Rainbow Beach

Bella A. Manning, MNNBEL002

A dissertation submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the award of the degree of
Master of Arts in Creative Writing

Faculty of the Humanities
University of Cape Town
2008

This work has not been previously submitted in whole, or in part, for the award of any degree. It is my own work. Each significant contribution to, and quotation in, this dissertation from the work, or works, of other people has been attributed and has been cited and referenced.

Signature: Signed by candidate Date: 13 May 08

**UNIVERSITY OF CAPE TOWN**

**GRADUATE SCHOOL IN HUMANITIES**

**DECLARATION BY CANDIDATE FOR THE DEGREE OF MASTER IN THE FACULTY OF HUMANITIES**

I, (*name of candidate*)

Bella A. Manning

of (address of candidate)

1750 P St. NW #PH9

Washington, DC 20036, USA

do hereby declare that I empower the University of Cape Town to produce for the purpose of research either the whole or any portion of the contents of my dissertation entitled

Rainbow Beach

in any manner whatsoever.

CANDIDATE'S SIGNATURE

19 Aug. 03

DATE

Rainbow Beach

Bella A. Manning, MNNBEL002

Rainbow Beach is the story of a family that escapes to a faraway place to forget the past and the past that follows them there. It is the story of a landscape, at times serene, at times explosive, that mirrors them and that they come to adore and yet resist. And it is the story of a father struggling under the weight of his memories and the daughter who loves him fiercely and senses the coming collapse and whose own memories take root in a part of the soul too deep to be erased.

Prologue

One day we went to Rainbow Beach and there were waves. A storm out at sea had stirred the languid Caribbean waters from sleep and driven them mercilessly over the jagged reef to crash on our shore. *Waves*. A pleasure denied us here where sea and sand met with no great confrontation. Now we felt the ocean surging around us, pulling us into the depths then buoying us toward the sun with every swell. Underwater, the lazy world was hurried for the first time in memory. An impending something tickled our stomachs and made the fish dart in and out of the coral, afraid.

That day came back to me in dreams sometimes. In my dream, it was the day my father died. We were swimming among different waves. They were larger, quieter. They mirrored the Caribbean. You could beat back its rotting green, but inevitably it would creep over everything you had built. It was in no hurry. It was unstoppable. I was lifted up, and my father slipped below. I dove to the bottom, but the seafloor that stretched on for eternity on other days was clouded with sand stirred up by the slow, throbbing sea. As I hovered there, fingers dug into the sand, squinting into the dimness, wet, silent, not breathing, I knew this was real. This was how it had happened. I reached into the void and felt for him. I brushed away the vague memory of a bare hospital room. This was real. This water holding me.

Chapter 1

An Island

Once we lived on an island.

"I liked its name," my father had said when we asked him why he chose it.

St. Croix. Holy Cross. We had not been named after a saint, like St. Thomas or St. John, but instead for rough slabs of wood that had been dragged by a condemned man through muddy streets, a burden heavy enough to break his heart, a single gateway to his heavenly destiny. We had been named for tough things, real things. Complicated things. I liked that.

One summer afternoon, when the sun's fierceness had given way to a warm, peaceful orange and the sand felt cool, we left the beach and climbed into the pickup to go home. My mother and father rode in the cab, the three of us in the back. Free. We had chairs just for the truck bed, with low metal frames and tough canvas seats. Ours were dented, with peeling paint. They had been bought or borrowed or found somewhere by my father. We only had two. I pushed Rebecca's up against the back window, safe from the wind. Julia scooted hers a little farther toward the middle. I sat on the rough metal of the truck and inched closer to the tailgate, where I would be bounced against the hard, rust-flecked walls once we started. We were forbidden to sit on the humps above the wheels for fear a rut in the road would send us flying, and they, sealed off in the silence of the cab, would drive on. But other than this, we were given no restrictions. My parents were optimists.

We wound past the battered palms, beaches, and shacks of the western shore, past the old Danish fort and the pier, where a handful of bedraggled fishermen had supplanted the cruise ships carrying fat tourists, not through force or intrigue but through the deliberate, inescapable decay of all non-belonging things. We entered Frederiksted and passed the empty shops with boarded-up windows. There were wooden buildings here instead of poured concrete, some with rare second stories and balconies, painted the colors of icing and Easter dresses, pale pink, yellow, and purple. Colors that, when you emerged from the blinding white light of the beach, were muted and cool. Colors that, if you were on your way home, let you rest your eyes on their softness, forget the rusty grillwork, the yards of bare dust, and the mean dogs, and remember only the sweet, chalky, cake frosting pastels.

We left town and turned onto the four-lane highway and picked up speed. I leaned against the hot side of the truck and watched the blue-green blur of the island fly past. The wind whipped our hair, and a bump sent

me and the chairs a few inches into the air. We crashed back down, the ridges of the truck digging hard into my bare skin. We began to sing one of our back-of-the-truck traveling songs. We were weightless. It was wonderful.

"Do you want to sleep with me?" my mother asked.

I did not want to sleep with her. I did not want to see my father when he got home. If I were to get into bed with her, I would lie awake long before I heard the truck career into the driveway. Then, through the window above the bed, I would hear the lonely rumble of the engine and the thump of reggae in the night as my father smoked a last cigarette or dreamed a last dream of Caribbean triumph, of a family who understood that he had plans, that he would be one of those men who escaped to foreign places and built empires there, free from the hard, humiliating appraisals of the cold and common world. I would lie still and listen as the music gave way to the night sounds of the wind in the palms and the rustling of lizards and other creatures. I would listen to the dog pad to the front door when she recognized the footsteps that scraped unevenly across the porch.

The front porch was not level. It was no longer a porch, really, though we still called it one. It had collapsed once in a storm, and after we had cleared away the warped metal and ragged screens, only an outline of chipping paint and mold where it had once joined the wall of the house remained. When we first moved here, the porch had been a quiet place. I would sit in an old lawn chair and read my books in its shade. The front of our house was surrounded by a gentle, motley grove of trees. They had been untouched by storms for a long time. Thin, graceful, pale-trunked palms, leafy, prickly lime bushes, and large flamboyant trees with arching woody branches and orange flowers gave delicate cover and dappled the sunlight, and the porch glowed with a restful green light and citrus smell.

But the trees had been ravaged, and the porch had become a cement slab that tilted dangerously toward the front door. When it rained, one of us was sent out with a thick, knobby broom to sweep away the vast brown lake that surged at our threshold. I liked this job, in a way. I liked wielding the broom without mercy against the madness threatening to engulf us, swinging the old broom with violent determination, sending dirty water cascading into the yard, and splattering the driveway with mud. After so many floods, the porch floor was rough and peeling, and when you walked across it, you made a scraping noise.

My father would come into the bedroom, and the loud scuffle with his watch and clothes and keys would follow, the exaggerated noises of someone who had been drinking and still thought he was in control. I would pretend to have just woken up. I would move toward my bedroom, tired but determined, pretending to be

unaware of him. My mother would guide me. She would take her time folding down my sheets and tucking me in, and usually, to my relief, to my mother's relief, we would hear him fall into bed and go to sleep. Other times, though, he would see visions, and I was the heir to his prophecies.

"Our family is different," he would say.

I was the oldest. I was smart. I was like him. I could be trusted with secrets, with his dreams for the future. Our family was better than those people who lived in beautiful houses in the hills. They were renting. He owned this house. These dirty tiles would be the foundation of his kingdom. Those people had only possessions. We had art and poetry and intelligence, he and I.

If you had grown up rich, you might believe this. You might be content to wait for this. If, when you were a boy, you froze, unsmiling, when pictures were snapped during rowdy holiday parties at your parents' glamorous house. If you had fought in a war. But I had known none of those things.

Sandy Point was a happy beach. You drove miles through a wildlife preserve to get there. The road was unpaved, a sandy winding track full of deep rifts and water. The barriers shifted with the wind and the tides. If you were a little girl in a bathing suit in the back of a pickup, bare arms and legs knocking against the unforgiving jumble of beach chairs, cooler, and grill, you would stare out across an endless stretch of dry scrub for what seemed hours and hours. This was the small western tip of the island that jutted out into the sea, unprotected. There were no trees or grasses or mountains to make a stand against the wind, which roared unhindered across thousands of miles of ocean before meeting us on this tiny speck of land. Everywhere else on the island, there were trees bent and twisted from long battles against wind and rain, and the ground was littered with palms, leaves, branches, and petals. Here it was clean and bare, with nothing but grey bush to offer sanctuary to the few birds we had left.

As the truck moved slowly toward the beach, I caught glimpses of white feathers against the grey. When we passed an open area of shallow water, a handful of graceful wading birds turned toward us. They were not startled. They were curious, almost disbelieving. We were from two different worlds now. My father had told my sisters and I stories about explorers, brave and ruthless, who had sailed in creaking wooden ships a long time ago into a sea more brilliant and beautiful than anything they had ever seen. Water that could make you weep.

"When they colonized, the sugar cane planters brought mongooses from India," my father said.

"Why?" Julia asked.

"To kill rats," he said. "But do you remember Rikki-tikki-tavi? With eyeballs of flame?"

"Yes."

"Mongooses hunt by day, not like rats. The mongooses killed snakes instead," he said.

"But snakes are bad, too."

"Well," my father said, "survival is complicated. The snakes belonged here."

They also ate birds' eggs, he said. There was no way to stop them, lithe little mongooses tearing through the rain forest battling snakes then scrambling into birds' nests to feast on egg after egg after egg. Now, when you lay in bed at night or in the early morning, listening, the songs of birds were absent. Only the soft sounds of rain on the tin roof, warm sluggish breezes, cows trudging through tall grass, roosters crowing, and lizards scurrying across leaves remained. When you drove through the rain forest, which people far away imagined to be rich and cheerful with the cacophony of bird voices, it was dense and close and quiet. You did not notice it at the time, only afterward. Our island was a silent place. It was not a place to escape your thoughts. There was nothing to drown them out.

We were nearing the end. The road flattened out and opened into a small clearing. My sisters and I jumped out of the truck. The beach remained hidden by a line of low scrubby trees, but we knew it lay beyond, white and windswept. Clean. This clearing in the bush was the final outpost. When we plunged through the last of the bleached branches and prickly leaves, the westernmost beach would rise up to meet us, with pale sand and colorless water spreading out in every direction. It was Sunday.

Some Sundays we went to church, but mostly we went to the beach. On church days, we went to St. Joe's. My parents had both been raised as Catholics, but their zeal for the faith had faded long ago. I was the only one of their children who had had a first communion. Every Wednesday evening, before we had moved to the island, my father would deposit me in the parish parking lot for communion class. As his truck rattled away, I would pull my jacket tight and stand in front of the low building behind the church.

"This is where the nuns live," a boy had whispered to me in our first class.

When I was the boy's age, my father had gone away for a while, and my progression through the sacraments was halted when I stopped attending Catholic school.

"How would you like to ride your bike to school?" my mother had asked during the summer.

There was a sprawling public school a few blocks away. In the mornings, kids would whiz past on their bicycles wearing jeans and sweatshirts, shouting to one another, their backpacks swinging and bouncing as they zigzagged up the road. I had always worn a plaid skirt and a short-sleeved blouse and loafers with two pennies tucked into the tops. My father had always driven me to school until that year.

Later, when we were together again, my father had decided we should be Catholics once more, beginning with me. So I won him redemption at the back of a stale classroom of younger kids on Wednesday nights. I would take a breath and step over the icy puddles in the parking lot and pull open the heavy door.

We learned to confess first.

"Do you know how to say your rosary?" Sister Theresa had asked.

"No," I said.

"Do you know the Hail Mary?"

"Yes." I remembered that from my old school.

She set two sheets of paper on my desk. One was the script I would follow during my first confession. The other was a guide on the rosary.

"You may be assigned the rosary as your penance," she said.

The next week, we had lined up and crossed over to the church. We sat in a row in one of the middle pews across from two narrow doors, the closer of which we entered one by one. When it was my turn, I pulled the door behind me until the latch clicked. I knelt in the dull light and leaned my shoulder against the bare wall, afraid of judgment but safe in a way as well, hidden away and anonymous.

"Forgive me, father, for I have sinned," I began. I had fought with my sister. I had talked back to my mother.

"I absolve you from your sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost," came the priest's voice. "Your penance is three Hail Marys."

A few months later, we had again filed into the church, this time in white dresses and suits for our first communion. But this was to be the last of the rites. Life usurped the place of the sacraments among my parents' priorities. Julia never made it past baptism. Rebecca did not even get that far. She was condemned to wander outside the body of the church, a religious vagrant. We three were outsiders both at St. Joe's as well as my mother's preferred church, though the excited group of evangelicals who led those services at a compound in the

center of the island did not adhere to such formalities as sacraments. They received everyone with abandon, man or woman, addict or thief, as long as you accepted Jesus during one mad, glory-filled moment.

St. Joe's was the compromise, a Catholic mass during which people shouted hallelujah and clapped when they sang. The congregation had outgrown the small church building, and a massive tent had been erected out back. They hugged you when you entered.

"Welcome, sister," said a grinning fat man. He smelled like sweat.

Our folding chairs sank into the mud when we sat down. We stood again when the music started, and people began swaying and raising their arms as it grew louder and louder. Even the priest rocked back and forth a bit. He wore a bright red cotton vestment. I closed my eyes and lifted a tentative hand. Nothing. Neither my mother's fiery missionaries nor my father's revivalist Catholics could make God seem real.

It was only when we went to Holy Cross that it seemed possible. It was an old church of weatherworn stone in the middle of Christiansted. Inside, smooth arches soared overhead, and its windows had no glass, just wooden shutters opened to plain light and air that drove out decay and left a cool emptiness. This was God. God was guilt and stone. He was high and far away, severe, serene, accusatory, enduring, remote, and beautiful, like Holy Cross, towering over the colonial town's crowds of crumbling yellow shops and damp alleyways. It would stand there when all around it became dust and dirt covered in rampant vegetation. I could believe only in this God, whose silent tenacity had no time for fervent pleas or heartache. Who offered no passion or hope, only a respite for the weary in a hushed and magnificent place.



That Sunday at Sandy Point, when we pushed aside the branches and tumbled onto the beach, it was just as it had always been. The beach was a hill. It was more level at the top, where we tossed our towels and bags, but it soon began to pitch steeply toward the sea and continued to do so underwater, so if you ran from your towel you would be drawn almost uncontrollably toward the ocean, feet slipping then thundering down the sand so fast you barely had time to raise your arms just as your toes touched liquid and dive cleanly into the colorless sea. You could dive without fear because of the slope. You could stand up to your neck in water just a few feet from where your feet had left dry sand.

There was no reef here. No shifting shades of turquoise and green over sea grass beds or purple over rock and coral. No stiff black urchin spikes to watch for or dried yellow and pink sea fans to collect. If you stood still, the fish that gathered around your legs were of transparent flesh with white-grey eyes. You only

knew they were there because you could reach down and touch them. They were like thick, clear rubber that blended into the clearness of the water, and you could feel them kissing your skin.

There was an old wooden sailboat that had been restored and would take tourists out for late afternoon cruises. The boat was long and beautiful. Its wooden rails were tan and smooth, and it moved across the ocean as if it barely needed the wind. As if the water below recognized a fellow countryman, humming with the same spirit that generated its gentle swells, and gave it a current to rest in and carry it to its destination. Its sails were a tan-pink color, and when they coaxed the unhurried air into their lofty havens, they billowed out into immense golden clouds above the glassy ocean. You could get caught up there in pockets of warm air, with light filtering through in tranquil flickers, with no noise but the distant sounds of water and the soothing, rhythmic whir of lines pulled through blocks that meant you were going somewhere. The boat was called the *Elinor*. A reminder that my mother had been named for far more elegant things than life had so far given her.

It was not sleek and white and fast with sharp sails pulled tight. It was not like a knife through the water, a non-belonger, with shouts, icy spray, and dry suits cuffed at wrists and ankles cocooning sailors' skin from ruinous, rapturous salt water. Those were for colder climates and younger hearts. No dolphins attended them. But dolphins did guide the *Elinor*. They burst from the ocean in a flawless line before the prow, keeping in perfect time with the ship. It seemed to us on the beach that no creature on earth was ever so free. They wanted only to play. They lightened your heart, and the handful of us scattered along Sandy Point, we who had fought our way through the tangles of the island, crawled through the wasteland sanctuary, and sought refuge here on this pristine speck of sand, watched the dolphins and ached to be with them.

