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A THICK DRIZZLE FROM THE SKY, like a curtain's sudden sweeping. The seabirds stopped their tuning, the ocean went mute. House-lights over the water dimmed to gray.

Two people were coming up the beach. She was fair and sharp in a green bikini, though it was May in Maine and cold. He was tall, vivid; a light flickered in him that caught the eye and held it. Their names were Lotto and Mathilde.

For a minute they watched a tide pool full of spiny creatures that sent up curls of sand in vanishing. Then he took her face in his hands, kissed her pale lips. He could die right now of happiness. In a vision, he saw the sea rising up to suck them in, tonguing off their flesh and rolling their bones over its coral molars in the deep. If she was beside him, he thought, he would float out singing.

Well, he was young, twenty-two, and they had been married that morning in secret. Extravagance, under the circumstances, could be forgiven.

Her fingers down the back of his trunks seared his skin. She pushed him backward, walking him up a dune covered in beach-pea stalks, down again to where the wall of sand blocked the wind, where they felt warmer. Under the bikini top, her gooseflesh had taken on a lunar blue, and her nipples in the cold turned inward. On their knees now, though the sand was rough and hurt. It didn't matter. They were reduced to mouths and hands. He swept her legs to his hips, pressed

her down, blanketed her with his heat until she stopped shivering, made a dune of his back. Her raw knees were raised to the sky.

He longed for something wordless and potent: what? To wear her. He imagined living in her warmth forever. People in his life had fallen away from him one by one like dominoes; every movement pinned her further so that she could not abandon him. He imagined a lifetime of screwing on the beach until they were one of those ancient pairs speed-walking in the morning, skin like lacquered walnut meat. Even old, he would waltz her into the dunes and have his way with her sexy frail bird bones, the plastic hips, the bionic knee. Drone lifeguards looming up in the sky, flashing their lights, booming *Fornicators! Fornicators!* to roust them guiltily out. This, for eternity. He closed his eyes and wished. Her eyelashes on his cheek, her thighs on his waist, the first consummation of this terrifying thing they'd done. Marriage meant forever.

[He'd planned for a proper bed, a sense of ceremony: he'd stolen his roommate Samuel's beach house, having spent most summers there since he was fifteen, knowing that they hid the key under the hawksbill turtle carapace in the garden. A house of tartan and Liberty print and Fiestaware, thick with dust; the guest room with the lighthouse's triple blink in the night, the craggy beach below. This was what Lotto had imagined for the first time with this gorgeous girl he'd magicked into wife. But Mathilde was right to agitate for plain-air consummation. She was always right. He would know this soon enough.]

It was over too quickly. When she shouted, the gulls hidden by the dune buckshot the low clouds. Later, she'd show him the abrasion against her eighth vertebra from a mussel shell when he dug her in and dug her in. They were pressed so close that when they laughed, his laugh rose from her belly, hers from his throat. He kissed her cheekbones, her clavicle, the pale of her wrist with its rootlike blue veins.

His terrible hunger he'd thought would be sated was not. The end apparent in the beginning.

"My wife," he said. "Mine." Perhaps instead of wearing her, he could swallow her whole.

"Oh?" she said. "Right. Because I'm chattel. Because my royal family traded me for three mules and a bucket of butter."

"I love your butter bucket," he said. "*My* butter bucket now. So salty. So sweet."

"Stop," she said. She'd lost her smile, so shy and constant that he was startled to see her up close without it. "Nobody belongs to anybody. We've done something bigger. It's new."

He looked at her thoughtfully, gently bit the tip of her nose. He had loved her with all his might these two weeks and, in so loving, had considered her transparent, a plate of glass. He could see through to the goodness at her quick. But glass is fragile, he would have to be careful. "You're right," he said; thinking, No, thinking how deeply they belonged. How surely.

Between his skin and hers, there was the smallest of spaces, barely enough for air, for this slick of sweat now chilling. Even still, a third person, their marriage, had slid in.

2

THEY CLIMBED ACROSS THE ROCKS toward the house they'd left bright in the dusk.

A unity, marriage, made of discrete parts. Lotto was loud and full of light; Mathilde, quiet, watchful. Easy to believe that his was the better half, the one that set the tone. It's true that everything he'd lived so far had steadily built toward Mathilde. That if his life had not prepared him for the moment she walked in, there would have been no *them*.

The drizzle thickened to drops. They hurried across the last stretch of beach.

[Suspend them there, in the mind's eye: skinny, young, coming through dark toward warmth, flying over the cold sand and stone. We will return to them. For now, he's the one we can't look away from. He is the shining one.]

LOTTO LOVED THE STORY. He'd been born, he'd always say, in the calm eye of a hurricane.

[From the first, a wicked sense of timing.]

His mother was beautiful then, and his father was still alive. Summer, late sixties. Hamlin, Florida. The plantation house so new there were tags on the furniture. The shutters hadn't been screwed down and made a terrific din in the wild first passage of the storm.

Now, briefly, sun. Rain dripped off the sour-orange trees. In the pause, the bottling plant roared five acres across his family's scrubland. In the hallway, two housemaids, the cook, a landscaper, and the plant's foreman pressed their ears to the wooden door. Inside the room, Antoinette was aswim in white sheets and enormous Gawain held his wife's hot head. Lotto's aunt Sallie crouched to catch the baby.

Lotto made his entrance: gobliness with long limbs, huge hands and feet, lungs exceeding strong. Gawain held him to the light in the window. The wind was rising again, live oaks conducting the storm with mossy arms. Gawain wept. He'd hit his apex. "Gawain Junior," he said.

But Antoinette had done all the work, after all, and already the heat she'd felt for her husband was half diverted into her son. "No," she said. She thought of a date with Gawain, the maroon velvet in the theater and *Camelot* on screen. "Lancelot," she said. Her men would be knight-themed. She was not without humor of her own.

