

1

LATE ONE NIGHT the winter our children are nine and twelve, I settle on the green couch in the den of our rural New England farmhouse holding an old softback book in shaking hands. Its title is *The Wrath of Chane*, and the teaser copy promises “the most shocking portrayal of slavery ever written,” but the image under those words reveals a tale as old as time. There’s a tall, muscular black man trying to pull his wrists apart, but his chains don’t allow it. He’s got no shirt on and his pants are unbuttoned. A white woman in a yellow dress with carefully curled blonde hair clings to his arm and gazes up at his face. I keep looking at the author’s name and trying to pull out a memory from the distance. I know it’s one of my father’s pseudonyms, printed there on the cover of this thick piece of pulp, but I can’t remember ever hearing it spoken out loud. Tonight—with my family sleeping upstairs—I open it for the first time.

My father wrote this book, and I know very little about my father.

Right away I see the name of my mother’s mother penciled in the right-hand corner of the first page. It’s handwriting that brings back birthday cards and grocery lists, handwriting I haven’t seen since childhood. My father’s mother-in-law didn’t just keep this book he wrote, she marked it as hers. Laid claim to his work, even when it was slavery porn. Her tidy name in the corner of that brittle yellow page softens me to the book, softens me to my dad. It allows me to begin.

"The young black man sat for a long time within sight of the house of the overseer. It was almost morning when he first stirred, changing from a sitting to a kneeling position beneath the large cypress tree hung with Spanish moss like a shroud," I read. These are the first words of my writer father's I've ever read. "The chorus of spring stars was still loud in eulogy in the heavens," I read. "Loud in eulogy." I run my eyes over the phrase again, there at the bottom of this first page. It's not so bad, I tell myself. I can do this, it is time to do this.

But then there are torn clothes. There is a "wide forehead." There's a "thick chest." There is Chane, speechless and superhumanly strong. A slave with sex appeal.

His large black nostrils flared and his heart pumped fury through the veins Iwana had given him. The son of Iwana and the high medicine stood in the Louisiana night and felt a great pounding beneath his forehead and behind his eyes. He remembered the white woman who was asleep not fifty feet from where he stood and tasted the heavy saliva that was collecting on his tongue.

When Chane finds that woman, her "white fingers [run] over [his] coal black skin," before he takes her head in his huge hand, "grasping it like a fruit" to "fling her to the ground by it."

He is an animal, this man with a vaguely African-sounding mother. He is an animal, this man in Louisiana where the "high medicine" made him, and not a mortal father. I can't understand why this man is shown to be an animal in these opening pages.

The white woman he's come for doesn't see yet that he's here to kill her. She thinks he's looking for something else. "She lifted her nightdress up to her thighs and said, 'Gonna get me some poison ivy like as not, but it's goin' to be worth it, ain't it, you?'" and I have to close down a memory that threatens to rise up—a story about a woman my father had sex with in the woods one night, how she became covered in a rash from poison ivy afterwards, how he wasn't allergic to it—and I give my head a shake, remind myself why I'm here. Look back at the book.

He knelt, took her neck in one powerful hand and began to choke the amazed, half naked, throbbing woman. Her eyes

swelled in her head, a strange small sound left her throat and when he stood up, still holding her by the neck, she was dragged up with him. Her nightdress fell, covering her body again. She shook violently for a moment and then died, a foot off the ground, held in the powerful grip of the infuriated slave.

AT FIRST I sit dumbstruck and wonder what my tidy WASP of a grandmother thought when she read her son-in-law's words. How Joan McKenzie from Albany, New York, felt about writing her name in that book after all.

Then I wonder what it takes to dream up that violence. What parts of a person have to be accessible for him to reach in and find *that*. How the plot the author puts down on the page is informed by the contents of his heart.

I think about my family sleeping above me and put the book down. I climb the stairs and creep into first one kid's room and then the other's. I linger as long as I can, press my lips onto warm foreheads until their bodies shift and resettle. Stand in the hallway and listen to them breathe. Worry about what I have done, opening this door. About what I will tell them when they ask where they come from, who their grandfather was.

