

FORECLOSURE

PATRICK COLEMAN

The night I told my father I'd beaten my best time in the five hundred meter swim, he told me there was a cabinetmaker who would give me summer work. All year I'd been the only freshman on either team who swam the men's five hundred; everyone was intimidated by the length. Now, of all my friends, I had become the only one with a job. My summer prospects dwindled, and I was moody getting through the last days of school. When Michael told me that no one liked a whiner, he was teasing and he kissed me and said he was sorry, but even his face, like all the others', showed he was glad not to be me.

A week after finals the job began. The cabinetmaker was a woman named Angel. My dad did countertops, granite and marble, and the two of them had worked together on some kitchens. On the first day she took me through a side door into her garage, bright with row after row of hanging fluorescent lights, and set me up on a mortising machine. It was a big green hunk of steel halfway between a table saw and a moon laser. I lined up pieces of wood to the pencil marks she'd made and pulled a handle like it was a slot machine.

After making a few cuts, the shop smelled like smoke. Angel came over from where she'd been gluing something. She leaned in, her long hair almost falling into the machineworks, showed me how to make the first cut go only halfway. "Then you go back, see, and do it again. It puts less stress on the drill. It sets you up for the deeper second cut." She worked the machine with a confidence and speed I

tried to record in my mind and recreate when she wasn't watching.

I made mortises for eight hours, minus the half hour I ate a lunch of cheese sandwiches and President's Choice soda in a lawn chair in her front yard. Angel ate inside at the kitchen table and did paperwork. She apologized for having to work through lunch, saying with a mixture of resentment and pride that it was just how things went when the business was all you. Her neighborhood wasn't far from mine and was mostly similar: post-war tract homes built cheap and fast, now on their third or fourth leg. A few had fresh paint in bright greens, teals, and oranges. Most were the original, now-dirty white with peeling darker trim. Families lived here, so every other front yard had a yellow and red plastic car in it, or a pink slide, or soccer balls and jump ropes. Mothers pushed strollers up and down the block while I ate. Some of them weren't much older than me. Those ones never looked lost or confused like I expected them to be. Often they seemed the happiest, and I didn't get it.

I wondered what Michael was doing. We'd met on the swim team; he did butterfly and IM. He had no plans for the entire summer. I was jealous, but he was also the first boy I'd said I loved, so the feeling was unwelcome and I tried to ignore it.

I rode my bike home at five thirty. My dad and I arrived at the house at the same time. He carried his tool box from the back of his white Ford F150, put it in the garage, and came over to where I was leaving my bike. He stood in front of me, and I squared up before him. He slapped me on the shoulders, fine wood powder lifting from me in a cloud. He said, "Manny, you smell like work."

My hips ached from standing so long, and a muscle under my right shoulder blade would sporadically spasm for the next two days. I saw myself as hunched-over, stoop-shouldered, an old man, ruined by labor. "I smell like crap," I said.

He smacked me lightly on the back of the head and said to watch my language. Then he listened to the house for a minute. It was quiet. Kids a few houses down were singing something. He opened the garage fridge door, pulled out two cans of Modelo, and asked if I'd talked to Angel much. I said no. He motioned me into the side yard through the door in the garage. "After work thing," he whispered to me. "We got five minutes before your mother suspects us." He put the can to his mouth. I drank mine as fast as I could, trying to both impress him with how well I put it down and not give

the impression I'd done it as often as I had. Mom was inside, doing who knows what.

He took the empties and hid them in the bottom of the recycling bin. We went inside, and—exhausted, slightly buzzed—the dinner my mom cooked tasted better than anything. I remember the way my dad kissed her as she took his plate away. He was focused, wolfish, held the back of her neck with one heavy hand and pulled.

Michael was probably out to dinner with his mom. They went out to dinner a lot then; his dad had left a couple years earlier. What was it this night: Thai? Burmese? Persian? What they would eat and enjoy was completely different from anything I'd been raised with. I imagined Daphne Cagayan across town, in the other half of Vista, telling her mother about her new boyfriend. The boyfriend was me: a Mexican boy, one of the nice ones, no, you wouldn't know their parents, yes, he's very sweet, Mom, he's so sweet. They were in a kitchen with bright lights burning in blown-glass shades, making lasagna on granite counters my father hadn't cut and installed, surrounded by lacquered oak cabinets ordered from a manufacturer way out of town.