Before the storm hit again, the doctor arrived to sew Antoinette back together. Sallie swabbed the baby's skin with olive oil. She felt as if she were holding her own beating heart in her hands. "Lancelot," she whispered. "What a name. You'll be beat up for sure. But don't you fret. I'll make sure you're Lotto." And because she could move behind wallpaper like the mouse she resembled, Lotto is what they called him.

THE BABY WAS EXIGENT. Antoinette's body was blasted, breasts chewed up. Nursing was not a success. But as soon as Lotto began to smile and she saw he was her tiny image with her dimples and charm, she forgave him. A relief, to find her own beauty there. Her husband's family were not a lovely people, descendants of every kind of Floridian

from original Timucua through Spanish and Scot and escaped slave and Seminole and carpetbagger; mostly they bore the look of overcooked Cracker. Sallie was sharp-faced, bony. Gawain was hairy and huge and silent; it was a joke in Hamlin that he was only half human, the spawn of a bear that had waylaid his mother on her way to the outhouse. Antoinette had historically gone for the smooth and pomaded, the suave steppers, the loudly moneyed, but a year married, she found herself still so stirred by her husband that when he came in at night she followed him full-clothed into the shower as if in a trance.

Antoinette had been raised in a saltbox on the New Hampshire coast: five younger sisters, a draft so dreadful in the winter that she thought she'd die before she got her clothes on in the morning. Drawers of saved buttons and dead batteries. Baked potatoes six meals in a row. She'd had a full ride to Smith but couldn't get off the train. A magazine on the seat beside hers had opened to Florida, trees dripping golden fruit, sun, luxe. Heat. Women in fishtails undulating in mottled green. It was ordained. She went to the end of the line, the end of her cash, hitched to Weeki Wachee. When she entered the manager's office, he took in her waist-length red-gold hair, her switchback curves, murmured, *Yes*.

The paradox of being a mermaid: the lazier she looks, the harder the mermaid works. Antoinette smiled languorously and dazzled. Manatees brushed her; bluegills nibbled at her hair. But the water was a chilly seventy-four degrees, the current strong, the calibration of air in the lungs exact to regulate buoyancy or sinking. The tunnel the mermaids swam down to reach the theater was black and long and sometimes caught their hair and held them there by the scalp. She couldn't see the audience but felt the weight of their eyes through the glass. She turned on the heat for the invisible watchers; she made them believe. But sometimes, as she grinned, she thought of sirens as she knew them: not this sappy Little Mermaid she was pretending to be, but the one who gave up her tongue and song and tail and home

to be immortal. The one who'd sing a ship full of men onto the rocks and watch, ferocious, while they fell lax into the deep.

Of course, she went to the bungalows when summoned. She met television actors and comics and baseball players and even that swivel-hipped singer once, during the years he'd made himself over into a film star. They made promises, but not one made good. No jets would be sent for her. No tête-à-têtes with directors. She would not be installed in a house in Beverly Hills. She passed into her thirties. Thirty-two. Thirty-five. She could not be a starlet, she understood, blowing out the candles. All she had ahead of her was the cold water, the slow ballet.

Then Sallie walked into the theater set under the water. She was seventeen, sun-scorched. She'd run away; she wanted life! Something more than her silent brother who spent eighteen hours a day at his bottling plant and came home to sleep. But the mermaids' manager just laughed at her. So skinny, she was more eel than nixie. She crossed her arms and sat down on his floor. He offered her the hot dog concession to get her up. And then she came into the darkened amphitheater and stood dumbstruck at the glinting glass, where Antoinette was in mid-performance in a red bikini top and tail. She took up all the light.

Sallie's fervent attention dilated down to the size of the woman in the window and there it would stay, fixed, for good.

She made herself indispensable. She sewed sequined posing tails, learned to use a respirator to scrape algae from the spring side of the glass. One day a year later, when Antoinette was sitting slumped in the tube room, rolling the sodden tail off her legs, Sallie edged near. She handed Antoinette a flyer for Disney's new park in Orlando. "You're Cinderella," she whispered.

Antoinette had never felt so understood in her life. "I am," she said.

She was. She was fitted into the satin dress with hoops beneath, the zirconium tiara. She had an apartment in an orange grove, a new

roommate, Sallie. Antoinette was lying in the sun on the balcony in a black bikini and slash of red lipstick when Gawain came up the stairs carrying the family rocking chair.

He filled the doorway: six-foot-eight, so hairy his beard extended into his haircut, so lonely that women could taste it in his wake when he passed. He'd been thought slow, yet when his parents died in a car crash when he was twenty, leaving him with a seven-year-old sister, he was the only one to understand the value of the family's land. He used their savings as down payment to build a plant to bottle the clean, cold water from the family's source. Selling Florida's birthright back to its owners was borderline immoral, perhaps, but the American way to make money. He accumulated wealth, spent none. When his hunger for a wife got too intense, he'd built the plantation house with vast white Corinthian columns all around. Wives loved big columns, he'd heard. He waited. No wives came.

Then his sister called to demand he bring family bits and bobs up to her new apartment, and here he was, forgetting how to breathe when he saw Antoinette, curvy and pale. She could be forgiven for not understanding what she was seeing. Poor Gawain, his mat of hair, his filthy work clothes. She smiled and lay back to be adored again by the sun.

Sallie looked at her friend, her brother; felt the pieces snap together. She said, "Gawain, this is Antoinette. Antoinette, this is my brother. He's got a few million in the bank." Antoinette rose to her feet, floated across the room, set her sunglasses atop her head. Gawain was close enough to see her pupil swallow her iris, then himself reflected in the black.

The wedding was hasty. Antoinette's mermaids sat glinting in tails on the steps of the church, throwing handfuls of fish food at the newlyweds. Sour Yankees bore the heat. Sallie had sculpted a cake topper in marzipan of her brother lifting a supine Antoinette on one arm, the adagio, grand finale of the mermaid shows. Within a week,

furniture for the house was ordered, help arranged for, bulldozers gouging out dirt for the pool. Her comfort secured, Antoinette had no more imagination for how she'd spend the money; everything else was catalog quality, good enough for her.

