

I

2011

Every day, they pass the old farm, and every day Ro wonders if anyone lives there. The buildings show signs of desertion--the barn roof of rusty tin, the worn wood siding of the house, unpainted pickets on the fence. There are no hens, no cows, not even a cat skulking in the long dry grass clumped at the corners of the barn.

Then, one morning, she sees two old people working in the yard. The man, white-headed, pushes a hand tiller through soil as rich and black as fudge cake crumbles. The woman wears a sunbonnet, the pioneer kind that wraps around her face from the top and sides. It's a bleached white bonnet tied securely under her chin with a blue ribbon, and when she turns, her face inside it is a flower, round and bright.

"How old do you think they are?" Ro asks Cam, who's driving.

"Not as old as they look," he says.

But Ro's thinking they're like a man and woman from the Thirties, maybe, when her grandfather's generation abandoned the farm for the city, and their parents, left behind, made do. Ro's mother would have said that the old couple had found a seam in time back then, and what Ro sees is their image leaking into the present like light around a door that doesn't quite fit.

This idea pleases Ro. She'd like to believe that nothing is ever really lost. It gives her a tipped, hopeful feeling.

*

2009

Cam is walking by the Serpentine in Hyde Park when the call comes. It's one of those misted English days, not quite spring, when the trees in the park are fuzzed expectantly, as though someone has exhaled green smoke into the webbing of bare limbs.

A day like this makes him conscious of the poets who preceded him here, breathing a version of this air, smelling the moist, chill probability of the new season. Each step he takes places him among them, along a continuum of feet, of observation, too, trees, water, birds, people. The nearby traffic, whizzing along streets slick with rain-shine, doesn't dispel the sensation. All poets occupy their own time, but also this ribbon of connected time, leading forward into a world whose poetry cannot now be imagined, even guessed at, not its form nor its language and definitely not its content.

For an irrational moment, he feels exalted. He shouldn't be here at all, in London, on a Monday. He ought to be at school, working, and would be if he hadn't just spent the weekend here with Angelica, his tutor's wife. An altogether brilliant weekend, actually, and not the first, although it was the first time he'd been inside her house.

Cam stops briefly to examine the peculiar mossy clumps clotting the water's edge. Brownish tendrils trail beneath the gleaming surface for more than a few feet, reaching toward the invisibility of deeper pools.

Angelica calls her arrangement with Michael an open marriage and it suits Cam to believe her. If this were Texas, he might look at the situation more closely. He might have his doubts. He likes Michael. He wouldn't want to hurt him.

Cam's own circumstances are more sharply incised. He has a girl back home. (Doesn't everyone?) A girl, Rose, rooted in real life, no way a part of this dream, which is how he thinks of his time abroad, his fellowship. A time apart.

This kind of thinking allows the investigation of many desires. It allows construction of a Cameron who drains experience of every possibility, pouring it all into his work. He wishes it were true. Wishes the vessel into which he excretes (a more accurate image) were made of lasting material, gleaming surfaces.

Home's reality requires a different version of himself, a person who will chuck it all and go back, not for Ro, so much, but for Greg, his little brother, getting sicker every day.

His dad's been home--twice--hitching both times from Kabul on the company plane. But Ro and his mother are united in telling Cam to stay. "You'll be done in a month. There's nothing you can do here," Ro says.

He has accepted that. He would feel better about it, though, if he were less aware of how much he wants to finish out the fellowship, enjoy the perks of remaining--not just the long boozy discussions of craft, but the way their whole culture here values poetry. And then, of course, Angelica.

Cam stops to light a cigarette. Ro detests the habit, but people here still smoke. Angelica smokes. He looks out at the platinum sheen of the water, deserted still, too cold for boating. He has never rowed across it, never wanted to see from that closer perspective the detritus lying below.

It's then that his phone--unwelcome insect--buzzes against his thigh. Ro's words take only a few seconds and through them he stands without moving.

And then he does what he will always regret. He begins walking away. Away from the lake, the park, down Edinburgh Gate and across the Brompton Road, although he will never remember doing that--crossing, avoiding the cars, emerging on the other side unscathed, oblivious. He becomes aware of where he is halfway along Sloane Street, where Pont Street intersects. He has a moment then to change his mind, to hail a cab and begin the process of leaving--the train to Oxford, clothes, passport, airplane ticket--but he doesn't. Instead, he turns toward Pavilion Road, plods down it until he comes to the shiny red door of a tiny brown mews house. He pushes the button and hears the peremptory bleat somewhere deep inside.