Daphne demanded a lot of attention, as did keeping up a secret relationship with Michael, along with all the other burdensome work of being fifteen. And now, suddenly, there was work work, the real, daily thing: forty hours a week on top of the laborious management of my actual life. All this activity made the summer pass quickly. I was trying to fit it all in and succeeding.

One morning in July I showed up at Angel's, and she told me to take the day off. She had to meet someone about her mortgage and couldn't leave me in the shop alone. I tried to tell her I'd be fine, I knew what I was doing. It was an insurance thing, she said.

I had my day back. I had no idea what to do with it. The sky was clear, air still cool at nine a.m. but going to warm up nice. I walked to the 7-11 and bought a Slurpee and copies of the AutoTrader, Truck-Trader, and CycleTrader. There was a bench out front where I sat and watched cars come in, get gas, leave. They were all heading somewhere, heading to work. I knew about work. I was like them. I folded the corner of every page with something on it I wanted to own, everything I wanted to drive. Even those fantasy vehicles I chose needed

restoration, improvement; even the things in my dreams needed some work put into them.

When it seemed late enough that he wouldn't be sleeping, I called Michael's house on the payphone. His mom picked up and said he'd gone to a swim workout. I thought about calling Daphne next, which was strange, but instead I caught a bus to the ocean, me and the mothers and the weirdoes who were out in the middle of a Tuesday.

Already the beach was crowded. It would have been good to be less alone. I was wearing my work clothes: tan leather work boots, jeans, a red t-shirt over a white long-sleeve shirt pushed up my forearms. They felt like a mark of distinction. I wasn't supposed to be there. The beach was for the people better off than me, the ones with free time, or money, or on vacation. Everyone else wore clothes they could swim in. I was proud not to, though the ocean looked perfect.

A ways down there was a playground bordered by grass. Around the playground, on the benches, were a few homeless men. One was reading. Another curled up with his backpack hugged to his chest. Behind him was a set of wooden stairs. At the top of the stairs, leaning against the rails, surfers were laughing and studying the water. They were shirtless, smiling, relaxed. They knew how to take their time. One jogged down the steps slowly, on light feet, a white board under one arm. He held the board angled behind his back; the white tail end jutted above his left shoulder, and the narrow nose pointed away from his right hip to the ground. It looked like an asymmetrical pair of wings. I lay down in the grass and, using the flimsy rag paper magazines as a pillow, went to sleep. When I woke up later, dew had soaked the last twenty pages of the AutoTrader, making one large smudge of the specialty and luxury cars.

The crowd had doubled. It was warm but frantic feeling: all those people moving around, the different faces they made toward their friends, toward strangers. I left, up the stairs where the surfers had been, and kept going inland.

The traffic along Pacific Highway was constant. Everything glinted with the afternoon sun. I walked down the street, looking in the windows of the squarish buildings: an accountant's, a wheel shop, a music store, Bessie's Cafe. A strung-out looking woman with three kids passed me, all holding hands in order from biggest to smallest, like ducks. I heard her say, "Just hold your horses and we'll get your

fucking grilled cheese. But you're going to eat a salad if it kills you." There was a used car lot. I checked the prices against the ones in my Trader magazines. A fat man with shining, thin hair came out and asked if I needed help. I said I was just looking. Looking wasn't free, he said; if I wasn't buying I needed to beat it. I called him an asshole under my breath and left.

Across the street was a big mission-style building, or I should say, it was a stucco cube with mission touches: a scallop-topped facade, mud-colored tile, the illusion of being supported by large, rough-hewn lengths of wood. One corner of it was a barber shop. The other door was under a horizontal awning, and above it an inverted-L sign read, in faded neon, *The Dolphin Hotel*. I knew about the Dolphin; it was a joke among our friends, a tease. Just speaking the name was titillating. It was the only hotel we'd ever heard of that listed room rates by the hour. Even the palm tree in front seemed to list away from it.

On the corner, in the shade of short palm bushes and an alder tree, Angel's blue and chrome Dodge truck was parked. I wondered if this was where her bank was. Then the door of the truck opened and she stepped out, and I tried to walk casually, in a way that obscured my face, down the alley. When I was out of sight, where it smelled like piss and oil, I ran around the block in time to see Angel walk into the Dolphin Hotel. First I wondered if this was the job she mentioned. Then, excitedly, I thought *affair* and then, even, *prostitute*. It never occurred to me to think *who*.

I crept out from the alley and pretended to look at the prices in the barber shop window so I could lean back and glimpse into the lobby of the hotel. The glare was too intense. All I could see was the street behind me, the stereo-and-rims shop.