Perhaps they could feel us. That day, they turned and let the *Elinor* sail on without them. They dived and danced just off shore, tempting us. *Come and play. Come and play*. And tired, sunburned refugees shook away listlessness, splashed into the water, and began to swim out.

"Can we go?" I asked my father.

"Of course."

There were no rules for us. No worries. We were golden children, able to run across the fields of the empty university near our house, drag up the slick fallen husks of royal palms, and fly down hillsides. Able to ride two on a bike, three on a bike, in flip-flops or with bare feet and no helmets. No floaties or water shoes or sunscreen reapplications. Able to swim into the deep, two tiny girls, surrounded by vast oceans, to meet dolphins.

"Of course you can go."

Worries were for bills and groceries and marriage and drinking. So we set off.

We were strong swimmers at first. If you kept your legs stiff, moving from the hip and not bending at the knee; if you kept your fingers mashed tightly against one another, turned them inward above your head so they could cut through the surface without a splash, and shifted them immediately afterward into tiny paddles; if you raised your arms again at your sides and bent your elbows; and if you turned your head, took a breath, and slipped your face back into cool water, all the time keeping your toes pointed and legs scissor-kicking, then you would think you could reach the dolphins in seconds. In one, two, or three strokes of your strong arms. But the dolphins were far out. We paused and looked back toward the shore, now way in the distance. And still there were miles to go to get to the dolphins.

"Let's go back," Julia said.

"No," I said.

I was beginning to feel afraid, treading water there. It was so transparent you could see each grain of sand far below. There was no more chop this far out than there was at the water's edge. If you swam for hours in any direction, you would still be right there, watching the hazy shimmer of palm trees on the hot, unreachable shore. You might lie back and stare up at the clear sky, and the clear sky might become clear water, and you would not even have noticed that you were no longer floating. That your shoulders were now resting on an endless bed of soft virgin sand.

I wanted to reach the dolphins. I wanted to feel the swoosh of water as their smooth shadows shot past and to try to touch one with a finger or a toe. It would be a life-giving touch, maybe, an alternative to touching Christ's robes for those of us who had been forgotten. But there was still so far to go.

"Come on," I said.

We turned away from the endless expanse of water and sky and focused instead on the distant beach. I swam hard, slamming the water with all the wrath my legs could muster, ripping into its surface with tight fingers. Pretending it was my cowardice.

"Wait up," Julia called.

"Chicken."

Long after I shouted it at my sister, it throbbed in my head, with every pull and every kick. *Chicken, chicken, chicken.* I was no tourist. This was my ocean. I was a child of the sun, freckled, blistered, and

toughened by the heat and the salt and the wind. What were fathoms and fathoms of flat, tepid water to me? Yet I had turned back.

"Wait up," Julia called again.

I did not wait. I was getting closer to shore, swimming faster and faster, and leaving my little sister behind, her bony arms and legs determinedly imitating my strokes.

I touched sand. I shoved the water out of my way as I battled uphill toward dry land and flopped down on my towel. My sister sat down beside me a few minutes later.

"Did you see them?" my father asked.

"No," I said. "She got scared."

"We're going sailing," he said.

"Where?" I asked.

"Rainbow Beach," he said.

Rainbow Beach was a day beach. It was for snorkeling and collecting things. There were thousands, maybe millions, of shells, sometimes conchs. There were dried husks of sea urchins, sand dollars, boulders of coral, pebbles of coral, fire coral pocked with red, and the crackling leaves of sea grape trees. It was all strewn along the beach and stirred into the sand. There was no soft, fine powder to rest on here but instead a scorching, dirty golden mix that crunched under the leathery sole of your bare foot or jabbed you haphazardly when you lay down on your towel. It did not fade into nothingness. It was part of the island. The westernmost finger of land curved around, and from Rainbow, you could see the whiteness of Sandy Point at the end. A beat-up fleet of boats was anchored off the shore. Their hulls were faded and peeling. The island had appropriated them. Maybe their owners had left them a while, just a while, and barnacles and seaweed had stolen over the chains, and sea grasses and coral had cemented the anchors into the seabed. They were living things now, not to be handled and directed by sailors. They were like the reef now, forming a wall out in the ocean, forming a bastion against waves that kept us safe and trapped.

During the day, Rainbow Beach was seared with fierce sunlight, an unrelenting brightness that charged through the gaps of palm fronds and burned through shifting shade. It was exhilarating. It tempted you to run wild along the dirty sand, darkening your skin and bleaching your hair, transforming you, too, into a part of the island. Behind the euphoria, you could sense a hint of malice, a warning that the light would cut through you

just as it did the withered palms. It was inescapable. It melted hats and sunscreen and flimsy cotton clothes until you were forced to throw yourself on the mercy of the water, which was as smooth and indifferent to your burning heart as glass. This was the Caribbean. It was a force without pity. A reckless, addictive beauty.

We would get our truck later, tomorrow. For now, we were heeled to port, my sisters and our friends stretching our arms and legs through the rail to dangle them in the water, tracing ridges on the surface as we flew onward. If only it were our boat instead of my father's friend's. If only my father could be out here every weekend. If only we could always watch the decaying beauty of the island from a distance, part of it but not part of it. Able to break free if we ever dared. The sun was orange. The sky was violet. The pier at Frederiksted grew larger. The lights of the little bar at Rainbow Beach grew closer. Rainbow Beach should be a day beach only. A bit of reggae danced over the water and pulsed around the boat. I wished we could always be sailing.

"Only room for adults in the dinghy," someone called.

We jammed our clothes into a bag and heard the splash of the first kid as he took off toward the beach. I stepped up to the edge and stared down. The dark ocean was darker in spots where there were rocks and clumps of coral below. I chose a place where the water was an unvarying indigo and dove. There was the thrill of being in the ocean at night, when fish and sharks and the octopus that lived at Rainbow Beach would wake from the dull haze of heat and light. My skin, which had minutes before been covered in goose bumps as the evening breeze touched my damp hair and bathing suit, was smooth and warm again. It was like diving into a memory. My sisters tossed me our bag, and I kicked hard to keep my upper body above water when I caught it to keep it dry. They jumped in afterward, and Julia and I pulled Rebecca along toward the twinkling lights and voices on the beach, me on my side, frog-kicking, holding her bathing suit strap with one hand and balancing our bag on my head with the other.

After we had clambered onto the beach, we wove our way among the crowd to the bathroom to change. When we came back, the adults had found a table, and my father had ordered a beer.

We lived near the university. There were two ways to get there. The first way, the usual way, was to cut through the yards of our neighbors across the street and run when you hit the field. The university was set apart from the madness of the island by a gigantic green sea of springy grass, always mown. You emerged from the neighbors' scraggly trees and overgrown lawns to look out over a warm sunlit stretch of freedom, with the royal palms standing sentinel along the main drive in the distance and the empty haven of the university building

beyond. Then you ran. It was the only way to cross the field. There were so few places so unencumbered by the insidious growth of shrubs, weeds, anthills, and thoughts. And yet this, too, was part of the Caribbean. It was the Caribbean that brought peace to world-weary outcasts and bathed things in calming light, for it was always in the late afternoons or evenings that we made our journey. It was the part that yielded guava and avocadoes into tenderly cultivating hands and ruffled your hair and rustled long skirts with the same gloriously mild breezes for which explorers once fell to their knees after long trials in the doldrums.

This was what it could be. It was wildness tamed the tiniest bit. When you arrived, broken, in search of solitude and rest and a different sort of life, with smooth terra cotta tiles, high mahogany ceilings, and lazily revolving fans, rich soil and pink flowers in brilliant gardens, and the daily cleansing of tropical rains, you thought that this was all there was. You would stumble ashore, and there would be beauty and sanctuary. You did not know that everything thrived on the island. Everything.

When you reached the royal palms at the opposite end of the field, you had work to do. We would walk among the gigantic trunks to search for the large husks called boots that peeled off the tops of the trunks, near the palm fronds, as the trees grew. When they got dry and old enough, they fell to the ground, and we would examine them. If they still retained a kind of canoe shape, so that the sides curved up a bit like a scoop, they were good. You could tuck your arms and legs in and hold onto the sides and go faster on those. The bottoms had to be dry enough to be slick, not sticky, but not so withered that they would crumble underneath you. They had to be smooth and spare with no dirt and shorn cleanly from the tree with no curling layers of stem trailing from them. We were particular gatherers. We wanted it all to be worth it.

When we had found three good ones, one for each of us, we walked on to the hill beside the parking lot. The parking lot was small and always empty. It was shaded by trees on two sides and the row of royal palms on the third. On the far side was the hill, with the grass mown short just like the field and no rocks or holes. It was steep enough to thrill even me, a teenager, and to terrify my youngest sister when we pushed her down. We dragged our palms to the top. Julia would go first. She settled into her sled, her skinny legs crossed. She pushed her rows of rope bracelets higher on her wrists to better grip the palm shell.

"Push hard," she said. "I want to go really fast."

"I will," I said.

"You didn't push hard enough last time."

I crouched down behind her and put my hands on her back.

"One, two, three," I counted.

I threw my weight forward and shoved her toward the edge, and she was gone in a burst of hot pink t-shirt and flying blonde hair. As she neared the bottom, she expertly leaned in to her left toward the hill, pulled up on the palm sled with her right hand, and steered parallel to the gravel lot until she came to a stop. She walked back up the hill to help position Rebecca for her turn.

"Fast enough?" I asked.

"It was okay," she said.

Rebecca tucked her legs under her tiny sundress and held tightly to the sides of her piece of palm.

"Ready?" I asked.

She paused and stared down the hill, steeling herself for the drop. With a nervous giggle, she nodded.

"One, two, three."

Julia and I pushed her down, not hard, and listened to her shrieks mixed with laughter until she rolled out of her palm shell at the foot of the hill. Then it was my turn.

If you closed your eyes, you could smell the hibiscus at the edge of the parking lot, the grass, and the bougainvillea at the top of the hill all coming at you in a rush of wind that blew the hair out of your face and lifted you higher than the few inches you gained when you flew over a bump on the hill. Somehow during those dashes down the hill, for just a few seconds, we transcended our house and the dim interior of our living room, one side without a wall. In its place was a giant iron grate with a gate in the middle that we kept padlocked at night. I suppose it was meant to let the breezes in, but low in the center of the island with mountains to our north and hills to our east, the wind had no dominion. Instead, at night, we curled up on the sofa to watch TV in the heat, trying not to see the gaping black hole across the room. Trying not to remember the rain forest beyond it. Trying not to imagine that anything or anyone lurking out there in the still night could see us, and the only thing separating us from them was not solid. Rebecca could get through whenever she wanted. Her head was small enough to slide between the bars. When we locked ourselves out, we sent her around back to climb through the cat flap in the porch screen and squeeze through the grate. We tried not to think that other things could get through. We tried not to think of what those other things were. We had just a few seconds racing down that hillside. Just a few seconds to forget.

When our palm sleds had unraveled so that we could no longer skim down the hill, we wandered along one of the many gravel paths toward the main building. It was the only building on campus other than the

admissions building, which stood on a hill above the big field. The admissions building was a beautiful old ivory-colored stucco house. Or it looked like it might have been once. When we peered through the dirty windows—real windows with eight panes that slid up and down—we saw books and papers scattered everywhere. There were very few desks. In some rooms, phones sat on the floor still plugged into the wall. It looked as if everyone had fled all of a sudden from a storm that never hit. It was in a quiet spot shaded by massive trees, set off by itself out of the glare of the sun. Once I had climbed onto the roof of the porch, opened a second-story window, and climbed in. It was damp and in disarray, with water stains on the walls and the floor and cracked plaster hanging from the ceiling. The books heaped on the floor were swollen, their pages brown with mildew. There was no sound other than my footsteps. I sat down on the floor under the window and pulled my knees to my chest. It was a forgotten place. I wanted to make it my hideout. I wanted to come here every day. But I did not go back. I was too afraid of getting caught, though by whom, in that lonely place where I had never seen another soul, I did not know.

My sisters liked the main building. They liked to watch the fish. The main building was sunny and noiseless and empty, but without the left-behind feeling. Only the classrooms had doors. It was open to everyone. On the ground floor, the gravel walkways simply turned into red stone paths lined with cool green plants, and there was a scattering of small ponds. It was like an oasis after crossing the field. We settled on some rocks that enclosed one of the ponds and poked our hands into the water. The fish were fat and slow. They were far from the ocean. If we went a long time without a storm, I imagined that the ocean fish grew soft and paddled idly here and there, just as we floated on our backs in the gently rippling, waveless waters between the reef and the shore. But when the weather subtly shifted and you felt that warning in your deepest self, when you knew something sinister lashed and tore and reeled in a dark cloud just beyond your sight, those fish were recalled to the agitated, enormous world. I wondered if these university pond fish felt the same tremor. I thought maybe they were too far removed, and when the storm bore down upon them, it was too late.

The other way to the university could only be attempted by bike. Julia and I discovered it one day. We did not always share secrets. This was a rare day when we chose to ride the other way on our street, away from the main road. When you first turned off the main road onto our street, it was sunny, and the plain concrete houses had large yards, even the houses on the right-hand side, which did not back up to the university field. Our house was on the right-hand side. Our back porch looked out over our yard to the impenetrable line of old,

twisted trees that marked the beginning of the rain forest. It loomed there, just at the border of our lawn, a brooding mass. The rest of our yard was bright, with a tall hedge of bristly scrub palms shielding us from the bad neighbor and a row of avocado trees among which my father had looped three clotheslines. On heavy washdays when we needed all three lines, I would hang the laundry in the shadow at the edge of the yard. No matter how hard I fought the urge to peer into the jungle darkness, I always yielded in the end. And no matter how many times I tiptoed along its borders and returned safely to the house, I never stopped expecting a sudden creaking of branches and swish of leaves as a great something leaped out at me from the dark green depths. But there was always only silence. Later, I thought perhaps each time I went near, the vines that trailed down from the mahogany trees swept a few more blades of grass into their fold. Perhaps the something I sensed was patient. It did not tear through jungles or carry young girls away into the dark. It simply crept onward. It would climb the trunks of avocado trees and curl around clotheslines. It would pull them down. It would pull down everything you had built into a verdant green ruin. It would coil around toes, ankles, and foundations, snaking upward until its tendrils touched the hearts of things and gripped them tight.

Our house was one of the last with such a buffer of a yard. As you went farther down, the rain forest crowded against the very walls of houses until the road curved out of sight. Our house was an outpost, and we lived with the uncertainty of settlers in a strange place. When you went to the beach or to town or drove along the scenic route that wrapped around Blue Mountain, you were an explorer. The Caribbean was virgin land, untouched. The town's sidewalks crumbled and its doorways were boarded up, but you were an intrepid traveler. The unknown made you heady. You wanted it for your own. You wanted no more visitors, no more buildings. You wanted to live in a wild place. You embraced that part of the island that remained undiscovered country. But at home, when the barks of strange dogs from beyond the curve in the road rattled the night or when soothing dusk shrank from the blackness along the periphery of the yard, you felt uneasy. Everything that was exciting during the day took on a subtle hostility during the night, and you wished you were normal, in a normal place in the States, or at least high in the hills here with the sound of the distant sea to lull you to sleep.

We never went far past our house on our bikes or skates. To drive to school, to get groceries, and to go to the beach, my parents always pulled out of our driveway and turned toward the main road. But Julia and I, in an odd fever of sisterly rebellion, set out on our ten-speeds to ride beyond the curve. We rode past the bad neighbor and were soon out of sight of our house. A tiny concrete house with iron grilles on the windows appeared on our right, and two others stood beyond it. Dirty white walls and ugly fences. I had grown too used

to grimy, cracked walls lined with crumbly brown termite tracks, crunchy gongolos underfoot when you walked from your bed to the bathroom at night, and the dull scuttling of creatures, mice or bats, maybe, between the tin roof and drop ceiling to fear or even notice these things much. But when the pit bull trotted out from behind one of the houses, we caught our breaths. He did not bark, but we knew he meant to chase us down. His powerful body swung into the road and his trot became a cruel, graceful gallop.

