claiming he'd met all graduation requirements and needed just six more simple credits. He took shop, bonehead history, and an English class bordering on remedial. He also signed up for art, although he hadn't touched so much as a crayon since our pre-school days. For his P.E. requirement, he chose weight-lifting. He would have bowed and taken French, but the school didn't offer a class for his talents.

"How sad," he told my mother. "Clementsville has no French 8."

Within a couple of weeks, Henry even had new friends: huge muscle-bound losers with tattoos. It was as if he had entered prison instead of public high school. It seemed to me that the two of us had been finally dropped into a more appropriate

sorter than Holt, and if I, in all my shiny, slender eagerness, now slid amongst the dimes, Henry tumbled headlong toward the heavy-shouldered nickels.

Henry's new best friend was Davy Lorecki, the son of the construction Lorecki: Rico Lorecki trucks rumbled through town and parked outside Geneva Lorecki's Sweet Pickle Deli at every mealtime. Davy's mother was Arista Lorecki, a woman known far and wide as the Statue Lady. A girl at school told me Arista's sculptures haunted the Loreckis' house. They hunkered over tables, crouched in stairwells, leaned against mantels. On the weekends, Henry began helping Davy deliver Arista's sculptures, shrouded in layers of packing, to galleries in New Hope or out on Long Island. She paid them twenty dollars each for the delivery. Easy work, but Davy could make twice that working for his old man, and he was sick of wasting his time. Within a few weeks of their acquaintance, Davy offered to give my brother an old van of his uncle's, on the condition that my brother take over Arista's deliveries. Of course, Henry might need a hand with the deliveries. The statues weren't that heavy, just ungainly. Almost anyone would do as a helper. Here Davy paused and gave me his dubious attention—"like Puss here," he said. Henry shrugged off Davy until the Friday night when neither my mother's Audi nor my father's Volvo was in the driveway and he had to walk the two and a half miles to the High Spot Tavern. The next afternoon on our way to an away game, the bus paused at Clementsville's single traffic light. I caught sight of Henry and Davy, idling in an ancient Ford Econoline outside the drugstore, Henry in the driver's seat, and I knew my brother had made his decision. His new vehicle was the same painfully bright blue used to paint the Holt pool. Along the side panels, swimming out from under the thin, brush paint job, were the words

Beecham's Champion Pearl-Diving Team

and beneath them

Pearl Diving—America's fastest-growing sport.

I could imagine my parents' reactions. "I once did a little pearl diving myself," my father would say when he saw it the next day. My mother would merely purse her lips into a knife edge

of a smile, and it would be easy to see she'd blame my father for the van as well.

I was still thinking about Henry's acquisition later that night, when after yet another humiliating defeat, the coach tried to cheer us up by having the bus driver make an unscheduled stop at the Colonial Shopping Center in Beecham, the next town over from Clementsville and the one-time home of Henry's new van.

It was nearly eleven o'clock. We were too loud in the parking lot, our voices cracking against the cold air. Inside, the throbbing overhead lights and the abrupt swoosh of the electric door at our backs dazed us. At one point, I nearly blacked out and, on recovering, I glanced around to see if anyone had noticed. The checkers continued to banter with customers; stock clerks kept shoveling boxes on shelves; my teammates raised havoc among the snack foods. In the aisle directly before me, an ox of a woman, her head lowered, pulled two full carts. And, behind her, my handsome, oblivious father, his face rapt with concentration, slipped a carton of cigarettes inside his overcoat.

By the time he reached the checkstand, I was out the door and halfway to the bus. There I waited, ducking low, when, holding a tiny paper bag in his fist, my father sauntered to the pea green Volvo sedan he drove to the train station each morning.

Henry was still out when I arrived home. My mother was sleeping the exhausted open-mouthed sleep of the justly maligned who had downed too much vermouth. And my father was comfortably slumped in his usual plaid wing chair, engrossed in a television movie about a pair of gunslingers, and eating pistachios from the paper bag. He looked disheveled and boyish in the blue light of the television, like any number of dateless Holt boys on a Saturday night, but he brightened when he saw me and held the little paper bag out.