Tears are coursing down his face by the time Angelica, still in her blue satin wrapper, opens the door.

*

2008

The plink of the aluminum bat--D sharp--brings Ro to her feet, but no worries, Greg's got it. Cam grins down at her as she resumes her seat. His thigh is warm and slightly sweaty against hers.

The seventh grade game on this overcast April Saturday has populated the stands around them with otherwise job-squeezed dads in full liberated voice. Greg's dad, Kevin, would be here, too, if Halliburton hadn't sent him to Afghanistan. The boys' mother, Linnie, works weekends selling houses, so Ro and Cam have child patrol for their Saturday entertainment.

Ro doesn't mind. She loves Greg. She feels an almost proprietary thrill when he fields a hot one--isn't that the term?--slings it accurately to first base. Baseball has expanded her vocabulary, previously far too bookish and riddled with the Italian words used in musical notation. Ro is a

pianist, a promising one, according to her professors. She is less sure about that. Recitals make her conscious of her nerves like piano strings tuned sharp, well past the point of sweet balance if not quite yet to the snapping point.

The brothers are close despite the nine-year difference in age. Cam watches with admiration--and, Ro guesses, a little envy--as Greg executes maneuvers with a grace that he can't equal. Mainly, though, the boys share a love of words in serial stories they invent that never end. They'll do it in the car, picking up and expanding a thread from one day to another, while Ro listens. She feels privileged to have this glimpse into the male imagination, so different from her childhood world of pretty dolls, books and piano scales.

Greg illustrates the stories, tacks the pen and ink drawings on the walls of his room in between posters of his favorite athletes. He and Cam walk around reviewing the action, thinking of plot twists. Ro doesn't care for the level of bloodshed the tales require, but she likes to think Cam's tenderness with the boy shows what a good father he will be some day.

She and Cam have been a couple since the night her roommate dragged her to a poetry reading the second week of freshman year at Rice. Cam--only a sophomore, then--had reminded her of a blue heron when he stood. In faded denim, his tall, slightly stooped figure held that kind of stillness. Then he began to read and she noticed how the overhead light fell across the planes of his face, hooding his eyes so that he seemed exotic, almost foreign, and she began to listen.

*

2009

At noon on the third day after Greg's funeral, Ro is playing hostess at Cam's house, refreshing glasses of iced tea. Drop-ins have been gathering in the living room all week, often

until nearly eight o'clock at night. But they're not the only ones. From the moment Greg died, volunteers from Linnie's church have been arriving in teams, like caterers with a specialty menu.

Today, Linnie is hunched on the sofa beside one of them, a friend from Bible study. Both blonde heads bow to the older woman's inaudible murmur. Occasionally, one or the other will nod.

Ro knows very little about organized religion, since her parents weren't members of a church. She'd only been to services a couple of times, on the Sunday of a sleep-over with one or another friend. It didn't matter to her which denomination--Methodist, Baptist, Episcopalian (once)--she liked the music, the singing, the hymns. It seemed to her that's what everyone liked.

One day, she asked her father why their family didn't go and he said he'd been "churched out" as a kid. Too many forced revivals in the small west Texas town where he grew up. Her mother had a different reason. Fran had been raised a Catholic, and had fallen away in college over certain teachings and what she called "the thoughtless arrogance of sermons." When pressed, Fran would say that she felt more spiritually elevated in the Arboretum, even with the West Loop traffic whizzing by, than she ever had at Mass.

Around five o'clock, Dr. Bailey, Linnie's pastor, arrives. With the last finger sandwich in hand, he settles his large body into the green vinyl recliner that Cam's dad, Kevin, occupies when he's at home. Kevin, like Cam, missed the funeral, and he's expected on the weekend.

Ro can deal with that, but she wears the combined absence of Cam and Greg like an anvil, cold and very heavy, pulling at the center of her chest. Returning to the kitchen for more food, she is mildly surprised not to be tilted forward from the weight.