"Pedal!" I ordered. "Pedal!"

We leaned forward like the triathlon competitors we had once watched pass by on our street. They had tossed us their used water bottles. We shot past the row of houses and saw a dirt track emerge on our left, opposite the rain forest. The university side. The safer side.

"Turn here," I said.

We flew off the asphalt and bounded over the rocky, potholed path. It led slightly uphill, and just as we reached the place where it leveled out, the dog fell back, turned, and trotted home as if we were nothing at all. An open area lay before us. The ground was not the springy turf of our field but rather dry and hard. The scarred balconies of the projects were visible on our right. On our left, I caught a glimpse of a stately building among the trees. It was ivory. It was the admissions building. My building.

"Where are we?" Julia asked.

"Behind the university," I said.

There were animal pens in the distance.

"Let's keep going," I said.

We rode slowly again, leaving zigzag tracks in the dust as we wove our way past rocks and holes. Soon we heard sheep baaing. I loved our cats most and our dog a little bit, but Julia loved all animals. She sped up to reach the first pen. It was full of sheep. She climbed off her bike and leaned against the wooden enclosure. I slowed to a stop behind her and rested on my handlebars, watching. There were sheep lying on the ground and little lambs wobbling after their mothers. This was the agricultural department of the university. But just like the other buildings, the barn beside the pen was empty. The sheep had been left to their own devices. We stayed with them for a long time. Then we followed the dusty track on toward the main campus.

We did not go back that way for a while. It was a journey only for reckless days, when the need to pump your legs hard, with your fingers gripping the handlebars, never straying to the brakes, and disappear was pressing. It was only for when you needed to live for an hour in that in-between time, when everyone supposed

you were in one place doing the same thing you had always done but you were really somewhere else. Strangers who saw you would assume you had some business being where you were. An errand. A shortcut to home. They did not know. They knew nothing about you. You could be anyone doing anything. And those who knew you, if they thought of you, would picture you crossing the field. It felt victorious, knowing that. If they went to the field and discovered that you were not there, they would not even know where to look for you. They would not know the quiet place beside the sheep pen even existed. You had secrets they had no idea were a part of you. On those days, Julia and I were fellow prisoners, conspirators. Friends.

Chapter 2

A Father

"I'm building a cat flap," my father said.

He stormed out onto the back porch, and we heard the banging of compartments and the clanging of metal as he dug into his toolbox. The back porch ran the length of the house. Before it became a repository for junk, it was a good place to play, screened off from mosquitoes and no-see-ums. It was long enough to host roller-skating sprints without interfering with the classroom at one end where Julia forced Rebecca to play school. She had balanced her chalkboard lopsidedly on her easel and arranged a cooler and a wagon before it for Rebecca and any other pupils she could recruit from the neighborhood. When we had first moved here, Julia and I had always watched for lizards on the back porch screen. They liked to just cling there, hundreds, thousands of them, and we would casually make the rounds from one end of the porch to the other, raising our fingers behind them on the inside and giving good solid flicks. Hearing the plop of lizards landing on the grass became addictive. We felt a frenzied compulsion to flick harder and send lizards flailing farther through the air. They gradually came to understand that the back porch screen was a risky place. When they sensed us coming, they scrambled down to the ground or up to the safety of the roof. We hardly ever saw them on the screen anymore. But the memory of those intensely satisfying flicks never left us. And whenever we sighted a rare little pale green-yellow body grasping the mesh, all thoughts but the itching desire in our fingertips would vanish, and we would tear through the kitchen or living room, smashing dishes and upending tables in our wake, in a wild, desperate attempt to get one last flick.

I followed my father to the porch and opened the back screen door to let the cat in. We had two cats, one old, one new. The old one, Spunky, battle-scarred and crooked, was my cat. They came and went as they pleased, lounging on the porch or in the yard during the day. In the early evening, they often disappeared, hunting, and reappeared before we went to sleep, pricking at the back screen door to be let inside for a second meal and to curl up at the bottoms of our beds for the night. Sometimes Spunky arrived at the door with a rat still clenched in his teeth.

"He's brought you a gift," my father would say.

I always felt bad when I stood at the door waiting for him to put it down before I let him inside, like I was being ungrateful.

That night, my father decided that the pricking had gotten out of hand. The back door was ragged. And it seemed you were most likely to hear it at the exact moment you had settled down in the living room to relax. That night, my father had just leaned back in his chair. He worked hard. You might be able to steal a few moments in that chair in the afternoons after school, but when you heard the truck pull into the driveway, you relinquished it fast. It was hard to enjoy your time in it, even on a holiday morning when hours of freedom stretched ahead of you. You knew eventually you would hear the engine and the slamming of the truck door, and you would have to scramble out. You knew it was not really your place. You did not spend hours in the baking sun lifting, bending, and breaking with a body that had grown too old for such work long ago. That night, when we heard the pricking, everything changed.

We had felt my father tense up. We clenched our fists and bit our lips, waiting to see what he would do. We heard his angry pleading in the stillness of the living room. Could he not have peace at the end of a long day? Could he not find rest in his own home? Could he not be shown mercy? Could he not find redemption? My mother heard it in the kitchen. The sudsy water and soft clink of dishes continued, but they had a listening quality. A waiting quality. Almost everyone, everything, heard my father, though he had not yet spoken a word.

And then he stood up.

"I'm building a cat flap," he said.

There was no shouting. Nothing was broken. That was it. There was only the jingling of the toolbox.

When I let the cat in, he ran for the kitchen, and I followed him and took the bag of cat food out of the refrigerator. While everyone was getting ready for bed, I went back out onto the porch. There was no nifty contraption. There was a giant hole cut in the screen by the door, with ragged edges that would later catch the cats' fur. They did not want to use it. We had to shove them through the first few times.

My father could build anything. A long time ago, I had sketched a picture of a desk, and he had built it for me. He had made bookshelves for my grandmother. He could draw. He made mobiles from scraps of metal and painted them. My father could build model ships from piles of pale balsa wood. He wanted to open a little shop in Christiansted one day for his ships. Once, my father was an artist.

The cat flap had its drawbacks, which I realized while my grandmother was visiting. She seemed older than other grandmothers. She was afraid of a lot of things. I once found an album of newspaper clippings in her bedroom. It held a history of years and years of her and her sisters in the society pages, in ball gowns, in bathing

suits, modeling at fashion show fundraisers, and lunching with Mrs. Smith and Mrs. Jones at the club. Now she lived in a small apartment in an elegant building and all that was gone. All her family was dead except for us. But she was frozen in that world. She wore clothes that had been tailored for her decades ago. She had had the same sleek brown leather shoes for as long as I could remember. She would not take you to the movies or out for pizza. Sometimes she thought she would take you to the club for lunch, but you never went. Everything in her apartment was just so, and she had beautiful things. Her apartment was like heaven, always neat, clean, and silent. We would sprawl on the white carpet with our sketchbooks and crayons and pencils and add to the collection of pictures she had already taped carefully around the apartment, along with photographs of us and of my father and my aunt as kids. Our grandfather had died before we were born.

"Why aren't there any pictures of your dad?" Julia had once asked my father.

"I suppose she has her reasons," my father had answered.

At night I think she dreamed of cotillions and summers at their house on the ocean. She told us her father had liked to watch the thunderstorms from the huge verandah.

"Come out here, Anna. Come and watch," he would say.

But she was afraid of storms. Her mother had died when she was young.

During her visit, my parents took her out one night to a fancy restaurant in town with their friends, as if we did that sort of thing all the time. My sisters were spending the night with playmates from school. My parents' friends dropped their daughter, Kelly, off to stay with me at our house. Kelly lived in a house like you would find in the States, with carpeting and a real upstairs. Every room overlooked the water. But she and I understood each other. Once our families had stayed at Salt River Marina late into the night. My father backed his pickup close to the open bar, and people climbed into it and danced. Kelly's parents did. So did the lady who worked at the bar, whom I had once seen my father kiss. My mother did not join them. Neither did we. We sat near the docks. We were tired. We had walked the rickety wooden pathway that ran over the water alongside the mangroves a million times already. We had studied each sailboat and memorized each name. The marina was a nice, leafy, hidden place tucked into a little nook at the foot of a hill next to Salt River. But it was a day place, good only when no people were there, and the only sound was the slap of the water on the hulls. My father worked there after picking us up from school sometimes. Julia and I would do our homework in the room above the bar. It had no walls, just a roof. We would do cartwheels across the picnic tables or walk along the railings as if we were on balance beams.

Kelly's parents went home after a while, leaving her to spend the night with us. My father stayed until every last hopeless reveler on the island had collapsed or gone home to bed. Then he reluctantly started up the truck.

"You're letting him drive?" I asked my mother.

I knew I was being cruel. As if my mother could demand the keys. As if you could make demands of a king among the leaderless. He was a conqueror. He was millions of miles above us, rocketing toward the future on a wave of alcohol and reggae rebellion songs. I missed the part of my father that told us stories in a quiet voice, with all three of us snuggled next to him in his chair.

I was squashed next to my dad in the cab of the truck. The gearshift was crushing my leg. Kelly sat next to me, then Julia, then my mother holding Rebecca. We were catapulting through the night, up the hill away from the marina. We swung around to barrel alongside the river. I wondered if we would die that night. I wondered how much anyone would care if we died. I was not scared as we thundered along past gated driveways that disappeared into the dark hill above us. My tears were angry. But Kelly reached over and held my hand, and I knew she was not scared either. She lived in a dream house overlooking the ocean, but there were other things we had in common.

The night they took my grandmother out, Spunky slipped through the living room grate with a rat still twitching in his mouth. Kelly threw a cushion at him. I tried to guide him back outside without getting too close, but he ignored me. He trotted down the hall into my bedroom instead, where he dropped the rat onto my sketchpad, which was lying in the middle of the floor. He swatted it back and forth, smearing rat blood on my drawing.

We ran back to the living room and leaped onto the sofa, pulling our feet up underneath us. If we did not touch the floor, we were safe. Kelly was laughing. It was a game to her because she got to go home at the end of the night. When we heard the cars pull up, we stayed where we were. But I recognized my father's hard knock on the door, and I took a deep breath and prepared to risk stepping in rat blood to unlock it.

"You're crazy," Kelly said.

She pushed me back down then stood on the arm of the sofa and yelled through the window.

"Unlock it yourselves. There's a rat in here."

There was a fumbling at the door before it swung open. My father and Kelly's parents stumbled inside.

"Where's this rat?"

Kelly pointed to my bedroom. Her mother marched in and returned with the rat in her bare hand and shook it at us, laughing. We climbed off the sofa and followed her to the door, and she chucked it into the dark somewhere. I stood in the doorway and watched my mother help my grandmother out of the car. As my mother led her into the house toward the girls' room where she had been sleeping, my grandmother patted me on the head.

"Good night, Rosie," she said.

It was the nickname she had given me when I was a baby. She never called me anything else.

"Good night," I said.

She smiled at me. *We are all enduring,* she seemed to tell me. *You'll be all right.*

Our island was a turtle nesting ground. At the beach, there were no rows of striped purple, yellow, and orange umbrellas piercing the sand and imposing solid blocks of shelter where you could hide from the sun. Here, the shade was ephemeral. It lingered beneath a few dry leaves or a patch of cloud for a fleeting moment before it skipped away across the sand, beckoning to you, stretching from a few fingertips' width of coolness to a space large enough to offer a foot, a leg, or a face a few minutes of relief. Then it danced back to a handful of flickering spots of shadow. *Over here. Over here,* it would call. The poles of beach umbrellas were pointed and sharp. They could tear apart baby turtle nests hidden deep in the sand. They were not allowed. On the island, we were exposed.

One day, we went to Sandy Point and there were many people. They were here for vacation. They had come from neat, plastic suburbs. They had laid suitcases open on fluffy flowered bedspreads and packed them with bright sarongs and straw hats. Maybe the wives had wanted to take a cruise, but the husbands had wanted a wilder trip. They pulsed with excitement as they reassured their wives that the stories of couples attacked on deserted beaches or robbed in charming narrow alleyways by poor, angry, machete-wielding men were exaggerated. They told them this from high in the pink rooms of holiday compounds.

Yet somehow they had found our beach. Our beautiful, moneyless beach. They belonged on beaches where waiters brought drinks to white lounge chairs. But maybe even they sensed that that was not real. Maybe they knew, deep down, that the force that thrust mahogany trees out of dark soil and draped them in every manner of green growing thing, then pummeled them with raging, wrathful winds and drowning downpours, was ancient, and its voice was deeper than the tinkling notes of a steal pan drum. Maybe they realized that

amidst the swirling, rushing, massive madness of it all was a nature so gentle it offered cool, secret places for geckos whose tiny heartbeats rippled along their translucent skin to hide in. Baby turtles were entrusted to its silent, sandy nests warmed by the sun and lapped by the sea. Maybe they wanted better stories to take back and decided to brave the island outside their resorts for one afternoon. But maybe they also sensed they were missing something.

That day, we saw the sea turtles hatch. A crowd had formed around a patch of sand not far from where we were sitting, my parents on our old faded beach chairs, my sisters and I lying on our towels.

"Turtles!" came the shout. "Baby turtles!"

Turtles. A treat even for us local kids, especially now, in the summer. It was too early for them. My sisters and I jumped up and nudged our way in among the lumpy white bodies of those who were visiting. They wore water shoes on their feet, on this beach without a pebble for miles, and left deep, clumsy imprints on the sand, while our bare feet made barely a mark. At our toes were the tiny, mottled green, insect-looking babies. Their long, fragile arms and legs looked like wings, deliberately paddling through the sand, moving in wide swoops the way your arms did when you swam butterfly, only in slow motion. They had climbed up out of their silent, cool nests, awoken by dreams of the sea. They, who had never before felt the slow, welcoming rush of plunging into salt water, of being wrapped in warm currents, or of somersaulting, weightless, in clear, green billows, knew which direction to crawl in. They would know, when they touched the water, how to dive under the waves, give a flick of their flippers, and coast along above the seafloor. They would remember how to breathe down there. And the ocean, in spite of its capacity to foam and rage and to toss sailboats upside down so their keels suffocated in the dry air, would welcome them. It would give them safe passage to wherever it was they knew they were supposed to rendezvous, in foreign places thousands of leagues away. And they would be allowed to journey back to our island when the time came. They belonged.

A kid with sunscreen smeared on his face and a Styrofoam floating contraption buckled around his waist bent down and picked one up. It squirmed. Its delicate, finely scaled flippers flailed out of its shell as they wrestled futilely with the air, finding no traction. It knew only sand and sea. It was being whirled about through an unknown atmosphere, straining against five points of pressure where alien fingertips dug into its still-soft shell.

My father had come up behind us.

"Put it down," he said.

***

My father's soul screamed in agony for helpless things being hurt. If he noticed we were sad, he might rebel against all that constrained him, cost be damned. We would do what other families did. We would go out to eat, all five of us. Five. We were never a neat, compact little family. We were always an ungainly herd of five. Too many.

My favorite times were when he would take us to the bookstore and buy us two, three, sometimes four books each. I had outgrown the little girl series I used to read. I wanted to read adult books, but I did not know where to begin. The bookshop had a small children's section at the front and a handful of rows of shelves at the back. It was the only one on the island, though, and to us it seemed like a maze of books. I had wandered around the shop for almost an hour when Rebecca pulled my hand.

"You should read this," she said, handing me a paperback.

I flipped it over. It was about a family living in an old castle in England. It was just the sort of stuff I daydreamed about. I looked up to see my father standing behind my sister, smiling as he scanned the shelf.

"Never underestimate the wisdom of children," he said.

So, a book or a pair of shoes you had eyed in a shop window would be bestowed suddenly, staving off heartbreak, delivering an hour, an evening, or even a week of intense joy and leaving you with an overwhelming love for the father who understood that sometimes entire worlds could be transformed through small things. They could turn the tide of suffering. They could make you feel human. My father knew that small things, thoughtful things, like remembering your favorite nursery rhyme from when you were a kid or surprising you on Christmas with a book of mythology, were vital to that part of your soul that was a poet. Back then, I thought my mother did not know this the way he did. But she knew, as I came to, that small things could not sustain you.