Then I climb into the bed I share with my husband and lie as still as possible. I don't want to wake him, I don't want to ask him to hold this truth with me, I don't want to burden him with these fears. I lie as still as possible in the bed I share with my husband and wonder how my father's imagination could have been so filled with racial stereotypes about couplings like my own. I lie as still as possible and think about how much I want to crawl out of my skin. Out of my marriage from the guilt I feel, because if this is who my father was, who am I?

2

THE FIRST TIME I saw Ngoni, I was eating lunch in the Bard College cafeteria. I looked up from my soup and there he was across the room, a point of stillness in the surrounding *mêlée*. Framed by the cafeteria's wide-open doorway, he didn't move while people pushed their way by and around him. His face was filled with uncertainty and confusion and confidence despite being out of place. He wore a round, flat-topped felt hat that didn't cover his ears and a tan cotton jacket with a pattern that, from a distance, looked like a map of the world. His lavender pants didn't reach his ankles, and I worried what was protecting him from the upstate New York winter that raged out the window behind me.

Looking at him made me shy, embarrassed, so I turned back to my soup. As I did, I thought I felt an invitation in the crinkling near his temples. A light behind the trim wire-rim glasses on his face. Picking up my spoon, I chided myself. He didn't smile at me. He can't see anyone particular in this sea of white faces.

The next day I rushed into the cafeteria for a quick lunch between classes. A South African student I hardly knew ushered me to a table and introduced me to the man I would marry. He told me his name but I couldn't hear it, he named his country but I couldn't place it. He made a joke but I couldn't follow it. I just looked into his soft brown eyes and smiled. When I walked away, my whole body vibrated.

In my bed that night, I turned off the light and closed my eyes and saw his profile as if in silhouette—the curve of his chin and lips, the round of his nose, the tall forehead and the spot where it met his hairline. I followed that line in my memory, tracing it to the tidy crush of curls on the top of his head. I still didn't know his name.

I opened my eyes some hours later into a darkness I couldn't change. I was too surprised by the contents of my dream to find the light switch. This dream had recurred throughout my childhood, but I hadn't had it in years. Its premise was always the same—my father is really alive—but the circumstances changed every time. In this one, we were speaking on the phone. He said he was living in New York, writing under a pseudonym. When he named it, I recognized the author—a literary hero I'd been reading for class—my God! That's really you?

But eyes open in the dark, the name was smoke.

SATURDAY NIGHT, THE first party of the semester over. Ngoni accepted an invitation to the local diner. Liz—my closest companion since our first day on campus—drove us over the bridge and across the Hudson, started interviewing him from our side of the booth. I sat across from him, really seeing him now that I could be still and watch. His eyes were set wide apart in a face shaped like an owl's. His nose was broad and—I noticed when he removed his glasses and wiped his hands across his eyes—marked on either side by dark spots where those trim wire-rims rested. He didn't smile much, and when he did I couldn't tell if it was because he thought something was funny or because he was tired of the talk, thinking of ways to escape.

"Do you have any siblings?" Liz asked.

"A sister."

"Older or younger?"

"Younger."

"What do your parents do?"

"My father passed when I was sixteen."

"I'm so sorry," I interjected. Our eyes met for a moment. My dad is dead, too, I wanted to say. I wanted to take his hand.

Liz again, though not unkindly, "And your mother?"

A pause. "My mother's not around."

Too personal too fast. I changed the subject, asked for the bill, got us out of there. Back on campus, we left Liz at her room, found our own spot in the lounge down the hall.

I asked only the safest questions.

"What will you do after this year?" was one.

"I want to attend graduate school to study colonialism," he said, as though this were perfectly obvious. I had to stop myself from asking why a young black intellectual from Africa would want to study the first thirteen colonies of the United States, my only definition of *colonialism*.

"The best programs are in the U.K. and the States," he said.

It was a physical jolt, my relief that he might return.

At some point I took his hand, led him back to my room. We talked late into the night. We started, then, to draw the lines of similarity, the lost fathers, the ties that would bind. The bright fluorescent hallway lights were sharp in my eyes when he opened the door to leave. I leaned in and kissed his cheek. He says now that's when he knew.