The door swings toward her, then, and Cam pushes through--unshaven, his fair hair matted, blue smudges beneath his eyes. The duffel over his shoulder collides with the corner of a cabinet, rattling the saucers.

Behind Ro, Linnie makes a choking sound. Her cheeks are dark and wet as she stumbles toward him. In the room that has grown silent, the smack of her slap is almost as shocking as the fact of it.

The pastor arrives at Linnie's side with surprising agility. His fingers indent the soft flesh of her bare upper arm, lightly, but she's not finished. "How could you?" Her voice is low. "I told him you were coming, but you weren't, were you? You're selfish to the bone, Cameron. It's a terrible sin."

Cam's head droops like he's been hung by his collar on a hook.

But Ro knows the truth. Ro is the selfish one, not Cam. She kept telling him not to come. She wanted him to finish all the things he'd begun over there. Finish and be done with them.

The following days at Ro's small apartment disappear into a stream of movies, junk food, beer. Ro has never seen Cam drink so steadily. He stumbles on the steps and sleeps drenched in sour-smelling sweat.

She has taken a week's vacation from her classes, claiming a death in the family, which is almost true. In the daytime, she leaves only to buy food, or meet with two after school students whose lessons she couldn't cancel. Whenever she tries to talk to Cam about his mother, about the strain Linnie's under, about how she hadn't really meant it, he burrows down further into the sofa. When Linnie calls, Ro is the one who receives her weepy apologies.

On Friday, the 4PM lesson stands her up and when Ro returns home, *Finding Nemo* is playing silently on the TV. Cam is in his usual spot, wrapped tightly in her ancient fraying quilt. She looks down on him for a moment, the question mark of his body under the quilt. And she remembers the college boy who slept after sex as if he'd landed in a heap at the bottom of a sharp incline. He had been sensitive then, too, but certain in the way he took the sound of language--not so different from music, after all--and used it to open her eyes. Less than two years ago, that's all it's been.

No point in waking him, she'll just go and grab a juice from the fridge. But her shoe, as she edges past, lands on something next to the old box she uses for a coffee table. The object, plastic, squirts away, bounces off a chair leg. A pill bottle. Empty.

Ro flings herself against Cam. He's breathing, barely. She gives him a good whack. Nothing. What kind of pills? But she's calling 9-1-1 before she even thinks to read the label.

*

2011

Ro and Cam have lived in central Texas since April. After his latest hospital stay--the third in two years--Cam wanted to get away from Houston and all of its associations. He needed to write something long, he said, prose. To do that, he wanted to be surrounded by birds and fresh air, not cars and smog.

There were no more poems.

"You can do composition, Ro," he said, persuading her. After all, her small inheritance would be paying the bills. She'd been talking about how she might try composing, now that recitals had become impossible.

Impossible is what she told him, anyway, although not on account of the nervousness she blamed. That had actually resolved easily enough with a beta blocker.

Her problem was that the music itself had become too much of a distraction. Performance, certainly, and teaching, too--she should never have left Cam alone that day in her apartment, the week Greg died. She should have noticed how sick he was. She should have been paying attention.

Ro has always been accused of living in a dream world. Her mother was forever chasing her out of doors, off sofas, away from books and computers. Or enrolling her in drama class--to bring her "out of herself"--and ballet, where music became no more than background to any number of uncomfortable contortions. For Ro, only practicing the piano had been an acceptable retreat from the strain of engaging a world of people who had their own thoughts about her and what she needed, or what they needed from her.

Even practice asks too much now, though, with the way it swallows time. The early sun will be gilding the treetops when she sits down at the keyboard, and when she rises, the day itself has fallen off into the west.

Years can disappear like that. Your life can disappear.

Ro had turned sixteen the spring her father, Tom, disturbed the hive. He'd been on vacation that week, trimming dead wood out of a pecan tree near the garage. By the time her mother found him at the foot of the ladder, he was already dead. Anaphylactic shock, they said.

Ro, arriving home from school, had come upon Fran kneeling beside the body, white-faced and dry-eyed, lost in all practical ways from that moment forward.