Summers were long. It was hard to invite friends over. One afternoon, I sat on the back porch steps, tossing rocks at imaginary targets in the yard. My mother came out with the laundry basket.

"Can't we move? Can't we just rent somewhere?" I asked her.

She gave a cool sigh, as if such things, like our happiness, her happiness, were no longer in her hands.

"You'll have to ask Daddy," she said.

My mother, in the face of such questions, could remain detached. There had been many disappointments in her life. She was so kind. She hugged us and kissed us and never raised her voice. She was

slender and beautiful, but you thought deep down something had hardened in her. It let her withstand whatever losses life hurled at her, no matter the force. She continued. Worn out, maybe. And perhaps unable anymore to recognize the exquisiteness of the beauty and heartbreak in the sad stories I read feverishly or told myself in my head. She did not have the luxury to indulge in poignancy. Our real lives were wrapped in disillusionment. But if we were to be condemned to have sadness, I wanted it with less squalor. I wanted sadness without rats and chickens clucking and broken tiles and the sweltering heat of the valley. I wanted sadness amid fine linens and sea views. Sadness you did not have to feel ashamed of.

"Fine," I said.

I would do it this time, I told myself. It was Saturday. My father had gotten in late last night. I pushed open my parents' bedroom door and took a few steps inside.

"Dad?" I whispered.

I knew this house was meant to be a stepping stone. He saw it as an accomplishment. And my asking to leave it behind would hurt him. He would think I did not understand.

"Dad?"

I did understand. But standing in this room, with the shades drawn and my father asleep in yesterday's khaki pants and shirt, I did not believe it.

Summer was hurricane season. When we first moved here, a long time ago, it had been winter. There had been snow on the ground when we left. It was old snow, no longer powdery but crusty with ice and smeared with black where the exhaust from cars had settled. Windows were blurred with a dull film, the same grey smudge as the sky. I think my father had begun to wonder how you could get ahead there. How your children could be happy and carefree, when everywhere people trudged along with heads bent toward the ground, thinking only of putting one foot in front of the other until they reached some warm, unfulfilling office. What did it matter that spring was just a few months away, when you felt that winter would last forever?

That was what our lives had come to. We were fogged and frozen. And my father dangled the Caribbean sun in front of us, in front of my mother. He tempted us with escape. With a new beginning. Even though my father had only just come home. Even though we already had one rebirth behind us, short lived and stifled by the same old house and the same old worries. Strange for my father to have thought it all would have changed when he decided to stop living halfway between our family and halfway between freedom, as if we had

never been suffocating enough to have made him leave in the first place. Maybe he told himself my sisters and I were too young to understand what had gone on. Maybe he thought our consciousness would commence only from that moment. But maybe he also perceived, faintly but piercingly, that his oldest daughter's love, fierce though it remained, was not quite as boundless anymore. Somewhere inside me, there would always be the memory of going to visit him while he was away, of opening a kitchen door, and of being commanded to get out by the hard slice through the air of a woman's red fingernails before the hand returned to the back of my father's sweater and the embrace they shared. Not my mother's hand. Maybe after all that, he felt he needed to take action. Flight was the only way to salvation.

"Did you kiss the first palm tree you saw?" we asked him when he picked us up at the airport.

He had gone before us. He had teased my sisters and me before he left that this would be one of his first actions upon stepping off the plane. But behind the teasing was the earnestness and solemnity of a vow. This would mark the start of our new life. This would bind us to our new home.

"Not the first," he said. "But the second one I did."

So when we left all we knew, when we drove away watching my grandmother in the window, we were wearing sweaters. Whenever we left my grandmother's apartment, rode the elevator down, skipped past the front desk and the doorman, making our shoes click as hard as we could on the marble floor of the lobby, and stepped outside, we would look up and give her a little wave. She would always stand in her bay window on the second floor, number 210, and watch over us as we walked to our car. There was an island in the middle of the parking lot, a tiny raised park edged with stone walls covered in ivy. It was not new or bare or bright. This park had stood for a long time. There were a few low, solid, dignified trees and an evergreen. The whole island was shaded. This was not a place for brashness. The flowers in their beds were plenteous but subdued in color. They had been planted with skill but not too neatly. They spilled over just a bit. Too neat gardens were for those who needed to impress, and no one in my grandmother's building needed to do so. On nice days when we visited, my mother would take us out to the island where we could run around and trample the nice deep grass. We would pretend to have been shipwrecked. The concrete hemming us in on all sides was the water. We would have to make a full circuit of the island to investigate, and we had to walk along the stone wall the whole way. If you walked past the island on your way to the car, you would have to jump up onto the stone wall and take this path as far as you could. My grandmother was probably nervous, watching this from her window. But that one winter, we left, and the visits and the watching did not happen anymore.

At our new school, kids wore nylon jackets. This was their winter. It rained a lot. There were ferocious, deafening downpours that began without warning and ceased just as suddenly. At school, you would hear the splatter of a few raindrops. The teacher would stop talking and look up, and then the thunder of torrents of water on tin would begin, and you would all just sit, staring out the louvered windows as if from behind a waterfall as sheets of water cascaded off the roof. I loved these storms at first. Listening to nature's unadulterated power from safe inside. You felt anonymous during storms. If you shouted, no one would hear you. I did not know then that there was no safety inside. That here, nothing was permanent. The change could happen slowly, like rust gnawing at your roof with tiny teeth or termite sappers quietly tunneling under your walls. You would wake one day to find yourself stripped bare, all your efforts at endurance having been for naught. Or it could happen in an instant. One blink, one gust of wind, or one crushing wave, and your life would be changed forever. There was no way of knowing here. In the beginning, I thought the roar of rain on a tin roof forced a kind of peace upon the soul. Later, it hinted too much of drowning.

One day toward the end of summer, my father woke up in pain. Physical weakness had always been foreign to him. When we were younger and he used to do projects in his workshop in the garage, he would entertain Julia and me by chopping in half blocks of wood he had lying around with his bare hands.

"How do you do that, Daddy?"

"Follow the grain," he would say.

We were never scared of anyone hurting us when we were with him. He would stop his truck for hitchhikers to climb into the back. He would walk down any street in town, unheeding how far he had gotten from the main paths close to the waterfront, and people would wave to him. Red, they would call him. It seemed the whole island knew him. The whole island, even that world of stray dogs and dirt, of wild-eyed people who shuffled along the streets and shouted things at you, of bats flying in through chinks in the roof, of rum, and of feet scurrying in the night above you, beside you. My mother and sisters and I wanted a different life. We wanted that world of wildness tamed, like the university field. We wanted to sleep peacefully at night in soft white beds. We wanted to throw our shutters open to the trade winds. We wanted a house high up so we could look out on the Caribbean from afar and venture down into it when we chose. We wanted a life that would give us only bright flowers dangling from wooden gallery beams, wicker chairs scraping on a flagstone patio, and cattle lowing in the distance. The rest would leave us alone. *No,* we would silently insist, *we would never run*

*away*. We wanted to be a part of the hermit crab races and the beach clean-ups. We wanted to dance at the parades. This was home for us. We knew this was home, and we had come to love it. But in my father's presence, you could feel like a traitor. Who knew where he went on the nights he stayed out? At those times, he did not like thatch-roofed bars on the beach or sleek clubs in restored Danish buildings in town. They still had faint traces of middle-class pretense. He had left all that behind.

So he could be fearless. No one would hurt him. Even bad people on the island, for not everyone was the fellow island visionary he perhaps imagined, would think twice—some would, not all—before hurting us. There was a temper that lay concealed, almost, behind my father's handsome freckled face. There was something in his blue eyes that made you think he might kill you if you threatened him. That he would not hesitate out of fear. That he had killed men before.

"Are those the guns you used when you were in the war, Daddy?" Julia had asked once.

The war was not a subject that came up in our house, though its trappings were everywhere. Spaced along a hallway were black and white photos of my father during training, calling for air support over a bulky radio, lying on the ground with his rifle trained on some distant target, and leaning against a tank, his helmet pushed back a bit as he shared a cigarette with some fellow infantryman. His sword and his medals that my mother had had mounted on a navy background and framed one birthday a long time ago hung on one wall. There was the tattoo on his hand, an eagle, globe, and anchor. There was the portrait at my grandmother's of my father, looking like a boy, in his officer's dress blues.

When I was very young, my father would drive me to kindergarten every morning on his way to work. There was always the exhilarating contrast between the icy cold leather seat of his truck and heat blasting from the vents. The thrill of going somewhere, leaving the stifling warmth of home behind, with my dad.

"What will you do with Mrs. Frog Face today?" he would ask.

"Sister Mary Charles," I would remind him, laughing.

"Oh, yes. I forgot."

It was on those morning trips that he taught me to sing the Marine Corps hymn, and that was usually how we ended, pulling up in front of school singing about faraway places like Tripoli, me picturing the streets of heaven cobbled with millions of pearls that were reflected in the shiny black shoes of the United States Marines who guarded them. He talked about having been a Marine all the time but never about what he had done when he was one. Somehow I knew not to ask. And when my sister had innocently done so, I became paralyzed. I did

not think then that she was the normal one. That she was brave. That I was the one who was strange. Who sensed secrets. Who never dared.

That one time, my father answered. The only time. Not about the rack of dusty rifles mounted on our wall. Not about the war. But about a memory, totally unbidden, the only one he would ever share with us from those days. And I would always wonder why he chose it. Was his mind also full of green jungles? Of debris choking streams, of rotting boots, and of hidden enemies watching and waiting? Of turning to see that your friend had been shot next to you? Of killing other men? These were the things you heard about that war. Was it because this memory haunted him less or because it haunted him more?

"First," he said, "I was stationed in Japan. At Mt. Fuji."

It was bitterly cold and it was Christmas Eve and they were far away from home. They took presents to a Japanese orphanage, and they were invited to stay for dinner. So they had Christmas dinner with the orphans and the ladies who ran the home. In my mind, they were not on a military base. The orphanage was not another nondescript building on a street in Tokyo. In the picture in my mind, they were high up on Mt. Fuji itself, the wind howling around them, bulky and stiff in their cold-weather gear and huddling around a fire. The orphans lived in a tiny hovel. They had been banished to the mountaintop, but they lived simply and contentedly. The Marines took shelter under their cypress roof. And all through the night, Christmas Eve, a fire crackled merrily in the grate, and they sang and laughed and ate and spoke their handful of Japanese words with the orphans. That was how I transformed the story. That was what I wanted the story to be. I wanted there to have been moments of peace in my father's past.



The pain was in his chest. I had gotten out of bed and crept down the hall toward the living room. I was standing in the shadows at the end of the hallway, peering into the half light of morning at my father, sitting on the edge of the sofa, doubled over and clutching the left side of his chest with his right arm. My father in his work clothes, heavy, deeply creased boots and threadbare khaki pants stained with what had once been grease, mud, and sweat. All those things that men who did not work at desks encountered. Those solid, concrete things that you could grab hold of and either crush or mold, which men who did not trade in ideas met with daily. Did his fellow workers have memories buried somewhere of their university days? Of showing their artwork at Philadelphia galleries with their slender, elegant wives draped in silk standing at their sides? My father had chosen instead to live this life, our life, I thought. I was young then, and it was a very young kind of thought that

life simply laid before you two options, this way or that way, and you had the power to determine how things would turn out in the end. That you were not at the mercy of other forces skulking, sweeping, and howling around you.

My mother stood over him. Anyone else would have seen a room of sleepy, quiet, gentle light and a lovely, solicitous wife bending over her husband with concern and love. There were all these things, and yet there was also an undercurrent of tension that cast its deflating wistfulness over us all. It was like a fine dust, unseen, but it made it hard to breathe sometimes. It shrouded us in a mist so that even in happy times, day times, the world never quite sparkled the way it should, like on a summer morning after it had rained in the night. It made it hard to see. It crunched beneath your feet. It dulled your skin. Anyone else may not have felt it. But I felt it. It was not borne out of anxiety over my father being ill. It had come into existence long ago. It had been with us almost—almost—as far back as I could remember. It was a part of me. At the moment, it had blanketed my mother, and though it would have been barely perceptible to anyone else, I felt her exasperation leaping, blazing up before me like invisible fire. I could not see it, but I felt its devouring heat. *Now this too? This too?*

I thought he must be having a heart attack. But eventually he straightened up and walked around the room a few times, tentatively stretching his arms, arching his back. Then he left for work.

Chapter 3

A Storm

One weekend, I went to Kelly's house to spend the night. Kelly was my only outside-of-school friend. At school, you could be a different person. The Caribbean, and I loved her for it, made ostentation a tricky pursuit. The heat and rain conspired to uproot pavements and trap fancy shoes, tangle and dampen long hair with sweat, and turn the sheen of fine fabric into itchy, sticky dullness. At school, you could just be a kid in a cotton t-shirt, neither rich nor poor. If you went straight home after school with your family, if you did not stay for sports practice, get rides home with other kids, or go to friends' houses in the afternoons and have to invite them to your house one day, if you just went home after class and came back the next morning, no one would assume that you spent your time away any differently than anyone else. They would think your parents turned right at the bottom of the school's gravel drive and that you drove out past town to the East End, baking in the sun. The East End was enticing mostly in its reputation. Rich people lived there. But it did not rain. The land was always brown and dry. You could even see cactus plants here and there. It had a magnificence about it. The ocean was deep, deep turquoise, the sky infinite and cloudless. The sun was scorching and pitiless. But it did not have beauty or mystery. There was nothing dangerous, but there was nothing else.

Kelly did not live on the East End at first. When they moved to the island, they assumed that the place to live would be the most beautiful side. If you turned at Salt River Marina and drove up the hill, you came to a bluff with a big cream-colored house sitting on top, facing the sea. When you stepped inside, you were jarred for a moment. Here were all those things you had forgotten existed. They belonged to another life. White carpeting. A staircase to a second story. Sunny, comfortable rooms with flat ceilings and overhead light fixtures. You would have thought you were in some suburban paradise if every room had not looked out over crystal water.

Kelly's house was a forgetting place. It was not what I wanted really, what I dreamed of. It was not beautiful in that old island way. There were no heavy plantation shutters to pull closed against storms or pirates. There was no romance about it. It made some things seem untrue, like that unspoken, addictive knowledge of the precariousness of order and discipline here. I, too, felt the brutal longing to recognize this. To understand this was to be saved, saved from an ordinary life. Not everyone could live with the possibility of destruction. In this, my father and I were different from others. But I at some point had turned toward functionality. I kept my need for this hidden in a deep place. There I tended to it. I would never let it die, but I did not give it the light or

space to grow. Not like my father. At Kelly's house, you could take a rest from being a dreamer, even if you were only a secret one.

Kelly and I were in our bathing suits. We had been getting ready to walk to the pool. But the sky had turned dark, and the warm, languid breeze had suddenly been roused from sleep. It skipped about in quick gusts, and there was an unexpected coolness. It was faint, but to us, who had been wrapped in stillness and heat, the change charged through the air like electricity, pricking our skin, stirring our senses. We had to be out in it.

"Let's walk the dog," Kelly said.

It was a novelty, to walk the dog. Here, dogs, cats, and chickens were free to roam on their own. There were no neat, fenced-in yards. There were no pleasant sidewalks through cheerful neighborhoods. Here, houses were on their own, like you were on your own, scattered across the landscape, fighting to maintain foundations in fickle surroundings. Still, we found an old leash, clipped it to the collar of Kelly's rottweiler, and raced outside. The dog hauled us down to the bottom of the drive before we abandoned the pretense of controlling him. Instead, we all three chased one another through the deluge, the dog dragging his leash behind him, Kelly and I in our soaked bathing suits, our bare, island-hard feet slapping the pavement and splashing through muddy puddles. When the rain stopped and steam began rising from the ground, we walked back up to the house.

Every room on the first floor of Kelly's house had sliding glass doors looking out over the ocean, with the kitchen, family room, and living room all in a row and, upstairs, the bedrooms in a row on top of them. The doors were always open. It only took minutes before our swimsuits were dry. We wore them through dinner. We went to bed with them on, so we could leave for the pool first thing in the morning, no time wasted changing.