Antoinette took the comfort as her due; she hadn't expected the love. Gawain surprised her with his clarity and gentleness. She took him in hand. When she shaved away all that hair, she found a sensitive face, a kind mouth. With the horn-rimmed glasses she'd bought him, in bespoke suits, he was distinguished if not handsome. He smiled at her across the room, transformed. At that moment, the flicker in her leapt into flame.

Ten months later came the hurricane, the baby.

IT WAS TAKEN FOR GRANTED by this trio of adults that Lotto was special. Golden.

Gawain poured into him all the love he'd swallowed back for so long. Baby as a lump of flesh molded out of hope. Called dumb his whole life, Gawain held his son and felt the weight of genius in his arms.

Sallie, for her part, steadied the household. She hired the nannies and fired them for not being her. She chewed up banana and avocado when the baby began to eat food, and put them into his mouth as if he were a chick.

And as soon as Antoinette received the reciprocal smile, she turned her energies to Lotto. She played Beethoven on the hi-fi as loudly as it would go, shouting out musical terms she'd read about. She took correspondence courses on Early American furniture, Greek myth, linguistics, and read him her papers in their entirety. Perhaps this pea-smearing child in his high chair got only a twelfth of her ideas, she thought, but no one knew how much stuck in child brains. If he was going to be a great man, which he was, she was certain, she would start his greatness now.

Lotto's formidable memory revealed itself when he was two years old, and Antoinette was gratified. [Dark gift; it would make him easy in all things, but lazy.] One night Sallie read him a children's poem before bed, and in the morning, he came down to the breakfast room and stood on a chair and bellowed it out. Gawain applauded in astonishment, and Sallie wiped her eyes on a curtain. "Bravo," Antoinette said coolly, and held up her cup for more coffee, masking the tremble in her hand. Sallie read longer poems at night; the boy nailed them by morning. A certainty grew in him with each success, a sense of an invisible staircase being scaled. When watermen came to the plantation with their wives for long weekends, Lotto snuck downstairs, crawled in the dark under the guest dinner table. In the cavern there, he saw feet bulging out of the tops of the men's moccasins, the damp pastel seashells of the women's panties. He came up shouting Kipling's "If—" to a roaring ovation. The pleasure of these strangers' applause was punctured by Antoinette's thin smile, her soft "Go to bed, Lancelot," in lieu of praise. He stopped trying hard when she praised him, she had noticed. Puritans understand the value of delayed gratification.

IN THE HUMID STINK of Central Florida, wild long-legged birds and fruit plucked from the trees, Lotto grew. From the time he could walk, his mornings were with Antoinette, his afternoons spent wandering the sandy scrub, the cold springs gurgling up out of the ground, the swamps with the alligators eyeing him from the reeds. Lotto was a tiny adult, articulate, sunny. His mother kept him out of school an extra year, and until first grade, he knew no other children, as Antoinette was too good for the little town; the foreman's daughters were knobby and wild and she knew where that would lead, no thank you. There were people in the house to silently serve him: if he threw a towel on the ground, someone would pick it up; if he wanted food at

two in the morning, it would arrive as if by magic. Everyone worked to please, and Lotto, having no other models, pleased as well. He brushed Antoinette's hair, let Sallie carry him even when he was almost her size, sat silently next to Gawain in his office all afternoon, soothed by his father's calm goodness, the way once in a while he'd let his humor flare like a sunburst and leave them all blinking. His father was made happy just by remembering Lotto existed.

One night when he was four, Antoinette took him from his bed. In the kitchen, she put cocoa powder in a cup but forgot to add the liquid. He ate the powder with a fork, licking and dipping. They sat in the dark. For a year, Antoinette had neglected her correspondence courses in favor of a preacher on television who looked like Styrofoam a child had carved into a bust and painted with watercolors. The preacher's wife wore permanent eyeliner, her hair in elaborate cathedrals that Antoinette copied. Antoinette sent away for proselytizing tapes and listened to them with huge earphones and an 8-track beside the pool. Afterward, she'd write giant checks that Sallie would burn in the sink. "Darling," Antoinette whispered that night to Lotto. "We are here to save your soul. Do you know what'll happen to nonbelievers like your father and your aunt when Judgment Day comes?" She didn't wait for the answer. Oh, she had tried to show Gawain and Sallie the light. She was desperate to share heaven with them, but they only smiled shyly and backed away. She and her son would watch in sorrow from their seats in the clouds as the other two burned below for eternity. Lotto was the one she *must* save. She lit a match and began to read Revelation in a hushed and tremulous voice. When the match went out, she lit another, kept reading. Lotto watched the fire eat down the slender wooden sticks. As the flame neared his mother's fingers, he felt the heat in his own as if he were the one being burned. [Darkness, trumpets, sea creatures, dragons, angels, horsemen, many-eyed monsters; these would fill his dreams for decades.] He watched his mother's beautiful lips move, her eyes lost in their sockets. He

woke in the morning with the conviction that he was being watched, judged at all times. Church all day long. He made innocent faces when he thought bad thoughts. Even when he was alone, he performed.

LOTTO WOULD HAVE BEEN BRIGHT, ordinary, if his years continued so. One more privileged kid with his regular kid sorrows.

But the day came when Gawain took his daily three-thirty break from work and walked up the long green lawn toward the house. His wife was asleep by the deep end of the pool, her mouth open and palms facing the sun. He put a sheet gently over her body to keep her from burning, kissed her on the pulse of her wrist. In the kitchen, Sallie was pulling cookies from the oven. Gawain went around the house, plucked a loquat, rolled the sour fruit in his mouth, and sat on the pump beside the wild roselles, looking down the dirt lane until at last there was his boy, a gnat, housefly, mantis on his bicycle. It was the last day of seventh grade. The summer was a broad, slow river before Lotto. There would be rerun orgies, the originals he'd missed because of school: *The Dukes of Hazzard*; *Happy Days*. There would be giggling for frogs in the lakes at midnight. The boy's gladness filled the lane with light. The fact of his son moved Gawain, but the actual person was a miracle, big and funny and beautiful, better than the people who made him.