"Don't know what came over me tonight—I had an overwhelming yen for pistachios," he said, spitting a shell into his palm. "You can buy them just like this," he said. "Alice told me about this. Bulk, she calls it. Makes me feel as if I'm really at the movies."

"That's popcorn, Dad," I said. "You buy popcorn, not nuts, at the movies."

"Yes, that's right," he said, happily splitting a shell with his teeth. "Popcorn. See that fellow?" He pointed to an actor,

dressed like Tecumseh, the cigar store Indian. "I went to school with him."

"Oh, yeah?" I said. "What's his name?" The credits were due to roll in a minute.

My father didn't miss a beat: "Harold Cloudsplitter, then," he said. "Not sure what he's calling himself these days." He paused to pick a piece of shell from his mouth. "Good game, tonight?"

I shrugged, not sure truth would have any place in this conversation.

"That's all right, Kenny," my father said, rattling his pistachio bag in commiseration. "There's always a second act, trust me."

Watching my father with his tousled charm and carefree wisdom, I was suddenly bitterly certain that of all our family, I'd been the most wronged. Henry had Lorecki and his crew, of course. My father, his Dr. Alice Chase. Even my mother was comforted by her cocktails and stories. Only the thought of my errant cousin, the floundering Laura, soothed me. I imagined her as I was, alone and disregarded, out of place in whatever new world her mother had decided to drop her.

She arrived unheralded. I saw her first in the halls of Clementsville High School. My mother's fragile relationship with her sister had derailed again when Ginny accused her of rewriting the past. By then, however, my aunt had come up with a plan for Laura that included Clementsville and her old school friend, Kay Croyton. The Croytons were old money and lived in an estate out on Leyland Road. Aunt Ginny, having just entered a new love affair, couldn't break herself away, but she'd arranged an illusion of caretaking by sending our cousin to live with the Croytons in proximity to us, her true family.

"Typical," my mother fumed. "You would think she would have at least asked if Laura could stay here. And Laura! Not one phone call! I haven't seen her since she was five years old, and she couldn't be bothered to let me know she was here."

The next moment she was on the phone to Kay Croyton, her voice transformed into silk. "Of course," my mother was saying. "Well, yes, that's Ginny, you know." Her laugh was icy.

To us, my mother was more direct: "Kay Croyton's a drunk-

en idiot. She hardly realizes that Laura's there. 'We gave her the carriage house,' she says. What the hell is Ginny thinking?"

My mother drove directly to the Croyton estate, where she was met at Laura's door by a nearly naked man who claimed to speak little English and was apparently extremely rude.

"What did I expect? The way that girl's been raised?" She threw her leather gloves onto the hall table as if she were tossing away any further thoughts about Laura. But you could tell she thought Laura might be caught in another of her situations, that maybe the savage at the door had prevented my cousin from acknowledging my mother. She sent my father back out to Leyland Road to gauge the level of Laura's distress. He was gone for nearly two hours and arrived home wearing a rakish red-and-black-striped wool scarf I did not recognize. Still, my father didn't have much to say about his visit. Laura had been alone. She'd given him a cup of coffee.

"She's fine, Elaine," he said, finally. "More than fine."

An understatement, as it turned out.

Clementsville High was not a small school, but my cousin immediately garnered attention. Slim, with full round breasts, the left slightly larger than the right, she favored black V-neck cashmere sweaters and short black skirts that made her long legs appear even more shapely and elongated. Laura spent her free periods in a corner of the cafeteria, chewing on a nicotine inhaler and reading Mishima in Japanese. Her skin was incredibly white without a single blemish, her straight black hair cut as short as a boy's. She looked like a woman out of a black-and-white movie. Everyone tried to hit on her: jocks, potheads, the theater crowd, even the vice-principal, Mr. Nugent, followed her languorous swish through the halls as if waiting for an infraction that would allow him to call her into his private office. Although we were cousins, we hadn't seen each other since we were children, and I never spoke to her. Neither did Henry as far as I knew. Despite her checkered school career, Laura had somehow vaulted ahead of me, and she was between us, a junior.