When he was gone, I slipped into the bathroom that separated my room from Liz's and took down the small laminated U.S. map she'd tacked up on the wall, flipped it over to see the other side, on which was drawn the world. I put my finger on Africa and quickly found Zaire—I'd written a report about it in sixth grade, and its familiar shape marked the only country I recognized on that continent. I searched all around and then drew my finger south before landing on a country shaped like the head of a rhinoceros. Zimbabwe. Landlocked, with a river following its northwestern border, Botswana and South Africa along the southern one, Mozambique curled around it to the east. I hung the map back on the wall, leaving the world side showing, and held my finger on Zimbabwe awhile, tracing the rhinoceros horn and thinking about Ngoni's place on the planet—a place I knew nothing about.

WITHIN A COUPLE of weeks, Ngoni and I had established the routines of college lovers. We knew the times and locations of each other's classes, knew which nights were best for sleepovers, didn't have to ask about when we would eat dinner, where we would sit at breakfast.

One night he told a story to the ceiling as we lay side by side on the futon I'd dragged from home to replace the narrow dorm-room bed. "My father was mentally ill," he said. "But in Zimbabwe, we don't think illness comes from nowhere. We believe there's been a possession."

I conjugated the word and realized a beat too late that he meant a spirit had possessed his father. I thought of *Poltergeist* and snow on a TV screen, had no frame of reference for what he meant. He was describing a culture so unlike my own, a place where even mental illness had a different name, a different definition. A world I was sure I would never understand without my own handles to hold it by. A world without the guideposts I'd grown up requiring.

There's been a possession.



IT'S JANUARY OF 1980 and I'm five and a half years old and my father is just dead. The house on State Street is full of love and fear and confusion and lasagna. I stand in the dining room loud with people, looking for my mom. My hand rests on the warm haunches of our loyal black Lab, Shandy. She hasn't gone on a run in a while. Her haunches are getting thick.

The light in the room comes from a large paper globe that hangs over the dining room table, which itself is round and has lion claws for feet that scare my toes when I eat. We haven't sat at that table since Dad left for the loony bin. I consider crawling under it now to hide from all these people—maybe Mom would look for me then?—but the lion claw feet.

I need Mom because I have a question in my heart that I don't know how to ask and I think maybe with all these people around I'll be brave enough to speak. Why hasn't Dad's picture been in the corner of the screen when Channel 3 Eyewitness News is on in the mornings yet, the way other dead people's pictures are in the corner of the screen? When are they going to come on the TV and explain why he's dead? Because I would really like to know.

I've been watching the news every morning since he died, crawling up onto the stool at the long kitchen counter across from Mom and her thick black coffee, no toast. "Tea and toast?" she asks me, and

I nod. But my throat hurts when people talk to me these days, so I just turn and watch the TV that sits on the counter and wait for Dad's picture to appear.

But right now there are all these people who knew him and Mom is nowhere and I'm not sure where to look for her and I'm afraid that if I take my hand off Shandy's back I'll lose my balance and fall through the holes I have just learned are all over this house. There are so many dark corners.

Behind me is the living room with the red couch Dad napped on, and my older sister and brother are sitting there with plates of food on their laps and grown-up hands on their shoulders. At least that's what I think they're doing, but I haven't been able to look at them the last few days because I don't recognize their eyes anymore and I can't tell if they know how to talk. I don't want to talk.

In front of me is the kitchen with cooking aunts, and the knees of one of the aunts look just like Mom's knees, and I'm scared if I see them I won't be able to stop myself from hugging that knee, and what if it's the wrong knee? So I just stay in the dining room. I just stay between.

Then someone says my name, and I look up and swallow, and the giant paper globe light is blocked out by a man's bald head. It comes down to my level before he speaks.

"When will I see your first novel, Jules?" the man asks. "You're always watching everything. You're sure to become a writer, just like your dad."

3

THE SUNDAY MORNING before my college graduation, the phone on the floor by my futon startled me awake.

"Julia?" said my grandmother Rose, my father's mother. She said my name as though she might've called someone else by accident. As though if she had, it would have been their fault.

"Hi, Grandma," I said, trying to sound awake, alert. Alone. She called me most Sundays. I was mostly at the library. Mostly let the answering machine pick up.

"What's new?" she asked. The question was code for *Do you have a boyfriend yet?* I sat up in bed, placed my feet on the cold linoleum floor. Felt a door open somewhere dark.

"Actually, Grandma," I said, "I have news." I turned to Ngoni and smiled, hoping to communicate to him to keep quiet, stay still.

"Oh?" The hope was in her voice now.

"I've met someone."

"What's his name?"