Ro had been stubborn about it, though. She was determined that her mother would not only get better, but that whatever ailed her was simply a choice she made, a role she was playing. Ro refused to cooperate with that. She did no more of what she thought of as her mother's chores than were absolutely necessary and she did them wrapped in the protective dissonance of Shoenburg, music she normally hated. For weeks it must have seemed like she didn't remove her earbuds even to sleep.

Fran wasn't pretending, however. Within the year, she had exited decorously, with pills-- leaving behind the safe deposit key and a note of polite regret to the daughter her husband had called his little prodigy.

People are so stupid, Ro told herself when adults kept saying how fortunate she was to have Aunt Helen nearby. Helen was her father's sister, a career woman, as they used to say. A nurse, the administrative kind. Aunt Helen regarded suicide as a topic to edge carefully around, even if that meant keeping your distance from the daughter abandoned so abruptly. Food, a roof, transportation, advice about colleges: all those things Helen could provide, and did, willingly.

There was no one, however, for Ro to talk to. No one to tell her it was perfectly natural for every orphan in every book she'd read to re-appear in the darkness before sleep each night, to be balanced carefully along a scale of ultimate desertion. There were plucky orphans, tragic ones, superheroes, and nowhere among them were parents who had died from an allergy to bees or an imbalance of neurochemicals. None of those orphans, therefore, wondered as Ro did, whether vulnerabilities, hidden weaknesses like that of the body or what is commonly called character, lay somewhere deep inside them, too.

Even before she met Cam, Ro suspected that music had become peripheral to what she really wanted, which was to be part of an intact family, one that wouldn't be gone overnight,

snap, the way a lid shuts on a piano keyboard. If a person didn't know better, a piano in that condition would look perfectly useless.

II

2011

In the middle of that drouthy summer in the country, Ro and Cam are invited to a party at the local *shützenverein* hall where the largely German community gathers to shoot targets and socialize.

While Ro waits for Cam to find drinks, she admires the array of homemade food arranged on three long tables by the door. The wives that day have set out pickles and preserves of plums, figs, sour grapes, along with cakes for purchase--Red Velvet and German Chocolate--benefitting the upkeep of the hall.

"I know you," says one of the women sitting in a lazy circle of chairs beside the food. Ro has to look twice, but then she sees: It's the sunbonnet lady. Even without headgear, her face looks round as a melon sliced through.

"You're young Miz Maxwell that just moved into the old Tiedemann place." The black eyes are kind and missing little, Ro thinks, except the fact she's just Ro Weldon, the way she's always been.

"You should come to our church sometime. Our organ is famous, you know. It was made entirely made by hand, a very long time ago."

Ro's face grows warm with uncertainty. If this is an invitation to worship, that would be awkward since Cam is as anti-religion as her parents ever were. Or is it something to do with music?

The other women in the circle of chairs wait with polite interest for Ro to speak. Only the old lady beams on her like there is nothing more anyone needs to say.

*

The days they spend in the rented house move according to the rigid schedule Doctor Fulton recommends.

Ro cooks breakfast. Cam eats. Afterwards, he takes his computer into the tiny back room and remains there all morning with his door shut. He says he's writing, although Ro has seen no pages.

While he works, Ro confronts the rooms the way you would an enemy. It isn't the house she hates so much, really, as the inescapable sifting of dust from the unpaved road that floats in every time a pickup or gravel truck goes by. She vacuums, wipes down furniture, even the walls, but the fine powder seems more resistant to her efforts every day.

Chores are like that for her, always rushing ahead on their own schedule of increase and complexity, always refusing to cooperate. When she cleaned her room in college--not too often, it has to be said--she'd listen to Bach, a great striding fugue to carry her through. Here, though, she doesn't use her iPod for fear she might not hear Cam if he calls. Or miss the altered nature of the silence if he doesn't call. That is her greatest fear.

*

Cam had been in England for just two months when Gregory's glioblastoma was diagnosed. Ro could hear his shock when they told him. The reception had been so clear, much clearer than an ordinary cell call across town.

"I'll come back," he said. "I'll come tonight, stand by."

But no, not yet. Linnie and Ro agreed on that.

Linnie was so proud of Cam, the first member of the family to attend graduate school, the first person to win prestigious notice of any kind.