On the afternoon we turned in our basketball jerseys, I realized I'd left my backpack and a particularly important assignment in my English classroom. Of all the Clementsville teachers, my English teacher, Jason Donner, clung most to the notion that his class mattered to us and our futures. He was a

few inches shorter than I, but his shoulders were broader, his pectorals monstrous. Rumor maintained that he was an Iron Man junkie who spent his weekends lifting in competitions. If that was true, he worked hard to lead us all astray. He kept his curly brown hair neatly trimmed and sported unfashionable aviator glasses above his thin white nose. He wore cabled sweater vests, and his voice trembled whenever his interpretations of Mark Twain or William Golding were challenged. Any life Jason Donner might have had beyond his classroom was unimaginable to me, so I had a reasonable hope that he would still be there, that the classroom would be open. The halls were deserted and seemed in their emptiness longer than they did in the crowded breaks between classes. I sprinted, and arrived at the door out of breath, hearing only my own heartbeat in my ears. The door was shut but unlocked, and I did not hesitate.

Donner knelt on the floor, his head in the lap of my cousin Laura, who reclined in the chair behind his desk. He jumped when the door squealed open and offered me the startled half-seeing look of a dog whose territory had been invaded.

"What the hell do you want?" he said.

Laura rolled back in his chair and rearranged her skirt, which was twisted around her hips. She brushed at her knees.

"Hey, Kenny," she said, easily.

"Hi, Laura," I said, my voice matching hers in nonchalance. You'd think we ate lunch together every day.

My pack lay beside a desk over by the window. I made my way through the desks and snatched it, banging it heavily against my hip as I raced back to the door.

"Sorry," I said.

"Wait," Laura said. I hovered by the open door, trying not to see Jason Donner's anguish as she leaned down to pick up her own black leather pack, revealing an inch of pearly skin at her waist. My own heart beat rapidly as if I'd just witnessed an accident.

She turned toward him finally. "Kenny is my cousin."

"Your cousin?" Donner said, staring at me.

"Yes," I answered, miserably.

Henry was waiting outside in the van. As a favor to our mother, he picked me up from practice, and he was watching when Laura and I left the building, when she kissed me on the

lips and murmured, “Thanks. Your family’s good at helping me out of messy situations.” I was too stunned to ask her what I’d done or, more precisely, what my family had done. The touch of her lips had sent a cold shock down my legs, and I automatically moved my backpack in front of me to hide the erection I knew was coming. She didn’t wait around, just shrugged before heading toward the teachers’ parking lot, where she kept the silver Karmann Ghia that once belonged to the Croytons’ horse trainer.

Henry didn’t say a word as we left the school. At the traffic light, he glanced in the rearview mirror, then began whistling softly.

“Our cousin,” I said, “Laura.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, lighting a joint. “I’ve seen her at the High Spot.”

“You talk?”

He paused for a long toke and choked out: “Lorecki tried.”

“Jesus, Henry, Lorecki?”

The light flicked from red to green as Henry gunned the van’s engine to keep it from stalling. As we rumbled through the intersection, his eyes shifted to the rearview mirror and the Karmann Ghia making its neat, quick turn away from us.

Two days later, Laura was in the van when Henry arrived to pick me up from track practice. I saw her white face from a distance, framed in the Econoline’s front window, and I thought for a moment that Henry had put one of Arista’s sculptures in the front seat—she was so poised and removed. Henry told me later they’d finally talked at the High Spot, and while I had no reason not to believe him, I didn’t. I think he went out to the Croytons’ estate the evening he saw Laura kiss me.

It was Laura, not me, who took over for Davy, helping Henry deliver Arista’s shrouded sculptures. They would leave early on Saturday morning and be gone all day. The van, once permeated with the mingled stench of sea salt and mold and pot smoke, now reeked of sex.

“She’s our cousin,” I yelled at Henry one evening, out of nowhere.

“Yeah, so?”

“So, you can’t sleep with your cousin.”

"Kenny," my brother said, calmly, "when did you become such a dick brain?"