It was good to be tired when you went to bed there. Otherwise you might lie awake for a long time, punished by the sweet, sad, heartbreakingly soothing sound of saltwater breaking on the reef, over and over and over again, never to touch the shore. You might cry at the injustice of it all, that the people you loved heard no such lullaby, would never hear it. That those to whom it belonged barely noticed it. You might want to pull the pillow over your head and stop listening. To make things fair. You might hate yourself for not being strong enough to do so.

The next morning, we rolled out of bed and were on our way. We skipped down the steep steps from the house to the beach and went west. The beach was rocky here and no good for swimming. This was the green side of the island. Things could remain hidden. You could drive by a place on the road and never know what was behind the trees that lined it. You might never imagine what you would find if you could see the coastline,

unobstructed, from the road. But from Kelly's house, we could get to the beach. And once there, we could walk along it as far as the island, with its overgrowth and its craggy reefs and rocks that sometimes crowded the shore, would let us. Maybe as far as the bay, where a finger of land swept around the far side of the beach and stretched out into the sea, blocking your path unless you were brave enough to climb its steep face and disappear over the top. That was the end of our known world. We had heard stories of there being tidal pools beyond, two absolutely still, safe lakes to swim in, but we had never been allowed to go exploring there. It was there that the rain forest began. And if you were used to light and air, then you thought that the opposite, the rain forest, would surely suffocate you and swallow up your children. This side of the island, the northwestern side, got lots of rain, and trees and plants thrived, and it was very beautiful. It was good to be just on the edge, to breathe in that cool greenness of growing things and still feel the sun and the heat. But too much green, a jungle full of green, might trap you.

We walked about a mile and then we were there. They had cleared a little space out of the bush and built a small community of pale yellow condos, with tennis courts, neatly groomed lawns, and, in the very center, not far from where the sand turned to grass, a pool. We rarely ever saw people on the grounds. There was a hush over the whole place, and I think it was this, its silence, that made it fit. It did not feel as if it were intruding here. It seemed to have struck up a truce. It would allow nothing jangling, nothing sharp. When we stepped from sand to grass, we were bound by this pact. Even Kelly did not speak above a whisper.

The pool was almost always ours alone. When there was the occasional solitary swimmer, he was content to ignore us, uninterested in where we had come from. We did not swim here. We could swim in the ocean. This was a place to practice diving. The only better spot would have been off the side of a boat. One person dove and the other judged. On my turn, I would stand at the edge of the deep end, rigid, my toes gripping the rough cement, my fingers and legs pressed tightly together. I would bring my arms up, bend my knees very slightly, and make the gentlest of jumps. I would enter the pool like a slow-moving arrow, toes pointed, and swim underwater to the ladder, then watch Kelly do the same. Over and over and over again, hour after hour. We knew nothing about diving, really. We only went for clean lines and the smallest splash. We did what we thought looked the most graceful. It would be a long time before we would grow tired of the repetition. Somehow striving for perfection, using your body, making your body flawless, and knowing you would be enveloped in warm, sun-flickering water every time brought peace. When I thought about heaven, sometimes, not church heaven with clouds and crowns, but rather what it might really be like if you died and there were

such a thing as serenity afterward, I sometimes pictured that pool, free from other people and their thoughts, and those grounds, with the ocean in the distance.

Hurricane season dragged on. Before storms, people would make an X out of silver electrical tape on each of their windows. One X. I wondered how one X could save a window. We were never hit. It would just rain. Lots of people would not bother to remove their Xs. You got used to seeing them. But sometimes someone would ask about them and you knew they were new.

"Are those houses condemned?" a woman had asked my mother in town one day.

"Condemned to what?" my mother had answered, but in her mind, I thought she went on. *To rot here? To never live a normal life?*

"Why are the windows taped up?" the woman continued.

"For hurricanes," my mother said.

People fancied themselves storm trackers. There would be yellow maps posted to refrigerators or laid out on countertops. They would be marked with small red crosses, each cross a storm. Lines connecting the crosses were the storms' paths across the ocean. Sometimes they bore down on splotches meant to be little lumps of land. They usually arced away from the splotch meant to be us. A surer hand, a darker pencil mark traced that curve. A bit of the whirl might brush our coast, but we could weather that. We would tie boats down and stretch Xs across our windows. It might give us waves for a day or two. As long as the eye kept at bay, no one minded where it went next.

One night, I awoke to a heavy rustling outside my window and lifted my head to see the soft, deep eyes of a cow peering in through the slats. She stood still for a moment, taking in the cracked tiles of the floor and the low, tired ceiling with as steady a gaze as she observed my canopy bed, which I had had since I was five years old. Then she turned away and continued to the back of the house. You often saw cows moving along the roadside, trudging through fields whose fences had gone unmended for years and were easily crumpled under hooves. They never stood still. Perhaps they feared the owner who had tied the dirty ropes around their necks, the frayed ends of which now trailed along behind them. They were lean but tough and muscular, and after years of no one to milk them, they dragged swollen udders unflinchingly over the rough ground. I imagined they were

on a quest, endlessly circling the island on an expedition you knew nothing about. They were messengers, maybe. They brought news to the other animals. Tonight, our house was a waypoint on their journey.

I slipped out of bed and walked on tiptoe down the gritty hallway floor into the living room. The iron grate that opened onto the back porch was padlocked for the night, but there were two bars near my father's chair that were uneven, the space between them wider. Rebecca could slip through easily. For me, it was harder to free myself. If you pushed your head through first, slowly, not minding the sharp pinch against your ears, and turned your body sideways and wriggled a bit, you could manage it. And then you were on the back porch, without ever having made a sound. It ran the length of the house, and at the end, there was a window that opened into my bedroom, where only a few minutes ago, I had been sleeping. I pulled an old beach chair from the clutter, draped it with a faded towel, and curled up to watch the cows. The moon was full, and the yard was flooded with silver. The avocado trees, the shaggy lawn, and the cows gathered around Rebecca's baby pool were coated in a gentle sheen.

It was a quiet night, one that softened the harsh realities of day. You felt chosen, the only one awake, alone, in a house that slept, as if the night were poised to unburden itself of all its secrets, to you only, at this one moment. Then I heard a footstep in the other room. The loose tile in the pantry clicked, and though the cows continued to drink from the plastic pool, the magic had been broken for me.

Earlier, we had waited. When we first got home from school, the evening seemed far away, and we could toss our schoolbags into closets for the weekend and run into the yard or drag our bikes from the porch. The thought that my father might not come home could be set aside for now, though gently. It was a volatile thing, heavy with the burden of an empty refrigerator and a long night ahead, imagining the truck swinging off the main road into our street, listening for sounds of the engine in the distance. Half wishing it would hurry up so you knew he was safe. Half wishing it would never come.

We played outside first. We had two sets of roller skates, though neither fit me anymore. My old ones were red, white, and blue and had belonged to the daughter of one of my mother's friends. The laces no longer matched. One had snapped, and Julia and I had tied together what remained with a shoestring we had pulled out of a sneaker. If she wore thick socks, my littlest sister could wear these. Julia's skates were ivory with purple wheels, and each time she retrieved them from underneath her bed, they glowed like on the day she had first

gotten them, her last birthday. She was faster than any other kid on her skates, fearless. Before I outgrew mine, she would beat me in races.

After we had gathered the skates and socks, we unearthed a jump rope from a box on the back porch. The back porch had become ours. It was filled with the inhabitants of the big bedroom and playroom we had left behind in the States. A low set of shelves was packed with books that were slowly swelling and rotting in their new climate. Paints, the easel my father had built for us, games, and notepads were scattered about, along with all of our beach things. Chairs, towels, and the old green cooler, which I had seen my father packing into the back of an old Jeep in a picture from when he was very young. Now a stripe of rust edged the bottom, but it still worked for the beach and as a bench for Rebecca in Julia's pretend classroom.

At the front of the house, in the driveway, I tied one end of the rope around the seat of my bicycle while Julia laced up her skates. Then we set off, me pedaling, Julia gripping the rope and weaving behind, up and down our bumpy street. The way out was harder. There was a low hill, and Julia had to skate a bit to help. But when we stopped at the third speed bump, as near to the main road as we dared, and turned around, I had only to give a few hard pedals, and we were gliding, picking up speed fast, as if home had given us a tug and we could do nothing but roll back downhill. My fingers touched the brakes, but I did not press them, and I could hear my sister laughing behind me. Then it was Rebecca's turn. And then we went inside to wait.

Sometimes, after five o'clock, long after you had given up hope, the dog's ears would twitch. She would lift her head and listen for a moment, her eyes fierce with concentration. Before she could allow herself to wriggle with excitement, bound out the open door, and run to meet him, she, too, had to make sure. She, too, had known disappointment. And on those days, you did not care. You let the tiny hope that this would mark the beginning of something, a change, that this would be the last day five o'clock would mean anything, remain throughout the evening. You knew you should not. You knew it would hurt more later, but you did it anyway. Because it could be true. We had not abandoned him.

That day, after five, we continued to sit in the living room, holding books but not reading, flicking through channels but not watching television. Not talking. We were waiting, even though we knew it was a payday. When I was younger, I would sometimes pester my mother.

"When is Daddy coming home?"

It was a question like a missile. A question to which I knew the answer but asked nonetheless. And my mother would be forced to give a vague reply, because she was a wife whose husband sometimes did not come home at night, I had reminded her. And in my anger, I would not notice how sad her eyes were.

"I don't know. Soon," she would say.

But I did not do that anymore. When an hour had passed, suddenly, the spell in our house was lifted. We had allowed ourselves an hour of nervous doubts and reckless dreams, and it was time now to return to the evening that lay before us.

My mother scanned the shelves in the pantry, willing God, I think, to drop some gem in among the tired cans of obscure meat and soupy vegetables, meant to be dropped in collection bins for charity, not eaten, and yet here in our kitchen. I stood next to her and opened the refrigerator, listened to the hum as it cooled a loaf of bread, mustard, and empty space.

"Pancakes," she said, relieved.

"I'll have toast," I said.

She turned toward me then. Sometimes it was like this. We were not mother and daughter then. We were neither of us in charge. Neither of us knew what to do. We were only doing what we must. And between us was forged a fierce connection, but we were also alone.

"It's okay," I said.

I had reached for the bread and carried it to the toaster.

From the porch that night, I again heard the snap of the tile and my mother crossing into the kitchen. A drawer was opened, and the jangle of metal as she dug among the utensils splintered the night's calm. There was the suck of a can opener piercing tin and a new set of footsteps, heavier.

"Eleanor?" my father asked.

"I don't feel well."

Her accusatory tone and my father's mounting exasperation charged the air and made my skin prickle. I closed my eyes and prayed to her to let it go. *Let it go.* It does not matter if you are right. Something would be done tomorrow. There was enough bread to hold hunger pangs at bay. But there had been a summer, long ago, before we had come here, when I was little and we had gone to the beach. One afternoon, I had found my mother had huddled in a green blanket, shivering in the heat. After that day, my mother's purse was stuffed with

small bags of cold meat and peanuts, and the smell of chicken lingered in our car. She had to have protein. But that costly item had now become a transient member of our household. And that night, I fixed my eyes on the dim white and brown and grey shapes that rested in the grass, while in the room behind me, my father watched my mother eat nameless meat from a dusty can. I listened to the gentle mooing of the cows and the quiet splashing of water as they lowered their heads to drink from the baby pool and tried not to hear the impatient exchanges from the kitchen, the "stop all this" and "just come to bed." I tried not to hear my mother's hushed crying or the scrape of her fork against that metal can.

The next day, I went grocery shopping with my mother. It was our payday celebration this time. I could get the lemon drops I mainly liked because of the fancy tin they were sold in. We picked up my youngest sister at day camp on our way home at my mother's church. I imagined she had worked out an arrangement about money, seeing as there was none.

"You can go, too," my mother had said.

Julia went sometimes, because they had a pool, but I refused to spend my Saturdays with a band of ragtag missionaries, particularly ones who had agreed to take pity us.

Someone unlocked the gate for us when we reached the compound, and we drove toward the main building where Rebecca was standing, clutching in her small fist a collection of ribbons that fluttered in the hot breeze.

"We had swimming contests today," she said as she laid three blue ribbons and one red one across the backseat. "I came in second for diving."

"You know how to dive?" my mother asked.

One weekend, we went to Rainbow Beach for a pig roast. The family that had just moved into one of the houses along the university field joined us. They were dive instructors with a daughter my age, Nikki. My father had set up two rusty pieces of galvanized tin, scavenged from an old roof somewhere, built a fire along the bottom, and balanced a spit horizontally atop two rough posts at either end. My father, in his swimsuit with a t-shirt wound around his head in a turban, pushed forward the heavy pole that impaled the pig a quarter turn every so often. Each time, juice would drop from the glistening pig skin and crackle in the flames. The sound of the lifeless lapping of the sea would be drowned out by a great sizzling, and the smoke that hung in the air,

already thick with heat, would mingle with the distant scent of salt. I lay on my towel with my eyes closed and tried to imagine that faraway beach where my father had taught me to swim.

We went every year to the beach, in the summer, loaded into the old station wagon. Julia and I always wanted the way back. My parents had a pair of heavy blankets, soft blue underneath, rough on the top, with orange and brown and red designs painted on in the shape, I thought, of arrows. We called them the Indian blankets. We would lay them down in the way back and watch the tops of the trees rush past through the big rear window until we smelled the ocean.

Back there, the smell of the ocean hit you long before you could see it from where we lay. But you stopped seeing trees, and you could catch sight of the tips of sea oats if you passed by a high sand dune. Julia and I had made the rule that you could not sit up until the bridge. We wanted to lie down outside our house and see nothing of the outside world until the ocean. It smelled so clean that it stung your nose. It was an almost overpowering smell of salt and freshness.

It was a different sea back there, one that never tired of sending blue-grey billows to crash and foam on the shore, spraying little kids who splashed in the shallows. A storm had blown in thousands of jellyfish, but my father waded in fearlessly and carried me into the deep water, beyond where the waves were breaking. The shrieks of waders on the shore faded away, and there was nothing but the rise and fall of the cold water, like breathing, and my father's solid palm under my stomach. A whirlpool could have opened up beside us, a funnel cloud whipped across the surface of the water, and his hand, all powerful, would never have trembled.

"Keep your legs locked," he said. "And make your fingers into a scoop."

A callused hand cupped my own small one.

"You don't want any splashing. Try to be like a secret," he said.

I kept my knees rigid and pointed my toes.

"You can glide above the fish without a ripple."

I mashed my fingers together, dipped them into the water sideways.

"You'll swim past people on the shore and they won't see you."

I felt an awareness of every muscle. I controlled them and made them fluid. So this was what it was like to be a dolphin, I thought. This was how you swam.

***

The next morning, I woke early for my diving lesson. Everyone was still asleep. Our house was quiet. Everything was quiet. When I went outside, there was that early morning feeling of being alone, like the day after a storm, when the crashing of thunder and roar of rain has subsided, and the pounding of your heart has slowed, but you remain wary, not knowing what you may discover has been destroyed, in the next room, around the next corner.

I walked down the street, keeping a watchful eye for dogs, but none came, until I reached Nikki's house and gave a soft knock on the door. Laurie, her mother, answered in her bathing suit and t-shirt. She had probably slept in it. On weekends, and during the entire summer, we were always ready for the beach. You could not grow tired of it. Or even if you did, you went back anyway.

We had class on the floor of the tiny space that should have been the dining room, but there was no table. Laurie held up a chart with decompression tables.

"You figure out your pressure group from the first table," she said.

It was hard to think about math when you were wishing life were different. I traced the curling pattern etched into the old floor tiles, embedded with decades of dirt. Nikki was my age, but Laurie was a young mom. Living here, in this shabby house, empty but for some lawn furniture, was an adventure, a chance to raise sun-kissed hippie children and go scuba diving. But my parents were not young. This was the end for them, here. I did not feel young either. Sometimes I wished for something big to happen. An act of God. If we were hit by a tidal wave, so much would cease to matter. There would only be a sound like a train, maybe, and my sister and I would put one cat each in our backpacks, put the dog on the leash, and we would all hold hands and run. My father would know where to go. He had had training. He would lead us toward higher ground, across the main road, toward the north side, maybe, toward the Beast, the closest hill. He would help my mother. He would scoop my little sister up in his arms. And when the wave smashed and swirled at our feet and ripped up schools and houses, we would think only of survival. Only of food and shelter. Nothing else would matter.