Ro shared the pride, of course, but more than that, she worried. A gift like Cam's had to be fragile. He would feel Greg's every needle prick, every unbearable ache. He would empathize fully and doing so would damage him. Much better for her to take his place, for her to be the one comforting Greg through chemo, bringing him cooling ices, playing music for him. She imagined herself a heroic figure, inspirational in her devotion, admired by everyone.

She didn't understand until later how pathetic it had been to regard Greg's struggle through the prism of her fantasy, rather than as its own miserable self. For misery it was, and real, and she turned out to have no stomach at all for that. Not that she didn't try. For months, she went wherever he was--hospital or house--every day. Well, every day at first. And then the days became like drops in an IV infusion, causing pain in a rhythm of hoped for cure and certain suffering.

As the weeks passed her tasks contracted to two. She played the piano every evening while Linnie and Greg sang hymns, for as long as he had breath for it. And she kept the brothers talking.

Four Skype calls every week didn't sound like much, but the time differential alone could be tricky. Greg's best period was late morning when he would have energy, and look as healthy

as he ever would. But eleven a.m. was five p.m. in England, and that opened the black hole subject of Cam's evenings without Ro. He'd pledged faithfulness with persuasive intensity, but a whole year in such a place? How could a person of Cam's temperament fail to fall in love at least once?

The longer he was there, the more certain she became that it had happened, was happening. A conversation on Skype is off center, because of where the camera is located. When he talked to her, Cam usually focused on the screen where her face appeared, which made it look like he was talking to her left breast. About three months before he came home, that changed. He made sure to look right into the hard, round glass eye of the webcam when he told her how much he missed her.

*

2011

Ro is obsessing. She can't get the idea of the organ out of her head. It makes no sense, musically. She hasn't played an organ since she was twelve years old, at her grandmother's house--one of the homey kind suitable for sing-alongs. She tries to imagine what the instrument in the old lady's church would be like. Certainly not a grand baroque job, with towering gilded pipes. Something smaller, something she would be able to handle.

She misses playing, it's true. Her professor called her crazy for coming to the country like this without a piano, or arrangements for using one. She had to, though. She had to clear away the clutter that kept her from seeing clearly, from noticing. She had to give no nourishment whatsoever to the insistent demands of abstraction, the pleasures of imagination that distract you from what is really going on.

All week she struggles with herself.

She's curious, okay? She's a tourist here, and wouldn't a tourist want to see a local object of interest? *Famous*, the old lady had called it. How many famous things can there be in such a small town? She and Cam have hardly gone anywhere since they arrived. Nowhere just for fun, to explore the local sights. She hasn't really wanted to drive very much, given the ugliness of the drouth-scarred landscape.

On Tuesday, though, she has an opportunity. While Cam visits the bank, Ro uses the truck. It doesn't take long to find the church--a wooden building, painted white, on a bluff that overlooks the Coyote Creek watershed. Below her, pastures you would expect to be lush in early summer have faded into the thin browns and grays of grass grazed to the very root.

Hot dust on the driveway lifts around her ankles in little futile gasps as she walks to the door. Rain would settle it, but the locals say it hasn't rained--really rained--for more than three years. In a drouth of this duration, the occasional sprinkle hardly counts.

The church is country Gothic with windows of frosted glass and a wooden double door. But a stout rod has been wedged between the pavement and the twin door knobs, barring entry. She stares at it, stupidly. Tears, welling up, are the last thing she expects and she rubs at them with her fingertips. She gives the rubber base of the rod a little nudge of annoyance with her toe, and is surprised when the shaft topples into her hand. The door falls open.

The air inside the nave is still, sun struck. It's an unpretentious interior of white walls, simple wooden pews, and a painted primitive altarpiece of Christ, wrapped in a red cloak, borne into heaven by three angels.

In the loft, the organ is scarcely bigger than the arm-span of a large man. From below, she can see the hand-turned cedar pipes that produce the sound, and the shining gold-painted screens in the shape of wings that are its only decoration.

She climbs up for a closer look and it seems harmless to sit for a moment on the organist's bench and run her fingers over the keys. Before she can play, however, someone will need to operate the bellows, a small box-like contraption attached at the side. She should have thought of that. Such arrangements are common for an instrument of this age. It's unreasonable for her to feel so thwarted.