And yet I wasn't the only one. Even my father noticed, pulling me into the kitchen one evening to inquire if I accompanied Henry and Laura on the deliveries, if they were seeing a lot of each other, if Henry ever brought along a girlfriend. And then there was Jason Donner. At first, my English teacher merely trailed Henry and Laura in the halls. We looked alike even then—all the males in our family, even my forty-six-year-old father, have the same lanky build—and he must have figured out that Henry and I were brothers.

"He'll treat it like a logic problem," Laura said. "If Henry and Kenny are brothers, and Kenny is Laura's cousin, then Henry, too, must be Laura's cousin."

We were huddled in the van's front seat, waiting for Henry to get his weekly pay and instructions from Arista Lorecki. Davy's mother was not a woman who rushed. We'd been waiting for Henry in the Loreckis' driveway for ten minutes already and the van windows were almost completely fogged, lending a covert intimacy to our conversation that I cherished. Laura was wearing an old gray cashmere sweater Henry had filched from my father, and she passed the time by idly sucking on the cuffs until they hung over her hands, misshapen and damp. Her pretty lips had reddened with the effort.

"Your brother knows Jason's harmless," Laura said, pinching a bit of sweater fuzz from her tongue.

Twice Donner had nearly caught Henry smoking his noonday bowl of hash. He'd become a nasty shadow, slipping out of his classroom and roaming the parking lot during Henry's free period. Just the day before, he slammed me against the lockers in the hall outside the language lab after school and grabbed my shoulders hard.

"Oh, sorry, Kenny," he stammered, when he saw my face. "I thought . . ."

I didn't wait for him to finish. I knew what he thought, a great hulk of a guy practically bawling.

"C'mon," Laura said, "let's walk around. My legs are so cold, I can hardly feel them."

The light outside the van seemed harsh and disorienting. Squinting, I followed Laura along the Loreckis' high back fence, nearly falling over her when we reached the gate. The back yard materialized before us just as my vision began to clear.

A party was in progress. Naked women of all shapes and sizes, linked in groups, crouched in the flowerbeds, on their knees, creamy hands held out in supplication. More women peeked from between the fir trees at the yard's far border; another one balanced starkly behind a shed window, her white palm raised against the dirty glass. It became a game. As each figure came into focus, I discovered another gem rising from the ordinary grit of a backyard landscape. I have no idea how long I stood there, lost in the fantasy, hoping one of the women would look up, smile, and invite me to join them. It wasn't until Laura wandered into their midst that I snapped awake and realized that, of course, these must be Arista's statues. Yet even as I acknowledged that indisputable fact, my heart pounded, and I wondered again if I was being deceived. The statues gave off a suppressed energy, as if they were real women who had just landed within my grasp and were only pretending to be unreachable.

"They're beautiful," I blurted.

Laura gazed at me with amusement. She strolled back to me, grinning, and draped her arms around my neck. She leaned into me, brushing her polished cheek against my rough one.

"You are going to be such a sweet man," she whispered, and I felt foolishly elated until, in the next breath, she said, with real affection in her voice, "Jason should see these. He'd go crazy."

As if she'd summoned him, Donner suddenly rounded the corner in his Volvo. I recognized the distinctive tick of the Volvo engine, so like my father's station car, and I jumped, but Laura held me. A mere moment later, the Loreckis' front door slammed. Laura raised her head, but kept her arms around me. I turned around just in time to see both faces tighten, as if Donner and Henry were each connected to Laura by a string she'd just pulled taut.

By early June, my parents had settled into a surprisingly comfortable niche. My mother hurdled her anger, put away the vermouth bottle, and decided to open a gallery, the first in Clem-

entsville. Already, she'd contacted Arista Lorecki, wooing her with an account of her pre-marital art history courses at Sarah Lawrence, her keen networking skills, and a completely fabricated, but very funny, story about her career as an artist's model.

According to my father's Alice Chase log, he too kept himself busy all spring. He'd stolen more cigarettes, a dozen unopened cartons stashed in the cupboard under the stairs. And flashlights and beef jerky. He'd gone completely against character and flirted with the Lorecki girls in order to pilfer penny candy from the bin inside the drugstore. Twists of bubblegum and loose Tootsie rolls weighed down the pockets of his old plaid jacket. He sauntered off on evening walks and returned with lawn ornaments and license-plate holders. But all this suburban marauding ended when he tried lifting a box of spark plugs from Nickel's Garage. In Jimmy Nickel (Gussie Lorecki's husband), my father found the answer to his problem. Jimmy held his hand out for the spark plugs as if he'd just asked my father to pick them up for him.