Laurie asked Nikki if she understood how to calculate the length of time you had to wait to do a second dive.

"Not really," Nikki said.

Then Laurie gave up on the dive tables. Nikki went to the door to let the dogs inside.

Laurie looked at me. "My mother was an alcoholic, too," she said.

***

For the first few days, no one thought much of the hurricane. We had heard it was coming. But you heard about a lot of storms, and they always seemed to twist away from us at the last minute, brushing the palm fronds on our perimeter with raindrops, keeping the wilder weather far away out at sea. Days passed, and still this one moved toward us, and we waited. It was summer, and the air had been filled with nothingness for so long. No waking up early and getting dressed for school, stuffing sandwiches and drinks into the Playmate coolers we carried our lunches in. At school, there was the struggle of wanting other kids to invite me places and the fear of having to reciprocate, wanting to be included, wanting to be let alone. I had been mostly alone for the summer. It was easier in a way, to confine my worries within me, each day like the last, same heat, same white sun, same absence of breeze.

"I've never been so hot in my whole life," our neighbor Godfrey had said to me that morning as he walked toward his car, sending chickens scattering across the yard.

Into this stillness, something new had come. We were waiting. I was waiting. My act of God.

The day before the storm, everyone stopped waiting. It was coming. Silver duct tape was stretched across windows. Lawn furniture was dragged from poolsides. My father began stacking our furniture in a corner next to the kitchen. The coffee table, the chairs, the television. He found a place for every odd angle, as if our things were meant to be piled on top of one another the way he used to pack the car when I was little, before we had come here, for our old beach vacations. He would study the suitcases and blankets and boogie boards laid out on the driveway for a long time and then load them into the station wagon carefully, perfectly.

"Why are you putting the furniture there, Daddy?" my sister asked.

"It's the leeward side of the house," he said. "It will be protected from the wind here."

If the wind ripped the roof off, I thought. If the hurricane knocked down the outer wall. This was why you needed to worry about furniture already inside being situated to the leeward. But I did not tell Julia this. I did not tell my father I knew. Part of me willed it to happen. The rusty strip of tin that obscured the sky sheared off from the house with one knife stroke of the wind. And the rain would come down hard like a shower of stones, scraping the walls bare, pelleting the floor until the crusty ridges of the tiles were worn smooth, and the dirt would be swept away in the flood. Everything would be carried off, and after the storm, we would walk through the house that was now a ruin, like the remains of the sugar mills scattered around the island, but better

for it, because in a ruin, there was light and peace. Our walls would be chalky white, our floor bleached and clean.

"Why is it leeward?"

My father took down the atlas from the bookshelf and opened it to us, the Caribbean.

"This is our island," he said. "And the storm is here."

He drew a faint line on the map with a pencil.

"This is the path the storm will take. And look very closely."

Julia and I leaned in.

"This is where we live."

On the green dot that was our island he made a smaller dot with the lead tip of the pencil.

"A hurricane spins. In the center, it's still, and the winds rotate around it. So if it moves across the island like this," he moved his hand in a circle, "then it will hit our house here." His other hand he placed sideways on the map, making a wall.

"Are we going to the shelter?" Julia asked. We had heard on the radio that the public high school would be turned into a shelter.

"No," my father said. "Our walls are stronger than the shelter's. We'll be safe."

We were sent to our rooms to pick up everything from the floor. I taped the boxes of my board games closed and stacked them on the shelf in my closet. When I wiggled under my bed to pull out the last game, I saw eyes. Spunky looked back at me, startled, and gave a low, mournful meow.

"It's okay," I whispered.

I crawled farther under the bed and reached out to pet him. But he jerked away. His eyes darted from me to the bed above him to the rectangle of light behind us, and he slunk past me and crept away down the hall to the living room, huddled against the wall and walking low to the ground. I followed him. My father had tilted the sofa on its side, and he now stood, leaning against it, eyes shut tight. I let the cat run past and stayed in the hallway. My heart beat hard. No one had mentioned the pain in the father's chest since that first morning.

"Dad?"

He opened his eyes, smiled, lifted the sofa off the ground, and wedged it into its place in the leeward corner. He kept his back to me.

The sun continued to beat down as evenly as ever for the rest of the day. It was hard to believe in the hurricane. But as the light outside began to fade, we heard the faintest whine in the air.

"Don't let the animals outside," my father said.

My mother and I unrolled the two sleeping bags on the floor of my parents' bedroom, unzipped them, and laid them flat to make a mattress, because all three of us—Julia, Rebecca, and me—would sleep here. My mother smoothed out the lumps and arranged our pillows across the top.

"Did you leave out the books you want?" she asked.

"Yes." I pointed to the small stack on the floor.

"You read that earlier this year, didn't you?" she asked, picking up the top book.

I looked up. She gave me a half smile and sighed, tugged my ponytail.

"I thought I noticed you reading it the day we saw the dolphins at Sandy Point."

"Yes," I said. "Just rereading."

One wall of our living room was a giant bookshelf my father had made out of cinder blocks and boards he had painted white. It was packed with books. All his. He had been the one to take us to the cavernous library downtown, back in the States. He tempted us with trips to the tiny bookstore in town here. He understood how you might forget to hang the laundry on the line because you had been reading. Yet my mother had remembered my book. And for a moment, I had to work hard to fold an extra blanket into a precise square so the memory of my mother and me, curled up on the floor of our old playroom, my playroom at that time, because no one else had been born yet, reading storybooks, would not make me cry.

We went to bed in our clothes, t-shirts and running shorts, with sweatshirts at the foot of the sleeping bags just in case. That thin whine became a drone, and slowly, slowly, the sound of the wind grew until there was nothing else. Our lights went out. In bed, my father fumbled with the batteries for his radio. On the floor, my sisters and I switched on our flashlights and continued to read. Then Julia and I shone the light against the closet door and made animals for my littlest sister.

"Watch," Julia said. She wiggled two fingers. "A rabbit."

The power was supposed to go out, we knew. It was a hurricane. I rolled over onto my side of our makeshift bed and stared up at the dim ivory knob of my parents' dresser, inches above my head, wondering what happened when you died. My father had once told me that all soldiers who die on the battlefield go straight to heaven and in a way that seemed right. I thought about the portrait of my father that hung in my

grandmother's living room, an old photograph that had been colored in with the most delicate of brushstrokes, in a frame, like everything my grandmother possessed, subtle and refined. His face was at once young and old. I knew as a soldier, and perhaps only certain men are ever soldiers, my father was capable of absolute cruelty and yet also fierceness and love. I imagined all soldiers to have the capacity to kill, the willingness to face death, somehow strangely interwoven with the gentlest touch, depths of calm, and stillness enough to hold baby daughters in their arms. It seemed right that boy warriors and scarred veterans should go to heaven if they died fighting. But the feeling that perhaps death lurked not only on distant battlefields but in more familiar places as well made my stomach knot whenever I pictured my father wincing in pain earlier. I knew we could die tonight, though mostly I was sure we would not. To be crushed or blown away was inconceivable. I was scared of nothing like this. What made me uneasy was something otherworldly in the keening of the wind.

We began to hear strange booms and rumbles, the beginning of the destruction, though of what we could hardly tell, hidden away in my parents' room. We could only hear its echoes. I crept over to the window and peered through the small space of glass left vulnerable to the elements between the crisscrosses of heavy grey tape, and I saw before me a land under domination. The tall prickly grasses, the spindly citrus trees, and the leathery palm trunks, everything was bent under the whip of the wind, twisted and cowering toward the south, leaving no question about the direction from which the merciless hurricane marched. It was coming. As I watched, there came an anguished wrenching sound, an immense, sorrowful creaking, and down the center of the dimly lit street cartwheeled, roots over boughs, a massive old tree, the end of hundreds of years of life.

"All right," my father said. "We're moving to the laundry room."

He took one sleeping bag and the radio and disappeared into the hallway. We all sat still on the edge of the bed. Soon he returned, scooped up Rebecca, put his arm around my mother, and led her toward the door. Julia and I clutched hands. To be moving during the tempest, to be part of it. My body was stiff and tense with fear but also excitement. My father led us into the hall, into the living room, and shepherded us into the tiny laundry room with its four solid concrete walls. As we took those few steps, the roar of the storm sounded like a freight train, and I imagined the rain and leaves spinning through the sky outside must look like the blur of the cars barreling along the rails.

In the laundry room, my mother settled into the corner with Rebecca on her lap, whispered into her ear, and smoothed her hair, but I saw her hand trembling. Julia and I sat down, our knees pulled to our chests, petting

the dog and the little cat, and my father wrestled a thick piece of plywood the size of the doorway inside and prepared to hammer it over the folding door.

"Spunky," my mother said, her quivering fingers straying to her mouth.

"Spunky," my sister and I cried. The cat, all alone, forgotten in the bedroom.

My father sighed, rested the plywood against the refrigerator. He stepped back into the darkness. I tiptoed behind him, ignoring my mother's call. There was no one to make sure my father was safe. The beam of his flashlight swept back through the house and I followed.

"Spunky," he said softly.

I heard again that tortured moan from earlier in the day.

"He's under the dresser, Dad," I said.

My father slowly got on his knees, then flattened himself on the floor, stretched an arm under the sharp carvings of the bottom of the bureau, and pulled out the cat, who hissed and twitched helplessly, locked in my father's grip. He nodded to me, and we hurried back to the laundry room.

I had gone diving the week before at the pier. The gate that had perhaps once closed it off from the road smartly, properly, was now a rusted heap, and we followed the half-naked kids who ran its length and dove beautifully off the end and the fishermen and brushed aside the disintegrating metal and stepped out onto the pitted concrete stained with salt and fish guts. We spread out our gear, and Nikki and I practiced attaching our valves to the tanks.

"Okay, just walk off the side," her dad said. "Like if we had a boat."

The water rushed up around me. My weight belt shifted and knocked my hip bone hard, and as I sank, I took a breath of cold oxygen. The pilings of the pier were alive with anemones, like rows and rows of miniature fir trees colored pink and red and purple. Laurie pointed at her eyes, telling me to watch. She poked an anemone with her fingertip and in a flash, the tree disappeared, sucked back inside itself in the face of this new enemy. As she swam away, I raised my own hand, let it hover above the forest of anemones. If you were tiny, if you were a little particle, you could wander through these woods for a lifetime, following the slimy concrete path between anemones and barnacles, and one day something far bigger than your capacity for imagination could come and crush you. I withdrew my finger and kicked after the others, my fins pushing water behind me in a soundless stream. The ocean only made noise if there was air as well.

All around me flickered the pale blue, deadly silent world. Underwater. There was only the slow hollow intake of icy air and the expelling of bubbles that drifted noiselessly away. In and out, until breathing became a kind of silence. Like the steady blowing of the hurricane outside our laundry room. When you thought of silence, when you wished for it, you were really wishing to be alone. There would be waves breaking or a cat purring, or if you were on a sailboat, the hum of lines. All of those vibrations that traveled through the air and, when perceived by the human ear, soothed you and reminded you of life.

My father stood all night against the washing machine. When the eye passed over, the wind stopped, and he gently pried away our improvised door. We stepped down into the living room, into a few inches of water. I slipped down the hall to my bedroom, dragging my feet to send quiet whirlpools spinning behind me. My bed rested in a dirty lake. We went outside. Everywhere there were bits of things, broken and tossed aside by the storm. Strips of galvanized tin glinted in the eerie light of an unseen moon. Then we heard a low whirring sound, and my sister's curls brushed across her face. It was starting again. The eye had moved on.

It went on for hours, worse this time, because the jackhammering of the wind was punctuated now by a whoosh, as a great piece of metal was peeled back, and an earsplitting clang, as it was slammed back down. The corner of our roof. My father fell asleep standing up. My mother mumbled prayers to herself. If the roof blew off, I imagined my father running to the bedroom and hauling back a mattress for us to crawl under. That was what they said to do, if you lost your roof. I never thought we would die. I never thought about how we would pay to have our roof fixed. I think now my mother did.

But it stayed on. And after an eternity of rage, there was a shift in the mood of the wind. It came in sharp gusts and reminded you of forgotten autumn briskness, when the sharp cracks of flags or sailboat sheets and the accelerated clang, clang, clang of buoys made you shuffle your feet like a runner before a starting line, anxious to move. I remembered holding my mother's hand, walking along the sidewalk when I could lean into the wind and it would hold me up, then running, then walking, then running again, laughing, fleeing the cold. If only you could carry happiness wherever you wanted. We had escaped winter here in the Caribbean. We were surrounded by verdure and sunlight. But there were shadows. With my head resting against the concrete wall, eyes closed, listening to the dying hurricane, I knew we would not go back. I loved this island. There was so much I missed, but I loved it here.

My father wrenched the wooden board from the door. We could see into the living room, where the rivulets now coursing down our walls glistened in the sunlight. It was morning. My father stumbled out of the

laundry room. He pushed down the sofa that he had propped up in the corner a lifetime ago and collapsed on it. I wandered past him to the front door. When I opened it, muddy water rushed inside to join the dirty pool that rippled across our tiled floor. I stepped down onto the slab that had once been our porch and trudged through the water to the grass, tiptoed around branches, jagged sheets of tin, a bicycle wheel. The shutters on my bedroom windows had blown away, and the back porch screens blew shaggy and loose in the still stubborn wind.

Our house stood. But the rain forest was gone. Layer after layer of cascading vines, ancient black-green foliage, had been ripped away, and the once impenetrable lair of my invisible beast was now a barren land of brittle limbs and dead trunks. I could see far off. The jungle had hidden a low hill, and on it were the ruins of an old sugar mill. All this time it had been buried there, but now beams of light invaded every crack and exposed its secrets.

The air hummed with wasps, thousands of them, homeless now. One landed on my wrist, and I stood still, watching its thick black shell creep across to the hollow of my bent arm, holding my breath, waiting for the sting, which came just as I raised my right hand to smack it away. It was a match extinguished on my bare skin, and a burning welt appeared where the insect had rested a second before.

For weeks afterward they hovered in the air like crude bits of jet glinting in the sun as we raked up leaves and flung chunks of wood to the edge of the yard. If we paused in our work, they would settle on our arms or legs, but we only half-heartedly swatted at them. Their stings were just an annoyance now, forgotten as soon as they happened, and the red marks they left behind blended in with the scratches and scrapes from the brush we were dragging.



Summer ended. The weather did not change, but school began. One afternoon, when Nikki's mom gave us a ride home, no one was there, and the pile of books that had been leaning against the end table for weeks had been moved to the shelves. The blanket on the sofa had been folded. My father was no longer lying there.

If you sat in the wicker chair in the corner, you could look out through the grate and the back porch across the yard. I usually did my homework there, with my legs tucked sideways, the woven cane scraping the soles of my feet, my notebook balanced on my knees. Before the storm, the dark smudge of the rain forest always rested in the corner of my vision. I would stop writing, tap my pencil against my exercise book, and steal a glance outside. Tell myself that the shiver of the grass at the base of the first tree was a mongoose, one of the

neighbor's chickens, or one of the cats exploring. Now at the edge of the lawn there was nothing but heaps of dead branches and withered trees stripped of anything green. Nothing could hide there anymore.

My mother came home alone. She lingered in the living room before finally motioning for my sisters to sit down. Then she took a breath. I stared at my math book.

"They're doing a test today to see if Daddy has cancer," she said.

I felt like the bare trees.

She knelt in front of my chair and looked straight at me.

"If he does, we'll be okay."

Later, I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling. No one was stronger than my father. He was our protector. He knew how everything worked. He was the one who understood me. In the darkness, so much of life seemed unfair. That we would lose him. That after working for so long, this house and a rickety old pickup were all he had. That life was hard for some people. That goodness made no difference. That he would never have a sailboat. And most of all, that he had a daughter who wondered for the smallest fraction of a second if life afterward would be easier, in a way. I had learned that God had made man in his own image, but I thought in his own image must not mean just alike. God had a pure heart, and there was pitilessness in purity. To be pure was to be whole, and a pure heart could not recognize nobility in what was broken.