It was in the reflection that I saw a white F150 with a toolbox in the bed pull up against the curb. It was my father's truck. Before he could open the door, I was down the street, looking for a place to hide. I pushed through the door into Yard Records under its big yellow, red, and green sign. There were two magazine racks just inside, and I pretended to look at those, glancing back toward the hotel through the window. There went my father, quickly, into the Dolphin.

A deep voice coughed behind me. I turned. It was a big Samoan guy, probably three hundred pounds. He had dreadlocks and a goatee and wore a Jamaican-flag sarong. Behind him I saw row after row

of bongs, in teal, in red, in green. He crossed his arms, smiled just a bit. "Bro," he said, "we don't need any trouble right now. Come back in a few years when you're legal." He nodded his head toward the door. "Thanks for shopping."

I left and went straight to the bus station. The car magazines I'd been carrying all day, those I threw away.

I stayed out until it got dark. I wandered places, didn't see much. Even though I hadn't worked, my legs ached and my shoulders thrummed with tension. I kept telling myself I shouldn't be surprised, but I was.

When I got home, Daphne was seated on one side of our circular dining table. I'd forgotten she was coming. My mother sat on the other side. My dad was on the couch with a beer. The oven was ticking, and the ticking moved inside me, I began to tick. I smelled pizza. My mom said hi. Daphne came across the room in her white summer dress. Her skin was smooth and flashed like polished ash. She had a big smile, just for me: it was my smile, or it felt like mine though it wasn't. When she went to kiss me, I hugged her instead. I forced a smile over her shoulder at my dad's forefinger-to-thumb okay sign. The smile sank into my gut and began ticking, too. Daphne released me from her arms.

My mother stood up. She was puffy around the eyes, tired. She pulled her green sweater straight, the one with Piglet on the front. "Come to bed, Vince," she said to my dad. "We promised them the television." She said goodnight to Daphne and me.

My dad grunted his way off the couch and went past Daphne and me to put his beer can on the kitchen counter. He hung his arm around my mother's hips. "Don't have too much fun, you two, okay?"

"We won't," I said.

He stuck his mouth against my mother's cheek and made loud kissing sounds as they went down the dark hallway. At the end, they disappeared. A light cast out of their bedroom a moment. Then the door shut. They were both laughing, laughing together.

I asked Daphne what she'd brought to watch. I didn't want to think anymore, as soon as possible. She pulled two DVD cases out of her purse. One was an action movie involving plastic surgery and secret identities. The other—a comedy, though I only saw in it tragic possibilities—centered on a man who'd lost his ability to lie.

"I wasn't sure what kind of movie you'd want," Daphne said. She looked at me expectantly.

"No, this is good," I said. "Both of these look good."

I took the pizza from the oven. I was starving. I was exhausted. There was a wash of pain through my muscles. Even my ankles were tense. I liked standing on them, though—easing into the tension, making them begin to hurt and then rocking back.

She knew where the plates were, in the cabinet above the dishwasher. I gave her two slices, myself three. She went to the fridge and two-handed a liter of Coke. She'd brought that, too; my mom always went generic—waste of money, she said, though she never complained about beer.

"Sylvia and John broke up," Daphne said. She screwed the top back onto the soda bottle.

"Yeah?" I said.

"Yeah," she said, "last night. Crazy, isn't it?"

Sylvia was her friend. I'd only talked to her a little, one night when we all were drinking in the movie theater parking lot. John was just a guy on the soccer team I didn't know. "Crazy."

"They seemed so happy," she said. "I guess it just goes to show."

"Yeah, I guess," I said. I couldn't stop a big yawn from coming on. She sipped her soda, standing there in the kitchen, and gave me a look that was a motherly look, a you're-such-a-male-but-also-cute look. It was a strange thing, to be judged and forgiven in one glance and only because I had a dick between my legs. The thoughts I'd been thinking—that Sylvia and John were none of my business, that Daphne thought I'd care, that she was playing house in my parents' kitchen and with me, that she'd make a short, plump, and difficult mother—they didn't let her off that easy.

She walked up to me, that kissing look in her eyes. I put a piece of pizza in my mouth. "You've had a long day," she said, thinking I'd been at work, a misconception I didn't correct. "Do you want to watch the movie now?"

I didn't wait to swallow before I said yes, showing her chewed dough, the grout of tomato paste between my teeth.