*

A strange thing happens after that. Ro stops cleaning and, instead, she begins to read. She had been a reader from her earliest years, even before music. Oh, yes. She had read a page out of *The Hobbit* when she was barely four. Her mother had been sitting at her dressing table, lining her eyes with thick black pencil prior to going somewhere, and she'd not believed Ro was really doing it, until she looked at the page herself. True, they had a CD of the book that Ro had listened to about a thousand times. But the day she started to read, the disk wasn't playing. She had just picked up the book and out came the right words.

Theirs was a house full of books with secrets and information in them that reading unlocked. At all hours, Fran would find Ro sitting cross-legged behind a chair, or sprawled on a sofa with one or another unsuitable volume. Art books with paintings of naked people in them, stories by John Updike. She couldn't possibly understand what she was reading, Tom said.

One day when she was five, Ro asked, *What is a cunt, Mommy?* That night Fran and Tom took down all the remotely racy books and sealed them into boxes that Ro found years later in the garage, half consumed by roaches and silverfish.

The replacements were child-appropriate works about horses, dogs, adventuresome little girls of one kind or another, usually detectives or orphans. Sometimes both. Encyclopedia Brown, although male, was a favorite.

Maybe her parents thought piano was a way to “pry her nose out of a book,” which was how Fran put it when talking to Ro’s dad. Ro isn’t sure. But she took to music immediately, as she didn’t with drama or ballet.

From then on, Ro remembers a constant struggle. There were the demands to be and do what others expect in the daily world of school and chores and family. Against those clamored the internal requirement, equally strong, to remain in her own head, to follow the path that her imagination led her along through stories or through music. A need to escape reality, in other words, has been what drives her.

If her mother were here now, she would tell Ro that the little organ was a sign, especially the fact that it couldn’t be played without someone to help, to work the bellows. That was even more significant than the mysterious way she’d learned of its existence. Because Cam could help her, of course. All she would have to do is ask.

Reading, however, she can do alone. The books are quiet. She can read so near the door to his study that she would hear him call or sense a problem if one occurred.

She doesn’t need to trespass to find a book, either. There is a library in town. There are ebooks. Through the internet, she can order paperbacks to be delivered right to her door.

Instead of going off to use a piano, or organ, she can stay right here in the house with Cam where the only sounds are the refrigerator's hum (middle C), and the air conditioner's whine (G sharp). She can read and he can work, and the machines can spin and turn as they would do anyway, without conviction, as though the house were holding its breath.

*

Fucking meds. He hates the way they flatten everything, turn him into a fingering chimp batting at the keyboard, making only dead words in lines that look like mere strips of font face, black on white emptiness. Not sentences. You could almost lift the lines off, wrap them around your finger or fold them into little accordions of irrelevance.

But he doesn't stop typing. What else is he going to do?

He's quit the meds before and slowly the words come back, for a time, not very long in actual count of days, but a relief all the same. Then Ro catches something in him, he never knows what, and back he goes to the facility. Incarceration. No more, no less, no matter how Dr. Full-of-Shit cocks an eyebrow at the term. Prisons don't need walls, your head is a prison, your skull is a prison.

He wants out. Out, away, up, blue sky words, Greg's forgiveness, his own forgiveness. Ro. Confession is good but he can't. The way he feels is a palimpsest of what's needed. Too much has been erased. The person who betrayed Ro and Greg barely exists any more.

And Ro is always here, always hovering. He knows she thinks she loves him, loves some image she has of him, no longer accurate. She loves his family, the scab that meeting him allowed to form over her own losses, but that's been torn away, now, by Greg's death and his own attempts to follow.

Theirs has become the kind of connection that binds long married couples, fused by shared calamity and blurry guilt. Before Greg's illness, they had planned a wedding when Cam returned from England. They would move to wherever he found a job. He would write and they would teach and she would perform whenever the opportunity arose. They would build a life.

What they're doing now, instead, is more like a panicky patching of the roof between storms, making sure plenty of buckets and pots are placed to contain the leaks. Her warmth, her passion for music that was so much like his for poetry, has burned down to a concentrated nub of determination that he will not relapse. He feels it like a brand.

III

2011

"Crap," Cam says from the bathroom, early one July morning.