But all at once, the world contracted around his boy. Astonishing. It seemed to Gawain that everything was imbued with such searing clarity that he could see to the very atoms.

Lotto got off his bike when he saw his father on the old pump, apparently napping. Odd. Gawain never slept during the day. The boy stood still. A woodpecker clattered against a magnolia. An anole darted over his father's foot. Lotto dropped the bike and ran, and held Gawain's face and said his father's name so loudly that he looked up

to see his mother running, this woman who never ran, a screaming white swiftness like a diving bird.

THE WORLD REVEALED ITSELF AS IT WAS. Threatened from below with darkness.

Lotto had once watched a sinkhole open suddenly and swallow the old family outhouse. Everywhere: sinkholes.

He would be hurrying down the sandy lanes between the pecan trees and simultaneously feel terror that the ground would break beneath his feet and he'd go tumbling into the darkness, and that it would not. The old pleasures had been sapped of color. The sixteen-foot alligator in the swamp he'd stolen whole frozen chickens from the freezer to feed was now just a lizard. The bottling plant just another big machine.

The town watched the widow retch into the azaleas, her handsome son patting her on the back. Same high cheekbones, red-gold hair. Beauty puts a fine point on grief, shoots bull's-eye into the heart. Hamlin cried for the widow and her boy, not for massive Gawain, their native son.

But it wasn't only grief that made her vomit. Antoinette was pregnant again, prescribed bed rest. For months, the town watched suitors come out in their fancy cars and black suits and briefcases, and speculated which she'd choose. Who wouldn't want to marry a widow so rich and lovely?

Lotto was sinking. He tried to torpedo school, but the teachers were used to considering him excellent and would not comply. He tried to sit with his mother and listen to her religious programs, holding her swollen hand, but God had soured in him. He retained only the rudiments: the stories, the moral rigidity, the mania for purity.

Antoinette kissed his palm and let him go, placid as a sea cow in

her bed. Her emotions had gone underground. She watched everything from a tremendous remove. She grew plump, plumper. Finally, like a great fruit, she split. Baby Rachel, the pip, fell out.

When Rachel woke in the night, Lotto got to her first, settled in the chair, and fed her formula, rocking. She got him through that first year, his sister, who was hungry, whom he could feed.

His face had broken out in cystic acne, hot and pulsing under the skin; he was no longer a beautiful boy. It didn't matter. Girls were falling over themselves to kiss him now, in pity or because he was rich. In the soft, silty mouths of girls, grape gum and hot tongue, he concentrated and was able to dissolve the horror that had settled on him. Make-out parties in rec rooms, in parks at night. He biked home in the Florida dark, pumping his legs as fast as he could as if to outpace his sadness, but the sadness was always swifter, easily overtook him again.

A year and a day after Gawain died, fourteen-year-old Lotto came to the breakfast room in the dawn. He was going to take a handful of hard-boiled eggs to eat on his bike ride into town, where Trixie Dean was waiting, her parents away for the weekend. He had a bottle of WD-40 in his pocket. Lube, the boys at school had told him, was important.

From the dark, his mother's voice said, "Darling. I have news." He startled and turned on the light to see her in a black suit at the far end of the table, her hair upswept, crowning her head in flames.

Poor Muvva, he thought. So undone. So fat. She thought the painkillers she didn't stop taking after Rachel was born were her secret. They were not.

Hours later, Lotto stood on the beach, blinking. The men with the briefcases had not been suitors, but attorneys. It was all gone. The servants had vanished. Who would do the work? The plantation house, his childhood, the bottling plant, the pool, Hamlin where his ancestors had lived forever, gone. His father's ghost, gone. Traded for

an obscene amount of money. The area was nice, Crescent Beach, but this house was tiny, pink, set on stilts above the dunes like a concrete Lego box on pilings. Beneath, all was palmetto tangle and pelicans canting in the hot, salted wind. This was a beach one could drive on. The pickups blaring thrash metal were hidden by the dunes, but in the house they could hear them.

“This?” he said. “You could’ve bought miles of beach, Muvva. Why are we in this dinky little box? Why *here*?”

“Cheap. Foreclosure. That money’s not for me, darling,” his mother said. “It’s yours and your sister’s. It’s all in trust for you.” A martyr’s smile.

But what did he care about money? He hated it. [All his life, he’d avoid thinking of it, leaving the worry to others, assuming he’d have enough.] Money wasn’t his father, his father’s land.

“Betrayal,” Lotto said, weeping in fury.

His mother took his face in her hands, trying not to touch the pimples. “No, darling,” she said. Her smile was radiant. “Freedom.”

LOTTO SULKED. He sat alone on the sand. He poked dead jellyfish with sticks. He drank slushies outside the convenience store down on A1A.

And then he went for a taco at the stand where the cool kids ate lunches, this mini-yuppie in his polo shirts and madras shorts and docksiders, although this was a place where girls wore bikini tops to stores and boys left their shirts at home to bronze their muscles. He was six feet tall already, fourteen tipping into fifteen at the end of July. [A Leo, which explains him entirely.] All raw elbows and knees, his hair tufted in the back. The poor blasted acned skin. Bewildered, blinking, half orphaned; one longed to hold him to one’s body to soothe him. A few girls had been attracted, had asked his name, but he was too overwhelmed to be interesting, and they abandoned him.

He ate all by himself at a picnic table. A fleck of cilantro remained on his lips, which made a sleek-looking Asian boy laugh. Beside the Asian boy sat a wild-haired girl with slashes of eyeliner, red lipstick, a safety pin over her eyebrow, a fake emerald glittering in her nose. She was staring at him so intently Lotto felt his feet begin to tingle. She'd be good at sex, he understood, without knowing how. Beside the girl was a fat boy with glasses and a sly expression, the girl's twin. The Asian boy was Michael; the intense girl was Gwennie. The fat boy would be the most important. His name was Chollie.