We started the movie and ate on the couch. I think it was the comedy. We got through ten, fifteen minutes of it—enough time to eat, to drink some soda, to burp quietly and blow it out the sides of our mouths. Soon Daphne was huddled up against me, pulling a

blanket over us. She was looking at me more than she was looking at the TV. I buckled, and we started kissing.

She kept stopping and saying, "Do you like that?" Her leg hooked over my knee, and it pulled on me. Her hand was on my chest. It moved to my stomach, and then under my shirt. I tried laughing at things that were still happening on the television, but she wouldn't get annoyed; she just kept going. Her fingertips pushed under the elastic band of my boxers. She lingered there at the pebbled skin. I kept thinking she wouldn't. I'd picked her because she hadn't seemed like the type. I thought of Michael, the way we would talk about what felt good, what felt less good. Nothing felt bad, just less good. With Daphne, there was nothing I could say, nothing to talk about, no way to.

I asked, "Are you sure you want to do this?" She said she did. "Why me?" I asked. It was the only honest thing I'd said all night.

She said, "Because you're nice. You treat me good. I want to make you happy." Then she had her hand on me. She moved clumsily. I thought to tell her no, to tell her that I didn't treat her well at all, but the clumsiness felt good: I'd want her to grip tighter or move more to one spot or the other, but she didn't know. That frustration drove me, and I moved my hips in ways to communicate where I wanted her hand and how hard. The frustration started feeling like anger, and I liked it. I felt I should reciprocate and slipped my hand down the back of her jeans until I found a slick, warm seam, which I had barely touched before she said no and pulled on my arm. I didn't understand but I relaxed. Later, I came. She nestled into my shoulder, proud of what she had accomplished.

I cleaned up in the bathroom, avoiding my reflection. When I came out, I looked at the watery, changeable light emanating from the bottom of my parents' door. Back in the living room, Daphne said she had a surprise. I wanted to say I couldn't handle anything else. I was avoiding looking at her.

She held out her hand, and on her open palm were two cigarettes.

We went to the corner of my block and sat on the curb. I lit mine first. She held hers out to my lighter without the filter in her mouth. She'd never done this before. It gave me an easy way to discount her in my head, which I took. She hardly smoked hers. Instead, she clung to my

arm. I blew smoke out my nose so it would roll off my chest across her face. Already, though, my body was waking back up to her touch. I inhaled deeply, held it low and long like it was buddha, until my vision went soft. The cigarettes were menthols, and my lungs felt like a wintergreen hell.

A group of kids walked past on the other side of the street. One whispered, "One sec," and then he trotted toward us. I stiffened and shook Daphne from my arm. The kid was probably my age, maybe a little younger. He wore an oversized blue-and-yellow Chargers jersey. My hips tingled.

He stopped a few feet away and said, "You guys gonna be here a while?"

I looked at Daphne, who I felt stiffen, and then back. "Maybe," I said.

The kid nodded. His jersey kept sliding forward, in a way that made it look like a sleep shirt. He lifted it by the shoulders and resettled it. "That's cool, this isn't my neighborhood. But I tell you what: some shit's going down. This faggot's been fucking with my shit." I flinched and then flexed, and wondered if Daphne had felt it. "I don't want any pigs showing." He looked up and down the street. "So what if I give you a dime bag or twenty bucks to act like you see nothing?"

I didn't want any part in neighborhood drama. I was about to tell him not to sweat any of it when he said, "If it makes a difference, I don't have the dime on me. I'd have to bring it by tomorrow or something. But the twenty, I have that now. I'm asking a favor, so I owe you something."

He leaned back and tugged on his shirt like a salesman pulling down the vest of his three-piece suit. He was bargaining with me. Any fear vanished. I took the twenty bucks, and he rejoined his buddies. They walked to a house a few down from where we sat. Daphne asked if that stuff was normal here.

"Shh," I said. "Wait and see." We hid behind a bush.

In the orange of the street light, the house looked mossy and green. The kids walked up the driveway past three short, half-dead cypresses. The kid in the Chargers jersey went to the front door and knocked. Daphne leaned her chin on my shoulder and, without thinking, I shook her off.

The front door opened. The vague shape of a short person was

outlined in the doorway. I assumed they were talking. The other kids milled around in the yard. The kid in the jersey danced back and forth. All at once, the kid in the jersey reached into the dark doorway and dragged out not an outline but a person: a fattish boy, one I'd seen scooting up and down the block on a skateboard, on his knees.