"Well," I said, wondering if she was wearing her hearing aid, hoping not to have to shout, "let me spell it for you."

"What?"

"Let me spell it, you won't recognize it if I just say it." I took a breath. "He's from Zimbabwe."

There was a silence then. In it, I knew the folly in that hope I'd held like a shard of glass.

"Colored?" Defeat thick in her voice.

"Yes, Grandma," I said, shifting on the bed so even my profile was hidden from Ngoni. "He's black." I wished I'd said something radical, I wished I'd communicated to my grandmother that my loyalty was to this man next to me in bed. I wished I'd challenged her language, ideas, assumptions. But I didn't know how to. I only knew how to change the subject, so we started making plans for the upcoming weekend—one I was now dreading.

And when she arrived for it, with my aunt and uncle and their children, they all seemed foreign and I couldn't place why any of them had come to my graduation when I hadn't seen most of them in years. I couldn't place how I was meant to treat them. My mother and sister, Ngoni and I, stood in a clutch by their car as they gathered their things and got out. Cold embraces, quiet hugs.

"This is Ngoni," I said to everyone, reaching out my arm to draw him near.

He was elegant and reserved, extending his hand to Rose first, as the eldest. "It is so nice to meet you, Mrs. Wolk," he said.

She turned her face away. Offered him her left hand, in which she clutched a Kleenex. He shook it as though this were the common way, but when he turned and looked back at me, I saw a shadow cross his forehead. I took his hand in both of mine, as though I could rinse it clean of her touch.

"I'm not surprised," my mother said after dinner, as we watched them drive away. "The black woman who cleaned her house was forty years old if she was a day," my mother said, "but Rose called her *the girl*."

I held Ngoni's hand but couldn't look at his face. I didn't know how this information would settle on his shoulders, if he would be able to join a family with people like that in it. By now I very much wanted him to join my family.

As we lay on my futon late that night, I held his face and apologized. For Rose. For my inability to confront her. For my inability to know what he felt and to help him through it.

"Your grandmother is from a different time," he said to me. "She'll come around."

I nodded at Ngoni, smiled a little. But I wasn't so sure she would.

◆ ◆ ◆

THAT SUMMER I rented a small apartment deep in the woods, bought a frame for the futon and a used dining room table, pots and pans, a few mismatched plates and glasses, and borrowed the old red couch from my mom. It felt like playing house, but I was determined to make it a home. Determined to make it Ngoni's home for his final semester in the U.S. before he returned to Zimbabwe forever. I'd found a job in the college admissions office so I could stay close.

One evening I sat on the couch staring at my hands. Wishing time would stop, wishing this warm night would last forever. Wishing Ngoni would never leave. I'd waited all my life to find my person. I didn't want him ever to leave.

Ngoni came over and held out his hand, leading me to the window. "Look," he said. "Look outside."

"What? I don't see anything."

"Look into the woods."

"I am."

"Look harder."

Then I saw her. In the woods through which we'd crashed an hour before, a small brown deer blended in with the trees. She was standing in the light from the sinking sun, and her white tail caught it. She was not ten feet from me, and yet she was a wild thing. I watched her ears twitch and her head turn as though she knew I saw her. She looked at me and I stood very still and for just one moment closed my eyes. I was playing the game I played as a child—if I don't move a single muscle and close my eyes and can't see you, you can't see me either. If you're peering into our car windows on the highway as you pass, or sitting next to me on the worn red couch after my father's funeral, or standing before me with a book in your hands trying to teach me to read, you cannot see me. I am not here.

When I opened my eyes and let them adjust to the light, the deer had gone back to her meal. I noticed the fading white spots on her

back—she was a baby. Then I saw the rest of her family and started to count in my head.

“Eleven,” Ngoni whispered. He had seen all of the deer from the beginning. He pointed with his eyes to the buck, larger again by half than the baby. His antlers stood on his head like tree branches that grew from velvet fur, and I understood why I hadn’t seen him before. He was at the edge of the group, alternately bending down to chew the blades of grass marking the spot where lawn turned to wilderness and looking up to keep watch. His whole body was alert, even when he ate. Several does stood behind him, their tails flicking as they chewed.