That day there was another Lancelot at the taco shack, this one called Lance. What were the odds? Lance was scrawny, pale due to a lack of vegetables, feigned a hitch in his walk, wore a hat sideways and a T-shirt so long that it bagged over the backs of his knees. He went beatboxing to the bathroom, and when he came back, he brought a stench with him. The boy behind him kicked his shirt and out fell a tiny poop.

Someone yelled, "Lance shat his shirt!" And this went around for a while until someone else remembered that there was another Lancelot, this one vulnerable, new, weird-looking, and Lotto was being asked, "Rookie, did we scare you shitless?" and "What's your full name? Sir Luvsalot?" He slouched miserably. He left the food, trudged off. The twins and Michael caught up to him under a date palm. "That a real Polo?" Chollie asked, fingering the sleeve of his shirt. "Those things cost eighty bucks retail." "Choll," Gwennie said. "Stop with the consumerism." Lotto said, shrugging, "A knockoff, I think," though it clearly wasn't. They looked at him for a long moment. "Interesting," Chollie said. "He's cute," Michael said. They looked at Gwennie, who narrowed her eyes at Lotto until they were mascara-clotted slits. "Oh, fine," she sighed. "We can keep him, I guess." There was a dimple in her cheek when she smiled.

They were a little older, going into eleventh grade. They knew things he didn't. He began to live for the sand, the beer, the drugs; he

stole his mother's painkillers to share. His sorrow for losing his father went vague during the day, though at night he still woke weeping. His birthday came, and he opened a card to find a weekly allowance that was stupid for a fifteen-year-old. Summer stretched long into the school year, ninth grade, a cakewalk with his memory. The beach was the constant from after school to night.

"Huff this," the friends said. "Smoke this." He huffed, he smoked, he forgot for a little while.

Gwennie was the most interesting of the three new friends. There was something broken in her, though nobody would tell him what. She'd walk through four lanes of traffic; she'd shove whipped cream cans into her backpack at the QuickieStop. She seemed feral to him, though the twins lived in a ranch house, had two parents, and Gwennie was taking three AP classes as a junior. Gwennie longed for Michael, and Michael put his hands on Lotto's knees when the others weren't looking, and Lotto dreamt at night of taking off Gwennie's clothes and making her jiggle; once, late at night, he took her cold hand and she let him hold it for a moment before he squeezed it and let it go. Lotto sometimes imagined them all as if from a bird's hover in the sky: round and round, they chased one another, only Chollie separate, gloomily watching the others' endless circles, rarely trying to edge himself in.

"You know," Chollie said to Lotto once, "I don't think I've ever had a real friend before you." They were in the arcade, playing video games and talking philosophy, Chollie from a bunch of tapes he'd gotten at the Salvation Army, Lotto from a ninth-grade textbook he could summon and quote without understanding. Lotto looked over and saw Pac-Man reflected in the grease blooms on Chollie's forehead and chin. The other boy shoved his glasses up his nose, looking away. Lotto felt tender. "I like you, too," he said, and he didn't know it was true until he'd said the words aloud: Chollie, with his uncouthness, his loneliness, his innocent money hunger, reminded him of his father.

Lotto's wild life was sustainable only into October. A small handful of months, to change so much.

This would be the pivot: late afternoon, Saturday. They'd been on the beach since morning. Chollie and Gwennie and Michael asleep on the red blanket. Sunburnt, salted by ocean, beer souring their mouths. Pipers, pelicans, an angler down the beach hauling in a foot-long golden fish. Lotto watched for a long time until an image slowly gathered that he'd seen in a book: red sea with a stony pathway flicking out into it like a hummingbird's curled tongue. He picked up a shovel a child had left behind and began digging. Skin taut, as if coated in rubber glue; the burn was bad, but beneath, the muscles loved the movement. A strong body is a glory. The sea hissed and gurgled. Slowly, the other three awoke. Gwennie stood, *pop pop* of bikini flesh. Goodness, he would lick her crown to hallux. She looked at what he was doing. She understood. Tough girl, pierced, jailhouse-tattooed by her own pen and pins, but her eyes overflowed the liner. She knelt and bulldozed sand with her forearms. Chollie and Michael stole shovels from the beach cops' truck bed. Michael shook a bottle of speed he'd taken from his mother into his palm and they licked the pills up. They took turns digging, popping their jaws. Four troubled kids in early October, through twilight deep into dark. Moon rose blowsily, pissing white on water. Michael gathered driftwood, started a fire. Gritty sandwiches long in the past. Hands blistered to blood. They didn't care. For the most internal space, the beginning of the spiral, they flipped a lifeguard's chair on its side and buried it and packed the sand down hard on it. One by one, they guessed aloud about what Lotto had meant by this sculpture: nautilus, fiddlehead, galaxy. Thread running off its spindle. Forces of nature, perfect in beauty, perfectly ephemeral, they guessed. He was too shy to say *time*. He'd woken with a dry tongue and the urge to make the abstract concrete, to build his new understanding: that this was the way that time was, a spiral. He loved the uselessness of all the effort, the ephemerality of

the work. The ocean encroached. It licked their feet. It pushed around the outside wall of the spiral, fingering its way in. When the water had scooped the sand from the lifeguard's chair, revealing white like bone beneath, something broke and the fragments spun into the future. [This day would bend back and shine itself into everything.]