The fat boy hit the concrete, covering his face with his arms. The other kids knelt on him. The kid in the jersey danced around, stepped in for a punch, danced back.

From some indistinct place came a terrible scream, the kind that hits your eardrums and flattens them—flattens all sound after. Even from across the street it was piercing. Another shape stepped from the doorway. It was a girl, a little girl in pink pajamas. Like her brother, she was pudgy. The scream turned into a name: Teddy. Most of the kids took off running. The one in the jersey, he kept pacing. For a moment I thought he was going to hit the girl, and I almost got up. Instead, he kicked the kid on the ground one more time and ran after his friends.

Daphne's presence next to me had gone cold. Without looking away from what was happening, she said, "We need to call the police." I didn't say anything. I had twenty dollars in my pocket, and my legs were burning from crouching so long.

I went back to work for Angel the next day because what else was I supposed to do? Half of each check went to my parents. My dad was getting fewer jobs and my mom liked to joke that I was eating too much not to chip in. I'd heard them talking, though: putting off a house payment, letting an insurance policy slip. I'd seen the notices from the bank, the hanging signs falling from the sky and into the yards of other houses in the neighborhood. The one comfort I had was in knowing I could help. When I was around Angel, I tried to pretend I didn't know what was going on. It was easier than I expected. Within a day, I knew nothing.

That Friday I sanded drawer fronts for eight straight hours: first with heavy grit sandpaper, then light grit, then by hand until the wood was plush under my fingertips and the sharp edges were eased. It wasn't especially hard to stand still and sand, but doing it for the day, the mental wrangling of sticking to that spot, moving the sander over the wood carefully, not letting fatigue cause a mistake—it had

an effect. *That* was the work. My body ached, but that was nothing.

It being Friday we ended a little early. She asked me what was left, and I made a mistake. I said, "Some easements," and she laughed and said, "No, that's something else," without telling me the difference. Something about the word *easements* stuck, linking it forever with mistake, with shame, with failure and hurt.

Angel wrote me a check. I was ready to leave—Michael and I were heading down to the beach—but I also liked waiting for my check in Angel's kitchen. She'd made the built-ins herself: solid, usable cabinets made of ash polished to iridescence. She lived alone. It was a small kitchen, a kitchen for one. She was always scrounging for another job to make the mortgage, but every few days she managed to mention how she owned every tool in her shop outright, that she had few expenses and obligations—all in a way that showed how hard she fought, in the world and in her own mind, to keep working in an industry overrun with men. While I waited for my pay, I studied her cabinets hoping I'd learned something new about how they were made and what functions they suited best. Mostly I'd learned how much time they took. The soreness in my body—like a twist in my bones, that deep—had me in a trance. My mind felt cool, heavy-lidded.

She walked me out, holding the screen door. "Tell your father I've got a new client who might need some counters," she said. She let the screen door slam shut behind me. "He should give me a call."

"Sure, sure thing," I said. My stomach rose in my throat a moment, and I imagined a hand forcing it back down, deeper than it had been originally. "I'll let him know." Angel pulled her black hair up into a high ponytail and slipped the tie off her wrist. It was hot out. The sawdust on my exposed skin had mingled with my sweat to form a paste.

Angel studied my face a long time. I tried to be distracted, looking at something on the ground. Eventually I looked at hers. She had big brown eyes and thin eyebrows. Her cheeks were high and heavy and cut a harsh line toward her mouth. She had an intelligent, intense face. Behind it, there was a space that I didn't know and was partly scared of. The length of her gaze made a strange arousal course through my body. When she spoke, her voice had dropped a register from her work voice, her boss voice: "You're doing good, Manuel." She wiped her calloused fingers across my forehead and held them

out, showing me the cake of sawdust and sweat. "Better than most would," she said.

I scuffed my shoes on the ground. "I'm trying to pick it up as fast as I can," I said. I knew my modesty was ingratiating, was looking for further praise.

She started to say something else but stopped herself. Her expression shifted back to one I was used to. "Looks like you've got a friend," she said, pointing with the same hand. Michael stood on the sidewalk, a backpack's straps cinched hard against his shoulders. His hair was blonding from all the time he spent in the sun, and it was parted and swayed up in the front like he was always going fast, and I liked that almost as much as the places where his legs touched against the fabric of his white boardshorts.

"I'll see you Monday," I said to Angel. I went over to Michael and said hey and we slapped five. The option of saying hello in other ways and not doing so made the brief touch burst across my fingers and palm, and I actually checked if my hand was wet.