"What is it?" Ro is in bed, floating in the backwash of a dream. She'd been swimming underwater. As the drouth drags on, she thinks about water all the time, longing for it, endless bodies of water shimmering and cool.

"I've run out of meds."

"Oh, Cam." She raises up on an elbow. He is standing by the sink, squinting into the mirror.

"No problem." He runs a testing hand along his jaw.

But it is a problem. The pharmacy in Branton is at least an hour's drive away, going and coming back. Ro dreads these longer highway expeditions--the blare of crisping fields, the stunned distress of trees. Riding in the cab with Cam, she feels the drouth climb in with them, press down on her until breathing, itself, becomes an act of will.

“I think I’d like to try it alone today,” he says in the same thoughtful voice. “I’m doing a lot better.”

A solitary venture might be good for him, she thinks. It would prove to both of them that someday this degree of reliance upon her will pass. She has labored up this ladder of hypothesis before, however, and always what brings her down is herself. She can never trust her judgment. Even when she gives in, she doesn’t trust it.

As the dust settles behind Cam’s departing truck, however, Ro feels a guilty rush of release. *Do something for yourself* is what they tell caregivers, isn’t it? Odd to think of herself as a caregiver instead of a girlfriend, although that is what she has become. Nevertheless, the “something for yourself” part smells of indulgence in her present situation, like playing a Chopin Nocturne just for the pleasure of it. Or Bach, even on an organ. For a moment she allows herself to think how it might sound, that little instrument in the church that speaks to a yearning for beauty, for transcendence, among hardscrabble lives.

She walks up to the road, but it’s way too hot for a run. By the mailbox she notices the remains of a snake, now only a dark squiggle of decay against the road’s ashy surface. Stunted grapevines and spindly cedar saplings line the fence, and she sees no animals at all--no birds, not even a turkey vulture circling over the fields.

Under the bell jar of the drouth, the land is weirdly quiet. It feels false, the wrong side of a glass through which she can see faint images of the life she might be living, where Greg worries about the SAT, and where her parents fuss over their first grandchild, where she and Cam are married and she’d not yet learned the shallow nature of her character.

2009

In the late middle of Greg's ordeal, when she, herself, had begun to flinch at every needle, she'd received an invitation. A chamber music festival in the countryside outside Houston--not far from where she and Cam are now, in fact. They needed someone to substitute for a pianist who'd cancelled and her professor had recommended her. The festival was highly thought of, attended by people from the city, as well as the local community. She'd been so grateful for the change of scene--for two days and two nights away from illness, sorrow, her own inadequacy in the face of the boy's suffering.

The principal violinist at the festival was Japanese, a visiting fellow at the University that year. Naoki.

Naoki had been a revelation, his playing so clear, so supple, so perfectly attuned to the other members of the ensemble. The grace of his bowing hypnotized her, the command in his hands, small but finely boned and strong. He smelled of something new, not sandalwood exactly, not resin. When they played together, the music stitched them closer than she'd ever been with anyone. Through it, she could express her despair over Greg, over her own inability to handle it, and never feel the need to confine the pain with words.

The weeks afterward--the trips back and forth to Austin until Naoki left--became for her the unacknowledged shadow on the time of Greg's dying. Naoki was the excuse she made to herself for not doing more at the end. For not doing all she should have. For not doing what Cam expected of her and what she expected of herself.

2011

Inside the house while Cam is gone to Branton, Ro imagines his empty, cell-like study, the powdery neglect that surely defaces all the books, strewn papers, open notebooks filled with his scrawl. She knows how he works, how the distribution of clutter mirrors the intensity of his focus.

It's unhealthy for him to spend so much time each day in a place like that. She knows ways to remove the dust around his disarray without disturbing things. While he's gone, she can slip in and clean it so carefully he'd never know she'd been there. He hasn't asked her in so many words not to, after all. It seems a kindness, a gift, when thought of in this way, an opportunity for her to make up for letting the house go lately. She gathers up her materials, the rags, the dusting spray, the electrostatic duster on a stick.

But there's no need for any of them, because there are no books or papers or notebooks in the room. No dust. The table he uses for a desk is pristine and empty except for his closed laptop. Her heart begins to pulse in her throat. She is going to open it. Her hand shakes with the realization that this has been her intent all along.