"You don't need to do that, son," he told my father, gently.

There was a girl at Jimmy Nickel's shop that afternoon—probably Jimmy's granddaughter, I thought—and my father told Alice Chase how he gazed from the wrinkled, unshaven face of Jimmy Nickel to the sweet curve of the girl's white cheek and felt something inside him unravel. The light altered as if trees had been felled all around him or a huge amorphous and opaque skein had slipped away. He knew, of course, that he didn't *need* a box of spark plugs any more than he *needed* cigarettes or Tootsie rolls, but when Jimmy Nickel placed a hand on my father's shoulder and steered him toward the door, he thought he could finally see what it was he did lack. My father felt real affection in that gesture, in the calloused weight of Jimmy's hand, and conceded that what he'd been searching for in all his thievery was simple human connection.

"Perhaps your wife?" Alice Chase asked. "Your sons?"

My father shook his head. Didn't she see? It was colors all over again.

He had lived in a bubble until he had taken up a box of pins and now, *now,* he could see the hues of passion, the subtle illumination of desire that had eluded him. There was more he

wanted, so much more he needed to take. Yet it was clear that what he so desperately wanted could not be eased away so neatly. His pockets weren't big enough to hold what was becoming an insatiable longing.

Desire. Passion.

Reading my father's account, I experienced my own revelation. And pins, I realized with a pleasant shock, weren't all that hard to come by.

Henry and Laura began squabbling just before graduation. It didn't take much to get them going: a whispered insult, a misunderstood tug on the hair. Just good-natured teasing, at first ending in embarrassing tickling fights or a spatter of silly apologies. More than a few times that last month, Laura wasn't able to accompany Henry on his Arista deliveries, and when he returned in the late afternoon, he couldn't find her. She had never been keen on coming to our house, where my mother would relentlessly interrogate her about Ginny; she didn't even like to telephone. A couple of times, Henry wouldn't even see Laura from Friday evening until Monday morning when we arrived, on schedule, to pick her up for school.

Then, one morning, while Henry was struggling to light the end of a joint, I glimpsed the square back end of a car speeding away from the Croytons' driveway as we approached.

"Can you believe it?" I said to Henry, my voice rich with incredulous naiveté. "What's Donner doing out here so early in the morning?"

Henry went to get Laura and stayed inside the carriage house until I was sure we'd be late. Eventually, they came outside and got into the van. Laura barely nodded at me. The ride to school was utterly silent. As we passed the teachers' parking lot, Henry muttered under his breath.

"Fuck you," Laura said.

"I'd have to stand in line," he answered flatly, and she flew out of the van.

That same afternoon, the parked van was totaled, brutally broadsided while Henry practiced graduation ceremonies with his class. Laura telephoned later that evening, but Henry was already out cruising with Davy in Lorecki's Charger, hunting for Donner.

"She said to tell you you're a paranoid bastard," I told Henry later.

They seemed exactly the right words at the time.

It was Donner who tracked down Henry around closing time at the High Spot. Gone were the sweater vest, the awkward glasses, the air of frustrated haplessness. At first Henry didn't know the bulky stranger who advanced on him, but Marco Lorecki, the bartender, took one glance at the tattoos that circled the newcomer's massive forearms and biceps and recognized him as kin.

"Take that shit outside," he told Donner, sending them to the alley to fight like a couple of lust-crazed toms.

Lorecki came in at the end, but you'd have to call the fight a draw: Henry with his battered face, Donner weeping into his bloodied fists. And Laura kissing no one's wounds.

She didn't come to graduation, and Henry celebrated without her, as perhaps only I knew he could. A couple of letters addressed to him were unfortunately mislaid. I heard a rumor she was leaving any day to live with her father in Baltimore. She telephoned again, but my father beat me to the phone that time. I heard him breathe her name, or thought I did, but he didn't mention the call to Henry, who strolled into the house almost the minute my father replaced the receiver. That same afternoon, I noticed the Volvo's driver's door was ajar, and when I went to close it, I spied a folded white square lying on the front seat. I flicked it open, saw Laura's familiar slanted handwriting, and slipped the note into my pocket. You would have thought she'd know Henry never drove that car.