We rode the bus to the beach, which took about an hour. Michael told me about his day, another in a series of days which consisted of sleeping in, reading graphic novels, and taking walks. I told him about mine. I'd been stationary, sanding the day away, sanding it into powder. I talked more about the things I learned from Angel: the people on the local radio station she knew, the owner of Filiburto's whose daughter was ill, the old man at the lumber yard who hugged her at each visit and criticized her selections because she was a woman. She told me about her first husband, a physicist who repaired Volvos. She talked often about men she'd been with who were now scattered around town. One was even dead. Just being on the bus passing through the city, I felt like I knew it better, that my range was expanding, that I was ranging.

At the beach, we swam. We were swimmers; it's what we did. The tops of thunderheads appeared to the east and the usual onshore wind dropped, allowing the surface of the waves to remain smooth. It was hot and the water was good: cool, a clear pale green like the flesh of a cucumber. It was clean and didn't hide anything. We body surfed, the surface of the wave against our chests keeping our heads above water. When we were tired of that, we stood near each other and dove under waves at the same time. Down there it was dark and loud. He'd find my face, put his lips on it. I'd kiss back. The suction

of the wave passing overhead pulled at our hair. His skin was cool, like a dead person's; only our mouths and the insides of our mouths, when touched, were warm. Then we'd separate, surface. Michael would tease me about licking my lips. "The salt tastes good," I said, scanning the shore to see who could see us.

Lying on the beach, he seemed bigger than me. I had my head down and eyes closed, studying the brilliant red of the backs of my own eyelids, when he said he was bored.

"Do something else," I said, feigning disregard, guarding against the possibility that part of what bored him was me—always guarding against that.

"No, I'm not bored now. I'm bored all the time."

This I couldn't believe. His days sounded perfect. I sat up and said so. Far off a lifeguard droned into a megaphone for the swimmers to please leave the surf zone.

"Quit your job," he said, looking at me hard. "We'd have my place to ourselves. All day. Every day." He laughed at this. His eyebrows raised in a half-suggestive, half-hopeful way. I smiled. The prospect of extended privacy—which we had enjoyed more than enough of already—was tempting: all that sand stuck to pebbled skin, and the sharp tan lines, and the flushed feeling of swimming in salt water, how it mingled with the feeling of coming. I told him I couldn't.

He looked out at the ocean and said he knew. I scanned his back, the moist valley along his spine, like it was territory to which I was being denied access. Working made me sore: in my legs, in my shoulders and neck, between the blades on my back, sore at the time everyone else was enjoying in any way they wanted. But I didn't want to stop it. My parents needed the money, but even if we were rich I think I would have wanted to keep on. The money wasn't it anymore.

"What about the princess?" he asked next, scooping sand with his left hand to bury his right. He meant Daphne.

"What about her?" I said. "I haven't seen her all week. She's not cutting into our time."

"She is a little," he said. "How could she not? You could dump her."

"It's not that simple," I said. At first I'd taken a scientific pleasure in being with her, with kissing her: what pressure against which lip, what movement of my tongue elicited a noise, a harder pull

against my back. I'd report my findings to Michael after those dates. It was funny, then. It was funny to take something so haloed with emotion and desire and discover it was mechanical. But now when I thought about Daphne, I thought of her jerking me off, of that girl's scream, and of everything I couldn't think of. Since that night, I'd avoided her calls as much as possible, unsure how to handle them.

"What's not simple? *Daphne, I hate you you little self-absorbed bitch. We're breaking up.* I can write it down if you need a script."

"One, when I do it I'm not going to be an ass like that. She's not a bad person."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah. And two, you just don't understand. My mom's been nicer than she's ever been since Daphne started coming over. It makes her happy. My dad, too. It's easy for you to talk."

Michael said something quiet that I couldn't make out, and when I asked him to repeat it he said, only barely louder: "It is *not* easy for me to talk."

I interpreted his hurt as feigned, and I said, "That's *all* you do, Michael. You're, like, gifted in the mouth. You're a talk marathoner."

I expected a laugh, but instead he said in a deadpan, "That isn't talking."

When I asked him what he meant, he said, "That's bullshit-talking. It's different. You should know the difference between talk and bullshit."

I didn't know what to say. It made me question this conversation—was this talking, or was it bullshit? I'd been under the impression it was the former. Instead, I remembered how willing to bend around my time and interests Daphne had been. I could call her and she'd be over within a half hour, usually dropped off by her mother. I could cancel plans and she might feign hurt but moved on quickly. Every favor I asked, even if it was to be left alone for a couple days, was given. Michael was beginning to act like he had a right to me.