THE VERY NEXT NIGHT IT ALL ENDED. Chollie, grandiose in his high, had leapt in the dark from the same lifeguard's chair, upright again. For a moment he'd been outlined against the full moon, but then he'd come down on his shin with a sickening crack. Michael had sped him to the hospital, leaving Gwennie and Lotto alone on the beach in the cold autumn wind and darkness. Gwennie took his hand. Lotto could feel the fizz in his skin—it was his moment—he was going to lose his virginity. She rode on his handlebars to a party in an abandoned house on the marsh. They drank beers, watching the older kids hook up around the enormous fire until, at last, Gwennie pulled Lotto through the house. Votives on the windowsills, mattresses with gleaming limbs, buttocks, hands. [Lust! Old story renewed in young flesh.] Gwennie opened a window and they climbed through and sat on the roof of the porch. Was she crying? Her eye shadow made scary dark jags on her cheekbones. She moved her mouth onto his, and he, who hadn't kissed a girl since he came to the beach, felt the familiar white-hot liquid move through his bones. The party was loud. She pushed him back on the sandy tar paper, and he was looking up at her face in the glow, and she lifted her skirt and moved the crotch of her underwear aside, and Lotto, who was always ready, who was ready at the most abstract imaginings of a girl—footprints of a sandpiper like a crotch, gallons of milk evoking boobs—was not ready at this oh-so-abrupt beginning. It didn't matter. Gwennie shoved him in though she was dry. He shut his eyes and thought of mangoes, split papayas, fruits tart and sweet and dripping with juice, and then it was off, and he

groaned and his whole body turned sweet, and Gwennie looked down with a smile growing on her bitten lips, and she closed her eyes and went away from him, and the farther she went, the closer Lotto tried to come to her, as if he were chasing a nymph in the scrub. He remembered his furtive porn mags, rolled her over on her hands and knees, and she laughed over her shoulder at him, and he closed his eyes and pounded in and felt her arch her back like a cat, and buried his fingers in her hair, and this is when he noticed the flames licking out of the window. But he couldn't stop. Couldn't. Just hoped the house would hold until he was finished. Glorious, he was made to do this. There was cracking all around and a blistering sunlike heat, and Gwennie was shuddering beneath him, and one-two-three, he burst within her.

Then he was shouting in her ear that they had to go, go, go. He didn't tuck himself in, scooted to the edge of the roof, leapt into the sago palms below. Gwennie floated down to him, her skirt up-petaling like a tulip. They crawled out of the bushes, his ween hanging out of his fly, and were greeted by firemen sardonically applauding. "Nice work, Romeo," one said.

"Lancelot," he whispered.

"Call me Don Juan," a cop said, cranking handcuffs around Lotto's wrists, then Gwennie's. The ride was short. She wouldn't look at him. He would never see her again.

Then there was the cell with its filthy troll of a toilet in the corner, Lotto scrambling for splinters he could use as a shiv, the sputtering lightbulb that finally popped in a rain of glass at dawn.

HOME. Sallie's bleak face, Rachel resting on Lotto's chest, sucking her thumb. One year old and already clenched with anxiety. It had been decided: they had to get him away from those delinquents. Antoinette closed the door behind her, cracked her thumbs, picked up the phone.

Enough cash will grease any wheel. By afternoon, it was done. By evening, he was on a gangplank shuffling into a plane. He looked back. Sallie was holding Rachel, and both were bawling. Antoinette stood, arms akimbo. She wore a twisted look on her face. Anger, he thought. [Wrong.]

The hatch closed on Lotto, boy banished for his sins.

He would never remember the trip northward, only the shock. Waking in the morning to sun and Florida, going to bed that same day in cold New Hampshire gloom. A dormitory smelling of boys' feet. An ache of hunger in his gut.

At supper that evening in the dining hall, a wedge of pumpkin pie had smacked his forehead. He looked up to find the boys laughing at him. Someone yelled, *Aw, poor Punkin Pie*. Someone else said, *Poor Florida Pie*, and someone else said, *Bumblefuck Pie*, and this got the most laughs, so this was what they called him. He, who all his life had walked everywhere in the sultry heat as if he had owned the place [he'd owned the place], felt his shoulders press to his ears as he scuttled over the cold, hard ground. Bumblefuck Pie, a hick to these boys from Boston and New York. Zitty, the childhood loveliness vanished, too tall, too skinny. A Southerner, inferior. His wealth, which had once singled him out, unremarkable among the wealthy.

He woke before dawn and sat shivering at the edge of the bed, watching the window lighten. *DOOM-doom, DOOM-doom*, went his heart. The cafeteria with the cold pancakes and half-cooked eggs, the walk over frozen ground to the chapel.

He called every Sunday at six PM, but Sallie was not much for small talk, and Antoinette went nowhere these days and had little to report beyond her television programs, and Rachel was too tiny to put together sentences. His call was over in five minutes. A dark sea to swim until the next call. Nothing in New Hampshire was warm. Even the sky bore an amphibian chill. Lotto went to the hot tub by the pool as soon as the gym opened at five-thirty, trying to boil ice

out of his bones. He'd float, imagining his friends smoking up in the sun. If he were near Gwennie, they'd already have exhausted every mode of intercourse he knew of, even the apocryphal. Only Chol-lie sent mail, though it was little more than jokes on pornographic postcards.

Lotto fantasized about the gym's beams, which were at least fifty feet high. A swan dive into the shallow end would put an end to it all. No, he'd climb to the top of the observatory, tie a rope around his neck, jump. No. He'd steal into the physical plant and take some of the white powders used to clean the bathrooms and eat them like ice cream until his innards frothed out. An element of the theatrical already in his imaginings. He wasn't allowed to come home for Thanksgiving, for Christmas. "Am I still being punished?" he asked. He tried to keep his voice manly, but it wobbled. "Oh, honey," Sallie said. "It's not punishment. Your mama wants you to have a better life." Better life? He was Bumblefuck Pie here; he didn't ever swear, so he couldn't even complain of his own nickname. His loneliness howled louder. All boys did sports, and he was forced to row in the novice eight and his hands grew blisters that grew calluses, their own shells.