I thought of asking Ngoni if that’s what fathers do—stay always alert to the dangers—but my throat hurt the way it hurt at my father’s funeral, and I was scared to speak the way I was always scared to speak when I was little. I hoped Ngoni didn’t see the tears on my cheeks, and I was almost glad when the spell was broken and something startled them and they ran away in different directions. But the baby was the last one to leave, slower than the rest, and I was sure she went the wrong way.

4

MY FATHER DIED in a psychiatric treatment center in the Berkshire Mountains, one month after his admission. My father died in a place my mother called “the loony bin,” and every Saturday morning I watched Looney Tunes and tried to make the world match up.

My sister remembers visiting him in his room at Austen Riggs. Talks about all of his things, his “personal belongings” standing bare on the shelves and windowsills, naked and alone. She says those things on the shelves were what made her so sad. His things, separated from him and home and set there in that space, apart.

Nan says she looked at the things. She doesn’t remember if she looked at him. She doesn’t tell me now what they were, and at first I picture a television jail cell with pinup posters of pink ladies, a Bible, an awkwardly placed toilet. I have to blink to come back to this place, wipe the slate clear, and put the things of his that she remembers inside the room I know I was in. I see arranged against the backdrop of white walls and windows: toothpaste, shaving lotion, a framed photograph tilted so I can’t see who is in it, several little bottles of booze.

It’s another conversation and another sister—his—who tells me Riggs allowed its residents to drink. She calls them “residents” and not patients, as I expect. She is, after all, an analyst herself. She says she has learned things about Austen Riggs since his admission, things that

would have given her pause had she known them before. That there were no locked wards. That the residents were free to come and go as they pleased. That there were no rules about what they brought into their rooms.

"I thought it was the Bellevue of the Berkshires," she says. "I thought we were putting him somewhere safe," she says. "I thought they could help him," she says. And then, after a moment, she says, "This was a preventable death." As though it's the fault of those lenient laws or those tiny bottles of booze.

All I remember about Riggs is the thick red carpet and the brown rounded tips of my beat-up winter boots.

THE FACTS I learned about my father in the years before and just after his death were spare. He grew up in Brooklyn, the first child of a Jewish couple whose parents fled Poland and Russia early in the persecution. He was smart, went to Cornell when he was sixteen. After he met my mother—a WASP from Albany—at the Riviera Bar in the Village in the sixties, they traveled by boat to Tangier and then by train to Rome, where they lived for six or seven months. When they returned to the States, they eloped to the shores of Lake George in part because his parents would never accept my mother as his bride if she didn't convert; Judaism is passed on to the children from the mother, not the father. And they eloped in part because it wasn't the first wedding for either of them.

I knew he suffered from eczema, which sometimes covered his body from his head to his feet. I knew he was funny. I knew he was handsome. I knew he had a thick red mustache despite the black mop on his head.

And I knew he was a writer who had published some novels under his own name—George Wolk—and many more under various pseudonyms. I don't remember a time when I didn't understand that word, or that pulp fiction was called that because of the thick, cheap paper it was printed on, revealing its true worth. Did I know that when they lived in Rome, both of my parents wrote trashy novels under names not their own? Of course. But that was just something to talk about at a dinner party with loud laughter and tarnished sentimentality,

my siblings and I squished along the top stair, elbows on knees, chins in hands. It was just part of the fabric of the past and, like any child who thinks her family is the only kind of family, I assumed it was nothing unique. *You mean your folks didn't write novels under pseudonyms in the sixties? Are you sure?*

I knew that my father had renounced Judaism and was seeking enlightenment when he went to a Buddhist retreat in the mountains—a trip of ten days, from which he returned transformed indeed, but not in the way he had hoped. I knew that after some time—a year and half, maybe—of trying to live with those transformations, he allowed himself to be admitted to Austen Riggs. And I knew that when that place was unable to quiet the voices or the depression, he hanged himself in his hospital room.



THE TATTERED YELLOW quilt is tucked up to my chin. It's dark outside Nan's bedroom windows. I've never been in here this early in the morning. Josh is next to me on the bed, our backs up against the wall, the quilt pulled high around us, my head on his shoulder. Why were we called here? Nan scoots back to sit up but stays under her own blanket. Apart. The quilt is soft against my face. My thumb is in my mouth, my eyelids are droopy. I don't hear the words Mom says, but when she speaks them we know he is dead.