We lay on the sand for a while, not speaking. Soon we were back to our normal selves again, without any way to mark the transition. When I had to leave I asked if he wanted to ride back together. My skin was scratchy with salt. He squinted at me through his fingers. "No," he said. "I'll stay. More swimming to be done. More sun to catch. More of everything. Have fun." He picked something off his stomach. "Tell Daphne your boyfriend says to be kind."

I said I was sorry I had to go. I must have said it five times. He said not to worry about it, and halfway through the bus ride I wasn't anymore.

I had told my mother if Daphne called to tell her I was out. Whenever the phone rang, she looked at me with that same judge-and-forgive look. Only one time was it actually Daphne. After she hung up, my mother turned to me, pointing: "I'm not going to say anything."

My dad was reading at the table. "Then don't," he said. "It's their business."

She ran a cloth over the kitchen table. "I'm not saying anything to you either." She threw the cloth in the sink and walked to her room. The door clicked quietly, like the locks on a safe after hours of thieves' work.

About a week later I broke up with Daphne. When I told Michael I'd ended things with her, he surprised me by not celebrating. Instead, he asked how I'd done it.

"I told her it was over."

"And she just said, 'Oh, yeah, cool?'"

We were at his mom's house, sitting on deck chairs in the backyard. I was sitting cross-legged on mine, and he was lying back.

"No, not really. It was like she couldn't get it. It took forever. Seriously, an hour."

He had sunglasses on and was staring off at the sky, expressionless, when he asked, "Did she ask why?"

I said she did.

"What'd you tell her?"

"It was tricky. First I said I couldn't explain it. *That* didn't work. Then I said it just didn't feel right, that it didn't feel like *that* kind of relationship. But she still didn't get it. She kept coming up with ways we could stay together. So basically I had to tell her I didn't like her at all. I said we couldn't even be friends anymore."

None of this was true. She'd taken it well, with pride. She'd asked some questions, and only a few minutes into my attempts to answer them she interrupted, saying, "No, it's fine. I understand all I need to understand," and then she hung up. Everything I was telling

Michael was to make him feel better about it, to try to make me feel better, too.

Michael only said, "Hm." He may have fallen asleep for a while then, or was only silent and thinking. For some reason that little noise irritated me—its dismissiveness, its privacy, that he had no other thoughts he'd choose to share with me—and I let that irritation grow until I stood up suddenly, put on my shirt, and told him I was leaving. He barely moved, just said, "See you." I knew something had shifted, that he knew something about me now, something I didn't know about myself but wanted to keep that way. He had his eyes closed then, but I was sure that the next time he looked he'd find something different than what he'd seen before.

When I got home, my mother was lying on the couch with her head on an armrest. She had a romance novel in her hand. Her face seemed slightly worked up—tensed around the lips, her cheekbones cutting sharper lines than usual because she was holding her breath, wondering what would happen next. I trained my eyes on the ground and headed for my room.

"I think that girl of yours called again," she said. "Someone keeps hanging up whenever I pick up the phone. I can hear her breathing."

I stopped in the hallway. I knew who was calling, but I wished it was only Michael, calling to apologize. I would have said I was sorry, too—then. But he didn't call, not for a long time. Why couldn't it have been Michael? Why couldn't it have been my mother saying, *Your boyfriend Michael called. He's so funny, so nice.* I watched that possibility dwindle until it winked out. There was a stale burnt smell in the air, something left over from a botched dinner I was glad to have missed.

The door at the end of the hall was lit from behind. My father was in there.

"She's not my goddamn girl," I said. "Why can't you get it? Christ—" I thought I was going to say something else, but nothing else was there. I'd gotten ahead of myself. I heard my mother get up off the couch, the creak of the springs, the tinkle of her earrings.

"Turn around," she said. I didn't want to. I didn't want to see her. She said it again, and I turned. "You want to rethink this attitude? What's going on with you, Manny?" she said. Her hands were

on her hips but her eyes seemed more puzzled than anything else. She was watching me like I was some strange thing. She was studying me.

"All you fucking women look out for each other first." It was a clumsy attempt to cause hurt. I didn't wait to see her reaction. I turned and went into my room and slammed the door. How much I wanted to hate her. How simple it would feel to have a mother who hated you, to have that pain tell you exactly where you stood. She knocked on the door, and I cursed her every way I could think, into my pillow. If someone had been listening to those curses and following up on them like prayers, my mother would have been dead within the week.