THE DEAN SUMMONED HIM. He'd heard that Lancelot was troubled. His grades were perfect; he was no dummy. Was he unhappy? The dean's eyebrows were caterpillars that chew down apple trees overnight. Yes, Lotto said, he was unhappy. Hm, the dean said. Lotto was tall, smart, rich. [White.] Boys like him were meant to be leaders. Perhaps, the dean hazarded, if he bought facial soap, he might find a higher perch on the totem pole? He had a friend who could write a prescription; he searched for a notepad to write the number down. In the open drawer, Lotto caught a glimpse of the familiar oily gleam of a pistol. [Gawain's nightstand, leather holster.] It was all Lotto could

see before him as he stumbled through his days afterward, that brief glimpse of gun, the weight he could feel in his hands.

IN FEBRUARY, the door of his English class opened and a toad in a red cape walked in. Grublike face. Pasty sheen, sparse hair. A round of snickers. The little man swirled the cape off his shoulders, wrote *Denton Thrasher* on the chalkboard. He shut his eyes, and when he opened them, his face was racked with pain, his arms extended as if holding something heavy.

Howl, howl, howl, howl! he whispered. *O, you are men of stones:
Had I your tongues and eyes, I'd use them so
That heaven's vault should crack. She's gone for ever!
I know when one is dead, and when one lives;
She's dead as earth. Lend me a looking-glass;
If that her breath will mist or stain the stone,
Why, then she lives.*

Silence. No scoffing. The boys were still.

An unknown room in Lotto illuminated. Here, the answer to everything. You could leave yourself behind, transform into someone you weren't. You could strike the most frightening thing in the world—a roomful of boys—silent. Lotto had gone vague since his father died. In this moment, his sharpness snapped back.

The man heaved a sigh and became himself again. “Your teacher has been stricken with some disease. Pleurisy. Dropsy? I shall be taking his place. I am Denton Thrasher. Now,” he said, “tell me, strip-lings, what are you reading?”

“*To Kill a Mockingbird*,” Arnold Cabot whispered.

“Lord save us,” Denton Thrasher said, and took the wastebasket

and swept up and down the rows, tossing the boys' paperbacks in. "One mustn't concern oneself with lesser mortals when one has barely breached the Bard. Before I am through with you, you will be sweating Shakespeare. And they call this a fine education. The Japanese will be our imperial masters in twenty years." He sat on the edge of the desk, buttressing himself before the groin with his arms. "Firstly," he said, "tell me the difference between tragedy and comedy."

Francisco Rodríguez said, "Solemnity versus humor. Gravity versus lightness."

"False," Denton Thrasher said. "A trick. There's no difference. It's a question of perspective. Storytelling is a landscape, and tragedy is comedy is drama. It simply depends on how you frame what you're seeing. Look here," he said, and made his hands into a box, which he moved across the room until it settled on Jelly Roll, the sad boy whose neck gooped out over his collar. Denton swallowed what he was about to say, moved the box of his hands on to Samuel Harris, a quick, popular, brown boy, the cox of Lotto's boat, and said, "Tragedy." The boys laughed, Samuel loudest of all; his confidence was a wall of wind. Denton Thrasher moved the frame until it alighted with Lotto's face, and Lotto could see the man's beady eyes on him. "Comedy," he said. Lotto laughed with the others, not because he was a punch line, but because he was grateful to Denton Thrasher for revealing theater to him. The one way, Lotto had finally found, that he could live in this world.

HE WAS FALSTAFF IN THE SPRING PLAY; but out of makeup, his own miserable self slid back into him. "Bravo!" said Denton Thrasher in class when Lotto delivered a monologue from *Othello*, but Lotto only gave a half smile, returned to his seat. In rowing, his novice eight beat the varsity in practice and he was promoted to stroke, setting the

rhythm. Still, all was drear, even when the buds tipped the trees and the birds returned.

In April, Sallie called, weeping. Lotto couldn't come home for the summer. "There are . . . dangers," she said, and he knew she meant his friends were still hanging around. He imagined Sallie seeing them walking up the highway, her hands of their own accord veering the car to smush them. Oh, he longed to hold his sister; she was growing, she wouldn't remember him. To taste Sallie's food. To smell his mother's perfume, to let her tell him in her dreamy voice about Moses or Job as if they were people she'd known. Please, please, he wouldn't even leave the house, he whispered, and Sallie had said, in consolation, that the three of them would come visit and they would all go to Boston in the summer. Florida had gone sun-bright in his mind. He felt he might go blind if he looked directly at it. His childhood was obscured in the blaze, impossible to see.

He hung up the phone, hopeless. Friendless. Abandoned. Hysterical with self-pity.

A plan solidified at dinner, after a food fight with mint brownies.

When it was dark, flowers on the trees like pale moths, Lotto went out.

The administrative building held the dean's office; the office held the drawer that held the gun. He pictured the dean opening the door in the morning to find the splatter, his shuddering backward step.

Sallie and his mother would explode from grief. Good! He wanted them to cry for the rest of their lives. He wanted them to die crying for what they'd done to him. He felt wobbly only when he thought of his sister. Oh, but she was so little. She wouldn't know what she'd lost.

The building was a lightless chunk. He felt for the door—unlocked—it slid open under his hand. Luck was on his side. [Someone was.] He couldn't risk turning on the lights. He felt along the wall: bulletin board, coat rack, bulletin board, door, wall, door, cor-

ner. The edge of a great black space that was the enormous hall. He saw it in his mind's eye as if it were daylight: double curved staircase at the far end. Second-floor catwalk lined with oils of fleshy white men. Antique boat hanging from the rafters. During the day, high clerestory windows shifted light one to the next. Tonight they were pits of dark.

He closed his eyes. He would walk bravely toward the end. He took one step, another. Loving the swishy feel of the carpet, the giddy blankness before him, he took three joyous running steps.

He was smacked in the face.

He'd fallen to his knees, was scrabbling on the carpet. Hit him again in the nose. He reached up but nothing was there; no, here it was again, and he fell back, felt the thing graze over him. His hands flailed, touched cloth. Cloth over wood, no, not wood, foam with a steel core, no, not foam, pudding with a tough skin? Felt down. Felt leather. Laces? Shoe? He was dabbed in the teeth.