5

AFTER NGONI RETURNED to Zimbabwe, our connection was dependent on weekly phone calls and nightly letters. This is how I learned about the demonstrations and strikes raging on his university's campus, how I learned that one day tear gas forced him back from the campus gates. Soon classes were canceled, and he described his days alone in the house where he grew up, trying to find a plan. No university to attend, no diploma in reach, no graduate school applications he was qualified to fill out, no way out. Just a love across the ocean who thought she saw a possibility. With a crackling phone line covering the distance between us, a conversation in which each word arrived a beat after it was spoken, I could hear something new in his voice, which typically betrayed so little. It sounded like fear.

"How long can I sit around doing nothing?"

I squeezed the phone to my ear and took a breath before speaking.

"We could get married," I said, my voice quieter than I intended.

A pause. So I filled it. "You could come here and marry me."

Another beat, so I said, "We would figure out school from here."

"Yes," he said, though it felt like hours waiting. "Yes," he said, and I could hear a new sound now—was it hope? "We could get married."

It was the only thing I ever wanted anyway.

ONE SPRING MORNING when everything was decided and the paperwork all but completed, when families on either side of the world were clapping at the news, I climbed into my car and drove a couple of hours south to see my father's mother for a conversation that had to happen in person. My grandmother Rose stood in her black slacks and silk blouse, her old lady flats, her short gray hair, her compact five feet no inches, at the head of the tarmac path that led to the front door of her retirement village condo. It could have been 1978, this scene was so familiar.

"You're delicious," she said, and squeezed my cheeks like I was tiny. Except now there was no one behind me waiting to be squeezed and made to squirm. I was here alone, heavy with my task.

I followed her into the air-conditioning and sat on the couch in her icy-white living room. The coffee table was made of glass. There were glass sculptures backlit on bookshelves. There was a glass door to a patio I'd never stepped on. When I was little, I'd wander from here into the bathroom to pee, linger there and lift every cloisonné clamshell lid in search of treasure. Pause at the bookcases in the back hallway and check for her footsteps before crouching down on my knees to read the names of the authors of the books on the bottom shelf. Josh said they were Dad's, and I worried that if I didn't memorize them on these visits, Dad really would disappear. Cheryl Nash. Barney Parrish. Walter Bond. I didn't know then that Dad's most prolific pseudonym was missing from his mother's shelves, I didn't know then that my father wrote more than these titles to pay the mortgage.

I'd sneak further back into her bedroom to scare myself at her shrine. Giant portraits of my grandfather and my dad hanging on the wall by her bed. Grandpa's hair was gray but his skin was smooth, and there was his nose like a mountainside on his face. I'd peer in as close as I could get to see if I could spot the scar—Mom said he'd tried to cut it off with scissors when he was little. Cecil died a year after his son, died of esophageal cancer a year after his son hanged himself. Died of esophageal cancer after not smoking a day in his life.

Dad's portrait was different. It was taken outside in the snow, and his puffy seventies jacket and transition lenses and slight smile ached because I knew them so well. This picture was meant to appear on the back flap

of a book he never published. Even as a kid I knew where Mom kept the negatives. I used to search them for clues. In high school I got one printed, kept it hidden between books in my bedroom. He's sitting on the top of a picnic table in a yard I don't recognize, he's smiling like there's something funny. How can Rose bear to have these portraits hanging on the wall, looking at her all night long? Doesn't she want to forget?

"Where shall we eat?" Rose said to me when I sat on her couch. It was a trick question, because there was only one place she thought good enough.

"That place you like," I said. "But before we go, there's something I need to tell you." My hands shook and my face was too hot. I was ready for the slap this time. She took her round pink plastic glasses off her face and looked at me steadily. "Ngoni and I are getting married."

There was a pause before the tears. I sat with my hands in my lap, tea cold on the table, and felt myself get distant from that place, from her pain. I almost wanted to laugh. If this was going to make her sad, I decided in that moment, I was sad for her. But I was not sad. *This is a ridiculous thing to cry over*, I wanted to scream. *I've found my person after all my life not having my person! If this makes you cry*, I wanted to tell her, *then cry. But I will sit here next to you and smile*. I saw her then as if she were very far, and I didn't come back to meet her.

After a while she got up and walked to the kitchen, so I got up too, and found her standing at the counter with something large and glass in her hands. A vase or a bowl. It looked heavy.