Between tests and visits to the doctor and mornings of pain, my father went back to work. The day the truck broke down, he took my mother's car, but he did not come home afterward. My mother worked now. Before she had gotten a car, she would wait at the end of our street for the taxi bus in the mornings, and we would ride to school with Nikki or pile into the cab of my father's truck. But now she had a car, beige and curvy. *A modern car*, my sister called it. Now backpacks and lunches were tossed into the trunk, and we each had our own space on the smooth upholstery and our own seatbelts, no one sitting on another person's lap. In my mother's car, after we bounced down the gravel drive that led to school, we emerged fresh and cool.

That night, as darkness crept into our living room, and the driveway remained a gaping hole in the dusk, my mother called a friend and asked for a ride.

"I'm going to get my car," she said.

She was right to go. She had worked hard. For so long, everything had been his. This was hers. I knew it was right. And I knew how traitorous courage could become when facing my father. It often hid in deep

places and played deaf, no matter how urgently you summoned it. It could wither under a flash of his blue eyes. Not an angry look, exactly. There was disappointment in it. There had been many mornings, after he had come home late the night before, when I had made a promise to myself not to speak to him. I had never told him it made me mad. I had never told him he hurt us. I did not think he would leave us forever. I knew he loved us. But some part of him must have felt trapped by ordinary family life. Because he did not come home. While we did our homework, while my mother made dinner, he stayed away. So I was a coward in the end. I ought to have been proud of her, for doing what she should have done so many times. What I could not.

But the reason I went with her was to prevent confrontation. You could not take back certain things, and the rift between my parents was almost a living creature, a vibrating force, dull but persistent, that pushed them away from each other, preventing even the slightest touch between them, like when you held the positive ends of two magnets together. They were each wrapped in a bubble, and the barrier had grown almost impermeable. Even when they spoke, the invisible membrane smothered their words, warping their meaning, no matter how hard they tried to understand. I think they stopped trying, and I no longer felt safe with them. My mother had been pushed too far, and like many on the brink, I think she saw an intoxicating horizon, sunrise flashing across soft clouds, and a new country, green grass glittering with morning dew, and it made her heady and bold and careless of the ravine she would have to jump to get there.

"I'll go with you," I said.

We left the girls at home, Julia bravely following us to the front door to lock it behind us. From the backseat of my mother's friend's car, I stared into the Caribbean night at a roadside devoid of streetlamps, with the glint of moonlight on an old fence or the far-off twinkle of windows on hillsides the only light before we got into town. I pictured my sister's face in the crack of the doorway, her freckled chin set in determination, and thought that whatever else we were, we were strong.

We pulled up in front of the bar, and my mother got out of the car and went inside. When the door shut behind her, my heart seemed to drop in panic, and I yanked the handle and climbed out of the car, fighting the urge to run in after her, needing at least to stand on the pavement outside, to be nearer, just in case. A thin neon tube spelled out "2 + 2" above the door, but it lit up with little enthusiasm, sending sputtering pink light across my flip-flops and the pavement at which I stared, seemingly endlessly, until my parents emerged.

"I want my keys," my mother said. "Please, Harry."

The look on my father's face then was burned into my memory, and it would come back at different times, intermingling with the images in my mind of him on his knees at the beach, helping my sisters build a giant turtle out of sand, and with all three of us balanced on his lap as he read us a story. That look of disgust outside the bar would be an intruder in happier memories ever after.

"You don't understand," he said. *I'm sick,* he may have thought. *I'm dying.*

He shook his head a little and then dug in his pocket for the keys, which my mother took from him silently. *Just come home with us*, I wanted to say. As he turned to go back into the bar, he winked at me. And grief tugged at my throat, because suddenly I was grown up, and I could no longer believe in his reassurances. When we parted on the sidewalk, my father slipping back toward the alcoholic delirium and cigarette smoke seeping from the doorway, my mother turning toward the cool night and the car parked down the street, the fracture in our family seemed to crack completely. And I had to choose to jump to one side of the fissure or the other, and I followed my mother.

My grandmother had come to stay with us. When I was little, before we moved, I had sensed her uneasiness in the elevator when we sped the two floors up to her apartment, a slight pursing of the lips, a longer exhalation of breath when we stepped off on her floor. She did not like for us to run or handle scissors. She kept a nightlight on when she slept. But she had gotten on an airplane and flown to see us for the second time. The first had been at the request of my father, to see where he would build his empire, where the foundation had been laid for the legacy of her son, her grandchildren. The first time had been about the future. This time, she had come to say goodbye.

One afternoon, she sat in my father's chair reading her book. We were glad to give her his chair. It felt strange to curl up in it, to rest your cheek against the cracked leather and breathe in the rainy leather smell mixed with my father's aftershave, knowing you could fall asleep there if you wanted to. You would not have to relinquish your place. Its rightful owner was not coming to claim it. We knew it for certain now. After so many late afternoons of wondering whether he would come home, we knew now.

When he had first gotten sick, he had been in and out of the hospital. My sisters and I never went. He would only stay overnight. My mother always went. He would come home with new brown bottles of pills, and the tink, tink, and rattle of tablets in plastic containers became part of the regular hum of our household, clinking in his bag when he shuffled to his bedroom after returning from the hospital, shaking as he tapped them into his

palm every few hours. He read book after book at first, walking to the taxi bus stop and traveling to the used bookstore in town every week while my mother was at work and my sisters and I at school, then climbing into bed with his overstuffed pillow positioned precisely against the wall to relieve the pain in his chest. He could not lie down flat anymore.

Later, his trips stopped, and it took him longer to finish his books. I had been asking for a new tennis racket for my birthday, with a roll of lime-green grip I had seen at the pro shop. My mother drove us through the gates of the resort just outside town, a sprawling pink Caribbean tourist dream, on Thursday afternoons for lessons with Don, the white-haired, wiry pro we sometimes saw in the newspaper. He won every tournament on the island. If you hit the ball buckets Don would place in the service boxes or the far corners of the court, you would win a can of soda. The courts were perched on the hill above the beach, and rows of pink bungalows tumbled down the slope below us. It was not real, you knew, but it was fun to pretend. When we filed into the pro shop afterward to collect our drinks, my mother would be waiting.

"Would you like to schedule the next lesson?" the lady behind the counter would ask.

My mother would hesitate. "I'll call you," she would say.

On the morning of my birthday, there was a racket-shaped package resting on our coffee table. That was always how it was. Every penny was counted on regular days. Yet somehow my parents performed miracles on special occasions. There was an enormous tree every Christmas. The manager of the supermarket saved the best one of the tiny shipment from the States at the back of the store for us, because my mother was nice to him. There were late-night dashes to shops before birthdays, a last-minute flight to Puerto Rico a few days before Christmas Eve. There was no planning ahead. They were never certain it would happen, and neither were we. So the special things they gave us were miraculous for their unexpectedness as well as their grandness, and the atmosphere at those times was all the more euphoric.

My father was the person who assembled bikes and dollhouses, who knew how cleats should fit, and who knew what product worked best to keep a snorkeling mask from fogging. In the old days, he would have whipped that lime-green grip around the handle of my new racket in minutes, and it would have looked as if it had come straight from the shop that way. But that morning, he sat at the table on our back porch by himself, deliberately wrapping and unwrapping, head bent over my gift, brow wrinkled, a slight tremor running through his hand. He stuck his tongue through his teeth when he was concentrating, like Julia, and it was that that forced me to turn away. It seemed to signal an ending, somehow. I dried the breakfast dishes for my mother and played

a game with my sister so that later, when he had finished, I could pretend as if I had just forgotten about the time and about how those pills, shaking in their plastic bottles, were slowing his mind.

One day, he went to the hospital and did not come back. And when my mother took us to see him a few nights later, there was a priest in his room. He rose from the empty bed next to my father's bed when we entered the room and shook my and my sisters' hands. His kind smile made me nervous. There was too much pity in it. We took over the empty bed while my mother whispered to my father. At that time, I still thought he might come home again.

"My sketch got an honorable mention in the art show," I told him.

Our art teacher had scattered a bunch of objects on the table and told us to draw them. I had thought it would be very grown up to draw the wine bottle.

My father looked at me, and the confusion in his eyes shocked me. Scared me.

"I thought . . ." he began. "That's good," he said finally.

So we went on, and as each day passed, without our even noticing, it became as if that was how it had always been. We went to school, we cleaned our rooms, and all the while, my father's voice was absent from our house. We visited him almost every other day. We brought our homework and books and games. We pushed his morphine button for him. We grew used to his hands twitching as the drug flowed through him. We watched the television that was mounted high in the corner of the room. His room only now. He had been moved into a single room with a wall of windows right next to the nurses' station, and I refused to think about what a private room might signify. There had been a lot of talk about infection in the early days, and now we were allowed to hug and kiss my father freely, to breathe and cough around him, and to track dirt across the sparkling linoleum with grubby flip-flops, and I refused to think about what that might mean as well. I joined in taking over the room, and when a long-ago conversation echoed in my head when it got quiet, I would read ahead in my history book or try to make sense of the next trig chapter with newfound urgency.

"I will beat this. I really feel like I'll beat this," my father had told me.

Now my grandmother joined us on these visits. And she was never nervous. She would smile and speak to my father and nod at his responses, and she would have heard them, muddled though they were. Outside the hospital, her hearing aid seemed to mystify her. She had lost the one for the left ear, and the remaining one seemed always to be turned off. When she saw you were trying to tell her something, she would shake her head and raise a thin white finger with manicured nail to her ear and twist up the volume. But I think now that the

device could have been without a battery from the day she had gotten it, for all the difference it seemed to make. She heard what she wanted to hear. She sensed when it was important, and the rest of the time, she was content to be slightly apart from the rest of the world, among us but not with us.

That Saturday afternoon, while she sat reading in my father's chair, I saw the dark body of a centipede begin whipping itself across the floor. Perhaps it was stories we heard at school, that you never knew, a centipede sting had been known to kill grown men. That you had to suck out the poison, suck and spit, before it entered your bloodstream. Even when you knew in your head it was not deadly, you could not overcome the suspicion that it was alert, aware, and evil. It moved so quickly, a polished red-black string of beads. You blinked and it disappeared, and the fear that it would surprise you, when your fingers slipped between sofa cushions or when your toes stood dangerously close to the dark spot under your dresser, lurked for a long time afterward. You had to catch it and destroy it.

"Centipede!" I called to my mother, never taking my eyes off it.

I heard her fling open the cabinet under the kitchen sink.

"Where's the spray?" she asked.

She hurried into the living room and thrust a plastic bag into my hands, then grabbed two magazines from the coffee table.

"I'll scoop," she said. "You just hold the bag open."

We danced around the centipede in our bare feet, jumping back each time it twitched. My mother tried to trap it between the edges of the magazines, and it thrashed and wriggled away. I swept it back toward her with the bag, and she rolled up the magazine and smacked it hard. For a flash of a second, it was stunned, and she squeezed it between two glossy corners and tossed it into the bag. We hurried out the front door and tied the bag handles tightly. We usually squashed them with my father's work boots, but they were not left outside the door anymore. My mother bent down and began whacking it with her magazine, over and over. Still, it writhed about in the plastic.

I took the broom that had been propped against the wall for clearing the water that flooded the front of our house each time it rained, ever since the front porch had blown away, and began beating the centipede with it, beating evil incarnate. When the plastic continued to rustle, my mother took the broom from me, flipped it

around, and thrust the wooden handle down onto the bag, one, two, three, and each time, we heard a satisfying crunch.

I glanced back through the door, which stood halfway open.

"Mom." I motioned toward my grandmother, who was just turning the page in her book. She had not looked up once during the battle.

My mother laughed, and soon we were both doubled over, hysterical. We laughed and laughed and laughed, the dead centipede, conquered, at our feet.

It was a time of downpours, and I was learning to drive. I drove us to the hospital every day now, and almost every afternoon, it seemed we were caught in a rainstorm. Great sheets of rain slammed onto our car, and the windshield became a pool of blurry shapes and running colors. But it did not matter. I no longer needed to pay attention to the turns. I knew how to get there as well as I knew how to get home. It was different now. Half of me was always there, anyway, in my thoughts during the day and in my dreams at night. Just as half of my father was now somewhere else. He slept most of the time while we visited. When one of the nurses had to help him sit up so the doctor could listen to him breathe, he looked confused and anxious. His hospital gown slipped off his shoulder, and I saw the black marks on his chest, a target drawn in thick pen lines to direct beams of radiation, which refused to fade long after the effort had been abandoned. But he liked to hear my mother's voice, and she spoke softly to him while the doctor did his tests.

I had started reading to them while we sat in his room. I read the books I had loved when I was a little girl. On our island, rain and clouds never lingered. Sometimes I would long for a grey day, when the edges of the world softened and the driving rain dissolved into mist, and you were cocooned from everything around you, from the future. But our rain blinded you in one disorienting flash and then disappeared, and sunlight and painful clarity took its place. Large blocks of light burned white on the linoleum floor of the hospital room, as intense as the quiet. Not the swaddling hush of a grey day, when life was fuzzy and muted. It was the insurmountable silence of the waiting room, the efficiency of technology and medicine, measured in low, precise pumps and pings, that tolerated only the most banal of human sounds. That allowed only those. If you wanted to scream, some invisible force would prevent you.

My youngest sister had managed to shatter the stillness and so had been banished, a self-imposed punishment but a testament to the power of that force all the same. If you were young, it put you on edge. It

drove you mad. It stripped you of all that was natural, like the desire to run, to play, or to laugh, like we used to do in this room. One day, the doctors and nurses were performing some silent maneuver, swift and well-organized, of oxygen tanks, while we stood to one side. But Rebecca had fidgeted and backed into one of the cold, silver cylinders. I thought the crash when it hit the floor had stopped my heart, and perhaps in the blink of an eye, I had been transported to purgatory, and it was the same room. No one moved for a moment. But the system soon corrected itself, and one of the nurses swooped up the tank, my father's oxygen was replaced with a barely perceptible hiss of air, and the hospital team soon padded away down the hall on rubber soles. That was Rebecca's last trip to the hospital. If you were young, you could break the force, but even so, you were afraid to return. And if you were older, it compelled you to sit quietly, to wait, to adopt the posture of acceptance, and before you knew it, you had accepted. So now there were only my childish recitations about lions and secret gardens, the rhythmic click of my grandmother's knitting needles, and my mother's voice, soft but insistent, if I paused.

"Keep reading."

On the last day, my father's eyes were far away, and his body was still. There was a wet, hollow sound of the sea sucking back waves that had crashed into coral caves. It was my father breathing. All afternoon, that sound filled our heads, and I clung to it. To lose it would mean terror. I closed my eyes and pictured myself in the ocean.

My mother prayed, her voice rising and falling against the waves. The prayers churned up the waters and made the ocean rough. I wanted peace. It was over. I leaned close to my father and began to sing to drown out the prayers.

"From the halls of Montezuma . . ."

*Just listen to the song*, I thought to him. *Let the rest go.*

One of the nurses came in.

"Why don't you girls go and get your mother some water," she said. Then she stood and looked at Julia and me until we left the room.

As soon as we turned the corner in the hallway, we began running. I had a dollar clutched in my hand, ready to slap down on the counter. *Water, please. Water, please,* I rehearsed in my head. My mind was full of hate for the nurse and rising panic. On and on we raced. I knew the tiny hospital as well as our own house, but

the fear that we had missed the canteen, that we were wasting time, made it harder and harder to breathe. I wanted to turn around but I did not. I did not have the courage for defiance, not even for my father.

We burst into the cafeteria.

"Water, please."

The man smoothed out our dollar and began fumbling in the cash box for change.

"Let's go," Julia said. "Before Daddy . . ."

I nodded, and we began the sprint back. I did not worry about Julia keeping up. She was just as fast as I was, faster, and she knew our father was dying. That made us equals.

In the room, my mother was quiet, and Julia and I slammed to a halt in the doorway, frozen with fear inspired by the silence. But the sucking sound came again, like saltwater being pulled through the tunnels and twisted formations of dying coral, then released, to flow back to the sea. My father breathed again. Julia and I handed over the water and sat down.

Now we were waiting, counting the seconds between breaths that no longer came rhythmically. Sometimes there were long pauses and you told yourself, *This is it. This is it.* You had known it was coming, and now it was here. But then his chest would shudder and rise again, and you could close your eyes and sigh with relief. You could put it off a bit longer. Panic, relief. Panic, relief. It went on that way for a while.