He crabwalked backward, a high-pitched keening noise coming from somewhere, and moved wildly down the walls, and after an eternity found the light switch, and in the horrible bright found himself looking at the boat suspended from the ceiling, tipped down on one side, dangling the worst Christmas ornament ever. A boy. Dead boy. Blue-faced. Tongue out. Glasses cocked. In a moment came the recognition: oh, poor Jelly Roll, hanging from the bow ball of a sweep eight. He'd climbed up, tied the noose. Leapt. Mint brownie from dinner all over his shirt. The sound died out of Lotto's chest. He ran.

AFTER THE POLICE, the ambulance, came the dean. He brought Lotto doughnuts and a cup of cocoa. His eyebrows danced all over his face, chewing on lawsuits, copycat suicides, leaks to newspapers. He dropped Lotto at his dorm, but when the taillights winked away, Lotto came out again. He couldn't be near all the other boys, who were, just

then, dreaming innocent anxiety dreams of girl bits and summer internships.

He found himself sitting in the auditorium on the stage when the chapel bell chimed three AM.

The long sweep of seats held the memory of bodies. He pulled out the joint he'd been intending to smoke just before he touched the barrel to his teeth.

Nothing made sense. There was an airy whistling off stage right. Denton Thrasher, sans glasses and in frayed plaid pajamas, crossed the stage, doppel kit in hand.

"Denton?" Lotto said.

The man peered into the shadows, clutching the bag to his chest. "Who's there?" he said.

"Nay, answer me: stand, and unfold yourself," Lotto said.

Denton padded upstage. "Oh, Lancelot. You startled the sap out of me." He gave a cough and said, "Do I scent the sultry waft of cannabis?"

Lotto put the joint into his outstretched fingers, and Denton took a drag.

"What are you doing in your pajamas?" Lotto said.

"The question is, my dear, what you are doing here." He sat next to Lotto, then said, with a sideways grin, "Or were you looking for me?"

"No," Lotto said.

"Oh," Denton said.

"But here you are," Lotto said.

When there was no more joint to smoke, Denton said, "Saving my pennies. Crashing in the costume room. I'm resigned to a destitute old age. It's not the worst. No bedbugs. And I like the constant bells."

On cue, the three-thirty bell chimed, and they laughed.

Lotto said, "Tonight I found a boy who hanged himself. Hung himself. Hanged himself."

Denton went still. "Oh, child," he said.

"I didn't really know him. They called him Jelly Roll."

"Harold," Denton said. "That boy. I tried to get him to talk to me, but he was so sad. You boys were terrible. Savages. Oh, not you, Lotto. I never meant you. I'm so sorry you had to be the one to find him."

Lotto's throat filled with something, and he saw himself swinging from the scull until the door opened, the light flicked on. It came over him that even had he crept up the stairs and found the dean's office unlocked and opened the drawer and felt the weight of the gun in his hand, something in him would have resisted. It would never have ended that way. [True. It was not his time.]

Denton Thrasher gathered Lotto in his arms and wiped his face with the hem of his pajama top, revealing a furry white belly, and Lotto was rocked on the edge of the stage, smelling witch hazel and Listerine and pajamas worn too many times between washes.

THIS LANCELOT CHILD in Denton's lap. So young, crying past the point of immediate sorrow into something deeper. It frightened Denton. Four o'clock. Sweet Lancelot, so talented, but this was a little much, even if Denton saw in him the rare spark. His looks were both promising and as if some essential promise had fled and left wreckage in its wake, which was odd, the boy being fifteen at most. Well, beauty could come back, perhaps. In ten years he might be ravishing, grow into his great goofy body, into his charm: already, there was the bigness of a real actor on the stage. Alas, Denton knew, the world was full of real actors. Christ, the bells of four-thirty, he was about to go out of his skull. Denton could not hold this sorrow. He was too weak. [Grief is for the strong, who use it as fuel for burning.] He thought, I'll be stuck here with this boy forever. He knew only one thing that could shut off this flow of tears, and in a panic, he pushed the child upright and scabbled in his lap and took the surprised pale worm out

of his jeans, and it grew impressively in his mouth, thank god, and this alone was enough to stop the sobs. Baton of youth! Youthfully swift, too. O, that this too too solid flesh was now melting, thawing, resolving itself into a spunky dew. Denton Thrasher wiped his mouth and sat up. What had he done? The boy's eyes vanished in shadow: "Going to bed," he whispered, and he ran down the aisles, through the doors, out. A shame, Denton thought. Dramatic, to be forced to flee in the night. He would miss this place. He would regret not watching Lance-lot grow. He stood and took a bow. "Be blessed," he said to the great empty theater and went off to the costume room to pack.

SAMUEL HARRIS, up early for crew, was watching out the window when he saw poor Bumblefuck Pie run across the dark quad, weeping. Ever since the other boy had arrived halfway through the fall semester, he'd been so blue he was almost iridescent with sadness. Samuel was the cox of Bumblefuck's boat, practically nestled every day in his lap, and despite the fact that the other kid was kind of a pariah, Samuel worried about him, six-foot-three and only a hundred fifty pounds, frozen-looking, cheeks like slabs of beaten tenderloin. It seemed clear he was going to hurt himself. When Samuel heard Lotto rushing up the stairs, he opened his door and manhandled him into the room, fed him oatmeal cookies that his mother sent from home, and this way got the whole story. Oh god, Jelly Roll! Lotto said that after the police came, he'd sat in the theater for hours to calm down. He seemed to want to say something more, considered it, packed it away. Samuel wondered. He thought of what his father the senator would do, and drew a man's stern face over his own. He reached out a hand to Lotto's shoulder and patted him until he calmed. It felt as if they'd crossed a bridge a second before it collapsed.

For a month, Samuel watched Lotto drag himself around the campus. And when school let out, Samuel took the other boy with him to