Throughout their time together she has never snooped on Cam, not his writing, not his email. It has been a point of pride with her, that she would not pry. He will tell her anything important when he wants or needs to. They will tell each other. She has believed in this openness, this transparency, despite every action of theirs that clearly demonstrates the opposite.

She awakens the computer's display. Without a password, his files are all right there for anyone to see. It doesn't take long to find the one he's currently working on. A substantial file.

Has he ever written prose of any length before? His fellowship was for the terse poems he built around desperate, inexplicable acts, so that the reader felt the humanity of the perpetrator. When asked, he said he trolled the internet for subject matter.

“You see,” he says in a curiously satisfied tone, “I’m fucked. It’s all fucked.”

Dwelling for so many years in the minds of nineteenth century composers, or earlier, Ro has never thought of herself as especially in tune with the thin harmonies of contemporary life. She has been unfashionably worshipful of Cam, of his brilliance, the heights and depths to which he could take her, just by talking. His poems shone for her with the same gleam as the perfectly struck notes of Horowitz, a kind of mental foreplay with guaranteed results. She never allowed herself to wonder what it would mean if he lost his ability, if he went mute, so to speak. If he became ordinary.

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For the next week, Ro can hardly keep from following him around. The property they’re renting has outbuildings, a metal barn and shed. There are plenty of sharp tools, rope, poisons.

She finds herself assessing his every move, every sigh, the fact he’s even stopped smiling. On the positive side, his expression shows no sign of a downward drag. Her mother had adopted the classical face of tragedy after her father’s death. Ro had thought it was like a Mardi Gras mask that she’d take off when the season was past. Cam doesn’t seem to be wearing any kind of mask, but she can’t imagine who he’ll be without the writing.

“I’m going for a drive,” Cam says on Saturday, much too early. His tone is casual, although there’s nothing casual about the break in routine.

Ro straightens from loading the dishwasher. “Let me get my stuff,” she says.

“You don’t have to come.” He has his keys in his left hand and is flicking them with his thumb. No backpack.

“You don’t want me to?”

“I’ve got some things to think about.” He moves a step closer and the absence of the touch she anticipates feels disturbingly intimate. “I appreciate all you’ve done, Ro, but it’s not right for you to sit here every day with me. You’ve let me interfere with your life.”

Ro tries to breathe normally. After all, it is daylight. Maybe he just wants to get away for an hour or two.

“We’ve changed, Ro. We haven’t wanted to face it, but the people we were before don’t exist anymore.”

Ro’s mind scurries through a series of possibilities, each one triggering its own different tone of buzzing alarm. “Do you know how long you’ll be gone?”

He works his jaw and shakes his head. He won’t look her in the eye.

A practical thought occurs to her. She has no car. She hasn’t needed one. “Cam,” she says slowly, “if you’re gone for any length of time, you know I’m stuck here. Did you think of that?”

A flicker of irritation passes over his face. She is conscious of the keys in his fist and the tension in his arms and shoulders. She thinks of the deer they often see in the fields. Poised. Ready to bolt. Just as likely to jump in front of your truck as race away.

“Maybe you could at least give me a lift to town?”

Ro isn’t sure what she expected would happen after Cam drove off. It was one of those occasions where she simply followed where her feet led, one foot coming after the other quickly enough to prevent her from falling face forward onto the pavement.

No one, not even the women moving about the altar, saw her climb the stairs. If Cam were there, he would have admired the little handmade organ, the care and patience of its maker--

working without a blueprint, the sign said, just the memory of the organs he had known in Germany.

She should have noticed that first day that the bellows contraption, in its anonymous, unadorned box, speaks to a different, more functional, spirit. Her mind works slowly, picking its way. The box is machine made, just like a motor housing. Yes. And, yes, there is a switch, a perfectly obvious small lever switch she hadn't seen before.

Reaching for it, now, she doesn't consider the women below and the fact that she is there without permission. She simply flips the lever and the bellows fills with a wheeze. The keys are pleasantly springy under her fingers, and the familiar notes of the Bach G-Minor fugue come into the church through the old cedar pipes like breath.

The voice she summons belongs to a boy on the edge of puberty, pure and high with the slight hoarseness of tone that signals how quickly the voice itself will be gone.