"Where will the children be?" she shouted as I walked in. "That is what I want to know!"

She slumped into a chair at the table, her back hunched and heaving, and I didn't know where to put my body, where to put my eyes. So I focused on the large glass bowl in her lap. She was curled around it like a baby. It was clear and the glass looked very thick. I'd never seen anything like it, but it reminded me of the thick glass countertops in the bank my mother used when I was little. As she filled out small rectangular strips of paper with a pen attached to a chain, I stood with my eyes just exactly at the counter level, staring into the thick green glass edge. I'd then pile onto tippy-toes to see that from the top all was clear. Back and forth, thick green glass edge, all clear on top. A magic trick, an

illusion. I repeated it again and again, rolling up and down on my toes. The bowl in my grandmother's lap held this same illusion—purple edging curled into handles like a basket, clear from another angle. I focused on the edges, the thick purple edges I couldn't see through. They were the color my skin turned with a bad bruise.

"Where will the children be?" she said again.

I sighed.

"That's what I asked your father," she said quietly.

"That's what I asked your father!" she shouted.

"But Grandma," I said, thankful now for a script. Thankful for her reference to what she considered the other mixed marriage in her life—my parents'. "Look at me! I'm fine. I'm happy and I live in a world that doesn't wonder what I am. By the time we have children, their world won't be as divided as yours has always been." How naïve to think this, but how could I have known?

She wouldn't look at me. She just shook her head. Continued to cry. Was it an hour before she spoke? A day?

"There's nothing I can do to convince you?" she asked finally, and I watched her free hand fold and refold a cloth napkin on the table. I looked at her clear nail polish, her papery white skin. Wondered if the bowl would tumble out of her lap onto the floor and smash to bits. Wondered who would clean it up.

"Convince me?" I asked.

"Because if you marry him," she said and looked at me, her round eyes narrowed to slits, "don't ever come to me. Don't ever come to me again."

I knew then that I never had to eat soggy chicken parmesan at a crappy Italian restaurant again in my life. I saw the exit map and I wanted to follow it. I could get out of this condo, forever. I pushed my chair back and stood up. Walked to the door.

"Julia," she said behind me.

I turned and saw her there, small and sour. Did I want her to take it back? Did I want her to come through herself and back to me? Did I turn because she was my grandmother, because she was my father's mother, because once when I was small we stood together at his grave and cried? She could have made it right with a word.

But instead she shoved the glass bowl into my hands. I grabbed onto it because I didn't want it to smash my toes. I grabbed onto it because I didn't want it to smash her toes. I grabbed onto it because she shoved it into my hands and I couldn't do any other thing.

We looked at each other for a moment, but there were no more words. So I turned and walked out the door with my gift. But once out onto route 84, I pulled into a rest stop, opened the driver's-side door, and placed the glass bowl on the black pavement. Looked at it in the rearview mirror as I drove away, an illusion of light in the afternoon sun.

BY THE TIME I joined the Taconic Parkway an hour later, almost safely returned to my apartment in the woods, singing along with Joni Mitchell with the sun shining and my eyes alert for deer in the median, I felt a familiar tap on my shoulder.

"It's just a muscle spasm," I said aloud, though I'd never before pretended to believe the tap on my shoulder was anything but what I knew it was. My dad, reminding me he's here.

I steadied my hands on the wheel and pulled myself up a little so I could see the backseat rather than the road behind me. I startled hard and swerved into the other lane, looked back to the road to right the car. Took a deep breath.

"No one was there, Jules." I said this out loud, too. But I saw him there in black lines and fuzzy shapes and tan cloth-covered car seats. Was he in the car with me, or hovering just outside?

I pulled into a rest stop that invites tourists to park and gaze at the view. Turned around in my seat and looked bravely into the back, convinced I'd be able to tell that he had been there, certain I'd see mustaches and transition lenses and a mop of curly black hair. Lying in the backseat maybe, giggling like a girl.

But of course the backseat was empty. So I stepped out and walked around the car a couple of times, held tight to the bike rack and stretched my arms long, arched my back to open it. "It was just a fucking muscle spasm," I muttered under my breath before I got back in the car and pointed it toward home.

6

"TURN IN HERE," Ngoni said as he touched my elbow to steer me into a small restaurant with tables and chairs lined up along a narrow window, a counter at the back. "This is the place I learned about fish and chips."