After a time, the soft padding of her feet on the carpet moved away from the door. I felt the edge wear off, knowing that she wasn't right there, that I'd lost my audience.

Twenty minutes later, there was a different knock. Without a pause, the door opened. I sensed my father's hefty body settle on the floor next to my bed. The sweet onion stink of sweat blossomed around my head. I pulled myself out of my pillow and looked at him. His lips were pressed into a line, making his black moustache turn down. His skin had darkened over the summer. The pouches of skin under his eyes looked thin and weak. But the eyes themselves—maybe it was just the light, or a fluke, you never can be too certain—they were bright, pleased. Every smile line and crevice and pore made my nerves fire, my brain short; they made my mouth dry and my fingertips tingle and my muscles contract like they would crush the bones they were lashed to. His face showed a kind of pride in what he saw, and each of its features nicked away at the parts of me I'd considered solid. I forced myself to look at him. I forced myself because it hurt me.

"I know you've been working hard, Manny," he said. "And I know you're tired. We all get tired," he said. I thought about going back to my job the next day: Angel telling me what to sand and how and how long, the aches working themselves into my legs and back. I would let her. It sounded good. I had a talent for pain: for bringing it on myself, for bearing it. "But that doesn't mean," my dad said tonelessly, "you can treat your mother that way."

I couldn't look away from him. I knew as soon as I did, it would be a long time before I could look anyone in the face again.

* * *

The day of the last swim meet, that previous spring, returned and returns. Everyone was there, cycling before my eyes like prizes in a game machine. Each was on a glittering tray behind glass, and the machine would take all the quarters I could find without ever really giving me a chance. But that's the illusion of those machines: a chance.

It was raining. The rain was warm enough, but the gray skies made the pool appear milky and rough. There was a cool, constant wind. It was May, and nobody's heart was in it anymore. A crowd of people was in the bleachers. My mom and dad were there. Six young men lined up behind the starting blocks, ready for the fifty meter butterfly event. Their skin was goosed, nipples puckered, and they either stretched and rubbed themselves to stay warm or held a stoic pose with their arms stiffly at their sides. Michael was behind the lane four block. He swung both arms behind him. The seam-like depression running from the notch of his clavicle to where his stomach ended at his Speedo pulled taut. He looked my way. I wanted to hug his chest, to be held, was only just learning to do without.

I waited, sitting on a low wall, preparing myself. Once again, I'd be swimming the five hundred meter as the only person in the water. It was unnerving, knowing that if anyone looked at the pool the only one they could focus on was me. It felt like a waste of everyone's time.

Daphne walked past. She wasn't wearing her swim cap and her hair was clumped and wet. I had headphones on, and she waved until I took them off. "Good luck, Manny," she said. She had her parka off, over one arm. I knew, like anyone with a body knows, by the way her hips rocked as she walked away, by the way the muscles moved under the blue of her suit, the way her naked legs crossed as she stepped so her feet landed on an invisible tight rope, that she was putting on a show for me, that she wanted me to look. Summer was a long time to be seen as unattached and uninterested. Daphne would make things easier. My dad's teasing was now being disguised as advice: "You're not so bad looking. Come on. Ask ten girls out and one's bound to say yes."

Michael swam his race. The sound was loud, like the ocean, and the asterisks of churning water moved down the length of the pool and back like they were marking footnotes to something I didn't care

to read about. Then it was silent again, and the chop in the water, stilled by the lane lines, disappeared. Michael came in second. He looked disappointed. We crossed paths, him going to the bleachers, me to the starting block. I wanted to make it up to him somehow.

I stretched behind the block. The smoky gray of the sky was reflected in the surface of the water. I waited for my signal and climbed onto the block. The wet pebbled surface felt good on my feet. I positioned them: left on the front edge, right toward the rear. Rain pecked against my back. On either side of me were empty blocks, no competitors. I crouched and hooked my fingers over the front lip of the diving block. My legs were sprung tight and ready to move.

The pistol fired and I leapt into the water. The feeling I had for the next six minutes was a feeling I'd come back to for a long time: one of quieting, of keeping my thoughts and heart slow; one of conserving energy, of hearing the steady ticking of time and feeling nothing about it, no panic for oxygen; one of pushing out of my mind the presence of others, which included myself. It was the feeling of moving through water alone.