I moved my chair closer to the bed and touched my father's hand, swollen, wet, as if his hand, his skin, and his body had already been overtaken. Only his chest fought on. He had been staring upward the whole time, and I leaned over him and saw that his eyes were battling on as well. His chest and his eyes were still alive, and his eyes were fearful. I thought, *How odd.* Because he was fearless. Then I knew he did not fear for himself but for us. For what would happen to us without him.

I remembered my mother, her eyes defiant. "We'll be okay," she had said that day when she told us my father was sick.

"It's okay," I whispered to my father now. "We'll be okay."

It was a promise to him.

Moments passed. There was another breath. Then nothing. It hurt.

"Go and find a nurse," my mother murmured.

It was like a dream when I walked out into the hall toward the nurses' desk.

"My father stopped breathing." My voice sounded far away.

The nurse hurried toward my father's room, and I followed. Then began the hushed succession of nurses and doctors, filing in and out of the room, and the detaching of tubes, the switching off of machines. The room deflated.

"Tomorrow's my birthday," my mother said flatly, to no one in particular.

At the funeral, it had seemed cold, even in the fiery sunshine of the Caribbean autumn. My dress had long sleeves. It was the only one I had that was all black.

"Will you be too hot?" my mother had asked the night before. "You could wear your navy skirt. You don't have to wear black."

But of course I did have to wear it, because that was how things were done. The night before, I had thought that a proper funeral with subdued, black-clad mourners and solemn words spoken under an overcast sky could restore lost dignity to the man being buried. The next day, I learned that the way things were done could not change what things were. If God had been watching, how insignificant we must have seemed. How disappointing. We were not grand. Nothing we did was grand. Even this day, the funeral, the death of the main character of our lives, was saturated with the feeling of anti-climax. The coffin wobbled as the pallbearers heaved it into the hearse, the same strain on their faces as they might have had loading groceries into a car. At the cemetery, a pastor from my mother's church began to speak and I knew all was lost. He had never met my father. I stopped listening and looked out across the yard. A handful of smooth markers had been arranged in the cemetery in neat rows, like seedlings. *I hope you're next to someone good*, I told my father. Another weather-beaten island man, a war vet, maybe. I wanted him to have a pal, someone he could tell things to. All the secrets we had never known.

The day before at the wake, I had seen my father's first wife. She rushed over to us, her hands fluttering in sympathy, dragging a girl about my age behind her. I think she was startled when she saw me up close. I was the twin of my father when he was young.

"You're exquisite," she said, reaching toward me. My mother stood beside me and held my arm, her touch firm and protective. They began talking.

I snuck a glance at the girl, and then another. She was tall, like me, but with blonde hair, not red, and brown eyes, not blue. On my next peek, I caught her studying me as well, and we cast aside good manners to stare at each other. There was not a single drop of the same blood between us, and yet there was a pull, from our

very cores, of an intensity only the unreal could exert. We were not sisters. We were *what ifs*. Years ago, when I was a little girl, before we had moved, I used to press my face against the mirror in my grandmother's hallway, peer as far as I could into that otherworldly passage with the same dark wood bench and cream rugs, and stare into the eyes of the figure on the other side. And this was the girl I saw. Me, yet not me. This girl.

"This is Brooke," her mother said. "I wanted her to experience grief."

My father had had a whole life before I was born, before he ever knew there was a young woman named Eleanor, whom he would meet through her roommate's friend in a little apartment to which she had moved to escape parents who drank and shouted. They were shadowy in my mind, their vague features recalled from only a few visits when I was barely a toddler. People lived lives within lives, and sometimes you only knew parts of them.

"So pleased my brother could accommodate you," my aunt said. "Let's go, ace."

She led me away.

I had not seen my father's sister since I was a little girl, and she would come up from Florida to visit on Christmas, before she and my father had fought. She was as slim and athletic as I remembered her, as she was in the photos on my grandmother's bookshelf and bureau, playing field hockey and lacrosse, riding her bike on the road along the beach. She had been a favorite of mine back then, the only other redhead besides my father and me.

There was a family story that during one visit she was on her way downstairs to check my grandmother's mailbox.

"Do you want to go, champ?" she had asked me.

And I, so shy that I cried the moment my mother left my sight, so shy that I often would not even sit with my father and wanted only her, nodded. My father exclaimed, and they laughed, and I shuffled alongside my aunt toward the elevators. It was strange now to think that I had had such a bond with my mother. I did not remember it. I wondered if those sorts of attachments died or if they only lay dormant, and you could find them again if you dug in the right place.

The fat pastor had stopped speaking, and stiff footsteps struck the ground from behind us as he huffed over to his chair. A young Marine walked through the group and stopped before my mother.

"On behalf of the President of the United States . . ." he began.

He laid a dusty flag in my mother's lap.

Chapter 4

A Parting

"We're going to go back to the States," my mother said.

I told her no, that I was staying.

"There's nothing for us here," she said. "This is an evil place."

I did not think it was an evil place, not solely evil, anyway. Places, like people, were too complicated to toss into a single category like that. Survival is complicated, my father had once said. You might cower in the corner of your house, listening to the metronomic groaning of the tin roof being wrenched from the walls then slammed back down with a shuddering slap of the wind, up and down, the hurricane like a seething beast. Yet the next morning, that very wind might have metamorphosed into a merciful bearer of the scent of hibiscus. This place, I had realized, was a shapeshifter, and to take refuge in its gentleness was to accept its occasional cruelty. It was a bargain to which my father had agreed, and one that I understood and might have made myself if my mother's eyes had been less sad or if my sisters had not been so young and had not deserved to make their own judgment about the sacrifices and blessings of chaos.

Later, after we had gone, I would sit at my desk during my last year of school. We were writing practice essays for our college applications.

"Describe a vivid memory," the teacher said.

I stared out the window. From the fourth floor, you could see over the small hill that surrounded the parking lot to the bare trees that lined the road. The world was dreary and tired. A layer of scum from frost and flurries fogged the car windows and gave the grass an ashen look. I yanked the sleeves of my sweater down over my hands and saw a tiny drop of red on the right cuff. Earlier, I had felt a flush of liquid and reached up to discover a nosebleed.

"Hurry, get to the nurse."

The math teacher had shoved me toward the door, tossing a wad of paper towels after me. I had held them to my face as I walked along the rows of lockers, taking the long way to make it last, this wandering of empty halls, when I should have been somewhere else.

"It's the cold," the nurse had said.

Now I reached for my pen with stiff fingers. The skin under my nails had a purplish tinge. I wrote, *In the Caribbean, in the rain forest, there is a hill . . .*

My father had negotiated the tight switchbacks in our pick-up, our first week there. The growl of the engine flooded our ears, and we felt the tires crunching on the sticky gravel, finding purchase with one slow rotation after another. Up and up. My sisters and I pressed our running shoes into the bed of the truck. This unknown air, baking hot, made the soles gummy and kept us from slipping.

"Are you sure, Daddy?" we called. The narrow road and the jumbled trees and rocks and grasses cartwheeled away in our wake.

"It's fine, it's fine," he laughed.

And he had brought us to the top. And we had looked out over a fluffy canopy, green clouds of vegetation below us and beyond, like a splash of pale emerald paint flung against a canvas, still and soundless from up here, the sea, our constant companion.

"Welcome home."

We were told to exchange papers and, after the rustling and chair scooting, offered one another indifferent critiques. The boy sitting next to me handed me back my essay.

"What, are you rich or something?"

"No," I said.

*Once we lived on an island*, I would write.

Later, after we had gone, my mother and I would leave my grandmother's building, and I would climb onto the stone wall that ringed the island of grass in the parking lot, picking my way over the darker patches of grey that marked the sinister presence of ice on the uneven stones. I could cross it in just a few strides now. At the corner, I stopped. Gone was our stately ship in a sea of cars, our secret garden with hiding places in pockets of ivy. Our deserted island had shriveled away, and it was a place for old people to sit. But I looked up to my grandmother's window, and there she was, the soft outline of pale hair and silk blouse, as if the past years had been just one night, when I had slept over, and she would drink in every last glimpse of me until our car had turned the corner.

We went the long way, through the neighborhood of massive brick townhomes, past the park, now a bleak stretch of frosty earth, and stopped at the light next to St. Anthony's, in front of which a statue of the

namesake held up a gentle hand, bent his head, and seemed to say, *Yes, yes, I know.* As if he knew my heart protested. As if he were saying, *Be still.*

"You were christened at this church," my mother said.

"I know," I said.

"I think you're angry," she said. "At God."

"I don't believe in God," I said. But I was scared when I said it.

The light changed, and we drove on.

"I was in St. Anthony's," my mother began, staring hard at the road, which was easier, I think, than looking at me, "when I first started to believe in God."

I said nothing.

"You were with me. You were just a baby. I didn't go for mass. I was driving by one afternoon and stopped, I don't know why."

The heaviness of the winter sky seemed to push hard on my shoulders, and my throat ached. I tried not think of why a young mother, my mother, would have run into an empty church with her little girl, bundled in a sweet-smelling fuzzy white jacket, for it could only have been during winter, on a day like today, that it happened. But I saw her in my mind, looking like she did in photographs I had seen of her when I was first born, tall and beautiful, with straight swinging blonde hair, wrapped in an ivory sweater, long legs in bell-bottom jeans. She would have hesitated on the road for a moment, unsure whether to trust her impulse, and would have only turned the steering wheel at the last minute.

She slipped into the back pew, and the ancient glossy wood was hard and cold. The coldness seeped through her jeans. Far ahead of her, the altar was cloaked in shadow, for the weak light outside caused only a faint glow in the stained glass of the rose window above, and the light of the votive candles behind her, like tiny prayers, flickered and died. What to do when she left this place? She had married young to escape a damaged life. She had married my father, handsome and privileged, only to discover he was damaged, too.

"I had a vision," she said. "There was a door. It was almost shut, but not quite, and out of the narrow opening, light was pouring."

I glanced at her as she continued to drive. I had always dismissed her belief with all the imperiousness of youth, thinking how foolish it was to believe God had time to bother with the trivialities of our lives. Yet behind it all had been a mystical experience of volcanic light on a winter day. How immature and unfair to think

my—and my father's—unremitting awareness of the poetry of life was a singular faculty. As if my mother could have loved my father if she had not been poet.

"What happened?" I asked.

"Nothing," she said. "But I kept seeing it. And I kept thinking . . ."

She paused and looked far ahead, past the stoplight and gloomy shopping centers.

"I still think," she said, "that there is something beyond the door. Something to make it all have been worth it."

I hoped, I hoped it was true. At the wake, before the others had come in, when it was just us, my grandmother had begun to cry as she knelt beside the coffin. I think only my mother had the strength to bear this. She understood there was nothing to be done. My aunt quickly took her arm and led her to the chair next to me.

"Come on, Mom," she said. "Here's Rosie."

It sounded strange to hear her use my grandmother's pet name for me. I had only ever heard it in my grandmother's voice.

My grandmother sat down.

"I'm sorry," she said, unclasping her purse and taking out a handkerchief, dabbing her eyes with fierce, delicate strokes.

"It's okay," I said.

"No, no," she said. *It isn't proper*, I imagined her thinking.

But your son has gone away, I thought. And my father. And there is a coffin at the front of the room that I helped pick out with my mother from a sticky album in the office of the funeral parlor. It is holding a person who does not look like my father. He is waxy and heavy, and there is a picture of him and us three girls on a faraway beach, posing next to a giant turtle we had built out of sand. Rebecca had screamed for hours last night because she did not want to wear her blue dress, despite my mother's pleas, so I had washed the one she wanted by hand in the kitchen sink, and Julia had slept with a Dallas Cowboys cap my father had worn after he lost his hair.

We remained silent for the rest of the trip home. I hoped my mother was right. That there was something more, on the other side. A door opening. Once, after the hurricane, my father and I had sat outside on beach chairs on the slab where our porch used to be. Moths fluttered around the bare bulb next to the front door,

thousands of them, it seemed, and legions of lizards crept up the wall toward them, in search of an evening meal. Bats careened out of the darkness and zigzagged around the pool of light in sudden, irregular jerks. A few minutes ago, before my sister had been called in to get ready for bed, one had streaked toward her head, then hovered, beating its wings at a ferocious rate against her hair until the dog lunged for it, barking. Now that it was quiet again, I watched the border where the glow of the bulb met the night, expecting other creatures to venture inside the perimeter, for it was as if our light was the only one on the island. The only one in the universe. As if we alone had survived catastrophe and were now forgotten.

"What if God doesn't exist?" I asked.

My father smoked his cigarette for a bit, then said, "Look at the sky tonight."

I looked. Against the blackness, stars glittered cold and hard, an infinity of silver.

"He exists," he said.

As I watched, one point of light dropped from its place and cascaded through the heavens. A faraway world had been extinguished without so much as a shudder.

Later, after we had gone, there would be a lilac tree in our new backyard. I would lie on my bed doing my homework. We each had our own rooms now. When we first moved back, we had lived in an apartment, with dingy stairs and a hallway that smelled of burnt food leading to our door. And as early winter descended around us, our first real winter in years, the radiators spluttered and hissed below our windows, and the hope I had allowed myself when we left everything behind began to fade away. *It hadn't been worth it.*

"I want to go home," I whispered to my mother.

"Don't worry," she said. "I'm going to fix it."

She left for work early in the mornings, before us, and we grabbed the lunch bags she packed every night out of the refrigerator before locking the apartment and walking to school. One day, she drove us to a small brick townhouse with a low hedge along the front path. We went inside. The living room was cozy, with a wood-burning fireplace. The narrow staircase led to four bedrooms. The hardwood floors creaked peacefully under our feet.

"What do you think?" she had asked, smiling.

My room looked out over the backyard, where plants and shrubs had been allowed to go without pruning for a while. But it did not look wild. It was a homely place. I heard a rustling outside and set aside my

notebook. The overgrown lilac tree settled in the corner of the yard, where the wooden fence met our house, was bare now, but a bright-eyed brown bird had stopped to rest on one of its branches.

It was strange to realize you had a different life. Everything that had once been absolute now seemed like a dream. And people you loved had gone, yet here you were, living on. The world had not ended. I hoped my father could see us now. I had always thought that, if I died, I would somehow send a sign to my family to let them know I was okay. That I had not forgotten them. Since we left, I had been waiting for messages from my father and had started to think there was nothing afterward after all. But now I watched the bird, and he watched me, and I thought maybe he had been sending them all along, and I just had not known what to look for.

Later, the lilac tree would burst into color, and my sister and I would shove the rough picnic table we had inherited with the house deep underneath its slender branches. And sitting there, caressed by pale blue-purple softness, bathed in the innocent scent of the blooms, I would remember Julia and me twirling in Easter dresses, a long time ago. I would remember spring.

But that was all part of a future, a world, too different to imagine while on our island. If you were leaving a place unexpectedly, you could tell yourself you were seeing it all for the last time, but you would not believe it. Especially if it did not look the way it did in your mind. The island had been weakened and wind-burnt from the hurricane, though the green would creep back in a slow but deliberate procession. *Over you, too,* you could feel it saying. *I will outlast you, too.* This was not the landscape I had known. I was still waiting for its return, so it was impossible to say goodbye.

When we left, the prop plane wobbled and wheezed, as if struggling against a sky-colored cord that held it to the bit of land far below. A sudden sympathy swept over me for the house I had hated, standing alone and empty, a grimy shell. And my father's grave, which I had not visited since the funeral. We were only four up here, and I felt the tug of the one missing with every jerk of the plane. When the engine finally burst into a steady throb, and we dipped away, out of sight of the island, the thread within me snapped as well, and fell, I imagined, in an invisible shower over the brilliant blue sea. Later, I would realize that my end was frayed, that the thinnest of fibers yet stretched away toward the tropics. When, perhaps, a catamaran cut a ruffle of white across the water, and a kid lucky enough to be sailing dangled her legs over the side and skimmed her toes along

the surface of the sea, peering through it as through a window at small fish traveling through thickets of sea fans toward homes in coral hollows, I would feel a tremor run up the tattered line. And memories would come.