We were just off the bus from Cardiff to Llantwit Major, in Wales, where Ngoni went to high school. Our fiancé visa application required forms signed by city officials in each of the places he'd lived, and we managed to make a reunion out of this one. We hadn't seen each other in six months, and it seemed worth the credit card debt to meet here for a week to spend some time together before the wedding. Make sure we meant it.

I looked around at the people in the little Welsh café and thought about Ngoni's uncle Dakarai, if he'd ever eaten here. If any of the people here knew him. Dakarai had married a Welsh woman he'd met at Oxford, but all I knew was that it didn't last. All I knew was what Ngoni had written to me about Dakarai these last months.

"Me being here helps my grandparents' burden with Dakarai," he wrote in one letter. I'd not known there was a burden with Dakarai. "Dakarai talks to himself sometimes now," he wrote in another. "Dakarai broke down the door in his bedroom," in a third. I sensed fear in Ngoni's tidy blue cursive words but didn't know how to hold it. This wasn't a topic we could talk about on the phone, Ngoni standing

in the hallway of his family home. So in my private thoughts about Ngoni's uncle I used words I'd applied to my own father, and which Ngoni sometimes used to discuss his—mental illness, schizophrenia. But I didn't know if Dakarai's illness was like that of his older brother Donal, Ngoni's dad. If he was, did that mean the illness snaked through this family I was marrying into, as it snaked through my own?

"Tell me more about Dakarai and Cati," I said to Ngoni as we sat in that Welsh café, unable to ask what was really on my mind.

"There isn't very much to tell." His face looked weary. "They met at university, at Oxford. They got married in Zimbabwe."

Now I had different questions. What was that wedding like? How did his grandparents, who raised Ngoni and whom I had not yet met, treat *that* white daughter-in-law? I looked across at my fiancé, his soft face, his stoic eyes, the newspaper greasy in his hands, but I couldn't ask any questions at all because thoughts about race and mental illness were mixing up inside me and I wasn't sure which topic to pursue, wasn't sure which topic I really wanted to know more about. Nothing felt safe.

"When they moved back to the U.K., he couldn't find a job, the marriage fell apart. So he returned to Zimbabwe."

That conversation we'd had in my dorm room about Ngoni's father came back to me in a solid beat. How his grandparents had sent him—a child in grade school—to a traditional healer in the bush whom they'd hired to heal his father. Father and son spent weeks there, drinking and expelling medicines, hoping to also expel the evil spirit, because "the spirit that possesses the father possesses the son as well," he had told me. I wondered now if the family took Dakarai to a traditional healer to expel his spirits, too. If the spirit that possesses a man also possesses his brother. Dakarai went to the best private high school in Zimbabwe, was its first black head boy, studied at Oxford. As Ngoni reminded me of this, I realized that maybe my future in-laws didn't believe in just one thing. Maybe they lived in two worlds. They'd blamed spirits for possessing Ngoni's father, but maybe this time they'd blamed something else.

"If he'd been able to find a job, become productive," Ngoni said, "he and Cati would have been fine. He would still be living here." He stood up, wiped his hands on a thin paper napkin, wrapped up the

newspapers with our other trash, and tossed it all into the overflowing bin. "It's as simple as that."

It didn't seem simple, but something stopped me from saying so. The same thing that stopped me from asking about the first interracial wedding in his family or what it was like to live with Dakarai now, even though we were alone in Wales and I could have asked him anything. What kept me quiet that day? Fear of admitting that I was scared for our future and what we might pass on to our children? Anxieties about not having the right language for our racial and cultural differences? Naïveté and my assumption that everything would be fine because we loved each other?



HERE IS A list of what I carry: One of my father's cousins killed himself when he was twenty-four. One of my father's cousins lived in an institution most of her adult life. One of my father's cousins died of cancer but took pills every day to quiet the voices. One of my father's cousins mixed cyanide with orange juice and fed it to her son, to her dog, to herself.

Some of the survivors whisper that the disease followed their parents from the shtetl. Some of the survivors whisper that the disease can't be traced because it died in the camps. Some of the survivors whisper that the disease started after the war. Some of the survivors whisper that it lingers now in our blood.

One of the survivors called me when our first son was born and told me that now my worries would really begin.