That night I woke just after midnight, breathless and sweating as if I'd been sealed in a box. I had forgotten to turn on the attic fan, and my room was stifling. Two floors down, I paused in Henry's doorway, envying him his easy slumber. My lucky brother. In sleep, he appeared as perfect as perhaps he had once been. The curtains sighed with the warm night breeze, the moon was nearly full, and the house filled with the sort of blue light that made the molecules in everything not only visible, but essential and beautifully deceptive. Bands of white moonlight slashed across the black polished wood surfaces, and I thought of Laura and felt again her cheek against mine, the weight of her body leaning into me.

Come to me, her note had implored. *Tonight.*

The ride up Leyland Road was the path through the woods in a dozen fairy tales. Trees sighed overhead. A family of deer posed gravely as my bike whirled past. The road rippled by beneath my bike tires. Where the blacktop broke and gave way to gravel at the end of Leyland Road and the deep, dusty ruts of the private drives began, I stashed my bike behind the crumbling stone pillars of the Croyton estate and found the trail through the field. Bright eyes appeared at every turn—skittering field mice; lazy opossums; shambling, guilty-looking raccoons; more deer, grazing on the moonlit leaves of the abandoned orchards.

Like Henry's sleeping face, the earth had been sweetened, every blemish smoothed. I nearly forgot why I'd come and thought instead of going on past the stone pillars and Laura's toward Lord's Lake, maybe, where a solitary rowboat lapped beside a dock belonging to the Catholic retreat house there. My mission seemed meaningless in the face of the night before me. The morning meant nothing; only the mesmerized calm of the night claimed me, and I walked and walked until, abruptly, the path narrowed. The high grasses by the fence scratched my bare legs as I stepped into the stable drive and the sound of my footfalls began chipping rudely at the still night air.

The carriage house lay in front of me. In the gravel drive in my T-shirt and boxers, I gazed up at her open bedroom window. As I wondered whether I should wake Laura or simply retrace my route, the side door of the carriage house opened and a figure slipped out and ran toward me. I'd felt both invisible and intensely protective of this private world I'd discovered. Time had inverted itself in that magic way that occurs when light is no longer the guidepost, and at first I merely observed as if the figure were advancing from a far distance. I did not recognize Laura, although I'm sure I must have known it was she, but I did not hesitate when she came into my arms, her nakedness such a shock that a cold shiver came over me and my teeth actually chattered. Her mouth was on mine before she realized her mistake.

"Oh, Kenny," she said, "it's you."

For a moment, I thought she would run away again, flounce that magnificent body back to the carriage house. As my vision

adjusted to the subtle illuminations of the night, I could see her expression shift rapidly from anticipation to resignation to something harder, more calculated, but she held me tightly by the hand and led me to a spot behind the hedgerow where a nest of silky blankets had been spread. The mosquitoes were fierce those early weeks of summer, but I noticed nothing as we fell together. I had never had the whole of a girl's bare skin against mine before and the feeling, like diving through water, was so overwhelming, I struggled to hold onto consciousness. Her skin was cool, a brilliant white, and smelled of dirt after a long, hard rain. Who knows where desire starts or how one moment a person can be pleasantly weary, enthralled by silence and solitude, and the next, pulled ravenously beneath the surface. Too soon we moved apart, and I plunged into sleep, feeling my arms spread wide as I let the world go.

Morning arrived, gray shadowed and damp. I woke rolled in the dew-soaked blankets—alone and shivering. The sound of a retreating car heading down the gravel driveway made me conscious of my nakedness. I kept my head down and hurried into my damp underclothes and sneakers and lit off through the field. A new crowd was out: cows, rabbits, cats on the hunt, all of them oblivious to my passage through their world. At the stone pillars, I retrieved my bike and pedaled furiously home, hardly noticing as light reclaimed the world, bush by bush, tree by tree. Everything falling back into place.